

**Don't Scratch**  
**By Benway, Tapestry and Alicia McKenzie**

She wasn't supposed to be here. Mama always said that the railway trestle wasn't a place for little girls, but Paige wasn't scared. She could always tell when a train was coming.

Beside her, Sam laughed. "We're okay. The rails ain't singing."

"I know that," Paige said crossly. She glanced back over her shoulder, but there were no trains in sight. "I'm going out to the middle," she said defiantly.

"That's my gal," Sam said. "It's good that you're not afraid."

Paige sniffed and ignored him, leaping carefully from tie to tie. There were birds flying down below, and she wondered if they were looking for something that wasn't as good at jumping the ties as she was. It was a long way down.

One of the rails made a cracking noise like someone had hit it with a hammer, and she stopped. "What's that?" she asked Sam uncertainly.

"Destiny," Sam said.

Paige gave him a strange look. "That's a funny thing to say. The pastor says there's no such thing as destiny."

"Who're you going to believe, little sister? The pastor or your kin?"

"You," mumbled Paige.

"You want to be just like me, don't you?" Sam said, and even though she wasn't looking at him, Paige could tell by his voice that he was smiling at her. "You can't be a superhero unless you can fly."

"I know." But it was an awfully long way down. "Are you sure we can't just go up the hill instead?"

"Remember how you learned to ride without training wheels?"

They were out in the middle now, and Paige teetered a little as the wind picked up. "Okay," she said, jumping as she heard a scraping noise from the rail. "What do I do now, Sam?"

When he didn't answer, she looked over at him and gasped as she saw that there was something wrong with his eyes. They were black like coal, but Sam's eyes were supposed to be blue. She heard the loud whistle of a train and her heart started racing.

"Sam?" she asked, her voice coming out shaky. She looked around, seeing the light from the locomotive as it came around the bend.

When she looked back, Sam was gone.

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There was a funny smell in her bedroom. Paige rubbed her eyes and frowned as she saw a hairy man in a cowboy hat sitting in the chair in the corner. "Mama doesn't let people smoke in the house," she said, seeing the red light at the end of his cigar. "And don't do that to Mr. Fluppy. Please put him down."

"He and I are just having a conversation, darlin'." He blew a smoke ring, and Paige blinked, because it was green and kind of glowy. "Fluppy and I go way back. I'm just here doing him a favor."

"What kind of favor?" Paige asked.

"I'm helping him keep away the monster in the hall."

Paige snorted. "There's no monster in the hall. I'm grown up now. I don't believe in that stuff anymore."

"Then what's that?" Logan asked.

Paige listened. "Someone going to the bathroom?" she suggested.

"Shuffling like that?"

"Joelle dragged her feet like that when she had the mumps."

He chuckled, rolling his cigar around in his mouth. "Anyone have the mumps at dinnertime, little girl?"

Paige frowned. "No," she said, not so sure of herself anymore.

"Then it's got to be a monster, doesn't it?"

The shuffling noise stopped for a minute. Then there was a scratching noise at the door. The knob rattled, and Paige pulled the blankets up over her head.

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"Sam always told me you were very brave."

"I am," Paige protested, swinging her legs over the edge of the hayloft.

Miss Munroe shook her head, staring up at Paige from the barn floor. "Then why did you hide under the covers last night?" she asked sternly. "If you're brave, you shouldn't

cower. The Morlocks ran when the Marauders came and they died.”

“All of them?”

“All of them. Whole families.” Miss Munroe looked sad and angry at the same time. “Even the ones that tried to hide. The Marauders hunted them down and found them in all their little corners.”

“But what can I do?” Paige asked, not understanding. “If it’s a monster---I can’t fight like Sam can.”

“Yes, but you could fly and find help.”

“I can’t fly.” Paige made a face. “I wanted Sam to teach me but he never did.”

“I’m teaching you now,” Miss Munroe pointed out.

“So what am I supposed to do?” Paige asked, looking down at the big pile of hay on the floor beneath.

Miss Munroe sighed. “It’s very simple. Jump.”

“Josh tried to do that. He broke his leg,” Paige said, remembering how angry Mama had been. “Mama said I wasn’t supposed to be up here at all.”

“Do you want to hide under the covers again tonight and listen to the monster eating your mother?”

Paige didn’t like that idea at all. She scrambled to her feet, taking a deep breath. “Okay,” she said. “I’m gonna jump.” She closed her eyes and jumped.

She didn’t fly. Instead, it was like the time she fell down the stairs and landed on Mama’s steel wash pail at the bottom. Her arm hurt, and she opened her eyes, expecting it to look like it had then. They’d had to go to the emergency room to get it stitched up, but this time it didn’t look that bad.

Mama would really scold her if she found out that she’d almost landed on the pitchfork.

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There was an old woman in the chair when she woke up the next time. She was all hunched over like Mrs. McCutcheon in her rocker, except Mrs. McCutcheon had a face.

“Votre pauvre petit chien,” said the woman.

“Mrs. McCutcheon?” said Paige.

“Votre avenir grande,” said the woman, stroking her puppy.

“I don’t understand,” said Paige. “Are you Mr Fluppy’s friend too?”

“Je ne suis pas votre ami,” she said. “Je reste a cote de votre tombe.”

