

the
Enigmatic
Monster

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Acknowledgements

Well, here we are now: a new issue of The Enigmatic Monster Project! What better way is there to end this gloomy month of April?

The Enigmatic Monster is a compendium of short stories written by first time authors of varying ages about the enigma we know as the 'monster'.

This project is presented digitally, free of charge and was made for the public to enjoy.

For more information and updates please go to:

theenigmaticmonsterproject.wordpress.com

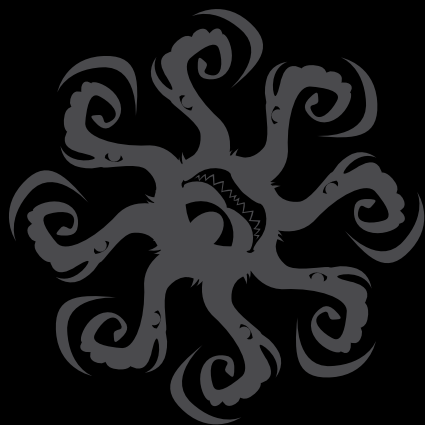
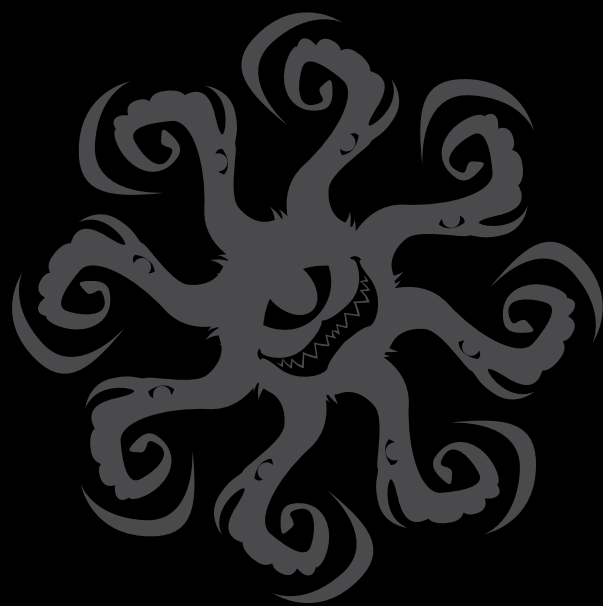
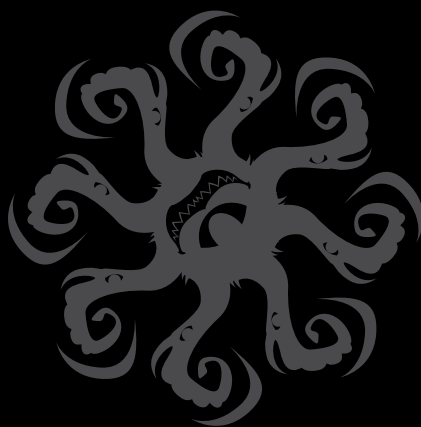
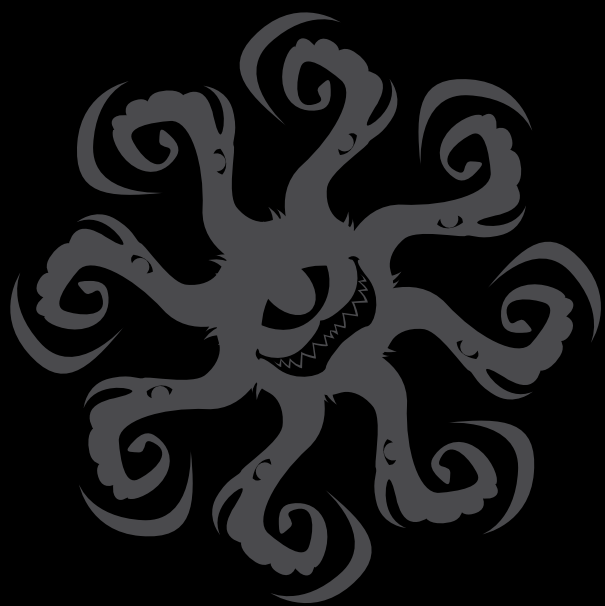
This project is lead by Penny Cobb. The stories included were edited by R.J. Mornix and this book was put together by Jacob Zaccaria, Penny Cobb and Jonathan Kruschack. We would like to thank Dave A. Mornix and Stephen Hawkins for their contributions to the project as well.

Thank you all for reading. And as always, keep it monstrous!

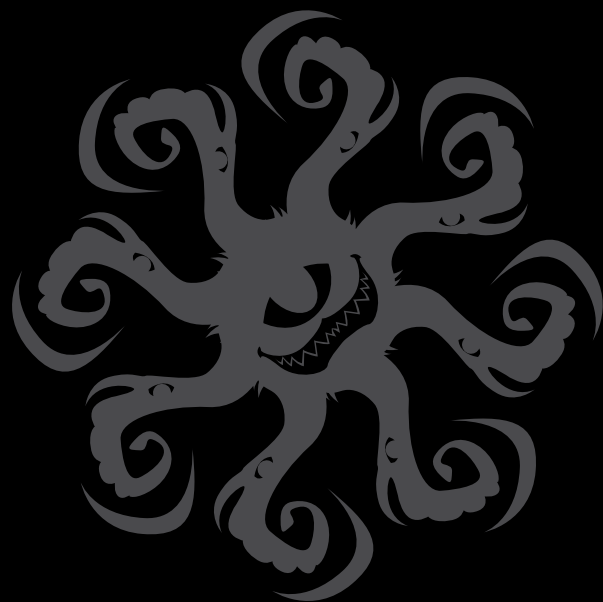
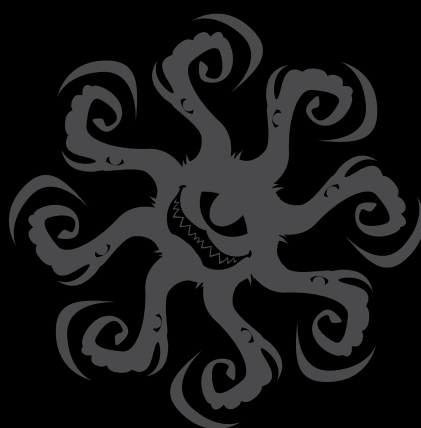
P.S: Theo sends his regards!



The Exhibit *by Stephen Hawkins*



I



Nothing is ever what it seems to be....

At twenty-one years of age, Mike Eden worked as a researcher for the local weather center in Wichita, Kansas. His friends thought him a bore and called him the “weather-man” because that’s all he ever talked about. Mike thought that was unfair.

Sure he liked talking about weather, but he had other interests like country music, having a beer and chasing the girls when they didn’t interfere with his great passion in life: storm chasing.

Storm chasing? Oh yes, chasing the real bitches of a storm or “mother ships” as he and his fellow chasers called them. So called because the storm’s cloud structure bore an uncanny resemblance to the shape of UFOs. In scientific parlance, these storms had been classed as super-cells: intense and violent rotating storms capable of spawning tornadoes.

May 5th

As he drove along the highway, Mike peered out through the windscreen of his Chaser van. It had a radar dish on top, and a computer rig inside for collecting model data of warm fronts in the area. On a hot day, that bode well for a storm.

Tall, lanky, and wearing denims, T-shirt and sneakers, a baseball cap covered his shaven head. He absently tugged on the cap before reaching out to a radio transmitter affixed to the dashboard. He unhooked the mike. As he did so, a thought to 911 crossed his mind. He shook his head. He couldn’t think why he’d thought of that. He had no crisis to worry about.

“Er... calling Wichita central. Ranger one, here. Are you receiving?”

He heard a lot of feedback. He expected that. *Ions on the up*, he thought. Then from the radio, he heard: “*Loud and clear, Ranger one. What have you got?*”

Mike instantly recognized the receiver as Bud Hopkins. Bud provided regular weather bulletins for local radio and TV. Mouthing into the mike, the thought didn’t cross Mike’s mind. “Looks like we’ve got a super-cell, Wichita central.”

“*Yeah, we’re tracking it on satellite. Where are you?*”

"Heading south of Pratt on the 183. I'm looking west over the oil fields."

"Okay. What can you see of the cell?"

Mike grimaced to peer out of the side-window.

"Well, its forward flank is about five miles west of Hodges, heading east and south. Cumuliform, heavy banking, shrouded precipitous core. Has a flat and elongated top shelf. The rear flank looks to be roping out. Could be a sting in the tail."

"Okay, got ya. Some close up shots would look good, Ranger one."

"Yeah, I figured that, Wichita central. I'm gonna go country and follow the dirt. Should be fun."

"Okay, but don't ride your luck, Ranger one. Getting upwind of a cell ain't smart. One of them twisters might just sniff your butt out, and man, have they got a sick sense of humor."

Mike chuckled at Bud's dry wit. "I'll watch the draft, Wichita central."

"You do that, Ranger one. Over and out."

"Ride my luck?" Mike smiled, "as if" as he re-hooked the mike. "Hell, no. It's the buzz, man. I like living dangerously," he grinned. "Just one shot at a big mother, that's all I want -- fame. Ha ha, yeah, being number one, that's what it's all about."

He thought of the Chaser Websites, and the best photo-shoot galleries. Some guys had really sailed close to the wind to get off shots of a super-cell in action. From skinny funnels to huge chimneystacks, you never knew what you were gonna get. He'd been caught in the precipitous core before with hail the size of softballs pummeling his van. He hadn't forgotten that day. It had cost him five hundred bucks to get the dents banged out.

His best shot? Well, not a tornado, but one of a flat cloud base. It had been no more than head-height above ground. It had this brilliant lightning bolt, thick as a tree trunk fusing sky to earth. *Pretty sweet that one, he recalled.*

Mike had spotted an exit road and started pulling over. The super-cell remained to the west of him. Set against the sun, the cloudbank looked as black as crude oil. *One mean mother*, he thought as he stepped on the gas. He could already feel the adrenaline rush coming on.

A few minutes later, he rode the bumps, gritting his teeth as the van's suspension groaned to negotiate another hump in the dirt road. The sun had gone and the visibility deteriorated, causing him to turn his headlights on. He squinted out front. To the north and south of him, he could see oil units pumping away like metal donkeys, but ahead

of him, he couldn't see anything except a precipitous mist. He could hear the thunder rumbling overhead, and the wind had picked up. Large lumps of flabby ice had started sliding down his windscreen. He turned the wipers on.

"Damn!" His prospects of avoiding the precipitous core and keeping upwind of the super-cell looked bleaker by the minute. The storm had closed in, and if he stayed on line, he would head straight into it. His only way out lay across the desert. Scrub, potholes, rock piles. *Dare I?* He thought.

With a sharp turn of the steering wheel, he dared. From then on, he drove like a madman. Up and down over mounds of earth. Endless crunching, wheel spinning, axle grinding...

"Yee-ha! Ride 'em, cowboy!"

He had fun avoiding all the hazards, that is, until a scrub-covered pothole bucked him off his rump. The van's rear wheel went in deep and stuck fast. He revved up the engine full-throttle. He got plenty of rubber-smoke, but the van wouldn't budge. In his frustration, he slapped the steering wheel.

"Shit, shit! Now what?" *Sit it out?* "What else can I do?"

Front, side and back of him, all black and banging hail. It sounded like panel-beaters at work: mallets hammering on the roof. Not again, he thought. *Another repair job.*

He sighed and leaned aside to grab his camera. A thought to call in crossed his mind, but that could wait. He set the camera's zoom lens and unwound the side-window.

"There's nothing like being close to nature," he mouthed.

As the hail thumped around him, he held the camera steady and snapped off a few frames. Then for the next few minutes, he couldn't hear as the heavens opened with a torrential roar. *Rain?* It sounded more like Niagara Falls.

When the deluge subsided, he seized his opportunity and got out of the van. He wanted to take a shot of the sky, but what he saw then left him dumbstruck. The cloud formation looked parabolic with lightning shimmers darting from place to place, and right in the center, a barrel-shaped vortex. *A giant mushroom,* he thought. "This beats all."

The rotating walls of the vortex were driven by powerful updrafts of wind, but in all the excitement, he didn't stop to think how dangerous his predicament might be. He aimed the camera skywards. The zoom lens brought it in close. *The shot of a lifetime,* he thought.

Sheriff Jack Biggins of the County Police Department stood leaning over his patrol car. He had radio'd into the station and had the mike to his mouth. Behind Biggins, a deputy busied himself checking out the inside of the abandoned van. ID found inside the vehicle had established its registered owner to be one Mike Eden who worked as a researcher at the Wichita weather center. They had followed that up.

A burly, grizzled man, Biggins had crewcut hair and wore shades under his felt hat. As he gazed away over the shimmering heat haze of the oil fields, he huffed and wiped the sweat off his brow.

"What was that, Joe?"

"His employers say he hasn't reported back yet."

"Uh huh. So what's he doing on oil land? Do they know?"

"They say he was gathering weather data. Seems like there was a storm developing out there, but it didn't amount to much."

Biggins would vouch for that. The ground looked parched dry, and above? No clouds he could see. "Uh huh. Did he radio in?"

"Yeah, they say he did. Just the once, while on the 183. He told 'em he was gonna go country to get in close to the weather."

"Uh huh. Did he have any company?"

"None they know of, sheriff."

"Uh huh. So how come he didn't call in when his van broke? The van radio's working' okay. It doesn't add up." Biggins scratched his brow. *Leaving the van unlocked an' all?* It puzzled him. "Okay, Joe. You'd better call in some units; we'll do a ground and air search of the area. There's no knowing what's happened here. Out."

With the mike replaced in its holder, Biggins wandered over to the van. That's when something caught his eye. Just a few yards from the van, he saw a metal object glinting amongst the scrub. His brow furrowed as he approached. "Now, what have we got here?" he muttered. In a few strides, he'd reached it and squatted on his haunches to peer closer.

