

The Pack Man
By Ethan Pranger

My eyes flutter open, and the confusion sets in immediately. My eyes quickly scan my surroundings, looking for any source of familiarity, but failing to find anything I can make sense of. I am in a long hallway, completely bare except for the strange, floating orbs shedding a dim golden light. My head throbs as I push myself to my feet, leaning against the cold, metallic wall for support. “Where am I? What happened to me?” I say out loud, trying to convince myself that I am not as alone as I feel. My stomach fills with dread when the next question pops into my head. *Who* am I? My vision begins to blur and the hallway begins to spin as panic and despair wash over me.

I stumble a few steps down the hall before my foot strikes something hard, sending me sprawling onto the ground. I lift my hand to my head. Yup, that is definitely going to leave a bump. My hands reach out blindly, looking for what caused me to trip, and that’s when I see it, a tiny red backpack. I open the backpack, looking for anything useful, finding a large waterbottle within. I unscrew the cap with shaky fingers and greedily drink the water, realizing for the first time how thirsty I am. I shoulder the backpack, thinking maybe it will come in handy.

I slide down the wall into a seated position. The water helped with the throbbing in my head, so I try to collect my thoughts. I don’t know where I am, I don’t know why I am here, and I don’t know who I am. All I know is that I need to get out of here. A shiver runs down my spine and I can’t shake the feeling that someone is in here with me. No, not someone, *something*. My paranoia is confirmed by a ghastly wail echoing down the long hallway. My body processes the sound before my mind does, and I am on my feet before I know it, hobbling away from the direction the wail came from. I don’t know what made that sound, but the thought of sticking around to find out makes my blood run cold.

My legs carry me as far as I can before the throbbing in my head resumes. I double over, trying desperately to fill my lungs with oxygen. It takes a minute, but I am able to slow my breathing and the tightness in my chest begins to fade. I look down the gloomy hallway, and I see the golden orbs again. I hobble over to one to get a closer look, and as I approach, I can feel the soft, warm glow illuminating my face. For the first time since I woke up here, I feel safe. Mesmerized, my hand reaches out, softly cupping the light in my hand, when, in the blink of an eye, it’s gone, and with it my sense of security. The panic sets in again, and I begin to hyperventilate. My knees buckle, and my head begins to spin. I fumble with the latch on my backpack, desperate to get more water, but the ground is coming at me in waves. Somehow, I manage to open the backpack, and I see the same soft, warm glow as before as the strange golden orb sits at the bottom of the pack. I feel my worries melt away as I hug the pack tightly to my chest, and a tiny voice whispers at the back on my mind. These things, whatever they are, are the way out of here.

I am met with a newfound sense of determination, and I set off to gather more of these orbs. Before long, my backpack feels heavier than it did before. I navigate the hallways slowly, cautiously peeking around each corner. I still haven't forgotten whatever made that noise. I know it's in here, and I know it's looking for me. I freeze dead in my tracks as I hear the same ghastly cry, except this time it's much closer than before. Before I know it, I am running, catching the orbs as I fly past them. As I race down the hallway, I look down the other hallways that branch off, searching for some sort of sign to know where more of these orbs are hidden. Around a corner at the end of the hall, I see a faint pink glow. I skid to a halt as I hear wail come from around the corner, and that's when I realize that the pink glow is growing brighter, and before I know it, a gaunt, pink figure staggers around the corner. My stomach drops as it turns my direction. Despite a thick, black ichor dripping from the holes where its eyes should be, I can still feel it staring into my soul. I freeze, hoping against all odds that if I stand still enough, maybe this won't see me. My hypothesis is proven wrong as its jaw unhinges and it starts making a low, guttural sound that slow crescendos into a deafening screech that fills my veins with ice. Its limbs begin to twist into unnatural positions, and with one final screech, it begins to crawl towards me at a blinding speed.

I sprint down the hallway, not even bothering to try to reach up and catch any of the orbs I am passing. I don't know how close that *thing* is, but I don't dare take a glance over my shoulder to find out. I know the moment I do, that thing will pounce, and when it does... No, don't think about it. I push the thought as far out of my mind as possible, and continue fleeing down the hallways. I take the corners as tightly as I can, hoping to put as much distance between myself and my pursuer as possible, but its cries are getting louder, and I know it's getting closer. I know it's only a matter of time before Pink catches me. As I round the corner, I see more orbs floating in my path, but something is different. One of the orbs, the one at the end, is much bigger than the others. I can hear Pink only a few feet behind as I reach the end of the hallway. Out of options, I dive for the big orb and hope for the best.

