

Snorky's Bar

"Where's my beer?"

"Coming right up," I replied, turning around to hide my annoyance. The current equipment at Snorky's Bar was outdated and a bit slow, no matter the amount of cleaning done. What was worse, being a male bartender did not have its perks. The regulars at Snorky's were older fellows who had long ago given up luring females and recently took up the art of flattering men. I was not interested, but they never seemed to take the hint.

The mug I was holding beneath the faucet finally filled with room-temperature beer, and I handed it to the lovely gentleman before me, who smirked and gulped half of it down.

"Excuse me!" said a man very loudly.

I sighed through the forced smile on my lips. I still failed to grasp the reasoning behind why people preferred Snorky's over the modern Werner and Sons Bar and Grill across the street.

"Ahem."

Right, a customer. I wiped my hands on a filthy rag and approached the man at the end of the bar. He was wearing a shiny black jacket and a white shirt, and seemed to belong more in the eighties than in the present. But I was not one to judge, seeming as I was the one working at Snorky's, wearing a filthy apron. Occasionally, a young fellow in his twenties would come to Snorky's looking for women who were never here, and then they'd leave after their first drink. So at first, this man was of no difference. "How are you doing?" I greeted.

The man straightened his spine and placed his hands on the bar top. "Actually, I'm not doing too good." He spoke in the way that young fellows do, with a smooth, rich voice backed by self-confidence. "The moment I walked in here, I realized that I had made a horrible mistake."

I snorted. "Check out Werner's place across the street. There's plenty of women who work there," I said. The only reason why I could not get into Werner's was because they employed mostly women, and it worked. People flocked there like dogs chasing after a disk of meat.

"That's not what I mean," said the man, and he seemed genuinely confused. "The people in here... Something's wrong with them."

"Hey, you got a problem?" asked the scruffy man with the half-empty beer glass.

"Keep it down," I mumbled to the man in front of me. I looked over my shoulder. "Nothing to worry about, sir," I said, flashing him a smile. He sipped his beer. I turned back to the man in the shiny black jacket. "Can I get you anything?"

The man's eyes were scanning the room. Then, he leaned in close and said, "I'm the youngest one in here. I'm twenty-three." Then, he scanned myself. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," I said. I had lost my patience with this man. He was going to get himself killed. "If you aren't going to order anything—"

"Why would you work here?" the man asked, looking alarmed. "It's dangerous here!"

I frowned. This wasn't a man before me; it was a kid. "Look, if you won't order, I'm going to have to ask you to—"

"Hey!" exclaimed the man holding the beer. "I need a refill!"

I left the kid in the shiny black jacket and grabbed the empty mug. But before I could go to refill it, the scruffy man grabbed my wrist with a sweaty palm and pulled me close. "I don't like that man," he said, nodding towards the kid in the shiny black jacket. "Get him out of here."

"I can't kick him out unless he's done something," I mumbled.

"Oh, he's done something alright," said the man. His eyes were glossy. "He's killed my friends."

Chills ran down my spine. Snorky's never attracted good-natured people, but there's never been any murderers. But I couldn't actually prove that fact; murderers don't admit that they're murderers. I glanced at the kid in the black jacket, but his seat was empty. I relaxed. He had left. I turned back to the scruffy man, when my heart gave a leap: the kid in the black jacket was now holding a lighter in his hand, the flame close to the man's face.

"What are you doing?" I said loudly. The other two customers in Snorky's were now looking at me.

"You should leave," said the kid through a clenched jaw. "These guys are dangerous."

This kid had lost his mind. At least I still had my sanity, even though I worked at Snorky's. I reached for the phone in my back pocket. "I'm calling the police!"

Immediately, the kid touched the flame to the scruffy man's face. The scruffy man did not scream, but rather, let out a snarl. There, beneath the flame's touch, the man's skin had become transparent down to the very bone. His skull glowed through his skin. I cried out in shock and horror.

The scruffy man reached out a hand and grabbed my hair, slamming me down onto the bar top. Immediately, stars danced before my eyes. I felt myself fall to the floor, and for a moment, red hot pain was all I knew. But then I realized that some of that red was the back of my eyelids, and I opened them to find the wooden ceiling of Snorky's staring down at me. My head and eyes burned, but I grabbed the bar top and pulled myself up.

Chaos was unfolding before me. The kid was outnumbered: three scruffy men to one. He held the lighter in his hand, dodging the chairs that were flying across the room. A glass shattered. The scruffy man who had slammed my head charged at the kid. The kid was much faster than the man, for the man had been drinking all day. He easily dodged the man's fist and grabbed at his head. He pulled, and at first it looked as if he was pulling at hair, but then a zipper came into view, and I gasped. The man's skin fell to the floor, revealing a skeleton. There was no blood nor organs, but a clean white skeleton standing in the middle of the floor. The skeleton collapsed, and I could see its jaw moving, as if it were a beached fish.

The kid was hit from behind by a table the second man had flipped. He fell to the floor. The lighter went out. I had to do something. These men were not human, and they were dangerous. I hopped over the bar and pulled the kid away from the second man, who had just rounded the table.