"Well, I'll be..." *Eden's camera?*

He picked it up and brushed off the dirt. It looked intact and on closer inspection, he noted it had a loaded film. He looked around him and spotted footprints. They looked fresh, but he only saw one set and they didn't lead anywhere. Then with a mind to the van, he checked for tire tracks. But again, except for the vans and their patrol cars -

nothing. He shook his head.

“Well, it’s got me beat,” he grumbled. Then for no reason except to cuss at the fierce sun beating down on his back, he glanced up again at the sky.

Mike Eden returned from the blackness that had engulfed his life. In flashbacks, he saw his body wildly thrashing at space as he was sucked up into the vortex. Ever higher, the ground receding from his eyes, then the state growing smaller and smaller. Then the continent, the oceans, and the whole world just fell away. The last thing he remembered... a door - like an iris - sliding under him.

He had been unconscious for an unknown period of time, but as he sought to quell the confusion that had beset his mind, he had no awareness of his mass: no physical sensation of anything. Warm, cold, nothing. He was paralyzed, locked away from the rest of himself. He couldn’t impose his personality or emotions. He felt trapped inside his forebrain... until his eyes were opened.

He lay helplessly staring up at a saucer of white light. It appeared to be emanating from a domed ceiling. Then as his mind balked in fear of an alien presence, he discerned a small, circular chamber.

Oh, God! Where am I?

They were all around him. Silent and working in a blur of speed, but he saw them. Their soft, pud-like hands attaching what looked to be...surgical devices.

Please! NO! Please don’t hurt me!

As if curious, one of the visitors looked at him. It had a prominent, baldhead with large, slanted eyes glittering like black onyx - no pupils, nothing. Its anemic, gray-skinned face looked humanoid, but almost featureless. It had no ears, a tiny slit for a mouth, and a barely formed pug nose. Its long-limbed figure looked extremely slender and elasticated with a total absence of any bone-structure.

Mike had always believed that extra-terrestrials existed and -- bizarre though it was -- a small part of him kept telling him that he had no reason to be scared. It was as if he’d always known them -- the aliens -- to be real. All his fears suddenly seemed very absurd and wholly unfounded. He felt in safe hands.

As a dreamy sense of well-being continued to permeate his mind, he had the impression of a foreign, inorganic object grafted to his own living flesh. He had no sense of pain, and all he could hear was the faint sound of a bee buzzing in his ear. He couldn’t see the instrument: the disk-shaped, spinning blade sawing into his head.

When Mike awoke again, his head was beset by a series of garbled voices.

They reminded him of a mass of short-wave frequencies crowding each other out.

The voices kept coming close, then fading out. Without understanding why, he knew it was his abductors. They were communicating *telepathically*. Voices that, at first, he couldn't interpret through the hash of interference, but then slowly, they became clearer to him. The voices had a tonal vibration, and as he concentrated, they seemed to form symbols in his head. Symbols like hieroglyphics. It shocked him because he found he *could* read them.

How? He knew nothing of Egyptology. Was this some kind of universal language? He didn't know. All he wanted to do was understand. They were *in* his head.

Implant enabled. The subject uses an analogous speech pattern. Adjusting wavelength frequency and modulating receptors. Telepathic simulator is functional.

The dispassionate examination continued.

Cerebrally retrograde, neural dependant - left-sided abnormality. Thought and verbal orientated.

Mike wanted to ask them questions, but how? He had no mouth he could speak through, so he tried to think as he might speak. As he did so, his will to speak transmitted an electromagnetic pulse. Via the implant, the entities recognized its signal. Accordingly, a communication channel was opened.

Voice transmitter enabled.

Mike Eden could now communicate directly with his abductors. His first question mirrored the confusion of his mind.

'Where? What? Who are you?'

As the entities' faces drifted in and out of his vision, he heard their mind-talk.

We abide in the region of the radio galaxy, Centaurus A, sixteen million light years from you.

Mike had a beginner's knowledge of astronomy, and he knew light traveled at 186,000 miles per second. So from Earth, that meant that their star would look as it did sixteen million years ago.

'Is it the same for you?'

In the physics of your universe, yes, but our dimension is not of time and space. Our universe lies within an electromagnetic sphere that exists within anti-matter.

It's a dimension that humans have yet to discover, yet it does lie within your future grasp.

'I don't understand.'

The right hemisphere of your species' cerebrum is similar to ours. It is used for spatial, intuitive development. It is the medium through which humans can evolve, but as yet, it remains untapped. Only in sleep, when the left-sided orientation of your cerebral functionality is relaxed, is your mind freed to travel beyond its physical domain. Therein lies a gate to the realm of anti-matter and the universe that we abide in.

'Can we exist at your level of consciousness?'

Only after death when the collective electromagnetic energies of the mind are resurrected within anti-matter. Humans dream of this realm and call it heaven. In a sense, it is. This is our universe where there is no time or space. A domain where image-based telepathy has superseded all thought. As you imagine, so it is. This is our plane of existence.

Mike couldn't stifle his burgeoning fear that this "heaven" they spoke of could become his living hell.

'What do you want of me?'

They gave him no answer.

Containment pod activated. Excess matter discharged.

Mike caught a glimpse of an object being jettisoned through a portal in the chamber's wall. Then he felt a light, transparent container being fitted over his head.

They were moving him towards the portal.

'They are letting me go? Oh, thank you, thank you. Thank you, God!'

Image intensifier activated. Alpha matrix confirmed. Transporting.

The last memory Mike had was of being ejected into oblivion: into the electromagnetic arms of the spiral vortex that took him home...

At 8.03pm, Jack Biggins sat lounging in his leather-bound executive chair. A fat cigar dangled from his pudgy lips. On his varnished desk lay his phone, hat, and shades; some photo-prints and negatives, and an ashtray filled with cigar-stubs.

Biggins sighed and leaned forward. His world-weary eyes rolled left and right over the photo-prints. He only had three to look at. The first two showed Eden's grandparents. As a matter of course, he'd notified the old people's rest home in Florida, and left it to

the careers' discretion whether they told Eden's folk that their grandson had taken a hike.

As for Eden's disappearance, Biggins thought it reasonable to assume that a downpour had wiped out the van's tracks. *So maybe he split and hitched a lift, he thought. Could be anywhere. Maybe with a woman, who knows? His dumping the van on oil land is the only misdemeanor here. I'm not wasting my time and resources chasing that up.*

Biggins sniffed to flick a worm of cigar ash into the tray. Then he looked at the third photo-print. He couldn't figure it out. *What the hell is that? A plane's landing lights?* "Must be." *But strange*, he had to admit. Reminded him of... no, he didn't want to go there. *UFO? Get real, Jack.*

The rest of the film had been over-exposed. "Mm." He grimaced as a sour taste in his mouth reminded him that his cigar had gone out. He dug into his pocket and pulled out his lighter. Then as he started puffing on the re-lighted cigar, he pulled the ashtray over; picked up the questionable photo and sparked the lighter again.

The corresponding strip of negatives would also be burned. "Sorry, bud," he muttered. "But this ain't the X-files."

For Mike Eden, The Rockies had always been a dream holiday venue. *Can't beat this*, he thought. The breathtaking view from his hotel room's window. The indigo blue sky, and fluffy, mother-of-pearl white clouds.

He sighed and turned back to his room. He liked its futuristic look. The transparent glass floor and walls. It amused him to think that if he passed through the walls, he'd reappear in another dimension. And there was something else, a stand and... *was this here before?* It looked like some kind of exhibit. He peered closely at the glass ball and the gray, globular blobs of matter floating inside it. There was something disturbingly familiar about them, for the more he looked, the more the blobs would cluster and form into what... what looked like a ... *hub*. He wanted to laugh.

A brain? Even as he thought that, he felt strangely enticed by the magnetic waves tugging at his mind-sense. They felt seductive and compelling, a part of himself. For an instant, he felt his mind being absorbed within the glass ball, but it was only for an instant.

A searing pain - *hurting me* - *NO!* He wrenched his mind free. Then, as he warily looked again, he saw the brain parts separating, and this time, he saw blood seeping from the globular blobs. The image reminded him of something else, but what? *Where have I seen that before?* He almost had it, a link back to his abduction. But then his dream took an-

other turn. He heard a voice in his head, and sensed it was his mother's....

Michael?

A life bond that had once been so strong, as forgetting the glass ball and everything else, Mike thought as a child again, and tears of joy glistened in his eyes.

'Mom?'

So great had been his unconscious needs, the *dream* became his living reality. He could see her slender figure bathed in light.

'Is this heaven?' he asked.

No, it's our sun. Can't you see? She replied.

As she stepped out of the sunlight shining high above the mountains, he could see the indigo blue sky and the fluffy, mother-of-pearl white clouds again. But then as his vision lowered, he began to wake from his wishful dream. He began to see the reality of his room. The transparent glass floor and walls of his room formed the base and sides of a pyramidal temple. And all around were thin, boneless, gray-skinned figures: some tall and some small. They all had prominent, bald domes with large and black, empty eyes. And a sickening sense of dread filled his mind as he felt a hand lifted from his face.

He remembered their soft, pud-like texture.

In freeing him from her mind meld, the Centauran mother smiled as her small child pointed.

It's woken up, the child said.

Yes, it can see us now, the mother replied.

It's screaming, the child said.

They all do, the mother said, smiling.

Jack Biggins sat forward in his leather-bound executive chair. On his varnished desk, lay his phone, hat, shades, Mike Eden's ID card and an open file. An ashtray still smoked from the sheriff's stubbed cigar. The grandparents had been informed of their grandson's critical condition. But due to their age and frailty, they couldn't make the trip north and so, reluctantly, they had given the doctors permission to decide their grandson's fate. Biggins had informed the hospital.

As for Eden's file, it didn't say much. His mom and dad had died in a highway accident when he was four. According to the report, they'd been hit by a container-truck when it spun in the wet. At the time, Eden had been staying with his grandparents who, after their daughter and son-in-law's death, had assumed parental responsibility for the boy. By all accounts they had done a swell job in raising their grandson.

Eden had no criminal record. Nor did he have any medical history... until now. Early that morning, Eden had called 911 from his apartment, and then left the phone off the hook. The paramedics and police had arrived to find him lying unconscious on the floor. Eden's ID had been located.

Biggins sniffed as he checked his watch. 8.05pm. He didn't know why, but for some reason, the time and date troubled him. *5th May?* It felt like *deja vu*. Like he'd been here before. *I'm losing it*, he thought, laughing at his own idiocy.

In the intensive care unit at Wichita General Hospital, the nursing staff stood by as a smartly suited surgeon and his similarly attired colleague, the neurologist considered the patient lying before them. He was being kept alive on a ventilator.

Earlier that day, the patient had been given a cranial scan. The results confirmed a subdural hematoma. Consequently, the patient had been taken to theater where the surgeon and his team had carried out a craniotomy. They removed part of the patient's skull so as to relieve the pressure on his brain. Regrettably, the operation had failed to arrest the patient's condition. Now, the neurologist was delivering his post-operative verdict.

"There's no neurological activity." He was referring to the lowest part of the brain stem and major pathway for nerves entering and leaving the brain. The patient was brain dead.

The surgeon nodded. "Are we agreed, then?"

The neurologist concurred. "Yes, we can unplug him."

At his signal, the nursing staff attended to switching off the machines. As they did so, the surgeon checked his watch.

"Time of death, 8.05pm."

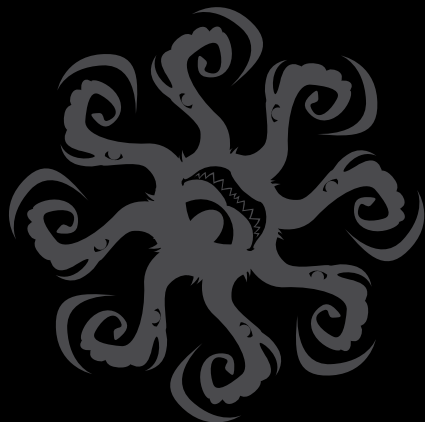
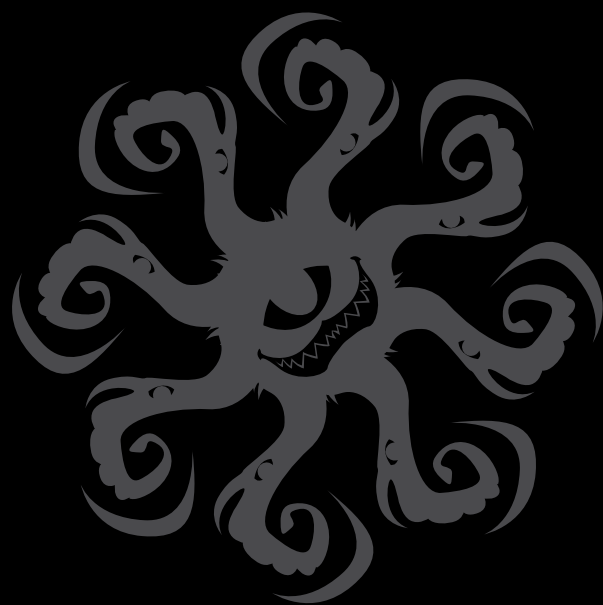
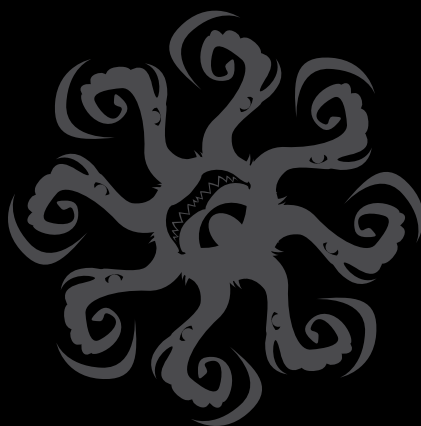
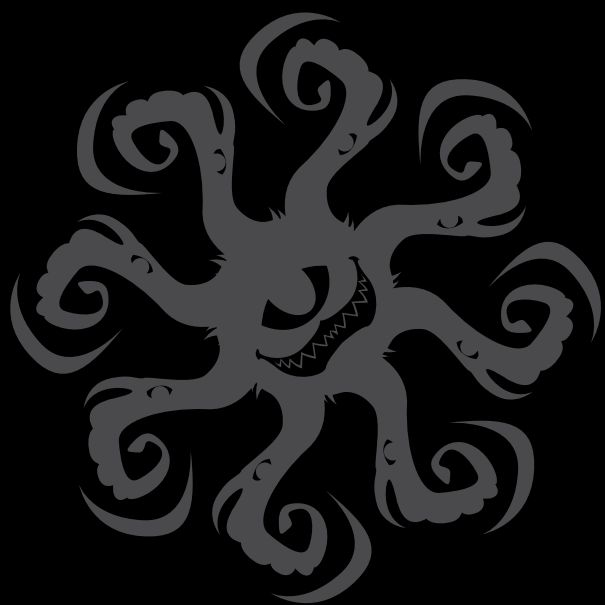
When Mike Eden suffered the brain hemorrhage that day, his mind had separated from his body and passed into the realm of anti-matter. Then what he imagined in dream became his living reality.