The moment I make contact with the big orb, it bursts in a shower of sparks, and my skin begins to glow a blinding white light. I hear the creature screech, and I flip over onto my back to look at it. It cowers as my light shines on it, and lets out a pathetic whimper as it turns and begins to flee down the hallway. I scramble to my feet and start to give chase, but pause, deciding to put as much distance between us as I can, not knowing if the effects of the orb are permanent. I turn the opposite direction Pink ran off and resume catching any of the orbs I come across. After several minutes, I notice the glow of my skin beginning to fade, and as it does, I begin to feel the effects of running for so long. My lungs feel like they're on fire, and every labored breathe causes me to wince. I've put enough distance between us, I've earned a minute or two to rest.

Once I'm able to breathe fine again, I resume navigating this maze. Every so often, I hear a screech echoing through the corridors, with another screech answering in response. How many of these things are there? I have no intention to find out. After what seems like hours of walking in circles, I finally begin to feel like I am making progress when I come across more hallways with orbs floating peacefully, seemingly unaware of the horrors going on around them. I see one of those big orbs that caused my skin to glow, deciding to avoid picking it up in case I need it to get away from one of those things again, making mental note of every turn I take so I can retrace my steps. It's odd, but I'm beginning to feel more confident in my abilities. At first, escaping felt like a pipe dream, but the longer I'm here, the closer I feel like I am to freedom.

I can hear the cries growing closer, but I press forward. I feel like I am close to finally collecting all of the orbs, I can't turn back now. I'm about to clear one of the hallways when I see a familiar pink glow coming from around one of the corners. I throw myself around one of the corners, praying it didn't see me. I question peeking around the corner, seeing if it's still there, but before I get the chance, a violent red glow shines from behind me. I spin around just in time to see a red, gangly, spider-like creature lunging out me. I throw myself at the wall, diving out of the way as Red narrowly soars past me. I scramble to my feet and begin running down the hallways, desperately trying to retrace my steps back towards the big orb.

I should only be a few hundred yards and a couple turns away from the orb, and Red isn't as fast, so I manage to make some distance, but I can still hear the thing behind me. I slide around a corner, and my stomach drops. The uncollected orbs littering the hallway are my first clue that I've taken a wrong turn and am now running blindly through the maze. My legs threaten to buckle beneath me with each step, but I press on. I've come this far, I won't give up now. I turn another corner, and my heart skips a beat when I see it, at the end of the hallway I see a big glowing orb. I push myself harder, picking up the pace in order to make it to the orb. One hundred feet. I can hear the things getting closer. Sixty feet. They're just a few steps behind me. Thirty feet left, and I know I'm going to make it. I reach out my hand to collect the orb when a flash of blue bolts out from a parallel hallway I pass by, colliding with me and knocking me to the ground.

We both crash into the wall, and my head throbs from impact. Luckily, the hulking blue monstrosity seems just as dazed as I do. I look at the other two creatures, and they've both stopped, eyeing the Blue and myself, shrieking with delight. They know that I'm blue's kill, and they're just as eager to watch me die as they are to kill me by their own hands. I'm only about 10 feet away from the big orb, so close I can feel the power resonating from it. I struggle to rise, but my legs give way and I collapse back into the ground. I can see the Blue slowly beginning to recover from it's daze. It's now or never. Summoning all my will power, I drag myself across the floor, inching closer and closer to the orb. The ground trembles as it puts its heavy hands on the floor, methodically picking itself up from the ground. I reach out for the orb, my fingertips inches from it, when I feel a crushing grip wrap around my ankles. With a short scream, I'm yanked back from the orb.

Blue picks me up with ease before slamming onto the ground on my back, forcing out what little air remained in my lungs. As I struggle for air, Blue pins me down, threatening to crush me under the weight of its massive stature. It gets its face right into my, and its jaw unhinges as it shrieks into my face, bits of spit and ichor spattering across my face. I know it's no use, but I hear my voice begging to be spared over the fiendish cries from Pink and Red, encouraging Blue to finish the kill. I close my eyes, tears streaming down my face, knowing that this is my end. I wish I could go back and try again; make better choices, go down different hallways or play it more safe. None of this is fair. I don't deserve to be here. I don't deserve to die. Not like this. I pray to whatever higher power is listening for one more chance. I feel an impact, and everything goes quiet.

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