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## **Bug Priest**

by Shen Ge

Bob sat up in the hospital bed. He had just woken up yesterday and didn't plan to sleep his life away. His head still hurt like hell but at least he could feel the pain now. From what the doctor told him, he was in a coma for about a week after the incident and couldn't feel anything.

Looking around the room, he saw that he was finally alone. This was a relief to him. He didn't feel he had enough energy to carry a long conversation with any one. It looked like an ordinary room in a hospital with a monitoring machine, an IV attached to his wrist, a very uncomfortable looking chair, a table and his bed. There was a pile of fresh flowers and some get-well cards on the table next to his bed. He was too tired to read any of them and frankly he didn't care to since most of them contained the same platitudes. It's funny how people who don't care to talk to you for years suddenly feel an urge to check up on you when something bad happens to you.

He never felt that he had many friends and he felt surprised when a few actually turned up yesterday. Family as usual didn't pay a visit though that wasn't much of a surprise. Bob shook his head and tried to put aside that distasteful thought.

*Now is definitely no time to get riled up,* he thought.

He tried to remember what exactly happened that night but all he could conjure up in his mind was useless info before the incident. He remembered was taking a walk near his house after dinner on Monday for a bit of late night exercise. He said a typical "how are you doing" to a neighbor who was gardening in the front lawn. Passing by the neighborhood golf course, he thought to himself that it was a quiet night as usual in suburbia. He glanced up to look at the waxing moon and then thought he saw something that moved at the corner of his eye. He looked and then there was just darkness. The next thing he knew he was here. Bob was told that a neighbor found him collapsed unconscious by the side of the road. The ambulance came and took him to the hospital where he laid unconscious until yesterday.

The police told him it probably wasn't a robbery. There wasn't anything taken from him. His wallet, phone, and money were all there. The hospital did a battery of tests on him but so far uncovered that he was just perfectly healthy. Apparently, he has just mysteriously collapsed and just as mysteriously woken up a week later.

*What exactly happened that night?* he thought in circles as he tried to recollect that night. No inspiration or sudden memory came.

Bob heard a door knob turn. Looking up, he saw his friend Mike peep in from the door that was just opened ajar. Seeing that Bob was awake, Mike walked in slowly. Mike was a nice enough guy but Bob really wasn't in the mood to talk. Mike was one of those people who never seemed to get upset at anything and was genuinely happy just about every second of his life. Bob has asked him once why he was always happy and got a longer answer than he desired. He never asked Mike this question again.

To summarize in one sentence, Mike attributed his happiness to his faith in God and Jesus Christ. Bob thought most religious people were delusional and he didn't think Mike was an exception to the rule. Yet, he also harbored a tinge of envy that someone could be this happy all the time. If anyone was to remove Bob's mental unrest, Mike might be able to do it.

"How are you doing, Bob?" Mike asked.

"As fucking fine as I can be," Bob grimaced. "Still can't remember a goddamn thing and as confused as the police and the doctors. How are you doing?"

" Pretty good. Pretty good. You know what happened today?" Mike asked with a grin.

Though Mike never cursed, he never did show offense when Bob does. Bob doesn't curse much either but he does when Mike was around precisely to see if Mike would ever show that his happiness would be temporarily reduced. *Yes, I'm slightly sadistic*, he thought.

"Sure, what happened?" Bob said with fake enthusiasm though he really didn't care to know.

As predicted, Mike droned on about his two little kids and his one big church. He talked about the new program at church they started several weeks ago where the bigger kids tutor the little kids on the faith. It was going pretty well for his kids from the way Mike put it. Also, some of them including Mike's family are also going on an annual retreat to this place in the mountains about two hours from here where they would worship together in an atmosphere of serenity away from the bustle of the city.

"When are they going to release you from the hospital?" Mike suddenly interrupted his own story and asked.

"Well, they should today," Bob said. "The doctors said since they can't figure out what's wrong with me, I can just go home. If anything is amiss, I'll just call them. To be honest, I think I'm perfectly healthy. This was probably just a fluke."

