

Nasty Nattie and The Nightmare Man

The metal creaked faintly as Natalie kicked her legs to move the swing. She moved her hands into the pockets of her dark blue coat and wrapped her elbows around the swing's chains. Her bright orange scarf was the only other thing guarding her against the fall cold setting in. Other children played nearby, but she waited quietly for her mother to come pick her up after school. Natalie would normally try to find animals in the clouds, but the grey overcast turned everything into a dark smudge overhead.

“Well, well...if it isn't ‘Nasty Nattie.’”

Natalie bristled at the sound of Becky Grindel's voice walking in front of her. She kept her head down so her limp, black hair covered her face. Abby Furman was giggling at Becky's side, the sweet laughter grating on Natalie's ears.

“I hear her hair is so greasy that it slips out of hair ties like water.” Abby laughed, faking a whisper that Natalie would certainly hear. “She can't even wear hats without them slipping off.”

Natalie kept her head down, not daring to make eye contact. The duo was looking for attention and they weren't going to get it from her. The sound of crunching gravel faded and Natalie drooped a little further. For now, her tormentors found entertainment elsewhere, no doubt spreading rumors about her. Ignoring them was easier than getting into an argument. Still, after years of teasing, the comments made her face red with shame. Becky and Abby would always find something to mock, no matter what Natalie changed. Now, Natalie just wanted to go away for a while.

For a moment, Natalie thought the sun had come out as the world got a little brighter above her, but the rest of the playground was overcast. Natalie looked up and saw the small ball of light glittering in front of her. She smiled and reached out to it. The ball hovered just out of her reach, playfully retreating before she could grab hold of it. It made sound as it moved, like her grandmother's crystal chandelier in the dining room.

"I've been waiting for you, Slip." Natalie smiled. Slip didn't reply, but darted off into the woods. Natalie raced after the ball of light, ducking between a gap in the fence that separated the playground from the tree line. Slip kept floating just shy of her fingertips every time she reached out. Natalie couldn't help but laugh as Slip played with her. The sounds of the children were far behind her, drowned out by the ringing of Slip flying off ahead of her.

Natalie's surroundings changed as she rushed through the trees, the leafy boughs forming into a canopy taller than Natalie's house. She ran faster, jumping over the roots as they grew thicker and wilder. Stones protruded out of the ground, some stacked up and forming columns. The rock columns turned into stone floors, archways and collapsed walls. Natalie laughed harder as the light ducked behind ruins and she followed it further. Slip knew the way, even if Natalie didn't.

The light stopped, startling Natalie. She skidded on her shoes and held out her arms to balance herself. The ball of light hovered in a loose figure eight, dancing around Natalie's eyes. She held out her palm and touched the orb, the light warm in her hand without burning her.

"Hello, Natalie..." A deep voice rumbled, echoing around the open space.

Natalie looked behind her and grinned. It was the Nightmare Man, simply Enem to his friends.

“Hello, Enem, you’re looking well today.”

“It is a gloomy day.” Enem looked up at the sky. “Many children are afraid of thunderstorms, you see...”

Enem looked like a squat toad with a tattered shawl around his shoulders. Underneath the shredded cloth, Natalie could see Enem’s heart beating through the thin skin covering his chest cavity. Covering his face was a pale, cracked mask with two rectangles for eyes and a thin slit for a mouth. A ruff of dark blue feathers flared around the mask, shifting like a night sky that fluffed and quieted with his temperament. His arms reached out like bent tree branches, tipped with gnarled fingers as long as Natalie’s whole hand. He crouched on thin, spidery legs and balanced on wide, flat feet with half healed gashes from an accident in what Enem called ‘The War’. Enem was never specific about what the war was about, but he was never specific about anything.