"No!" cried the kid, looking at the lighter that was beyond reach.

“Kid, what should I do?” I asked frantically.

“I’m not a kid!” he spat, standing to his feet. “Do you have a lighter?”

The second man took a swing. I ducked. The third man was coming closer, throwing glasses. One shattered at my feet. The kid dove between me and the third man, grabbing the lighter. I felt my shoulders being grabbed by sweaty hands. I was pulled to my feet. Immediately, a sickening blow hit my gut, and all breath left me. Sweaty hands were around my throat. The second man before me began to blur.

Suddenly, the man’s face began to glow. I could see the skeleton beneath his skin, a maniacal grin embedded into the skull. The kid was behind the man. I heard skin unzip, and suddenly, fragile bony hands were around my throat. They released me, and I fell heavily to my feet, gasping for air.

The third man swung for the kid. This man was faster than his friends, for he had barely had one drink. The kid dodged the first punch, the lighter illuminating the man’s skeleton. But then, the man kicked out his foot, and the lighter went flying across the room. The kid cried out, and the man’s foot reeled back for another blow.

I charged. I tackled the man to the floor, his body cushioning my fall. The skeleton’s eyes blazed with fury. I punched it in the face. Again and again, I punched the man in the face. I could see his skull begin to fracture.

A knee slammed against my ribs. I heard a crack. Instant fire spread through my chest, constricting my throat and my ability to yell. My hair was grabbed, and I felt my weight lift. The man lifted me up, a few hairs on my head tearing from my scalp. The kid was on his knees, the lighter in his other hand. He looked at me with wide eyes and shook his head slightly.

This is it, I thought. This is how I die. The kid won’t even help me.

“I’ll be a better host!” the kid said suddenly. He closed the lighter.

I felt my feet touch the floor, and immediately I fell, bittersweet air rushing into my lungs. I managed to turn my head to see the scruffy man staring at the kid. I tried to speak, but no words came to me.

“Take me instead,” said the kid, his arms at his sides. “I’m a better host.”

The man reached into the back of his head and slowly unzipped his skin. It left a shaking skeleton in its place. The skeleton had thick bones and a slightly cracked skull, with hollow pits for eyes. It started for the kid.

“Wait!” I gasped. “What are you doing? Just stop it now!”

The kid shook his head. “You’d be dead already if I didn’t do this,” he said quietly. He closed his eyes.

I was not prepared for what came next. The skeleton’s toe touched the kid’s knee, and immediately, the skeleton seeped into the kid’s skin. The kid fell back, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He looked as if he were having a seizure.

I grabbed the lighter. I wasn't sure what to do, or if it would work, but I opened it. I thrust the lighter at the kid's face. Immediately, a skull began to glow through his skin. He stopped seizing, and his eyes returned to the front of his head, but the skeleton did not come out. I reached for the kid's head. He grabbed my arm with a sweaty palm, and I dropped the lighter and grabbed with my other hand. He grabbed that wrist, too. I acted on impulse and slammed my own skull into his. Blinding stars once again danced before my eyes, but whether it was from luck or divine intervention, my hand had found the back of his head. A zipper appeared. I pulled.

Unlike what happened before, the kid's skin remained glued to his bones. But something was oozing from the back of his head. My first thought was that I killed him, and horror flooded through my veins. But then, the kid gasped and sat up, black goo dripping down his neck. He grimaced and touched the back of his head. There was no longer a zipper there, but there was a gash. He looked at me.

"How'd you know that'd kill it?" he demanded.

I frowned. "Is that what just happened?"

The kid glanced around the bar to ensure that there were two other skeletons lying on the floor. "I suppose I'll explain, now."

"You aren't hurt?" I asked.

"I'll admit that my head stings," he mumbled. He grabbed the lighter and shoved it in his pocket. "Sometimes, people... People become infected with a sort of parasite."

"What?" My heart began to pound. "What parasite? How is it transmitted?"

"Don't worry, you don't have it," he said. "When someone... When someone becomes sad, their own body generates the parasite."

My jaw dropped. Sadness was a requirement in order to work at Snorky's.

"Not regular sadness," he said. "It's something much deeper... Something that strengthens the shadows and weakens the light around you. It slowly swallows you until you are no longer yourself. Or so I've heard," he added hastily. "Anyways, the parasite is born inside of you, and it feeds off this sadness until you are literally not yourself, and instead, you are a mere shell of what you used to be."

"It kills you?" I said. "It's like a zombie."

The kid shrugged. "There are two ways to stop them: Shine a light to reveal the zipper and release them of their shell, where they'll die of vulnerability, or... Or offer it a host where there is still enough emotion to be toyed with. Miraculously, you freed me from the host, and it melted into this disgusting goo on my neck," he said with a repulsive shudder. "You released it from its *shell* before it could actually settle."

"Hmm," I said. I would've thought this kid—this man—was insane, but again, there were skeletons lying on the floor of Snorky's. "And you do this for a living?"

"More or less," he said. He stood to his feet and helped me up, and I pressed a hand to my burning chest. "Got a closet we can put these in?"