THE INFIRMARY

By
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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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PUBLISHED BY:
Bridget Squires on Smashwords

The Infirmary
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The Infirmary

A cool breeze crawled down the empty corridor, causing the cobweb covered light bulbs to sway. Eerie shadows danced in the little light that the broken windows allowed to leak inside the building. As Sarah made her way to the infirmary she felt fear and hope intertwine as one emotion, a nervous freedom swelled within her. She couldn’t recall actually being loose in the hospital, the corridors seemed so vacant and the silence was bitter. Sarah had a destination; she only hoped she had the courage to make it there.
It was summer; Sarah could feel the warmth and taste the sting of freshly cut grass. Salty sweat gathered along her brow, upper lip and her face felt flushed. Temptation to peek through a broken pane and see the sun for the first time in what seemed to be ages overwhelmed her fragile form but Sarah knew if she looked she'd lose her last ounce of sanity which she was so desperately clinging to. Even now she knew her mind teetered precariously on the brink of a full fledged mental breakdown at the mere thought of seeing real sunlight, slide grass through her hands, smell a flower, all for the first time in years. No. Sarah knew she had to keep it together. Sometimes all a person has left is their sanity, a retreat of the mind; Sarah remembered a fellow patient reciting long ago and she lived by it daily.

She continued down the hall, noticing the little things slowly. A few crooked photo frames, spidered glass leaving a creepy 3D image in the faded pictures, hung off the stained walls. Some doors in the hall were ajar, the former residents long gone, leaving only minor possessions to show anyone ever stayed there at all. A rust stained teddy bear peeked out of the nearest room, its glossy eyes shining where a strip of sunshine hit them. A cane, snapped and rotten, a shoe without strings, a clump of what appeared to be hair, a wheelchair, bent and broken, all crowded the hallway, left behind in the initial evacuation which she still could remember well.

Sarah shivered with discomfort, goosebumps snaking over her exposed skin. The dingy gown Sarah wore did little to cover her up, the ties in the back so loosely attached that her buttocks were constantly uncovered. Safety lay a few twisting twilight tinged hallways away, at least those were the rumors that were whispered in the darkest of hours. Now Sarah found herself closer to the happy ending she often envisioned. All she had to do was get there without being captured. Sarah noticed her bare feet left prints in the thick dust on the floor. It rose and swam into the air as she disturbed it while she navigated the path few had dared go. There was no immediate fear of discovery though which was comforting.

No one had noticed her escape, the cell would not be checked for at least an hour in theory, she would be free if she made it to the infirmary. There was safety there. The infirmary was like Neverland from stories she heard as long as she could recall, a sacred place where safety was guaranteed, no doctors, needles or experiments. At night stories regarding the infirmary were distractions that kept the pain at bay and the darkness from taking her mind entirely. During the day it was a daydream that she lost herself in during the research, her happy place. Sarah promised herself she'd make it to the infirmary or die trying.

Several steps later Sarah passed a door where one of the horrible jackets hung and anxiety rose on her chest. Images bombarded her mind, tortuous nights and scarring days wearing something similar to that damned thing, the hopelessness and misery. It was her punishment, for not cooperating. A flood of tears fell from her eyes, mixing with the dirt caked onto her face, making a muddy, slimy substance that refused to be wiped away. Dashing blindly, Sarah found herself digging absently at the track marks that lined her arms, thick blood rising to the surface.
Sarah was panicking, her obsessive compulsive disorder of self mutilation taking over. Her skin became raw and rolled back as her nails dug into the already damaged flesh. Wrong turn after wrong turn it became apparent to Sarah she was lost. The halls went on and on, turning occasionally but still the same endless passage. Collapsing to the floor in defeat Sarah sat a long time, crying, releasing years of abuse in a single moment of disparity. This she allowed herself, it was something she never let them see, never gave them the satisfaction of her tears. Now though was her opportunity and she cried as blood soaked her gown.

As time passed the sun rose in the crimson sky, its rays slipping through the higher windows which signaled that the room checks would be conducted soon. They'd know she was missing, they'd know she was too weak to go far, they'd find her and the infirmary would remain the destination she'd never reach. The tracks in the dust would be simple to find, simple to track. If she didn’t make it to the infirmary she knew she’d be in the jacket for days, maybe weeks for her disobedience. Desperately she looked for a sign of where she was, a landmark that would guide her. A glimmer of final sunshine off metal caught Sarah's eye.

Crawling cautiously toward it, aching for a promise of refuge, she found herself holding her breath. Sarah brushed the years of filth away and read the words over and over. "Infirmary" was all it said but it was exactly what she needed to bring a renewed vigor toward escape. She was close, the sign meant she was in the right vicinity. The worn out, dented raised metal arrow pointed out her final sprint to everlasting freedom. At the end of this corridor was a door, barricaded with a piece of heavy wood, aged but sturdy. She smiled widely, surprising even herself that she still had the emotion of happiness.