“The monster?” whispered Paige.

She could hear a scraping sound in the hall. The doorknob rattled.

“Triste,” said the woman, who slowly faded from view.

“Truhhh,” said a voice from the hall.

Paige dived under the covers, and held both hands over her ears.

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“Come on, Paige! Higher!”

“Mama said I’m not supposed to go so high,” Paige said, clinging to the branch for dear life. The wind was so strong that the tree was swaying back and forth, and the branches had been getting smaller and smaller as she climbed. She was so high up that she could see all the way to the Smiths’ farm, and that was a long way, because it took half an hour to walk there.

“I’m a lot higher than you, and I’m okay,” Kitty said, grinning.

“Sam says you can walk down through the air like a ghost,” Paige said. “So you don’t have to worry about falling.”

“I can’t,” Illyana said.

Paige thought for a moment. “But Sam said you could do those things--” She stopped, thinking. “Those stepping discs?”

“But they take you to Hell,” Illyana said sadly.

“Noooo,” Paige said, wide-eyed. “Really?”

“Really,” Kitty said seriously. “Trust me. And stop picking at that scab. Ororo wouldn’t like that.”

Paige made a face. “But it itches.” She reached a hand up to the next branch, but then stopped. “What do I do when I get up to where you are?” she asked hesitantly.

“You fly, silly,” Kitty said.

“Ms. Munroe was so disappointed when you didn’t do it right yesterday,” Illyana added. “She said you don’t care if the monster eats your mother.”

“Paige Guthrie!” Paige looked down and saw Rahne standing there, watching them. “What are ye doing up there?”

Kitty giggled. “Acorn fight!” she exclaimed, and threw an acorn right at Rahne’s head.

“Jump!” Illyana hissed at Paige, grinning. “Jump now, while Kitty’s got her!”

Paige shook her head. “This is no fair,” she said. “It’s three against one. I’m going to go down and help Rahne.”

It took a long time to get down, and Illyana kept hissing at her to jump. An acorn whizzed by her ear, but Paige kept going. “I’ll be on your side, Rahne,” she said as she reached the ground. But Rahne was nowhere to be seen.

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That night, there was a big man with white hair instead of the woman with no face. Somehow, he was even scarier than the old woman had been. He scowled at her. “Fluppy gave me flonqing Nescafe,” he growled, setting a coffee cup on her dresser and getting up, stomping towards the door.

Paige sat up in bed. “Wait,” she protested. “What about the monster?”

But he didn’t listen. He went right over to the door and opened it, walking out into the hall without looking back at her. Paige jumped out of the bed and ran over to close the door. But a pale white hand reached out and grabbed the doorknob.

The person standing there looked like one of the people from the horror movies who had scared her before Sam had explained that they were just dressed up in plastic and covered in fruit syrup. But the people on TV didn’t smell like really bad cheese, and weren’t dressed in a uniform just like Sam’s.

It had long blonde hair, Paige saw, just like hers. Except there were little bits of rice wriggling in it.

“Please don’t eat my mama,” Paige whispered, backing away a step and scratching at her scab.

“Don’t,” it said. It sounded like her papa had, just before he died. “Don’t.” It reached out and hugged her. Its hands were so cold. “Don’t,” it said again. The smell was so bad

Paige thought she might be sick, and the thing was hugging her so tight she could hardly breathe. “Don’t. Don’t, don’t, don’t,” it whispered, sounding like it was crying.

And then--

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The tracks were singing. She could tell, even though the train was blaring its horn over and over again. It was coming so fast, it was already on the bridge, and she still couldn’t see Sam anywhere.

The other side was too far. She’d never make it in time. Paige looked down. The birds were still circling. Sam had told her they were turkey vultures. She looked back at the train, then at the other side, then back down.

“I can do this,” she said. “It’ll work if I believe it.”

And she jumped off the trestle.

Something was wrong. The wind was roaring louder and louder like a jet plane. Something hit her from behind, knocking the breath out of her, and she realized that there were arms around her, holding her. It was a man, and he was screaming. But they weren’t falling anymore. The ground was coming up more slowly, and as they landed, Paige looked up and saw that the man was older, with red hair. He was wearing a blue and yellow outfit, almost like Sam’s.

“It didn’t work,” she said, disappointed.

The man sighed and put her down on her feet. “Because it’s not your destiny to fly, lass.”

Paige started to cry. She couldn’t help it. “But how am I going to save my mama?”

“One day ye will,” the man said, ruffling her hair. “Study hard, apply yourself, and ye will find a way. Although ye won’t do it by jumping off railway trestles.”

“But Miss Munroe and the others said that I had to fly.” This was all really confusing. “What about the monster in the hall?”

The man put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in close. “I’ll tell ye a secret,” he said softly. “That monster will be you someday, if you fail.”

Paige sniffled and rubbed her eyes. When she looked back up, the man wasn’t there anymore. There was someone else there, a man that was thinner than Sam and had strange black hair that stuck straight up like a broom. He was floating a little bit above the ground, staring at her with coal-black eyes.

He smiled at her, and the whole trestle burst into flame. Paige took a step back, but he

turned and walked away, leaving her there. She watched him go, and started to scratch at her scab. It was itching again.