

Hard to Love

“Son...” a familiar voice rang through the roaring wind.

Samuel’s eyes fluttered open as he jolted up, covered in a cold sweat, and clasped a hand over his chest. He could still feel that weightless feeling and the wind hard against his face. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to still his surroundings, yet all he could focus on was the pounding of his own heartbeat.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum...

After what felt like an eternity, the world around him finally came to a stop and he warily slackened his eyelids. The night was now silent, all except for the buzzing of insects and the occasional hoot of an owl. Overhead, the pale crescent moon shone like a silvery claw in the night sky. Slipping out from beneath the canopy, he felt a singular urge to take a midnight stroll.

As he ambled along the ridge, he felt a breeze blow across his face—yet strangely he couldn’t tell whether or not it felt pleasant. Coming to a halt at the cliff’s edge, Samuel gazed into the dead of night. Wouldn’t life be so much simpler without all the drama and mind games? Wouldn’t it be nice to just... get away? As he stood, deep in thought, he saw a figure approaching from the corner of his eyes. As it closed in, it began to contort, twisting and turning and in an inexplicable way. Whirling around in alarm, Samuel watched as its head melted into the night, and its body began to grow at a disturbing rate. Samuel drew back, and so did the light, leaving the figure surrounded by a ring of darkness. Then, in a wink, it was gone—as if it had never been there in the first place.

Dazed and confused, Samuel surveyed his surroundings, and just as he began to let out a sigh of relief, he heard a soft crackling followed by a fluttering of wings, then a chilling shriek—one too high pitched to belong to any human being. Turning towards the sound, he found himself face to face with an indescribable... what was it? It was like a rift of nothingness, yet it was strangely familiar. Samuel stared into the black hole and it stared back at him.

“You’re just too hard to love,” that same voice came again.

Before he could process any of it, he felt a shove and tumbled back—the world darkening around him as he was swallowed whole by the night.

“No!” he heard his own voice echoing through the night. “Not yet!”

The next thing he knew, his eyes fluttered open and he was sitting up in a pool of sweat. Breathing hard, he clasped a hand over his chest and tried to still his surroundings. As he stared sightlessly ahead, all he could hear was the pounding of his own heartbeat.

Ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum...

Straining into the darkness, Samuel managed to make out faint outlines of the figures laying next to him. As he leaned in, he saw a friendly face and his breathing slowed. Right... the camp. It all came rushing back. The night was now silent, all except for the ticking of a watch and a low snoring. As Samuel shifted in his sleeping pad, he felt the call of nature. Edging his way through the narrow interior, he made it to the opening and slipped out into the vast night.

As he zipped up his pants after a relieving session around the corner, he felt a curious urge to take a late-night stroll. Without thinking much of it, he turned and began up the ridge. Before long, he found himself at the cliff's edge, staring out into the night. A breeze blew across his face, and for a split second, he was hit with a tinge of *deja vu*. Was it a memory or a dream? He tried to think, but his head throbbed in protest. There was something he was forgetting. He didn't know what it was but he knew—he just knew—that it was important. As he stood there, he felt a shiver travel up his spine—not from the cold, but from something else altogether. At that, he frowned. What was it? It was on the edge of his mind yet he just couldn't recall. Wait... wait a second...

As he paced back and forth, there came a moment of clarity. He had to be there. He had to get back before it was too late—for nothing else mattered. But before he could act, a high-pitched shriek cut through the night, and the next thing he knew, he was falling back, the wind howling in his ears.

In the breathless night, there came a muted crash, then all was swallowed up by silence once again.

Across from the mountains, in a slumberous neighborhood, a glimmer of light peeked through a window and found its way onto the girl still lying in bed. As the darkness evaporated into the morning air, she awoke with an unusual sense of unease. Stirring in bed, she felt a vibration through her pillow and reached under towards her phone. "You have a new memory," the notification read. As she clicked on the banner, she was brought to an image she had forgotten existed. It was a selfie she had taken with her father years ago, and she had worn a

broad smile as he carried her on his back. How has it been seven years already? Time had slipped through her grasp, and he... he had grown older—much, much older. When was the last time they had a proper conversation? When was the last time she let him hold her? The girl couldn't recall. With that realization came a pang of guilt. But not to worry, they've still got time.

He'll be there tonight... right? Yes. He'll be there.