The abduction did take place, as did the sheriff's investigation, but only in the realm of anti-matter and Mike Eden's dream. He had died in one plane of existence, but the electromagnetic energies of his brain had been resurrected within anti-matter. He lived on in another plane where he would be preserved as a living exhibit... in the Centaurans' Natural History Museum.

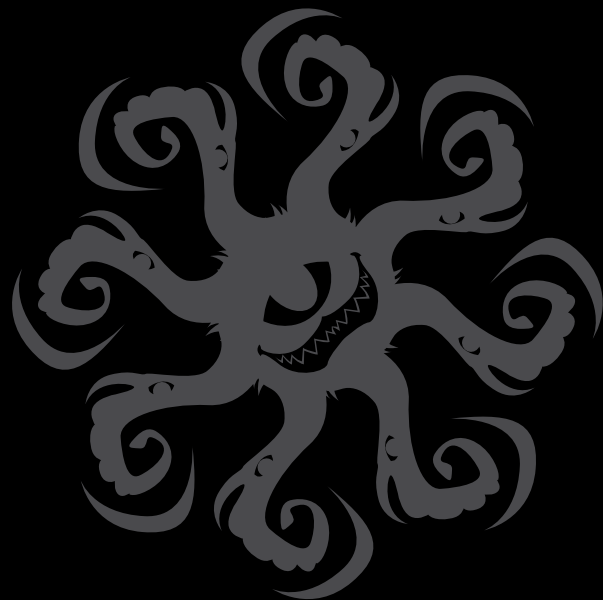
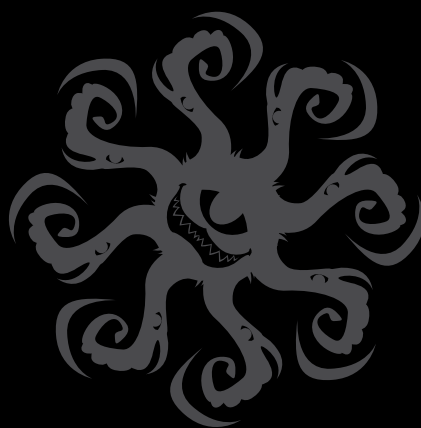
Sixteen million years had passed. The Centaurans often visited Earth to collect samples of their prehistoric ancestry.



Must Love Dogs *by R.J. Davies Mornix*



II



Wiping the steamy mirror he could see his eyes burning back at him. It was the shadow of him . . . a face that he no longer recognized. A lot of things had happened in the past year. A lot of adjustments were made. A few friends were lost. Isolation was the only companion he could count on. Every time he looked in the mirror it was a ghost of a man, of himself staring back. Someone he didn't and couldn't recognize any longer.

It was the reason he decided to go out on a blind date . . . it was the reason he signed up to the dating site. He just needed to get out there and meet people to feel real again . . . to feel normal. It wasn't that he wasn't real. He knew he was real he knew it every day he looked in the mirror at himself. Yet lately there was just something missing.

Staring back at him in the mirror he wondered. "Are you crazy?" he asked himself. "Maybe you are and you just don't know it? If you are crazy would you know it?"

Would he know it? If he was crazy ... maybe he was crazy? His situation was crazy. There was no normal girl in the world that would understand him. How could they? It was crazy! But did that make him crazy? Yes sometimes his situation really made him crazy. But was he crazy?

"Am I crazy?" he stared wide eyed at himself. Then he laughed, "Crazy people probably don't think they are crazy."

He headed to his bedroom to get dressed. "But if I don't think I'm crazy maybe I am crazy? A crazy paradox?" He paused, then reason returned, "let it go Jack ... just let it go."

Quickly pulling on his black denims he searched his closet for the light baby blue dress shirt. It brought the blue in his eyes out. At least that's what his last girlfriend said it was the night before she packed her bags and left him. She had enough of his secrets. He had a few secrets. There were some things a person couldn't reveal about themselves even to their lovers. Maybe that was his shadow self, talking? The shadow self was the darkest part of a person. His shadow self was more than just a shadow at that point, it was a beast that lurked within him. He could feel that part of him pacing back and forth deep in his soul. There was a beast within him that fought to be let out. The beast was impatient and it came out once a month. When it did it went on a rampage. No one was safe. Did he kill anyone? He was suspicious that he might have. He had woken up with blood all over him on more than one occasion.

"Okay buddy, shake it off. Put your game face on. It's a date Jack ... it's just a date."

He checked himself in the mirror added a little cologne and ran a brush through his hair again. It didn't matter how many times he had done it. It still looked a little dishevelled. There was nothing he could do with it, he wanted to look nice but chances were this date wasn't going to go anywhere anyways. They never did. Yet he still tortured himself. Slipping his shoes on before he changed his mind he grabbed his jacket, keys and wallet and then left his apartment locking the door behind him.

It was a short walk to the restaurant where he was meeting Sasha Longfellow. It sounded made up, but that's who she said she was. The air felt cool on his heated skin. His palms felt sweaty and warm. His throat was feeling tight all of a sudden.

Trying to clear his throat he swallowed hard and felt his heart racing. Okay this was how it was going to be he thought. Just like the last one he went on. He almost had a heart attack and passed out over drinks. These things ... dates ... were supposed to get easier the more he went on, so he was told. He should be an expert by now. He had been on so many.

A monk ... he could give up women all together and be a monk. Becoming a priest, or a monk, or signing up for any other religion that required taking a vow of celibacy and getting out of going on dates if that was possible, or he could be gay. There was nothing wrong with that either except he would still have to go out on dates ... no, no gay was not an option that appealed to him, it didn't exclude him from the whole dating factor. Giving sex up altogether was something that didn't appeal to him either however these date things were really taking a toll. His mouth felt so dry and his palms were sweating. As well as the back of his neck! Why was the back of his neck sweating? Just one hour from now he would be in a better place. He would have the introductions over with. They would be eating. She would be deciding on whether or not she wanted to stay for dessert or to go dancing or even go back to his place. Oh god that brought on a whole new set of things to agonize over. What if she wanted to go back to his place? It was clean, he had protection. Tonight wasn't a full moon. He never dated on a full moon night.

Standing outside the restaurant, he really wanted to slap himself to snap out of this. "Focus," he growled at himself. "Just focus and breathe don't forget to breathe."

"Are you meeting someone here tonight?" a soft voice asked a head tried to peek into the same restaurant.

"Yeah," he croaked.

"Me too, I hope he's not a loser. The guys I have dated recently have all been losers."

"Yeah, join the club," he couldn't look at her. Whoever she was ... felt the same way he had. His throat felt so dry. He needed a drink. Maybe he would go get a quick drink at the bar before his date got there. "Come on I'll buy you a drink until our dates get here."

"Sounds good," the woman was nervously looking around. She didn't look at him until they were sitting at the bar.

They ordered drinks he gulped his back and asked for another one. She turned facing him and laughed.

"What? Do I have snot hanging off my face or something?" that would be just great. It might still be a better night than some of his dates even with snot hanging off his face.

"No but ... hi, I'm Sasha Longfellow." She held out her hand.

He shook it and smiled. "Nice to meet you," he nodded to the bartender for another. "God I hope she gets here soon to get this over with."

"Well it's your lucky day." The girl beside chuckled.

"How's that?" he took his new drink and slugged it back, looking around the room looking for his date.

"I'm here. I'm your date."

"You ... you're," he paused ... blinked and looked at her.

The very pretty brunette smiled at him. "Yup, surprise!" She grinned.

"Holy crap, ah I mean, well, I um ..." he prayed a hole in the floor would open up and swallow him whole. What were the odds? If he had he been thinking he might have noticed her when they were standing outside! Her green eyes were striking. Her smile warm, bright, friendly and very inviting, he liked her so far.

"Let's get a table so this excruciating moment can continue on," she teased.

He nodded and followed her. His cheeks were flaring up unless they turned up the heat within the past few seconds it was extremely hot in the restaurant. Sasha looked amazing. They sat down and she reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

"Breathe ... remember to breathe," her eyes lit up as she smiled at him.

He nervously laughed and reminded himself in an hour this would be all over with. She would be heading home and he would be heading back to his apartment alone. Women like her didn't go home with men like him after the first date.

“Must love dogs, I really like that. What kind of dog do you own?” she was trying to start a conversation with him.

Gulping back the rest of his drink he cleared his throat and smiled. “I don’t ... not really. I used that to convey a dog lover’s image. Like loyalty, friendship, etc ... those trigger words you think of when you hear the word dog.” Plus I’m a werewolf, he added to himself.

“Oh I see.”

“Do you have a dog?” he asked.

“In a way yes,” she smiled

“Oh nice what kind?” he tried hard not to sound so nervous.

“Wolf like,” she looked uncomfortable.

“What’s his name?”

“Wolf.” She looked away. “Let’s order?”

“Sure,” he was grateful for the distraction. They ordered and then continue with some small talk. They had similar likes and dislikes. She got some extra points for owning a wolf like dog.

They took their time and ordered dessert and were sipping coffee when a waiter came over to them. “We’re closing in ten minutes is there anything else I can get you?”

Jack blinked and looked at his watch they had been there all night and it was going on one am. “Sasha?”

She shook her head no and smiled at him.

“No just the bill thanks,” he looked back at her. After the initial date thing wore off it was like spending time with an old friend he hadn’t seen in a while.

The waiter slipped him a bill and discretely disappeared.

“Well I have to say when I first got here I was a little worried.” She laughed.

“Yes me too. You’re great. Can I see you again?”

“Are you ditching me?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Let’s go back to my place or your place and continue. I don’t want this night to end. If you haven’t noticed Jack I like you.”

"I like you too." Then he thought about the blood. Swallowing hard he reminded himself it only happen on full moon nights. Tonight Sasha would be safe. "Alright I just live around the corner want to stop by my place?"

"Sounds good lead the way," she got up and grabbed her coat.

He paid for their evening and held the door open for her. Once outside in the early morning air, it was crisp and chilly. They didn't take their time strolling it was a brisk short walk. He ushered her through the lobby and up the stairs.

Once inside his nice warm apartment he took her coat and they kicked off their shoes. He went to put the kettle on for tea and she found some soft music to play. It was like she had been coming over all the time. He brought her a cup of tea in and they began to warm up.

"Tea?" she looked at him with a grin.

"It's cold outside. Coffee would keep us up all night and I drank all the alcohol I had left before I came to meet you, sorry."

"And being up all night would be bad how?" she teased him.

He laughed. "I can put a pot of coffee on if you like."

"No I actually love tea. Thank you for picking up on the hints tonight."

"Thank you for giving them."

She sat on his sofa. He sat down across from her in the chair.

"What are you doing over there?"

"I don't know what I was thinking," he got up grinning and sat down beside her. She leaned in.

"You smell really good," her warm breath caressed and teased his skin, she pulled back and looked him in the eyes.

"So do you, I have this urge to pee on you to mark my territory like an animal."

"I'll break your legs." She laughed. Then leaned over and kissed him. Pulling back just a little bit ... their noses still touching, her lips just millimetres from his. Looking at him, she whispered, "I know what you mean though. Am I dreaming?"

"That's what I was thinking," he leaned forward until their lips were pressed against each other. "Don't wake me up."

"What do you mean? Literally like in the morning? Or figuratively?" she giggled.

"Both," he bit her lip gently.

She retaliated and they moved their play into the bedroom.

The next three weeks they were inseparable. It was a full moon night ... what was he going to do? He wanted to tell her, but that would ruin everything. She wouldn't want anything to do with him. She would think he was crazy. Crazy ... it was an ongoing conversation he had with himself about the subject of his sanity.

He had to make an excuse, but what? What would be believable? This woman was amazing. She was everything he ever wanted in a woman. Normal people didn't believe that there were werewolves. Normal people would never have to worry about this. Why couldn't he just be normal?

He would die if anything happened to her because of him. She couldn't be around him when he went through the change. In the morning he would be back to being normal again. Tonight he had to find a valid excuse for not being able to hang out with her tonight. He had been agonizing over it all week long.

Sasha Longfellow was the nicest, the sweetest . . . and so intelligent ... she was the perfect woman for him. She was normal. He really wanted some normal in his life.

His cell rang. Looking down it was a picture of her face on the screen. She was calling to make plans for this evening. If he didn't answer the phone now it would mean he would have to call her back. No it was better to get it over with fast.

"Hi babes," he answered.

"Hey honey, I know you were looking forward to getting together tonight, but a friend of mine is going through something and kind of needs me tonight. Can we get together tomorrow night?"

"Uh sure, I completely understand." He had never felt so relieved in all of his life. Problem solved!

"I'll try to call you later, but if I don't please don't take it personally. She's a real head case so I might not get a chance to call you or talk to you tonight."

"I understand baby, I love you and will see you tomorrow night. Take care."

"You are the best. Love you too." She hung up.

The next six months he didn't have to make any excuses up. Each night when it was a

full moon, Sasha was either out of town on business or her friend had called her and needed a shoulder to cry on. It was perfect.

He woke up in the woods and got dressed then headed home. After getting out of the shower he felt full which meant he must have eaten something last night. Hopefully it was wild life and not some unsuspecting campers.

