

Infinite Freedom

By R. Vance



It's torture. Staring up at that infinite freedom every night. Every day. Night is worse because the view is breathtaking. The millions of stars that I know are out there...yet I can only see a handful. Still beautiful. I'm glad I can appreciate beauty—glad I can distinguish it and its contrast still.

I feel mad. Insane. At least mostly there. I've been down here for weeks, maybe even months. I don't know—I stopped counting how many times the sun disappeared and left me with screams a long time ago.

Like most monsters, they come out at night. They sleep during the day. It's peaceful during the day...except for the rotten stench of death. But I've gotten used to that.

They feed us. A part of them is human enough to know we'll die without nourishment. But they aren't human. And therefore cannot be called cannibals.

My legs hurt. . . .

I can hear them sleeping during the day while I'm staring up at blue vastness. They snarl in their sleep. It's a wet snarl because they're always salivating. They live under the desert mountains in southern Arizona, and probably anywhere else that has dark, moist caves. They live in the underground chains here. They hoard their food. And when they run low, they go out at night in groups and hunt.

That's how they got me. I think it was August 23rd that I was outside late at night. My dog was missing. I was looking for him. I had that fear in my heart that felt like I would never see him again. I searched for an hour on foot before I decided to get in my car. There was a wash nearby; a large ditch that would catch the rain that would rush down from the mountains. I thought Sawyer, my dog, might be there.

I parked the car and took out a flashlight and continued my search. I called his name and whistled a few times.

Then it struck. I had been so distracted that I didn't hear its warning. The rattlesnake snapped at me, its neck flying forward like an armed rubber band. It bit me just above my foot. I had lived in the desert my whole life; I knew its bite was poisonous and I didn't have anything with me to treat it. I would have to leave my search behind and hope Sawyer was all right until I could continue, or he found his way home. I needed to get to a hospital.

They don't usually hunt people my size. I'm almost 6 foot tall and 155 pounds. They usually prey on children because they're small enough to carry away.

But I was injured. And therefore an exception.

I was sweating. My leg felt heavy. I could feel the poison coursing through me. I got to my car and opened the door to climb in. They jumped on me. Dozens of tiny, bone-sharp fingers digging into my arms, legs, torso. They could smell the blood you see, and also feel my distress. They knew I was on the verge of fainting and that I couldn't put up a fight.

I swung my arms and screamed as loud as I could, but I wasn't able to stand. Couldn't fight back. The sandpaper gravel of the desert floor clawed at my back as they dragged me. Their hands felt rubbery. I couldn't see them yet, though. Not through the darkness or my poisoned vision.

They dragged me for a long time. Under the mountains, descending further down the earth. My head throbbed. I think I vomited once. Maybe twice.

I remember thinking that I wouldn't suffer long. Even if these things—whatever they were—intended on making me a meal or harming me in any other way, the poison would kill me soon enough.

I was wrong.

They chained my leg—my good leg—to the rocky floor. I looked up through my hazy vision and saw an imperfect circle that showed the night sky. A hole in the ceiling of the cave. The half moon looked down on me with several diamond companions at its sides.

I didn't care that I could see the moon and the stars then. But what a sight they are to me now. . . .

All around me, noises suddenly filled my ears. Chittering. Like birds. And crying. It sounded like children crying not too far away. Their sniffling tears echoed off the cavern walls.

The bird sounds came from the creatures.

Their intelligence must have told them that I was going to die from the wound on my leg. My hopes for a quick death quickly receded.

I felt razor-sharp pain just below my knee. I started screaming again; flailing my arms, trying to claw them away from me. Dozens of rubber, bony hands held me down. A large rock was shoved into my mouth to quiet me, chipping a tooth.

I passed out from the pain.

* * *

When I awoke, it was daytime. Heat poured down on me from the hole twelve feet above my head. My leg still throbbed. I looked down and felt bile rising in my throat at the sight. I forced it back down and then screamed. Hot tears filled my dark eyes.

My leg had been chewed off. Then tossed to the side. The leg—*my leg*—still contained the rattlesnake poison. All of it. My body held clean blood, I realized.

Insects buzzed around the leg. Carefully chewing the parts that weren't contaminated; the flesh that wasn't dead yet.

My screaming didn't wake them. Too used to screams. The terrorized screams of their victims were probably a lullaby to them.

The night fell hours later and the things returned to me. This time I saw them in the silvery light from the moon above:

Little bodies. They stood maybe three feet tall at the most. They had hands and legs and walked upright, only they didn't walk—they hobbled and hopped. They had large, pointed ears and a pointed snout that dripped snot. Beady black eyes that were soulless and reminded me of a shark's. They had tiny wings on their back that didn't seem to serve much purpose because they were too small to allow the creatures to fly. They had long, pointed tails.

They must have come from hell.

They feed on us. Keep us alive as a lasting food supply. They don't eat much—just a little at a time. They can go days without eating (I think the most I've gone without them eating off of me is a week). They bring us food; rats, fruit, even insects. Most of us try to ignore the food—wishing to starve to death—but after a while, the pain becomes too unbearable and we give in, not realizing that we're prolonging our suffering until we've already eaten. They bring us water in hollowed-out cacti.

For as long as I've been here they've only eaten bits of me. I have wounds all over my body. They sting sometimes but I've gotten so used to them now I hardly notice them.

I thought I would have died by now, if not from loss of blood then infection. But I think there's something in their saliva that seals off the wounds.

In the beginning, I tried speaking to my invisible prison-mates. I couldn't see them, but I knew they were near. I could hear their cries every night. It pained me to hear them because I knew the others were younger than me. Smaller than me. Just children. Some cried for their mothers and fathers. Others had given up on screaming for help—they only cried now.

It broke my heart, but all I could do was cry with them. When I first got here anyway. Now, I'm apathetic. The world is not real to me. Their cries are just a part of my hallucination.

I can't wait for the day they decide to eat the rest of me. Then maybe I can rest.

The sun is now gone. The moon is rising.

Here they come, drawing me out of my memories. They've chosen me for their feast tonight.

They jump on me. They don't weigh much so I barely notice them. Staring. My eyes keep staring at the full moon above me. It's so beautiful.

Piercing. Their teeth are gnawing me now. One rips into my shoulder and I hear the sound of my flesh tearing off my bone. But it doesn't bother me. The pain is dull, barely there.

I don't even cringe when I hear the bone of my index finger snap in half.

The moon is so beautiful.

They're like piranhas. Quick. Little bits of flesh at a time.

But I never bleed. Yes, their saliva must be healing.

I wonder, as I stare up at that infinite freedom, why do I no longer cry? Why do I no longer scream?

I believe it's because I am mad.

I smile at the moon and he smiles back.

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