"Great!" Mike said smiling. "You should come to the retreat with us."

"I really can't, Mike," Bob said. "You know I have work to catch up on."

"I'm not trying to convert you, Bob," Mike said. "I stopped inviting you to church a while ago though you're always welcome to come. I just think this will be a good break after your bad break, you know what I mean."

"I don't know..." Bob said.

"What do you have to lose? You might even find your answer there," Mike said.

"I really don't think God will just step down from the mountain and tell me what happened," Bob said. "God definitely didn't tell me why Anna suddenly broke up with me two months ago."

"All your answers can be answered. God works in mysterious ways," Mike said. "Who knows?"

Bob sighed. Mike can be irrationally persistent. He didn't think anything will come out of this but he was tired of arguing with Mike.

"Fine, I'll go," Bob finally said.

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A week later, Bob found himself sitting in a small church at the little retreat. There was a calm silence among the group and Bob felt a sense of belonging which he never expected. *Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea*, he thought. The strange episode from last week seemed like a dream.

"So how long do we have to wait?" he quietly asked Mike.

"Just a few more minutes. Pastor Miles usually takes his time to prepare," Mike replied. "It's worth the wait, though. He always makes everything relatable and funny, even for the kids."

"How now brown cow shit hole now so brown loud," an annoyingly loud voice filled the room originating from the pulpit.

Bob looked up at who was saying this nonsense and had to try his best to avoid screaming in horror and dashing away as fast as humanly possible. He could not help his eyes bulging out though. A creature that looked like a giant praying mantis, bug-

eyes and all, was standing at the front wearing a typical black clergy attire. Every time, the praying mantis creature opened his mouth, more nonsensical words came out.

He looked around the room. No one else seemed to have noticed that their priest looked like a giant praying mantis or that the creature was saying things totally incomprehensible. In fact, they all seemed to be intensely listening to the bug's words. Some even smiled when the creature said things like "right black white kite wow cow how flew by rite." Bob turned to look at Mike. He was smiling and nodding like a bunch of others were nodding. *Am I hallucinating?* Bob rubbed his eyes hard and then frantically shook his head. He opened his eyes. Nothing has changed. There's a giant bug on the pulpit and he (or it) was still preaching nonsense.

Running away didn't seem like an option when no one else seemed to be bothered. He would just seem crazy to everyone else and with his recent hospital stint, he didn't plan to draw any further attention to himself. His other more concerning fear was that maybe he was right and everyone else was brainwashed or he just had some special ability. Running away in this case would just lead to giving himself away to the bug creature. Staying was the best option for now.

In a confused and suffocating state of mind, Bob sat through the entire sermon in silent agony. He watched in curious horror as the sermon ended and the priest went on to bless those who came up to be blessed. Each time someone bowed down near the altar, Miles took its bug claws and touched the shoulder of the person. Then Miles's mouth would open and there would be a thin mist rising from the person and going into Miles's gaping mouth. This was accompanied by a loud slurping sound like someone slurping a smoothie through a straw. It didn't take a genius to deduce that Miles was sucking up something from them. Bob thanked to God that Mike didn't go up.

His horror was broken by the sound of a girl's voice. It was from the girl sitting behind him who had just returned from having part of her whatever taken from her to be digested by the bug creature. Bob really hoped it wasn't her soul.

"Hello, my name is Diana. Wasn't his message great?" said a tall girl with brown hair to Bob.

"Yes, totally understandable and very inspiring," Bob said while struggling to maintain his composure.

He needed to get out before more people came and greeted him. He has no idea what just happened but he wasn't going to stick around here and find out. He made up an excuse that he needed to go do number two and disentangled himself from a group that started asking him what he felt about the sermon. He was about to hit the exit and then the sunshine when Mike stood in front of him blocking his way.

"Come on, Bob, Pastor Miles wants to talk to you for a bit," Mike said.

"Um, I really have to go," Bob said.

"You can use the restroom later. Talk to him first," Mike said as he dragged Bob toward the pulpit.