“Oh please don’t be campers,” he groaned turning the news on to see if anything unusual was reported.

There was a knock at his door. He went over and opened it. Sasha looked nervous. She came in and headed for the kitchen. Grabbing coffee and some toast she was pacing back and forth.

“Why do you always have to smell so good?” she groaned. Rolling her eyes she stopped. “We need to stop seeing each other. I can’t do this anymore. You are an amazing guy but I can’t see you.”

“Why?” he felt like someone had just kicked him in the stomach.

“There are just some things that can’t be said. I have this thing and I can’t have it passed on to you.”

“Well I have this theory about being crazy.”

“What?” she looked at him as if he just told her he had three arms or something else strange.

“Yes there is this theory about being crazy ...”

She interrupted him. “God I wish it was something like that.”

“You know what sometimes there are some secrets that are best left that way. I have mine and you have yours. We make each other happy. Why rock the boat.”

“What are you saying?”

“I mean I know you have feelings for me I have some for you and whatever it is that has you crazy just don’t think about it.”

“You have secrets from me?”

He laughed. “Just like you have something that you can’t tell me about, right?”

“I guess.” She hesitated.

“I don’t have another woman stashed away. I’m not doing anything criminal,” he hoped.

"I'm a werewolf!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry what?" he thought she said werewolf.

"Haven't you noticed? Every time there is a full moon I'm busy?"

Now it was his turn to be suspicious. Was she a hunter? Oh god that would be his luck. Find an amazing woman and she hunts his kind down. Was she toying with him now? She must have found out what he was. There was no way she was a werewolf. He would have noticed wouldn't he? He should have ...

"There is no such thing," he heard himself saying.

"Oh there is and I am one! I wish I didn't have to say this to you. I just really ... really like you. I love you and I just can't take it anymore."

"I see."

"You see what?"

"Okay so you are a werewolf, when did it happen? How does something like that happen?"

"I was bitten a few years ago."

It was going on three years for himself. "So you change into a hairy monster every time there is a full moon. That's what you are saying to me?"

"Yes," she couldn't look at him. "I have never told anyone about this."

"And you shouldn't either . . . ever."

"I'm not crazy."

"I didn't say you were."

"It really happens."

"I am not saying you are lying."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm really not sure."

She looked at him and he saw fear in her eyes. Was this a trap? It was feeling like a trap. He had to be careful ... don't tell her you're one too idiot! The shadow self was grinning in delight there was danger and a question of whether she was setting him up for a trap. It really felt like a trap. Then again he did have some trust issues.

"I completely understand if you don't want to see me again."

"Why did you take such a risk and tell me in the first place?"

She looked away. Tears filled her eyes. He watched her swallow and sniff back a couple tears before whispering, "I love you."

He didn't know what to say. It's a trap! His shadow self, giggled with glee. There was no question about it. It was such a delicious beautiful trap. Did he take the bait or run?

She closed her eyes tight and wiped her tears away. Should he reach out to her? Should he confess he had feelings for her too? Did he really have feelings for her? Yes that was already established he reminded himself. What did he do? Standing there like an idiot wasn't really helping.

Sasha got up and looked at him. There was such hurt in her eyes he didn't want to see it there, but didn't know what to do to remove it. She turned and ran out of his apartment.

"Sasha wait!" he called after her but she was already down the stairs when he got to the door.

Maybe she was a werewolf after all she was pretty quick on her feet. Racing back inside he ran to the window to yell after her, but she was already half way down the street. She was gone.

You're better off without her, his shadow self, conceded. She was only going to bring trouble. She is trouble! A werewolf? How did she find out he was one? He hadn't done anything did he? God he hoped he wasn't talking in his sleep again. She had to have some kind of insight that he was a werewolf and concocted this story. She was trying to draw him out. Don't chase after her, his shadow self, warned. No good can come from it. Next time we change we can hunt her down and kill her for lying to us. No he was not a killer. Why was he arguing with himself?

"Because you're crazy?" he whispered. Maybe he was crazy after all? Either he was crazy or being a werewolf was making him crazy. He wondered how many more werewolves, were there? Was it possible to find a mate? To find a real, live, werewolf mate? What if Sasha was his chance? What if that was his one shot of finding a real mate? He really loved her.

"A trap you fool!" he growled to himself. It had to be a trap. What were the odds of him finding someone who was so compatible in every sense he needed.

He spent the rest of the day brooding about Sasha. Then he found himself outside her apartment standing in the shadow watching her window. She was home alone from

what he saw she wasn't having a party nor was she celebrating anything. None the less, he just stood there and watched until she went to bed around one. He had been at her place more than once quite a few times since they had started dating. There wasn't anything that he could remember that would indicate she was working undercover for anyone.

Sasha Longfellow came out the front door! He saw her leaving her apartment. Where was she going in the middle of the night? He decided to follow her, but kept a distance. If she really was a werewolf she would sense someone following her wouldn't she?

Now she was going to lead him to whoever she was working for! He was ready for it. He would bust in and show them who was boss. Couldn't mess with his feelings and get away with it. Someone was going to pay for messing with him and his feelings. He would bite their throats out. She stopped and was looking up. Looking around he realized she was standing outside his place. How odd. What was she up to? Was she going to call and alert, whoever she was working for that he was ready for ... whatever they were planning?

Confront her! Bite her head off, his shadow self, had his fur up on end. Ready for battle! He watched for an hour she didn't move from her spot she made no movement as to call anyone on her cell. What was she waiting for? What was he waiting for?

He crept up behind her and stood just one foot behind her watching her. She didn't move. He could hear her sobbing. Why did she have to be crying? There was nothing worse than a woman crying. Even his shadow self who wanted to rip her head off was quiet and seemed to have disappeared back in the dark shadows of his mind. He didn't want to be around it either. Stepping closer until he was right behind her. Reaching out he touched her shoulder.

She jumped and screamed. He laughed and felt bad for that too.

"Sorry," he held out a hand to her.

Sasha looked at him and flung her arms around him. Sobbing into his coat she clung to him. He was going to have to wash it later to get the werewolf tears and snot off it. He noticed having her arms around him felt . . . so good. Please don't be a trap.

Once she calmed down he took her for a walk into the park. It was really dark there and if things got out of hand he could deal with her there without any witnesses. They stopped and sat down on a bench. She snuggled up to him. He wrapped an arm around her.

"So who are you working for?"

"You know where I work," she didn't move.

"I know where you told me you work, but who are you working for?"

She pulled away and looked at him confused. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"No I don't think I do. Spell it out for me please."

"You claim to be a werewolf, so I'll drop my guard, but I'm on to you. I won't hurt you if you tell me who you are working for." He grabbed her arm and held it firmly.

"You're scaring me Jack. I don't know what you're talking about?"

He laughed, but the humour didn't reach his eyes. Glaring at her he decided he wasn't going to leave the park without the answers he was looking for. "You're not a werewolf I get it."

"But I am Jack! I really am."

"Stop lying to me!" he growled. "I am a werewolf and I need to find out who you are working for."

"What?" her face dropped as she looked at him. Then her eyes lit up and she flung her free arm around his neck. "Really? This is the happiest day of my life." She kissed his cheek and then his mouth.

Was she really a werewolf? Did he have it wrong? No don't trust her Jack, his shadow self, warned. She is trying to get you to drop your guard. She's working with someone you need to find out who Jack!

Swallowing hard he really wanted to believe her more than anything else in the world, but there was a part of him that was scared to. If he did what did that mean? Trust, loyalty, friendship, lovers ... it was a must love dogs thing.

"I scratched you when we were having sex a while back I know. It was my fault wasn't it?" she looked a little sad.

"No I was one before I met you. So you really didn't know I was one?"

"I was suspicious but then couldn't allow myself to get my hopes up. I wanted you to be one so bad."

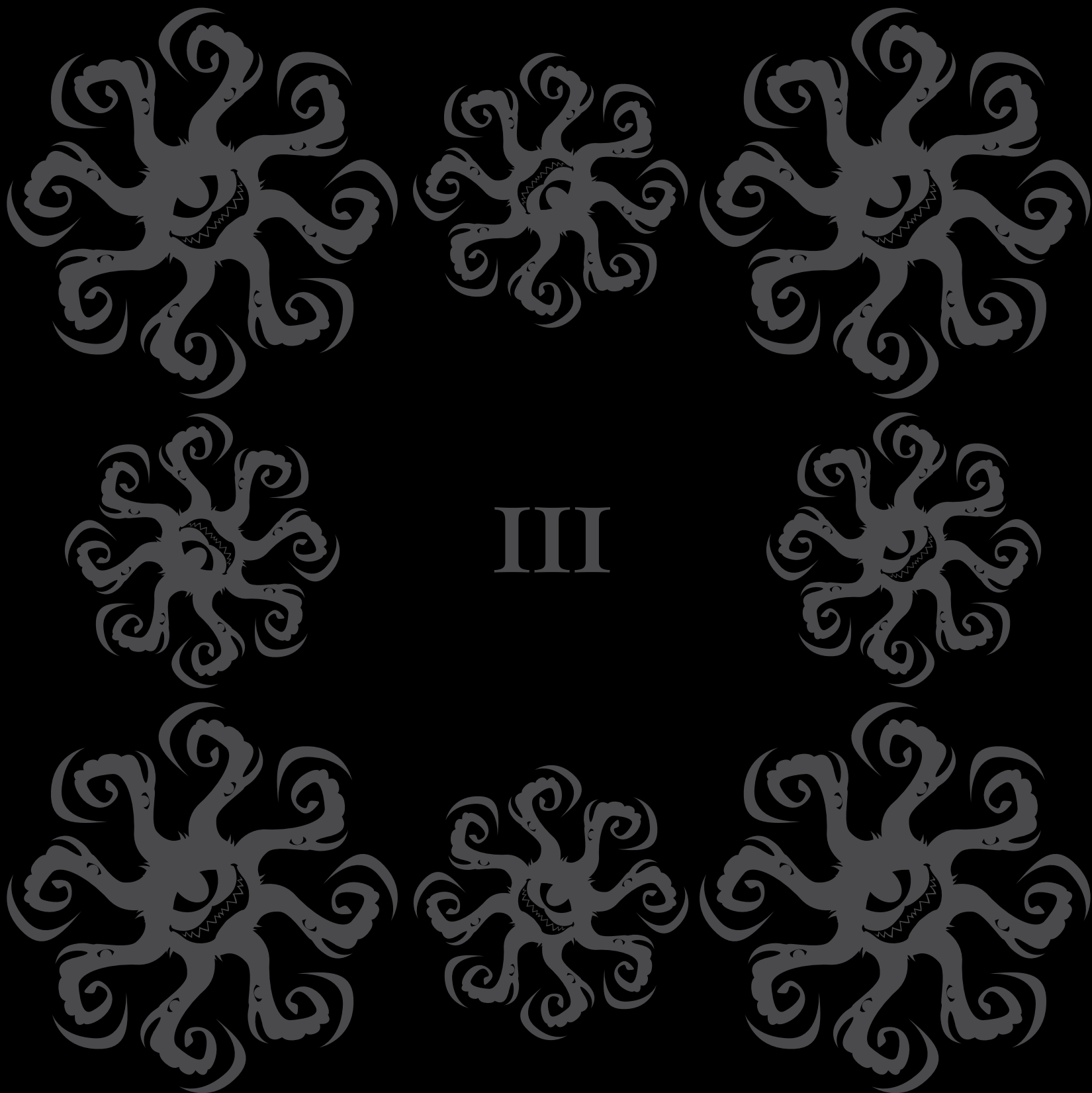
Just kill her Jack! His shadow self, was screaming at him. No one would blame you kill her dead! "Do you ever hear a little voice inside your head telling you to do things?"

She laughed nervously. "Sometimes, but it's usually just to keep me safe."

“Oh yes that is one way to interpret it,” he smiled. Then again maybe he was just crazy! Fine Jack keep her alive a little longer but you will have to kill her eventually you know that right? Jack I know you can hear me. Sasha Longfellow will die soon. He kissed her and prayed that he wasn’t crazy and that he could control his inner beast ... his shadow self.



The Void *by Dave A. Mornix*



It's everywhere ... the darkness ... it hides in the darkness. Just as you wake in the morning that moment when you are neither awake nor asleep. In that moment where you are trapped in between it lives there. That shadow that ducks out of the way, outside that peripheral zone of your vision. You know what I mean, when you justify it as just a dark shadow, just your mind playing tricks on you ... it was nothing. It was something! Something in a big way. When you are home alone and you swear you see something moving ... hear a noise ... something that is unexplained, but your rationale mind declares it was just a shadow, the house settling, your neighbour making too much noise, or it's just the jitters. It is not just the jitters ... that is the VOID. It lurks in the dark, and plays in the dark corners of your mind. It toys with you and your mind rationalizes it.

"Don't blink ... don't blink...", he repeated to himself. It was his new mantra.

Yet, it brought no peace within. Not knowing ... what he knew ... the truth.

Eyes stinging as he tried to keep them open for as long as he could.

Biting down hard on his bottom lip, he desperately needed a distraction.

Everything he knew ... his entire existence and the world around him was falling apart before him. Like the bottom of the shopping bag tearing free and all the contents free falling into an abyss.

"Don't blink," hot tears burn the back of his stinging eyes. His heart racing so bad he was afraid it was going to jump out of his chest.

With sopping wet hands from sweat he got up slowly and searched for a flashlight. Light was his salvation. Only in the dark ... the dark recesses of a room, of the mind could they get him.

A choked half crazed chuckle, caught in his throat as he recalled a time when he was only a small child about six: he hated going down into the basement, it was dark damp and distressing. Monsters lurked in the dark, his older brother who was eight said the monsters under the stairs were going to get him. They had both been terrified to go downstairs. His brother swore he saw monsters down there; their parents had chalked it up to an overactive imagination. It was two years later his brother had went downstairs to get something out of the freezer for their mother and he fell cracking his head

on the cement floor ... dying instantly.

Everyone was distraught, since then he had been forbidden to go down stairs, which was fine with him. After all he didn't care to go downstairs, he knew that was where the monsters lived. The same monster was back, he was thirsty for the ones who got away. All the kids he hung out with were gone ... dead ... mysterious deaths all of them. There were seven children deaths, when he was younger.