Slip left Natalie’s hand and floated to the Nightmare Man, resting by his head. Natalie could see the hollow pits of his eyes and the light reflecting off the bone white surface of his mask. Natalie looked away and saw the moss covered ruins that surrounded them. Roots grew up around the base of the columns and tightened around the stone, constricting like Enem’s fingers as he gripped the stones of his archway. Enem called them the Nightmare Lands, where dreams seeped into reality. Nightmares supposedly lurked nearby, but Natalie felt safe near her friend.

It had been so long ago that Natalie couldn’t remember meeting the Nightmare Man properly. She was sure Slip had led her to him. Natalie was never sure if the ball of

light was a separate entity or an extension of Enem that he used to draw people to him like a lure. Though his lure was more for company than food, in Natalie's opinion.

Enem was very talkative and would chatter for hours if she let him. Her mother insisted that Enem was just an imaginary friend, but he was too vivid and more lifelike than any imaginary friend she'd had before. He was Natalie's only real friend, but she was fine with that. She only needed to talk to the Nightmare Man for a short time and the troubles of her world seemed to melt away around her.

"You are sad?" Enem asked, getting Natalie's attention back. He never had to try hard to read her mood.

"Yes."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"I'd like to forget about it," Natalie said. "I'd rather play a game."

"What game will we play today?" Enem asked, gleefully wringing his hands.

"Can we play Hide and Find? Or perhaps Tag?"

"I was hoping we could play the Question Game again?" Natalie asked. "You know I love the Question Game."

"Very well," Enem's voice indicated a smile under his mask. Slip brightened, spinning in tight circles around Enem's head like a crown. Enem leaned forward and examined Natalie. "I will begin today."

"Alright." Natalie said, sitting cross-legged in front of Enem. Enem stood a little taller, considering his question and stroking his mask's chin.

"What are you afraid of?" Nightmare Man asked. Natalie knew this was his favorite question. The light drifted from Enem and floated by Natalie's shoulders.

"I'm afraid of being alone." Natalie said. This was always her answer.

"Harrumph!" Enem barked, hopping up so he rested on his haunches. "That is still not a very good fear. Good fears are things you can touch...things that can follow you or climb out from under your bed at night."

"I don't think it's a bad fear." Natalie said. She lifted her hands to her shoulders so Slip could float around her wrists. "But now it's my turn."

"Go ahead." Enem said, stretching his arm out to the light. The sphere of light darted to his hand, looping between his long fingers.

"Who fought in 'The War'?"

"People, of course," Enem said. "The Dream People and the Real World..."

"And who did you fight with?"

"It is not your turn," Enem said, wagging one of his long fingers at her. Natalie swore the edges of his carved mouth turned up in a grin. "What is your biggest dream?"

"To fly." Natalie said. "To be a pilot."

"Oh, flying is a wonderful dream!" Enem beamed, the feathers puffing up with delight. "Pilots often have nightmares of falling, you know. Falling makes a very good fear."

"Stop stalling, it's my question." Natalie chuckled. "Now, who did you fight beside in the War?"

"I fought with the Dream People, obviously. I wouldn't be a very good Nightmare Man if I fought for the Real World."

"The Real World is full of nightmares." Natalie said, pretending to juggle Slip with a lazy twirl of her hand.

“Oh?”

“Nightmares like Becky Grindel and Abby Furman.”

“They sound like dreadful nightmares.”

“They are.” Natalie said. “I like spending time with you though. You’re a good nightmare.”

“Oh, I only eat nightmares,” Enem said.

“Well, you are what you eat, right?”

“Is this another question?”

“No, not really.” Natalie sighed and looked up at the sky. It seemed darker than when she had arrived, but she was unsure how much time had passed in Enem’s domain. It was always dark here. “I should go. Mother will be by school to pick me up soon. They’ll notice I’m gone then.”

“You could stay forever if you liked,” Enem said.

“No, I like our little visits better. They make the Real World seem a bit brighter.”

“Very well,” Enem said. “Dream well tonight, Natalie. Perhaps you will dream of planes.”