Mike was surprisingly strong and with a few steps quickly took the struggling Bob to the pulpit. Bob very reluctantly turned to the creature in front of him. He was thoroughly shocked when the creature greeted him in perfectly comprehensible English, "Hello Bob. Mike has told a lot about me. I heard that this is the first time you've come to our little church."

"Yes, it is," Bob said after swallowing several times and diverting his eyes to a point above the creature's head. To sustain the effort of looking at the creature's face directly was too much for him.

"I also heard that you recently had an unfortunate accident," the creature said with unblinking bug eyes and reached out an arm. "Shall I pray for you?"

"Yes, but I'm better now. No need for anything today thank you," Bob said as he backed away a foot.

"Bob, what is wrong with you?" Mike said. "I know you don't like religion but you don't have to be terrified of it. Pastor Miles is not going to bite your head off."

*Actually, I think he probably wants to. I'm probably the only one who can see the pastor as he really is,* Bob thought. He said aloud, "No, I'm perfectly fine. I don't need God for this one."

"It's alright, Mike," the creature said. "Let your friend be though I will like to talk to him in private in a few minutes. It's very important."

"I really don't think it'll be that important," Bob said.

"It is," the creature said as it edged its sharp pincers menacingly closer to Mike's head. Mike smiled and didn't appear to notice at all.

"If it's just a few minutes, okay. I will talk with you," Bob said with a gulp.

Mike simply smiled again as the priest led Bob away to a private room. Bob thought that his friend was probably struck with the mistaken hope that the pastor will finally get through to him on the meaning of original sin and believing in Jesus.

A few minutes later, Bob sat in front of the bug creature in the creature's office. Aside from a few photos with the bug creature in them, the office decor looked ordinary enough. Bob wasn't sure how he was going to fight out of this one but he damn well wasn't going to sit here and let his body be torn apart or his soul drained out of him. He saw a big dictionary on the shelf beside him and a table lamp next to the dictionary. The dictionary was the safer bet for an item to bludgeon the creature if the need arises. Yet, so far, the bug creature was just shuffling some papers on his desk and told Bob to wait a bit. For a horrifying looking creature, this bug who called himself Miles was very polite.

Finally, it turned to Bob and said, "Let's talk. Sorry I had to pretend to threaten your friend for you to come here."

"Pretend? You really weren't going to cut off his head?" Bob inquired.

"Of course not! I'm not a monster," the creature said. "Anyway, let's talk about you since that's what's important."

"Huh?" Bob said pretending to be calm as his heartbeats betrayed him.

"You can see me," the creature said. "Describe what you see. And I want the whole truth."

"You sure? I'm not sure you'll like it." Bob said.

"I'm sure. Just be as honest as you can," the creature replied.

"You look like an overgrown bug. A giant praying mantis with bug eyes, pincers, clinching teeth, and all," Bob blurted out. "Are you going to kill me now? I don't think anyone else can see you."

"You're right. No one else can see me. I have no idea how you're able to. Our cloaking devices are supposed to be perfect but I have heard there are some gifted individuals like yourself who's capable of seeing past the veil. I have no idea how you're able to. Also, you may have heard nonsense when I was talking earlier. We are capable of saying things on two vocal channels where one is to communicate with our fellow kind. Once again, it's strange that you can even hear that channel since that signal is cloaked as well."

"Who are you?"

"We call ourselves the Nashgatis. We come from a star system so dim that your astronomers haven't yet discovered it. After we discovered interstellar travel, we navigated the galaxy in search of other intelligent life and to settle other planets as our population grew. We landed on your planet over ten thousand years ago."

"And are you supposed to stay that long?"

"We have a law which states that we cannot colonize planets which already has an intelligent species, no matter how primitive technologically and socially that species is. Usually, we'll all agree. However, this time it was different. Our communication systems were fried after a radiation blast hit us from a neutron star earlier on our journey. We had no way of communicating with our home world or any other starship. Worse, several of our life support system had malfunctioned after this exceptionally long journey and we were all doomed to die if we were to continue on our journey or turn back for repairs."