When he hit eighteen he had moved away. Three friends and he were the only ones who had escaped. He had done it once escaping the demons that haunted these grounds. He had thought he made it out for good. Yet, here he was. He should never have come back. He only had himself to blame for coming back. There was a nagging little voice that begged him to stay in New York. He should have listened to that voice. Yet, when he heard about Stevie's death, he had to come back for closure.

Before Stevie, Rick and Allen both died in a car accident. It had been just him and Stevie for a couple of months, the only survivors. He needed to see the last of his friends, the last of the haunted. Before he came back he thought it was the exaggeration of a child's scared mind. Then when he stepped off the plane he knew. The air smelled different. There was that deep seeded fear that haunted him for years creeping in the shadows.

Once he was back in his parents' home that distinct odor of haunting decay lingered. His parents were happy to have him back and were going to cancel their cruise trip which they had been planning for over a month; they had already prepaid it. He had talked them into keeping their plans and the day of the wake they caught a plane out of town.

The soft quiet echoes of his big brother's child like voice crept through the floor boards and taunted him in his parent's empty home.

The funeral was yesterday his return trip back to the big city was for tomorrow morning. Looking at the large clock on the wall he had nine hours to go. Biting back the fear, his hands were trembling.

"Don't blink ... don't blink..." trying to swallow his fear his stomach felt knotted and twisted. It felt like time had spun wildly backwards standing in the kitchen at the sink, he felt like he was that scared six year old kid.

Paralyzed with fear he was frozen on the spot. His eyes locked with a pair of red burning eyes glaring at him just outside the dark kitchen window. Swallowing hard, he realized whoever those eyes belong to were either, ten feet tall, or floating above the ground outside that window. Trapped with those eyes burning into him, his body could

not move. "Don't blink ... don't blink..."

Time felt frozen, the hot salty tears streamed down his cheeks. It couldn't be real, sense of reasoning screamed in the back of his mind. Stepping backwards slowly he knew he needed to put some distance between him and those vigilant eyes. They were bright rolling pools of hot red lava. Back peddling his flaying arms he managed his way back into the living room. Here he couldn't see the eyes watching him. Here that darkness was kept at bay. The curtains had been pulled close earlier, the monster couldn't get him here. Here he had the illusion of safety. All he needed to do was wait ... wait for morning. At that point he had a plan. He wasn't packing anything, he was going to make a break for the door once the sun came up. He would walk to the airport if he had to and get the next plane out. He promised he would never ever come back. Praying quietly, all he could think of was getting out alive. Wiping the tears off his cheeks with the back of his hand he thought he caught a glimpse of something moving swiftly out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't blink ... don't blink," he was practical sobbing at this point.

Maybe he was crazy? If he was crazy, then nothing was going to get him, right? He tried to reason that train of logic out in his mind. Crazy people imagined things all the time. Turning he examined that side of the room. Earlier he had collected all the lamps in the house and plugged them into the living room. His intention at the time was to eliminate all the dark corners in the room.

His chest continued to heave rapidly. Crazy ... yes maybe I am crazy? He hadn't been crazy two weeks ago, had he? Not all crazy people acted crazy twenty-four/seven, he countered. Didn't he read somewhere that sometimes it was the little things that could trigger crazy into being crazy. Maybe coming back here was too much for him. Being back in the house that his older brother had died in ... back in the house where the monsters lived.

"Don't blink ... don't blink," he knew he was just moments away of curling up into the fetal position and crying himself to sleep.

"No!" he shouted and startled himself. He was trembling. "Don't blink ... don't blink ..." If he did that the monster would get him in his sleep. He could not close his eyes. No that would be signing his death warrant.

Cold, the house felt so cold, or was that just him? Looking at his bare arms there were goose bumps covering his skin. If you were to fall asleep and woke up in the morning, it would mean that he was crazy. Then he could just seek out help for his craziness. Shaking his head he knew he could not take the chance. What if he wasn't crazy? What if the monster was real? He didn't just imagine those red burning eyes piercing through

him. Pacing back and forth in a small area he tried to think of something else.

His brother's voice creep into his thoughts, *"it's real Jack, its' real. It lives in the dark and the shadows, and when you blink or close your eyes ... it's there. It's called the void. I'll protect you. Its' not that strong now Jack but it is getting stronger. Don't be too scared. But don't go into the basement by yourself. Do you hear? You hear me Jack? It's not safe there especially."* His brother had always been looking out for him.

"Jack?" closing his eyes tight briefly he opened them quickly. Swallowing hard he noticed there were shadows in the room that weren't there before.

He heard it again, his brother calling him from the basement. Shaking his head he slowly turned and studied the room. The lamps were all still brightly lit, yet there were thin, light shadows creeping into the room. Tears blurred his vision, choking back sobs he shuddered uncontrollably.

"Jack?" his brother sounded like he was in the kitchen coming for him.

The soft shadows were creeping their way from all corners of the room towards him.

"Stop!" he sobbed "Stop. Oh god please stop."

"Jack?" his brother entered the living room wearing a smile but it wasn't Mike. It looked like ten year old Mike but it wasn't him.

"Please go away," Jack pleaded.

"Let's play hide and seek close your eyes and count to ten. I'll go hide."

"Please," he begged. "Please go away."

Mike stood in front of him, the shadows accumulated and towered behind Mike. The red lava eyes were back watching him.

Mike stood in front of him, shadows crawled out of every corner, accumulating and towering high behind Mike. His red lava eyes were back watching him.

Mike's cold fingers grabbed his hands and raised them up to his face.

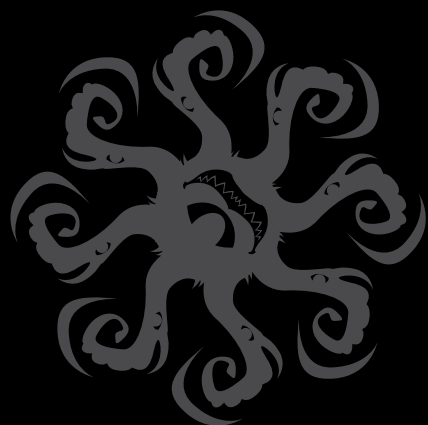
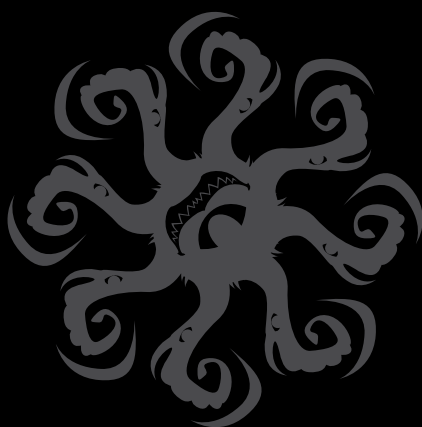
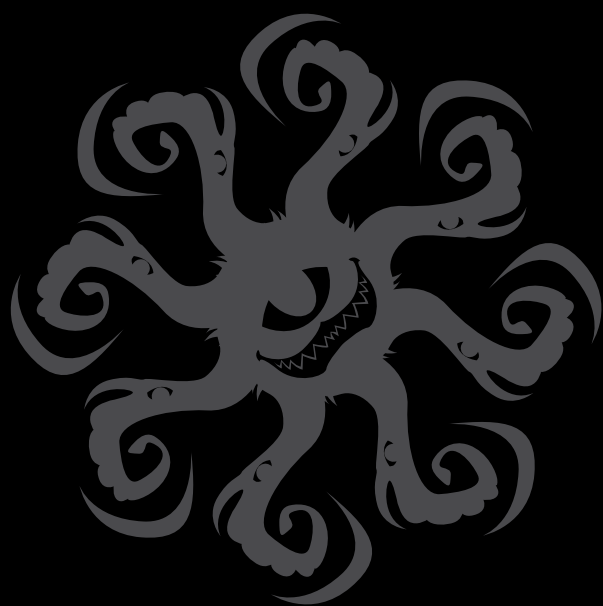
"Count Jack ... it's your turn to count to ten."

"Please don't," he sobbed softly shaking uncontrollably. Then the darkness of the void swallowed him.

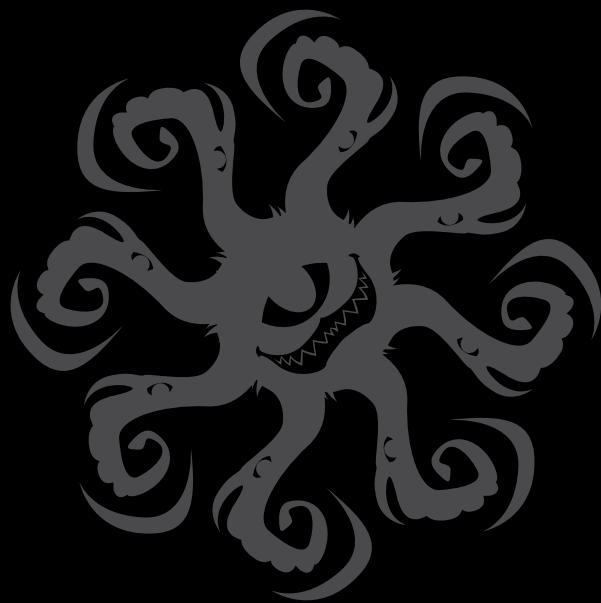
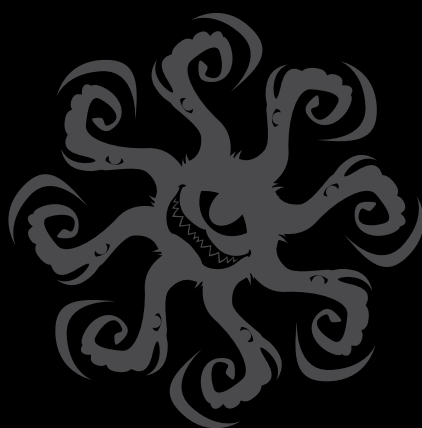
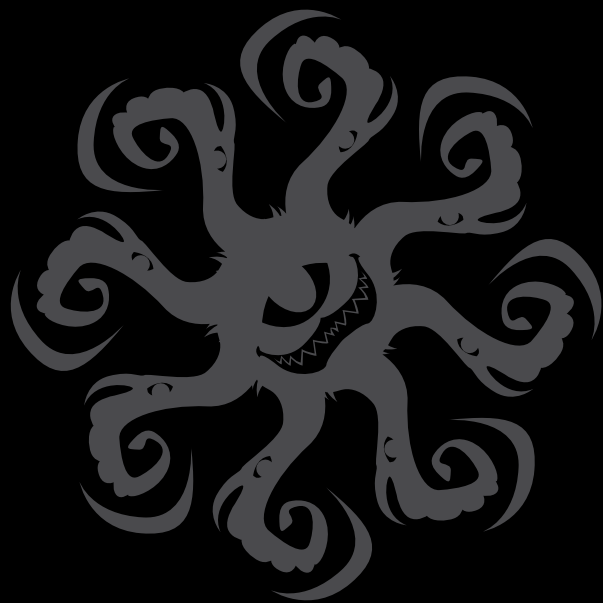
The last words he heard were. "I wanna play," in Mike's voice. It was the last thing he heard before he died.



Apocalypse Man by Penny Cobb



IV



1: The Outsiders

They were walking down Church St. at 2 am in the morning. Literally, they were just walking—away from an embarrassing night at the bar. Some men have the knack for driving young women away, especially the older ones ...

She supposed that was fine though.

Her friend grabbed her arm. “Hey, look at that!” she stopped in front of a store window ... It looked like a cross between a laundromat and a convenience store on the inside.

But she wasn’t commenting on the interior design.

For this type of scenario it truly was the inside that counted most, and what was on the inside was purely bizarre.

It looked like a cross between an AA meeting and a role playing convention. Instead of goblins and dwarves there were aliens; it was like looking inside the mind of HR Giger.

The group watched the two girls as they watched them with mouths wide open.

Seeing them made her blood run cold for some reason . . .

One of them caught her eye in particular: he was the most humanoid, which wasn’t saying much. She didn’t really know if it was male, to be honest. It’s glossy, ebony skin glistened in the fluorescent light.

He smiled at her, looking both sweet and sinister, if that was even possible . . . Her cheeks flushed, hot enough to fry an egg.

“Hey!” she felt a tugging at her sleeve; it was her friend. “Let’s go!”

“Sure,” she mumbled. Was she being resentful? Her mind was elsewhere, a large part of it occupied by the *man*.

He was like an apocalyptic vision of the future.

Or was it a nightmare from the past?

2: Luke’s House

Why was she here?

She couldn't recall anything. Nothing. Her mind was a blank slate.

The only thing she remembered was a late night bar fiasco, followed by the Dungeons and Dragons session from hell. And, not surprisingly, *him*.

Whoever the hell he was . . .

Which brought her back to the then and now: why was she here, and how did it happen? That she was alone was well out of the question.

A muffled sob came from nearby.

Hmmm . . . she thought. So I'm not alone then?

That was hardly comforting.

There was no light to be had, so she couldn't see a thing. Likewise, there was no warmth, so she could barely feel. All there was, was a cold numbness from her hands down to her feet. All that was left to her was her sense of hearing. Through all the sobbing, that wasn't working too well for her. She sat up, feeling weak and sore.

As soon as she was sitting in an upright position her head began to throb. Her ears rang. *It's like someone dropped a bell over me.*

What happened after sitting upright was fuzzy, because she blacked out. Anything could have happened to her.

In the next instant someone was shaking her awake. A light was being shone onto her face, a dim flashlight; the battery must have been considerably weak, but the light was too much for her to handle. Mumbling something in protest, she made an attempt to swat the flashlight away.

The stranger responded by shaking her by the shoulders with both hands.

At least the light's out of my eyes, she thought feebly.

"We need to get out of here!" the stranger hissed, an urgent, desperate sound to her ears.

What? She felt as if someone had thrust her into the middle of a climactic story.

"Where am I?" she managed to say.