The word ABANDONED was haphazardly spray painted across the splintering surface but Sarah hardly noticed. Instead she dug frantically, prying the board from its sealing screws, tearing at it with the last bit of energy she had. The wood had corroded with age, tender yet still somewhat tough. Its pieces sliced into her skin, her nails, broken and bent bled as splinters wedged into her flesh. Finally the board came loose and fell to the concrete beneath her feet and she used both hands to fling the infirmary doors wide open.

It was the smell that hit her first, a sour scent of decay followed by the aroma of stale urine and fecal matter. Behind those smells lay another, a coppery whisper of dried blood; one Sarah was all too familiar with. What she noticed secondly was the crowd, and as soon as the faces turned in her direction, she gagged deeply and dry heaved before finally vomiting onto the already repulsive floor. There was a makeshift hole from the upper floor in the ceiling of this room, crows sat perched upon the jagged edges staring down at the crowd hungrily. This was no Neverland, this was hell, there was no other word Sarah could think of.

There were no smiling faces, no arms outstretched in welcoming, no comfort. Instead Sarah found herself face to face with the corpses of the living dead, some of which she was horrified to realize she recognized. They were like the man that haunted her dreams only these creatures
were familiar. A female, jaw hanging by a few greasy tendons, cocked its head to attention at the
glimpse of fresh meat. Slowly the female pulled its leg less body with bone exposed hands in
Sarah's direction, intestines dragging across the floor leaving a slug like trail.

A male, naked decomposing body with its embalming Y incision clearly visible, noticed her as
well. He released a low, scratchy moan which scattered maggots and roaches from his mouth
onto the floor. Sarah found herself gagging uncontrollably again. The zombies looked crippled
and Sarah assumed her torturers were simply pushing them from the upper floor down here, the
fall damaging their frail bodies. A majority of the corpses were falling apart, organs laying
uselessly on the floor, and flaps of skin curling and drying in the heat like some strange beef
jerky recipe. They didn’t belong here; they belonged outside the hospital walls roaming the
streets. They moved very slow thankfully.

The room was packed shoulder to shoulder with the corpses that Sarah knew wanted nothing
more than to dine on her succulent skin and tender organs. These were the remnants of a time
long ago, when patient zero began the apocalypse that ruined society as a whole. It had seemed
to occur overnight, yet she hadn’t seen these monsters since she came into the hospital. Why they
were packed like tuna in the infirmary was a question Sarah found herself both wanting and not
wanting an answer to.

Worse yet Taylor was there, in better shape compared to his roommates, but there none the less.
Sarah's breath caught in her throat with emotion. Taylor's skin still held some pinkness, not as
rotten and oatmeal gray as the others, less bloated. His throat was split wide, like a twisted, ruby
red smile. The gown, similar to Sarah's, remained intact, and still born his name drawn with a
Sharpie yet was stained with dried blood. Teeth marks in a variety of stages of healing covered
his formally well toned body. Sarah couldn’t help but look at her own teeth mark covered arms
and flinch.

With a quivering lip, Sarah said his name and caught his attention. She had heard he was here,
that was one reason she had escaped but she had no clue he was infected. His face stared at Sarah
with the slightest hint of recollection of their former relationship. His right eye was missing; the
deep cavern was all she could focus on. The whole room of living dead were heading toward her,
hunger on their minds yet all Sarah could do was pick more faces she knew.

Darren was there, missing both his arms, green, putrid teeth snapping loudly. Judy was there as
well, her generous breasts completely eaten away, leaving deep red holes that exposed her rib
cage. Judy’s breasts had probably been an ample meal for her starving new companions or even
the ravenous crows that waited for the right moment to swoop in and grab a piece to go. The
crows themselves looked somewhat naked, feathers missing in several areas, probably infected
as well Sarah thought. Although from what she had overheard there was no evidence the disease
spread to animals but Sarah saw the proof sitting neatly above her.
It was too much, the final straw that broke her spirit. Sarah found herself letting go, ready to accept her fate. She would die with these monstrosities rather than at the hands of the ones from the laboratory. She’d die with her former friends and people she hadn’t known rather than with the ones she had known since the start. Sarah hoped Taylor would reach her first, hoped he would remember her and end it quickly rather than the alternative of her being torn apart slowly. She would watch her former friends and the strangers filling their bellies with her flesh. She wondered how long it would hurt before shock set in, how long it would take to free her from the intense pain she lived daily.

