

Demon Lab

By Emma Galbraith

Strangely, it reminded me of Jurassic Park. The large lab space was filled with counters of equipment and large glass tanks rimmed with metal. Some of them were filled with water, some were not. Glowing panels attached to the sides read off and regulated temperatures, pressures, humidity, and other variables that I couldn't pronounce if I tried. Each tank contained a monster, some snarling as we walked past, others in perfect stasis. Sharp claws and grotesque faces and twisted horns turned to face us wherever we went. And yet, the Professor strolled past them with the ease and confidence as someone strolling through an art gallery. I could see the pride in her eyes reflected in the reinforced glass as she inspected each figure and the numbers on their panels, regulating them, keeping them in captivity. All around us were the hums of machinery and occasionally the rolling thunderstorm raging outside.

She stopped at one of the panels, frowning. The beast in this particular tank had a sort of metal visor tightly clamped around its eyes, secured with a collar around its neck. It swung its snakelike head around confusedly, obviously blinded, its long body twisting around in the liquid it was submerged in. The Professor began scrolling through controls on the panel, occasionally adjusting the digital controls delicately. When she seemed satisfied, she turned back towards me. I must have been more visibly anxious than I thought, because she immediately became irritated.

"Your concern insults me, David," she scolded in an authoritative tone. "Do you not believe that I would not study these creatures without appropriate methods of containment and constraint?"

"Why does that thing have a mask?" I asked, disregarding the question.

"*Ardenti Aspectu*. Anything mortal that locks eyes with it dies instantly. I theorize this is due to the emission of concentrated radiation able to completely cut off circulation in the nervous system. It wears a visor that deflects this radiation so I can safely study it." She read this information off like a Wikipedia entry.

The monster turned its head towards me and snarled, revealing a mouthful of shark's teeth. I shuddered at the notion that, had it not been for that metal plate, its eyes would

have been the last thing I saw. Unable to look at it any longer, I swiftly turned around and met the gaze of the monster in the adjacent tank. It was large, four-legged, and vaguely reptilian, and its white-eyed gaze seemed to stare into my very soul as it paced the tank. The light from the fluorescent bulbs above was completely absorbed by its jet-black scales, and the edges of its form seemed almost wispy, like a desert mirage. It didn't glare or snarl or try to attack. It just stared.

"That one is a bit special. *Desiderio Tenebris*, I call it." The Professor looked at this beast with a strange, unreadable expression, a conflicted one by the looks of it. "This demon can take your darkest desires, the worst inside you, and use it to turn you inside out. It took a great deal of work to safely trap and contain it, but because of its uncontrollable abilities I have not been able to conduct any sort of study or experiment on it. Until I can fully research the others in its genus, the risk is too great."

I had to process this for a bit. "Wait. You... experiment on these things? Aren't they... literal demons?"

The Professor looked back at me, reverting to her previous state of annoyance. Even with her slightly-singed ponytail and the discolored spots on the fringes of her lab coat, she was kind of attractive. I could see the normal person behind the lab coat, a college-age girl who just wanted to prove herself.

"Did you think I keep these specimens here for show? Did you think a prodigy such as myself would spend her days collecting the most dangerous, elusive, and mysterious creatures on this planet, unknown to any respected field of science, so that I could admire them like fine art? I brought them here to learn all that I can about them, their biology and strange abilities. Ever since I heard of the possibility that these demons existed, I've craved that knowledge. I've been mocked by the abyss of unproved theories and undiscovered facts. I have to know. I have to discover." She spread her arms out wide, gesturing to the whole room of tanks and tables, of equipment and abominations. "This is potential. This is discovery. These are future ideas and facts in the making. And once I'm done, the world will know that I was right."

Suddenly, the walls and ceiling shuddered with a particularly violent clap of thunder. The Professor and I, we watched with wide eyes as a computer monitor on a nearby table blinked its display of data once and went dark.

The lights started flickering out. The proud panels on the tanks died one by one. Glass was breaking, and my shoes were hitting the linoleum floor in the rhythm of a panicked sprint for the door. The Professor, however, didn't move. She stood in place, looking around in disbelief at her life's work crumbling around her. The laboratory was plunged further and further into darkness until I couldn't see anything in front of me. Then there was silence, unmoving silence, as I was frozen in place, not sure where to go or what to do next in the pitch-black lab. There was only my heart beating furiously in my chest, the quiet rush of leaking water, and the echoing *clang* of a metal visor hitting the floor. I felt like I was being watched by an army of unnatural monsters, each one contemplating how they would kill such a defenseless creature and who would make the first move.

Eventually, my eyes adjusted slightly to the darkness, enough for me to make out grayscale shapes in the room. There were shattered tanks, overturned tables, smashed computers, and standing behind me, right where she was before the lights went out, was the Professor. Her ponytail had come undone, leaving a mess of slightly singed hair in front of her downturned face. There was something on her shoulder, practically an extension of the darkness that surrounded her. It was a clawed hand, with the flickering edges of a mirage.

"I... was... right..." she breathed. The smug annoyance, the composed pride, it was all gone from her voice. There was only one word that I could use to describe it, and that word is *madness*.

A hundred eyes glared at me from the dark.

With my sight partially restored, I could make out the door.

That room was the last of its kind.

That room was the last Demon Lab.