The stranger, an older man, paused to shake the flashlight. For a brief moment the light intensified, before returning to its lacklustre brilliance. "Well, that did nothing," she heard him say, very bitterly. He returned his attention back to her.

She expected a long bit of exposition, but instead received a short: "*Luke's house!*" in re-

ply. He shrugged his shoulders at her disbelieving frown. "This isn't a dream you know, but suit yourself," were his final words before retreating from her.

And the room that they were in.

Not wanting to be alone, she scrambled after him. They went from room to room for at least ten minutes. Wherever this place was, it was a damn maze. Down hallways they went, past more dark rooms . . . Some of those rooms were neither quiet nor empty. She didn't want to think about them . . . Would NOT think about them. All she wanted was to see the light of day.

Finally, they came to a flight of stairs; they lead up to a closed door. Faint light filtered through the cracks. Her heart did a back flip.

There was also another door though, on level with them, to their left. The door was slightly ajar; a light was on inside, and someone was in there. They could hear it, whatever it was, whatever it was doing . . .

. . . Who wanted to know?

The stranger was about to set a foot on the first step when a thing shot out from the room with a loud crack. It was like a long, thin, snake-like creature . . . with teeth covering every inch of its body . . . the thing wrapped itself around the man's arm.

There was a sickening snap, and then it dragged the poor bastard into the room.

She had never heard anyone squeal like a pig before.

Her mouth opened to scream, but there was only silence. The next thing she knew, she had bowled through the screen door of the house. On the outside it looked like a normal house.

It wasn't.

This was Luke's house.

Whoever, and whatever, the hell he was.

Shocked and dazed, she stumbled from the front yard onto the street, yelling for help. None came. That was fine by her. No one would listen. If anyone cared at all they weren't extending much effort. Not one soul came out to see what the commotion was. It was like she had stumbled onto a ghost town.

There was a definite wrongness about this neighbourhood.

So she ran.

And ran, and ran, and ran.

Anywhere but here . . . wherever here was.

3: Henry

Little did she know that things would go from bad to horrifying . . .

He peeked through a crack in the blinds to watch her go.

Such a curious girl, was his disinterested thought as he wiped the blood from his hands, disappointed at the loss of the test subject: Ross. He must have escaped his holding cell somehow. In the events that followed Ross had discovered the girl, and had made an attempt at liberating both themselves.

What a foolish man. Kind-hearted, but foolish. The *z'bar* had made quick work of him, leaving nothing that was recognizable . . . It would take weeks to clean up the mess.

Luke let out a sigh. He would have to send someone to dispose of the girl—*Henry* being the likely candidate, considering that he was the one who had brought her here in the first place. “Damn,” he growled.

According to Henry, the girl and her friend had seen one of the meetings which took place every week or so. Therefore he had taken her into custody . . . But not her friend.

Luke knew better. Most humans saw a group of people dressed up as aliens if and when they stumbled upon the night meetings. Generally they were good about it, thinking nothing was out of the ordinary . . .

. . . Henry was lonely. When he saw the girl he took the first opportunity he had, and abducted her. Luke couldn't blame him, as he himself was a hybrid, and understood the crushing sense of loneliness.

Still . . . What a flimsy excuse.

Now she was gone. What she had seen was very little, but even that was too much. It was now Henry's problem. And he would deal with it.

Luke finally picked up the phone. There were approximately five rings before Henry picked up; he had been sleeping, perhaps. Luke didn't care.

“Hello, sir?” came the voice from the other end.

“She's escaped,” Luke informed the voice.

Silence greeted him from the end.

“You know what to do.” Luke hung up.

He did. Dead air met him after the other end clicked out. The creature known as Henry slipped out of his bed . . . Pants on . . . Shirt on . . . Guns and knives . . . And so on. In less than five minutes he was ready. Grabbing the keys, he left his home, got into his car, and drove away.

It was a nice day, but the neighbourhood was quiet. It always was, and he hated it. They only made a pretence of living a normal life, without even touching upon normality, and he hated himself for it . . . For perpetuating that lie . . .

From the rear-view window he noticed a dark shape dart across the street. The car screeched into a U-turn, and Henry doubled back, slowing down at the spot. He craned his neck, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. It had to be her, though. He was sure of it. His attention returned to the quiet road as he mulled over his thoughts.

Then he cranked up the speed. Tires screeching . . . Engine revving . . . *She has no idea what hell is*, he thought.

And the fault was all his.

4: Apocalypse Man

The sun sank low, lower and lower, dangerously so . . . By this time tears had begun to stream down her face—hot salty rivers that stung her cheeks as they dried, leaving behind snowy white embankments. This place, this damn ghost-town of a *neighbourhood* was a maze. A trap. At first she hadn't felt them, had been unaware, ignorant . . . Ignorant of the hidden eyes which watched her from every nook and cranny of this nightmare. After what had seemed like hours she finally felt them drilling into her. Wherever she went they were there. There was no peace for her, let alone a place to hide, and more importantly: no exit.

She stumbled down the pristine sidewalk, not caring whether they saw her or not. Her foot caught itself on the pavement, and she fell to her knees. "Whatever," she muttered to herself. There was bile at the back of her throat. "I just don't care anymore!" The taste of the bile was indescribably bad; she coughed, spat . . . *The taste just wouldn't go away.*

Her ears caught a faint scraping from behind her, the scraping of feet over pavement. She peeked over her shoulder for a better look.

Him.

He was exactly how she had remembered him from that one fateful night . . . Whenever that was. It felt like she had been running for weeks.

The only thing she had not anticipated, however, was for him to be real. Here he was,

in the flesh, out in the open, framed by the orange light of a setting sun. The scene before her was oddly picturesque; the creature before her was tall, lithe, possessing the build of an Olympian. In one hand he held a gun. The arm which held it hung relaxed at his side. That did little to assuage her unease; everything about him suggested a creature made for action . . .

. . . As if that were his sole purpose.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“Yes,” was his reply. His voice was soft and smooth. Before she even realized it his gun was pointed at her head.

“Why?”

The creature hesitated; he looked worried, then he looked sad, tortured even. A myriad of facial muscle twitched in those few moments, each movement resulting in a new nuance, resulting in a new emotion at war with the others. What could he be feeling? The sun descended, till it was just above the horizon, casting the creature in a deep violet hue. The stark red of the dying sun smouldered for another second, outlining his face, before finally sputtering out.

After a moment’s pause, she worked up the courage to repeat herself: “*Why?*”

His gun hand wavered, but he managed to compose himself. Then he jerked his arm down to his side; the gun skittered over the sidewalk. As if in shame, he lowered his head, looking anywhere, but at her.

“**Because,**” he told her.

He sounded so pitiful.

“What?” she said in a low voice, confused. “What does that —”

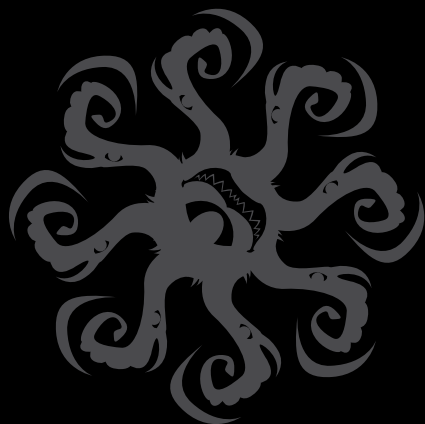
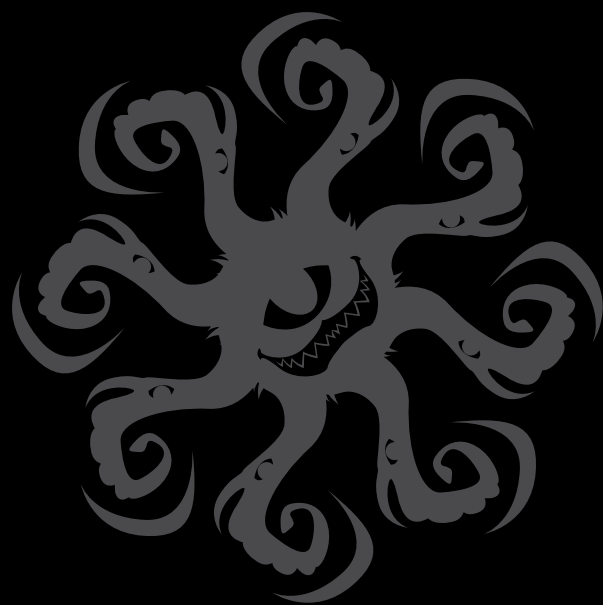
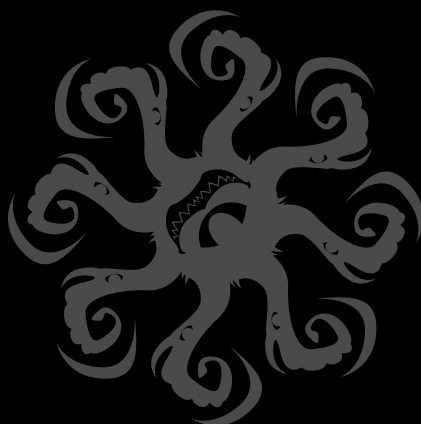
— **BANG** —

— squelch —

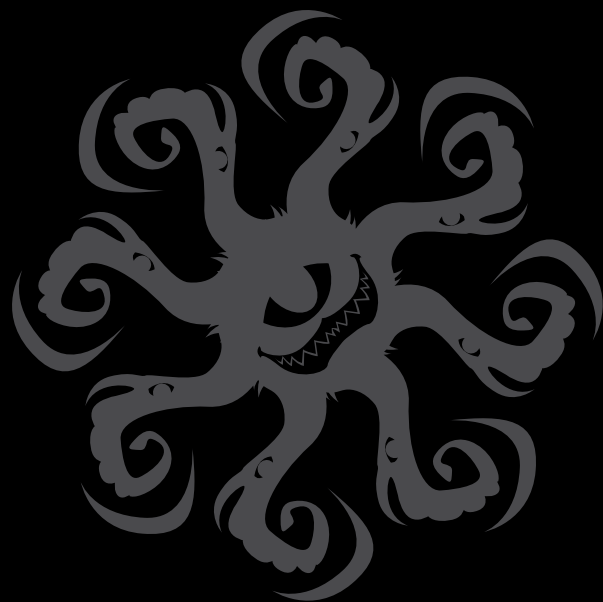
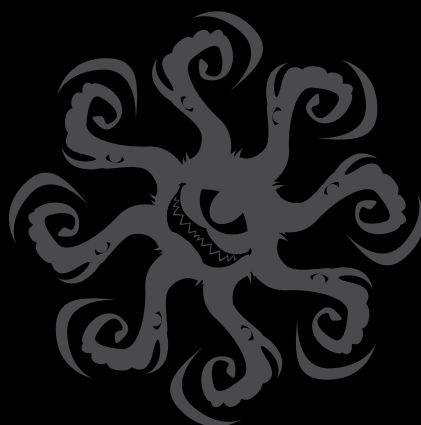
— *thud* —



The Eldritch Abomination of
Mount Meager *by Jacob Zaccaria*



V



For a long time, we've tended to brush off tales of monsters in the dark as simple myth — scary stories to tell by torch light — and nothing more. We've become so accustomed to our cozy way of living, that we forgot something critically important.

That there really are monsters. And let me tell you, they surely didn't forget about us.

It all started early one frosty September morning in the foothills of Mount Meager of British Columbia, Canada. This pinnacle massif is a dormant stratovolcano, within fifty kilometres of the town of Pemberton and the city of Whistler.

In Pemberton that morning, all of the streets grew eerily silent. All of the birds had been startled by something unseen, and left the area in haste. The town's domestic cats and dogs were whimpering softly, and hiding themselves. Clearly something was up, but no one could tell what that was.

Suddenly, the earth began to tremble. It was a fluttering at first — barely noticeable — but it grew to a crescendo! The first wall fell on the north side of town; people were in a panic, flustering, grabbing all that they could and hoofing it to their cars and their minivans. For those who looked up, they were greeted by a billowing of steam and dark clouds rising from the northwest: Mount Meager.

The mountain was alive with activity, waking from a two-and-a-half millennia slumber.

And by God, it was angry!

As Pemberton broke into a frenzy, the city of Whistler felt the quakes and woke with a start. Calls from loved ones were coming in fast, and sooner than not the grey clouds rolled into view: those ash-choked bringers of decay and ruin.

The citizens of Whistler bunkered down; the quakes were minor here, and the mountain was far enough away to cause little enough harm, they thought. They would welcome their neighbours from Pemberton and wait it out. But Fate had other plans...

The mountain was not the only thing waking.

Deep in the womb of the earth, shaking off its sluggishness was an Eldritch abomination of a thousand arms, huge gnashing teeth, and beetle-like eyes: eyes filled with death and no remorse. It was rolling in its cocoon deep in the roots of the mountain, and every shrug of its thousand shoulders shook the foundation of the earth.

And as the last of its hundred eyes opened wide, it began to claw its way up, tearing the stone entombment apart. Lava poured from the wound it wrought, and as snow and water poured in, it erupted with a staccato! The beast shrieked in what could only be interpreted as a blood-curdling cry of challenge, as if to say *I am Death, And I come for you!*

The monster's body was still so hot from its slumber in the magma below that it steamed in the chill air, obscuring its mad, hideous body from the world. The entire mountain had exploded and cracked around it, whole pieces flung far and wide like a violently cracked egg.

Now it just so happens that the town of Pemberton is within sight of the once-mountain, and the commotion of its fleeing residents drew the attention of the dark child like a beacon in a black room. It hulked its steaming form downriver, leaving ruin in its wake: trees caught to flame, the river whistled and boiled, and its great mass was so large, that it rubbed its thousand elbows with the mountains to either side of the valley, causing avalanches and rock falls as it went.

I was only a child then, but I cannot forget that moment when that... that Thing... reared its bilious, smoking form into my sight. I don't think there is a more fit word in our vocabulary for its size than *colossal*. As its body began to cool more and more in the chill air, more and more of its absurd vessel came to light. Many people fainted on-sight, became dazed and confused, or began to suffer from fits of seizures like an epileptic. Trust me, this thing was frightening.