"So you stayed for ten millennia just to repair your ships?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Earth at that time did not have the technological infrastructure for us to do any repairs. We stayed for ten millennia to help develop humans to the technological state that you see today."

"Wait a minute. I'm really confused here. If you're going to repair a spaceship, why aren't you masquerading as a scientist or engineer? Why are you in the church?"

"Some of us are but I was never trained to be a scientist or engineer. I'm afraid that much of my race's prodigious knowledge was lost with each generation born on this planet. We live a few centuries longer than humans but we are far from immortal. I'm part of the 31st generation since Landfall, what we call our landing on Earth. Also, you need to know something very important. We Nashgatis require food in a different form than humans. Of course, humans need it too but most humans don't suffer the same consequences we do."

"What food? I saw you taking the souls out of those in the congregation."

"Those are not souls. I was ingesting what humans will call faith. We Nashgatis require nourishment from the spirit as well as the body. On our worlds, the greatest sages among us have enough faith to feed every Nashgati. If we do not ingest enough faith every week, we will quickly atrophy and die."

"So you're using the church as a means to get your faith food?"

"What I'm about to tell you is something that no human has known until now. We're not using the church. We are the church. And it's not just Christianity. We established almost all religions around the world. Of course, nowadays, most people in the churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are humans. In the beginning though, they were almost all Nashgati."

"What are you doing with this congregation?"

"Something that all Nashgati Faithbringers do. A Faithbringer is what we call someone who creates faith. I preach to them and increase their faith. Then I take some of their faith and consume a portion of it. The rest I distribute as food to others who as you kindly pointed out work in the fields of science and engineering."

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing, if you say anything no one will believe you anyway. If you try to harm me and manage to kill me, you'll be a criminal. The police will only see you killing an innocent man. The cloaking device is in our cells and is active even after death."

"So I'm just going to pretend nothing happened."

"Yes, I'm telling you this so that you'll know we have nothing against humans and try to stay out of most conflicts and politics."

"But what about all the religious wars and the terrible technologies that your scientists helped develop?"

"It's up to humans to decide what to do with the infrastructure we helped provide. My people are not responsible for the religious wars and the destructive power of technologies. Some of us believe that we have accelerated the human development too much. You see, for most societies, technology and religion develops more slowly allowing a greater sense of consciousness to be developed by the time technology and religion has reached your civilization's point."

"What do you mean by consciousness?"

"Like us, humans have a need for faith food as well. Your kind has just not developed enough consciousness to realize this. With increased consciousness in a species, each of you will grow to feel and care for other living creatures around you. There will be less wars and conflict when you can sense others' suffering and anguish. Usually, a species will not have developed the technology to destroy the entire planet when their overall consciousness is so low."

"But we have since you helped us."

"Yes, and for that, we have accelerated the chance that your kind will destroy yourselves. Yet, some of us like me are hopeful that is not to be the case. The religions we spread did not come from nothing after all. They originated from the profound faith that we have developed over millennia before we encountered humans. Now I'm sure you have many more questions to ask but I just don't have the time right now. Let us talk again when I have a spare moment. And once again I'd like to remind you to keep this a secret if you don't want to sound like a madman. I will not disclose this to anyone who cannot see me."

Bob left the room in a daze. Someone has just taken the veil off of his eyes and pulled it away to reveal a different world. It's actually the same world but whereas everyone else can only see the illusion, he now knows the biggest secret. He wasn't sure what he's going to do now that he knows this. *Whether I want to or not, knowing this changes everything*, he thought. Too many questions were floating in his mind begging to be answered. He wanted to find the others who also knows this secret. How can something like faith actually provide nourishment? If faith is real, is there actually a God? And still the great mystery remains on why he can suddenly see these aliens. Do the others who can see them also suffer a mysterious coma? What makes them so special that even the aliens don't know the answer to that? God forbid, maybe he's half-alien? He decided that the first thing to do would be a DNA test to determine whether or not he's human.