Taylor naturally moved faster than the others. It made sense since he was whole, not yet missing needed extremities. He was so close, Sarah felt his hot, foul breath on her face, felt his rough hands dig into her wrists, felt him tilt her head back to rip open her throat. Sarah closed her eyes, praying. She was ready. Suddenly Taylor's head exploded, shattering Sarah with skull fragments and brain matter. The shot had hit him right between the eyes, an expertly aimed bullet. Sarah knew immediately what had happened. Two more shots exploded the heads of the next closest zombies before a pair of gloved hands yanked Sarah back and away from the doorway of the infirmary. She was no longer in the midst of the ones she'd come so far for.

Sarah fought the gas mask faced soldier, kicked him, screaming but he never loosened his grip. "Let me go, let me stay with them, let me die!" Sarah repeated which brought more zombies to try and come towards the live humans but they were quickly shot as well. There were masked men with pistols surrounding her, trudging up memories she had long suppressed. People cried out as the doors were shoved closed and a new board was screwed into place. Same as the one Sarah had taken down. She fought, kicked, wanted to be with the dead, wanted to be dead. She knew it was a fruitless struggle. The last thing Sarah saw before the rifle butt slammed into her temple was the words abandoned being repainted over the door that had held so much promise.

Sarah found herself dreaming the same dream she always had. She was young, big blue eyes wide and darting up and down the crowd. Her father was screaming, fighting the masses to reach the gates. Her mother held her hand tightly, crying uncontrollably as people pushed and shoved. There were men in white hazmat suits and gas masks ahead, they had guns. Sarah saw her father bleeding, the chunk of flesh torn away by an insane man who had attacked them moments ago. The man had bitten her mother as well, tearing a chunk of cheek away, revealing the teeth below. Sarah’s mother tried to stanch the blood flow with a shirt but it was swelling quickly. Her father had knocked the stranger down and stomped his head in with rage Sarah had never known him to possess. Sarah still had the slick blood splattered on her arms. All she had thought during the attack was that the man looked strange, emaciated and twitching.

The men in suits stood steadfast at the gate and were bringing people to safety, to the CDC stations the radio had announced. There were fortresses where the creatures would be unable to access. That’s where Sarah's family was heading, to safety as the radio had promised. There was food, water and safety at these stations and they had waited hours to get toward the gate. When
they finally made it to the front, ducking the sunflower colored police tape, Sarah was snatched from her mother’s grip. The men in suits called out "infection! Infection" when they saw her parents. Screaming, tears and snot running down her face, hands outreached and fingertips brushing her mother’s skin, it was the last time Sarah ever saw her parents.

Suddenly fluorescent lights burned Sarah's eyes as she blinked into awareness. She felt groggy, nausea swept over her yet she could not turn her head to vomit, nor could she move her arms. Her head throbbed and the room spun and came in and out of focus. Sarah knew the lights above her well. Realization didn't take long to sink in, she was back in the lab, the place she had desperately tried to escape and failed. The walls were dirty and blood streaked, some dried, some still tacky. It was the observation room and she was strapped to the exam table, she could tell by the cold metal that strained her back with its dented middle.

The voice came through the speaker system, as it always had and always would. "It’s ok Sarah, your safe now" the voice sounded soothing, strangely comforting but that tone wouldn’t last. "You're the only one immune Sarah; you’re the only one immune to the Devcon virus! Why would you jeopardize all our research with such a stupid stunt? Sarah it’s been eleven years, why would you escape when we've come so far? You and the others know you’re the only chance for a cure, for a final solution to the Devcon virus" the voice was aggravated now, the razor edge of its words was clear. Sarah lay there silently as it continued.

"I know Taylor's loss was devastating but he was one of the lab rats, you knew that in the beginning! You knew eventually he'd be used; you should have never gotten so close with him. They are ALL lab rats Sarah, all but you. Your special but we allowed you all to mingle to keep things as normal as we could. But that's all different now. From now on you will be housed alone, thus reducing your stress and interaction with the rats. I'm sorry Sarah but welcome home" and with that the buzz of the intercom cut away. The voice would not return, it would let her suffer instead. The point was clear, her immunity would be her undoing. Her gift would be her curse. She would die here, only not like the others, she would die slowly, under bright lights and surrounded by needles.

Sarah lay there and lost the last thing she treasured. She actually felt her mental grasp on reality finally fray, like a sweater finally becoming unwoven. Sarah imagined her sanity rose from her body like a wisp of smoke, leaving her a cold shell as it dissipated. Sarah laughed, a crazy, last resort laugh, she’d never escape, she’d never see the others again. They would think she made it to the infirmary and its safety, they would continue on without knowing her true fate. There was no Neverland, there was no freedom and now there would be no more whispers of hope from her co-prisoners. The last words she ever spoke again slipped through her lips. "Abandoned"