And it was headed straight for us.

By the time that it was within a few kilometres of the town line, most of the town's buildings were a rubble: the quakes of its footfalls were terrible, its vast roiling mass likely akin in weight to the Moon itself.

There were casualties before the thing could even reach out a hideous claw or a dozen to grab us up and stuff us into its slathering maw, which was now painted red with blood. It shrieked again, with an ungodly pitch so high it induced vomiting to almost everyone within a twenty kilometre radius. With a hundred swipes at once, it levelled seven city blocks, and gobbled up some more dazed civilians.

Lucky for me, my mom was a natural-born runner. She had long since dropped everything else and took me into her arms, running headlong up the side of the road, taking us as far as she could possibly muster from that horrible Chthonic demon. But I watched from my perch over her shoulder, and watched my whole world fall to ruin and fire.

And I swear, this thing looked like it was grinning. It's razor-sharp smile, smeared with the blood of friends, neighbours... I can never forget that sight.

The people of Whistler could see fires from where they lay, and at once a call to arms rallied fire-fighters, police officers, medical staff — would-be heroes — to take flight to the need of their neighbours.

They didn't stand a chance.

I'd blacked out not long after the beast screeched a third time; I remember seeing the lights and hearing the sirens of our rescuers. When I awoke, my mother and I were in a hospital bed, hooked to an IV drip and pumped oxygen. We were smeared with ash and flecks of blood — and I knew it wasn't our own.

We had been out cold for three days; in that time, the town of Pemberton and the city of Whistler were razed to the ground by the Beast, but there was a glimmer of hope.

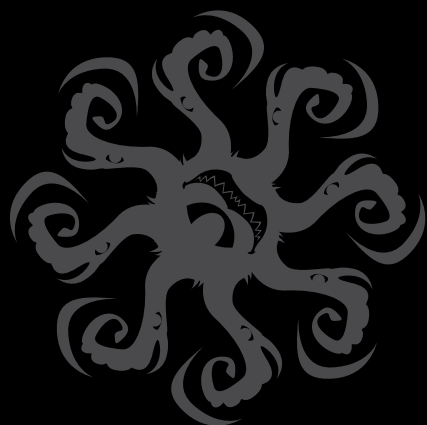
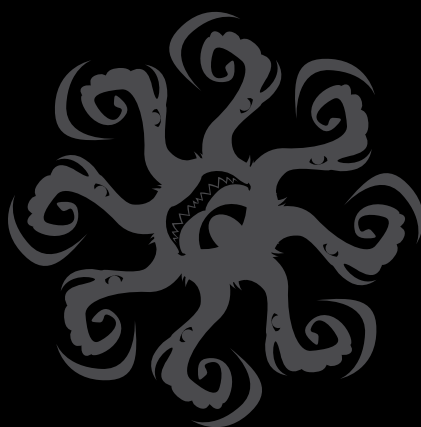
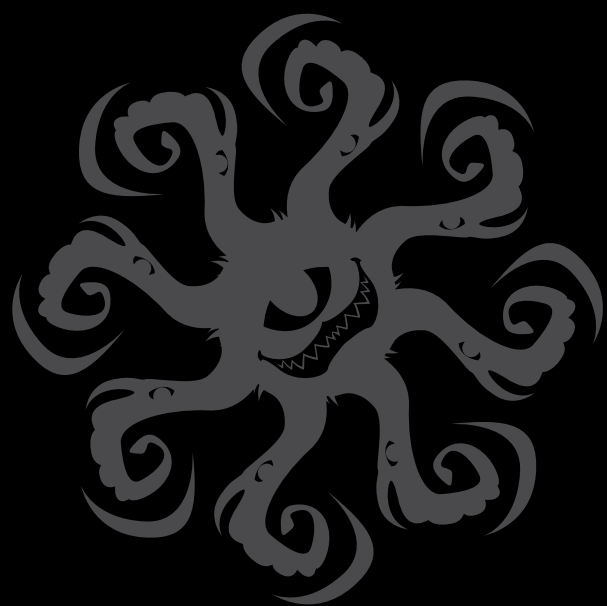
The military had been called in as soon as we understood that there was nothing more to be done, and that this threat was far from natural. They mounted a full assault; many more lives were lost, but in the end, they had wounded it terribly. Its hot blood flowed out like syrup, and yet it still kept on reigning terror and ruin to the city and the countryside.

It took a call to our allies in the south — The U.S.A. — to call in the big guns to kill this monster once and for all. They fired a missile capped with a nuclear warhead to level the beast — and the immediate countryside along with it.

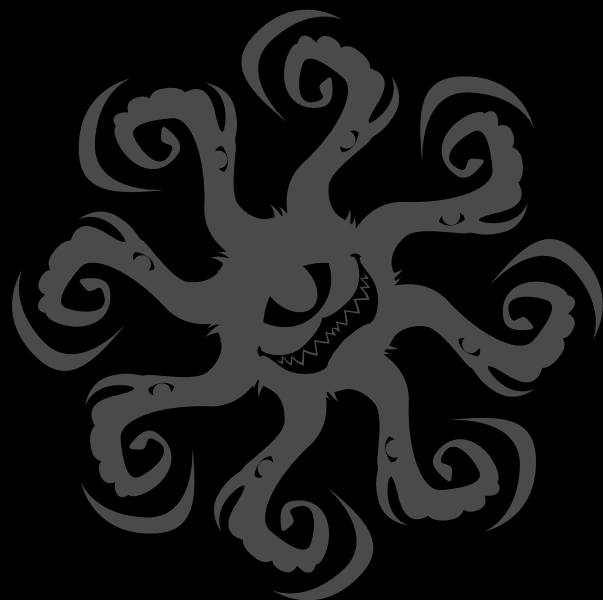
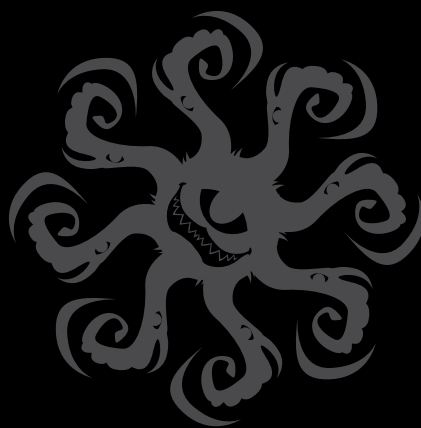
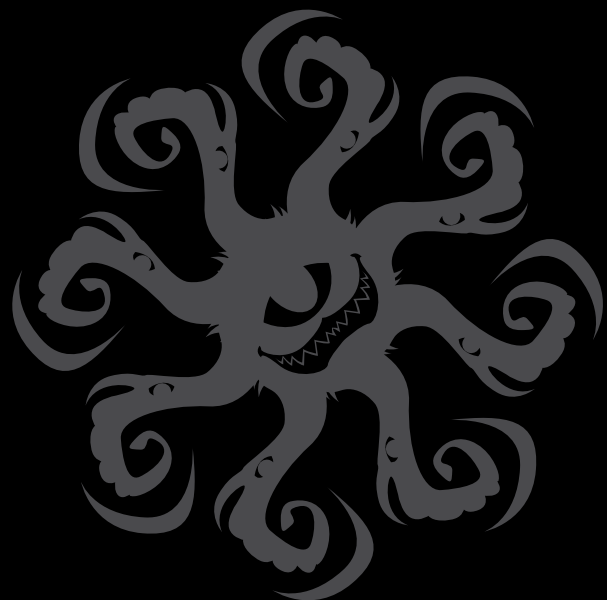
Twenty years later, we still have not been given any access to that area, which has been quarantined, but no one can forget the day that the Eldritch Monster of Mount Meager prowled the sleepy foothills of British Columbia.



Hunter *by R.J. Davies Mornix*



VI



He stared at her ... hungry ... his eyes drinking her in deeply ... unblinking.

His eyes caught her breath, so intense and his attention unnerving. The moment she laid eyes on him she knew he was different. She felt naked standing before him.

Licking her hot dry lips, she knew she wasn't safe there ... not with him ... not alone. There was something about him that she couldn't ignore. He haunted her night and day. He was all she could think about, he occupied every moment of her waking day and haunted her dreams. Swallowing hard her words had escaped her. What was he really thinking? He was different than the others. She knew. Gulping back the rising fear, she tried to calm her racing heart.

"You shouldn't be here," he whispered hoarsely.

Taking a step backwards she swallowed hard again, trying to clear her throat yet words still alluded her. She couldn't be anywhere else, she had wanted to say but her voice had disappeared with those intense eyes staring at her. It was like he could see through her, see who she really was.

"Why?" he took a step towards her. "Why can't you listen?"

He had warned her several times he was no good and that he really liked her more than he should. Holding her head high she refused to let him scare her off.

There was just something about him that she wanted to understand. She wanted to get to know him better. Even if it was the middle of the night and she stood alone with him deep in a alley with no one else around.

"Really?" he was in front of her invading her space. His long fingers caressed her cheek so gently. "Why can't you listen?"

She said nothing, but hated the fact that she really liked him touching her that way.

His eyes didn't leave her as his fingers trailed to her lips. "You're not scared of me?"

Biting her bottom lip she took another step backwards and bumped into a wall. They were standing in an alley. Only the moonlight lit the alley but it was enough light to see his face. His beautiful handsome face. A cool breeze sailed through, rustling debris and carrying it down the alley towards the street.

Touching the cold brick wall with her finger tips she was acutely aware that they were hidden away in the alley ... away from the rest of the normal human world.

“Oh ... you are scared,” he grinned. His fingers were now slowly caressing her chin and trailing down to her neck. His face was so close she felt his breath on her skin as he spoke, “that’s much better.” He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Pausing.

Run! Screamed the little voice in her head ... yet her feet wouldn’t move.

She couldn’t move, she couldn’t walk away from this being. It wasn’t in her nature to run from anything. She stood her ground. He leaned his face close to hers, their noses touching, his warm exhaling breath on her cool skin. “So scared,” he rasped.

She looked deeply into his eyes then grabbed his face with her hands and kissed him. Her heart racing, his lips tasted sweet and the kiss ended far too quickly for her liking.

He pulled back, “I could snap your neck off right now with little to no effort.” He was breathing hard.

“But you won’t,” she gasped.

“Tell me why?” he brushed his lips against hers and nibbled gently.

Swallowing back the emotions he was eliciting within her she focused on him, “you may have lived a thousand lives, but you knew this day would come.” He was the monster of all monsters, imagine a beast that ate the depraved and fed off the souls of the suffering then times that by a hundred fold and you had him. There were rumours that he had recently changed and was no longer evil but such evil could never ever change, not really. He looked so irresistible but that was part of it, part of his charm.

He pulled back and looked her in the eyes, there she saw intrigue, curiosity, and desire deeply rooted. “Tell me, what day is it?”

“Malacai , I know you, I know what you are. I am here to help you sleep.”

“What?” he stepped back and tilted his head slightly looking at her. “Help me sleep? What are you talking about human?”

She closed the gap between them and reached out pulling his head towards hers. “I am your angel. Close your eyes and sleep demon.”

“You’re no angel,” he shook his head.

“Well you’re not really a demon are you? We’re even then aren’t we?”

He blinked, “How? What?” He was beginning to feel the effects of her kiss.

“You’re time has expired Malacai, sleep ... sleep,” she whispered softly. “If it was another time and place maybe we could enjoy each other’s company more.” She really did feel a connection with him and was sorry he had to go like this.

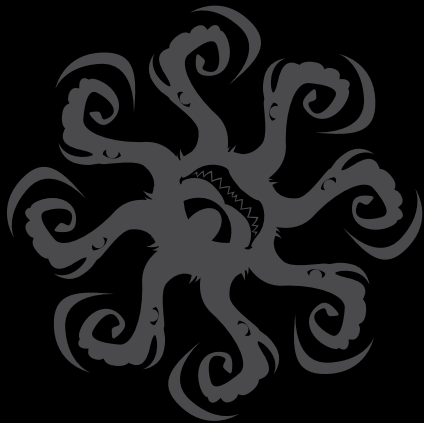
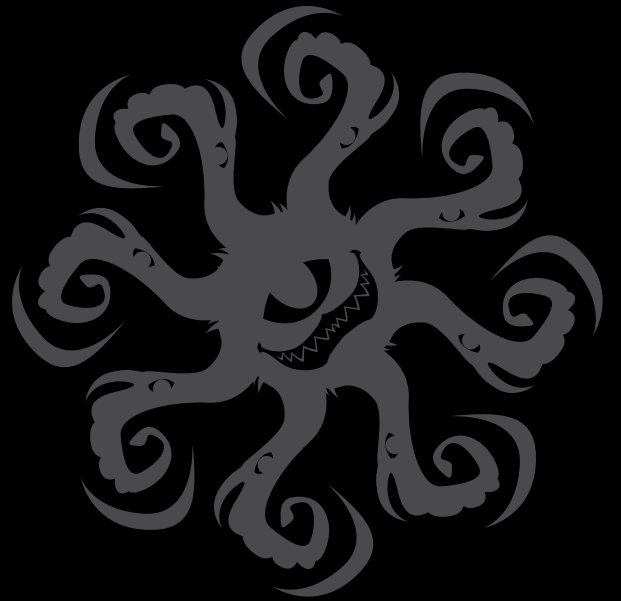
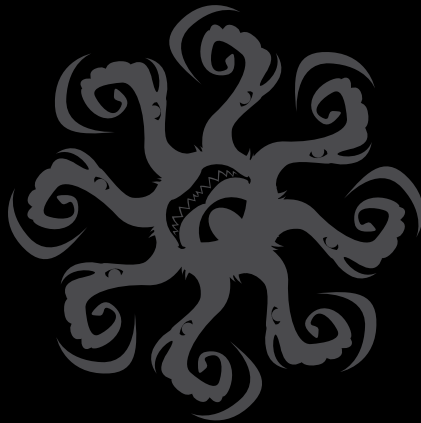
“You are a reaper?” he whispered barely able to stand up staring at her completely confused.

