

I sit in an empty room.

Wooden walls, concrete floor.

Worn mattress.

Iron stool.

I am Medicinehead.

I sit here.

Waiting.

The room does not have windows. Miss Miranda removed the clock years ago. She said the ticking only made me anxious.

It did.

But I am nervous all the time.

My hands shake.

People make me nervous.

I do not like talking to them, and they do not like talking to me. That is fine. They are here for a service, not conversation.

A service I provide.

Because of my family.

When their debt is paid off, I can leave.

Someone knocks on the door. They use that familiar rhythm, the one that tells me they have paid Miss Miranda their fee.

They must pay first.

Those are the rules.

Once, someone broke that rule.

Opened the door.

Rushed in.

Grabbed my ear.

Sucked.

I screamed for Miss Miranda

She entered the room with a scattergun. Her husband, Eugene, followed close behind. He had an ax, sharp and deadly.

"Stop it," she said.

The man sighed and stepped back.

Satisfied.

"Doesn't matter," he said, laughing. "I've got the medicine. I'm all better, huh? Nothing you can do to me now, woman."

Miss Miranda smiled.

Pulled the trigger.

Miss Miranda fixes problems.

My mind flutters.

Back to the present.

The knock on the door returns, harder this time.

"Enter," I call out.

The door slowly opens.

A young mother and her daughter stand in the doorway. They look nervous. I know that feeling well. I am naturally nervous.

I know that feeling.

Too well.

"Hello," I tell them. "Step forward."

The process unnerves people.

It unnerves me, too.

I try to put them at ease.

Relax.

Take a breath.

I am here to help.

Not harm.

I motion for the mother to step forward.

"How can I help?" I ask.

"Molly," the mother said, gripping her daughter's shoulders tightly. "She's so sick. She bleeds. She bleeds so bad."

I look at the little girl.

So frail.

She coughs.

Blood peppers her lips.

Her nose.

What is wrong with her?

I do not know.

I just assess the problem.

Put my mind to work.

I process what I see.

Fragility.

Sadness.

Hopelessness.

She is dying.

My mind comes alive.

I can feel the strange substance bubbling in my skull, splashing against my brain. It tickles, hurts. But I have no choice.

Until I've paid those debts.

Here I sit.

And help.

Under different circumstances, perhaps I would not mind so much. I do like helping others. But I am a slave to Miss Miranda.

I am a slave to my family's debts.

"Step forward, please," I say.

Gently, the mother pushes her daughter.

The little girl takes small steps forward.

I close my eyes.

"Do not be scared," I tell her. "In a moment, you will see a stick protrude from my ear, okay? I want you to drink from it."

I cannot see her reaction.

I do not need to.

I feel the fear.

Terror.

She knows this situation is unnatural. She understands that what happens here doesn't happen anywhere else.

It's instinct.

She knows.

So young.

But she knows.

Then, I feel it.

I am told the stick looks like a tube fashioned from spoiled meat and bad dreams. It drips green fluid, thick, slimy, and fragrant.

Once, I was normal.

Long ago.

When I was young, my mother thought I was ill.

She took me to a doctor.

He filled me with drugs.

And she kept coming back

More drugs.

And soon, my head swelled to three times its normal size. So many pills and capsules and liquids. So many chemicals.

I mutated.

Transformed.

"Are you sick?" Mom asked.

I am now.

My neck wobbles. My ears ooze. My eyes bulge and roll in their sockets. People stare and point and laugh. I am a freak.

No one will love you.

Medicinehead.

No one will cherish you.

Medicinehead.

They tell me these things.

So it is true.

All these memories.

Horrible memories.

My eyes snap open.

"See the stick in my ear?" I ask the little girl.

"Yes," she tells me.

"Drink from it," I tell her.

She walks over to my ear, pulls out a very long tube, and begins to suck. I can feel my head dry out. I do not like this sensation.

Lips crack.

Tongue gets puffy.

My large head wobbles on my weak neck.

"Stop, now," I tell her.

She doesn't.

"Stop, please," I beg.

She doesn't.

"Make her stop!" I tell the mom. "Please!"

She doesn't.

"Make her stop!" I scream. "I'll die!"

Eugene storms into the room. He grabs the little girl. I fall off the stool and curl into a fetal position. This has happened before.

"What did we tell you?" Eugene snaps.

"I don't know..." the mother says, trailing off.

"Damn it," Eugene grumbles.

"Is he dead?" the little girl asks.

"I am alive," I tell her.

She kneels down in front of me.

And smiles.

"Thank you," she tells me.

Her face, full of color.

My heart warms.

This is the first time anyone has thanked me.

I am a product.

Why thank the product?

Eugene escorts the mother and daughter out of the room.

Miss Miranda comes in.

Return me to the stool.

"Rest up quickly," Miss Miranda tells me in a whisper. "That debt is close to being paid off, huh? Then you can go home again."

I think about that.

Home.

"Can I stay?" I ask.

"Stay?" she laughs. "You mean, stay here?"

"Yes."

"After you pay the debt?"

"Yes."

"And do what?"

"Help."

"Who?"

I motion to the door.

"Everyone."

She gives me an odd look.

"I'll discuss it with Eugene," she says.

With that, she leaves the room.

Wooden walls, concrete floor.

Worn mattress.

I sit on the iron stool.

I am a slave.

I am salvation.

I am a healer.

I am Medicinehead.