

The Thing I Saw In The Dark

By

Gloria Wickman

The sun had already risen and fallen once since my imprisonment. I spent the time watching the sliver of sunlight from a fissure in the stone ceiling slink its way across the damp, pitted floor and decay into nothing. The room turned a sickly turquoise as night fell, lit only by the luminescent fungi feasting on the walls.

The inside of my cheek had swollen and my jaw ached from hours spent grinding my teeth.

I was terrified.

I was bored out of my mind.

I looked toward the opposite corner of the room, fighting my drooping eyes to see clearly. I hadn't slept since the singing and the ceremony and the tearful goodbyes. I couldn't sleep. Not as long as *he* sat awake across from me.

He would kill me with his bare hands before the sunlight wormed across the floor a second time. He resembled his name. Fierce Leopard.

I'd seen him once, returning from a hunt. He'd smiled at me as he passed, a carcass weighing heavy on his shoulders, dried blood staining his hands. We ate well that night.

The room—the cage—that held us would not open until one of us was dead. Magic twisted through the walls, the air, wrapping and knotting us in tighter than even Great Aunt's prized snares. Death cut the sinews, let the monolithic stone door fall open like a maw after too large a meal.

Fierce Leopard shifted his legs. Fear leapt through me like fire scorching through the fields during burning season. I scrambled further back into the corner, pressing my back against cold stone, my fatigue not even a grim memory. Fierce Leopard didn't say anything to me, nor did he move again.

I took a breath. My arms shook and I felt foolish. I had scraped my palm against the floor when I flung myself back. It stung and felt gritty. I held it up toward some of the fungus, trying to see if it was bleeding. It wasn't. Somehow that made me feel worse.

We call this place, this cage, The Room of Chiefs, though no-one is declared chief before entering. Our tradition is simple. Two enter the room. The one who leaves becomes the next chief. We call it fair. An even chance. But what's said by day and what's whispered around fires at night are very different.

Truth shows itself in the dark.

Fierce Leopard commanded the respect of all who met him. He slew a wildebeest before his twelfth year. He ended a feud between two clans with nothing more than a donkey, a dance, and a cask of very strong wine.

I had no feats to boast of. I'd lived my seventeen years quietly, a girl like any other. My

role was to die, whether by his hand or by nature, and to let my death teach Fierce Leopard the price and burden of leadership.

The Elders believed I accepted my fate.

They were wrong.

(End of preview)

Want to read the full story? [Subscribe!](#)

Gloria Wickman is a speculative fiction and comic book writer currently residing in Wyoming. Her work has been published in *Metaphorosis Magazine* and *Better Humans*. When she's not writing, she's usually studying Korean or spending time at the park.