“Sleep ...,” she watch as he tried to fight it. Her kiss ... it was all in that kiss. He slowly sunk down to the ground. She knelt down beside him and caressed his cheek as the life slowly leaked out of him. He had been one of the most feared nightwalkers known to human kind. He had stolen more human souls than any she had ever hunted and yet she was sad it had come to an end. She had liked this one very much. Once the last bit of life left him, his body went “POOF!” And all that was left ... dust. The cool night air came along and carried his dust down the alley and out to the street. He was nothing more than a memory. A rapidly fading dream.

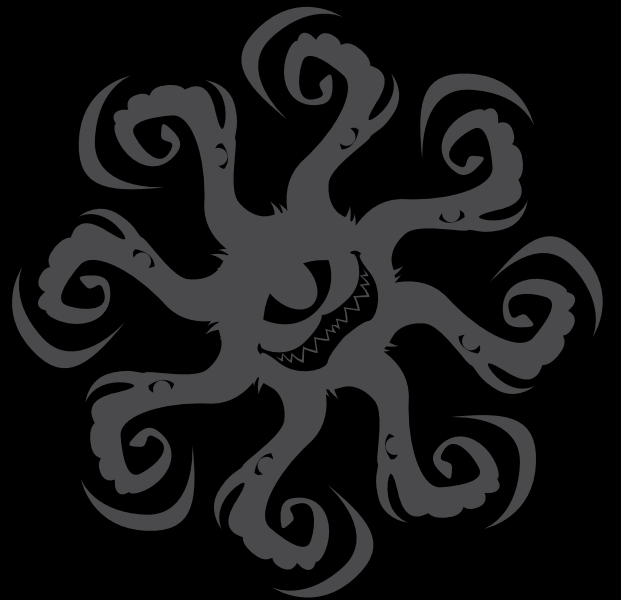
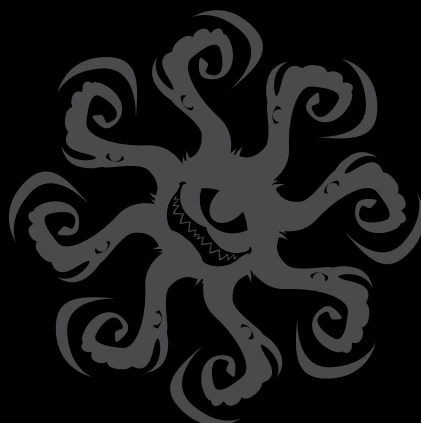
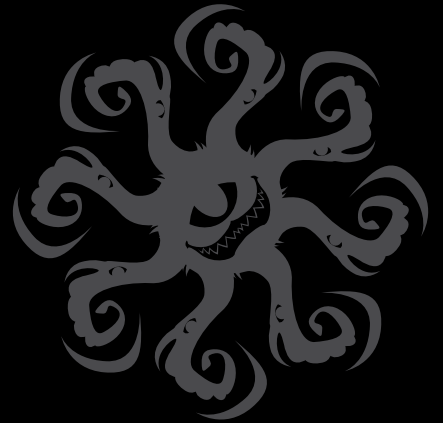
Standing up she looked up and down the alley. She felt pleased. No humans were witnesses to her excursion. Stepping back into the shadows she became the shadow. She was neither male nor female, she was merely a hunter. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the night air. Sweet ... crisp a slight chill swept pass carrying with it a hint of another nightwalker! It was her lucky night. She was no longer hungry but she did love a good hunt.



Never Liked Him *by Jonathan Kruschack*



VII



This is a nightmare I had very recently. I retell it here only because of its unsettling nature, I don't want it rattling around solely in my head. Maybe if more people know its power will dissipate and I won't have it again. Anyways, I'll begin.

The dream starts off with me about to go to bed, only now I live in an apartment except not with roommates I know in real life, as I am planning to do in the near-future. No, its with an older woman, in her early 30's and her three children. They're soon to move out and my friends are soon to move in. The children really set me off, they look like children I know. My friends kids (one even has the same name, "Logan"), with the third sometimes taking the appearance of my nephew. Only one of the three that speaks that I can remember is Logan.

So the basic gist of the dream is I share the apartment with these people, who are moving out soon to move into a bigger place, where they will live with a third person, probably the children's father but I never asked. This is just a temporary domicile until their new home is ready.

One night the kids are tucked into bed early and everybody's about to hit the hay, including me. The mother is very tired, as she worked a long shift that day and mentions she's "a heavy sleeper."

I say that's good, that hopefully nothing will wake her up like before. My dream-self seems to be alluding to incidents past that I can't recall. So I bid her a goodnight and think that I'll miss these people when they move out, they're nice and the little kids are well-behaved, though I'm very eager for my friends to move in.

As I lay my head down and quickly drift off to sleep, a clear sign it is a dream as I'm prone to fits of insomnia, but after a few moments I'm awoken by odd noises coming from the children's room across the hall. Something's off about them, I can't say what. They sounded like footsteps of a huge thing or person, trying to be quiet and failing. Thinking the kids are feeling mischievous and not wanting them to get in trouble I get up silently, quickly grabbing a shirt and throwing it on.

Approaching the door across the hall, I soon realize that the sound could not be the three kids. And that it is unmistakably the sound of a large person, probably a teenager or much worse, an adult. A person, uninvited I may add, in a room where children sleep. Fearing for the worst as my calm quickly fades into anger, I open the door and

find the kids are still laying in their little temporary beds, awake but the room is empty.

“The light in their adjourning bathroom is on but it always is,” I think out loud to myself, “nothing off there. None of these kids are past five years old, makes sense to have a nightlight.”

Leaning down I quietly apologize for waking the children, and the one nearest to me, sharing the name and appearance of my friend’s child, Logan, says “You didn’t wake us up.” Rather innocently, I might add. Logan doesn’t seem to think there’s anything wrong.

“You were already up? Why?”

Logan, who, like the other kids, is quickly becoming sleepy again, doesn’t reply. Like I didn’t even ask a question he’s starting to fall asleep again without a word. So, I bid them goodnight for a second time and go back to my room across the hallway. Again I effortlessly fall asleep, though a tad shaken. I could swear I’d heard something.

An hour or less passes and once again, I hear the same odd noises from the kids room. Only I hear something else, on top of the footsteps (which are much quieter now), I hear a crunching. Someone is eating something. Candy, perhaps? No, it’s something thin and brittle, chips probably. I’m a tad on edge from before but not as worried, I try to assure myself that one of the younger kids probably snuck a snack into his room and maybe they’re having a quick bite. But then, I hear another noise. One that makes my eyes snap wide-open. A soft giggle, definitely male and very pleased with themselves.

Again I go across the hall, quiet but not slowly, like before and I see the door to the kid’s room is already open. I can see the bathroom door slowly move until it’s almost completely closed. Someone is in the bathroom, and they don’t want to be seen.

“Trapped now.” I think, brow furrowing and eyes squinting.

The kids are all sitting up in bed, eyes closed, as if held up by some unseen force. A thought creeps into my mind that I try to assure myself can’t be true. A single word, repeating over and over and growing larger every second. Try as I might I can’t suppress it.

“Demon.”

Gritting my teeth, and unclenching my fist, which was close to bleeding from my uncut nails being driven into my palms, I pad towards the door. Somehow, I’m more quiet than before. Whoever’s in there may know I’m in the room but there’s a good chance the person in the small bathroom can’t tell I’m next to the door and I can take them by surprise. Which in all honestly, is my only hope. I’m no tough guy, but I can fight dirty

if I have to. And this seems more and more like one of those “have to” situations.

Moving my left hand just out of sight near the edge of the slightly open door I leave it hovering there, careful not to nudge the door as I inhale without a sound. My plan is to open the door and move in with one quick movement, raising my right hand to strike and letting out a loud yell, hopefully alerting the mom and scaring the intruder into immediate surrender as I strike them unconscious from repeating blows to the skull. Again, this may seem unsportsmanlike, but I am no athlete and this is an uninvited person in a bathroom. I do not need to fight fair, nor give them a chance to surrender unharmed.

Somehow, I pull off my hastily thought-out plan. My left hand yanks the door open as I side-step out of its way and into the room, right hand ready to either strike or throttle whomever I find within. But before I can let out any noise I quickly find I’m standing in a bathroom with no one else in it. Just a toilet, a sink and a mirror in front of a hanging cabinet. I turn to leave, thinking myself crazier than usual, when I step on something. Something thin and very brittle.

A chip, a single chip, crushed beneath my bare foot. Someone wanted to give them a treat. Thoughts of white, windowless vans and missing persons reports run through my mind. I’m gripped with fear, the word grows louder in my head, now an unavoidable and ever-present undercurrent to my thought-process. Again, I go to Logan and softly shake him awake. I look straight at him and ask him, who was in the room, what were they doing and what did they want. Groggily, he says “I dunno, he looked funny and talked weird.”

“Funny how, Logan? How old was he, how’d he sound?”

He shrugs, not knowing how to answer and seeming uninterested completely, “Tall and skinny I guess. Not very old.”

“Like me?” I question, calming down slightly so I don’t raise my voice and awake their tired mom.

“No, younger. Furry boots and a tight shirt.”

Unsure how to take in this information, I tell Logan to go to sleep and if anyone tries to talk to them again, to yell for their mom or for me, as loud as he can. I may not want to scare him but I sure as Hell don’t want anything else happening either. I leave, closing their door and returning to my room. It takes me longer to fall asleep, but again, just like before, I do.

Once more I awaken, to the sound of many footsteps and the TV down the hallway in the living room. Not loud but definitely on, no mistaking that. Opening the door

quickly I see the kid's room door open and the room empty, beds and sheets tossed. I no longer care about subtlety, nor catching anyone or anything by surprise. I run down the hallway, which seems longer than before. Reality is bending, trying to keep me from getting there. But I press on, reaching the end of the hallway and turn to see the kids suddenly stop whatever they were doing and look at me with blank faces and something vanishes from the centre of the room. It was tall and lanky, with hairy, goat feet and an impish face. Its eyes were unavoidable, pools of obsidian that pulsated. It winked as it left, teeth set in a wide grin.

Angrily, I yell at it pointlessly. I scream for it to never come back, as if whatever it was would listen to me. The mother wakes up, coming out from her room and asks what's going on.

"Something was in here, it tried to take your kids and goddamn left before I could..." I trail off, as I notice her expression has changed from confused annoyance to utter dread. She's no longer looking at me. But what's behind me.

The TV, crackling with static. I turn and look down at the three kids who're smiling. Logan is waving at the screen, gingerly. Not at the screen, no, at what's on it. I begin to stare at it for what seems like an eternity.

A figure, the one I saw before, lit only from behind, which encased his front in shadow while illuminating only the edges of his form. I hear its haunting laughter, the same giggle I heard before, turning much, much deeper at strange intervals, at times becoming a hearty laugh from a throat long singed from an aeon of inhaling smoke.

Its position shifts, as waves of static blur its image. I can't hear it speak, neither can the mother. The kids seem to, they mouth responses. Their mother grabs the remote and feebly tries to turn off the monitor. The laughing intensifies as words appear on the screen, phasing in and out of sight. It read as follows:

You cannot stop me.

I will take them far away, very soon.

They will never grow old, but they will grow cold.

To a land where no one will find them, just like the stories of old.

I will give them freedom for a price, which they will pay dearly.

No one can stop me, nor will they try.

Snapping free from my trance in an explosion of rage, snatching the remote from the mother's shaking hands and hurl in at the television screen. It shatters on impact as the

controller bounces to the floor. The kids break from the spell, scream and cry for their mother, who holds them close.

Waking from my dream shortly after this, terrified and filled with fury at the same time as chills shoot through me, I wonder why I've had this dream. Why has my subconscious created this? My other nightmares usually have some grounding. In something I've read, or experienced or feared. I don't have or want kids, nor have I heard of anything involving a kidnapping in a while.

Then I remember something that I've always knew was odd about me. An idea I've always hated that most would think pretty great. Everlasting youth. Never growing old. Which is really, when you break it down: never learning or truly experiencing life. I get not wanting to grow old and die, everybody fears death and adult responsibilities can be daunting but chucking them aside for carefree playtime forever? That is the stupidest, most closed-minded thing I can think of.

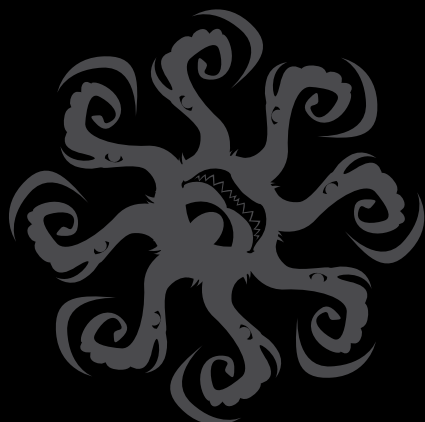
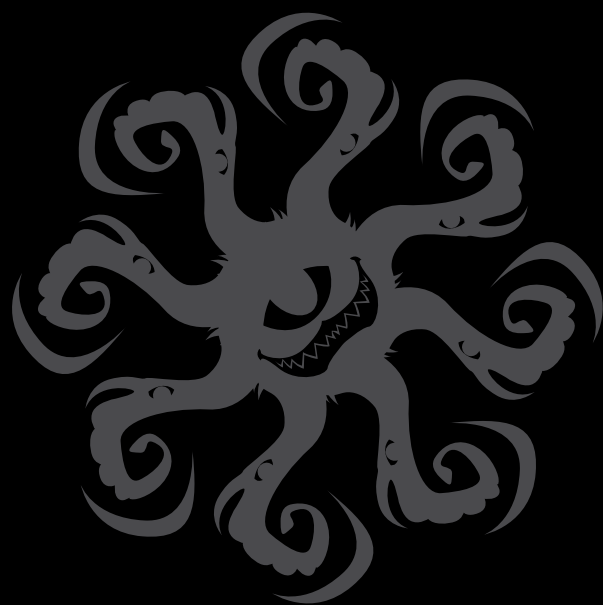
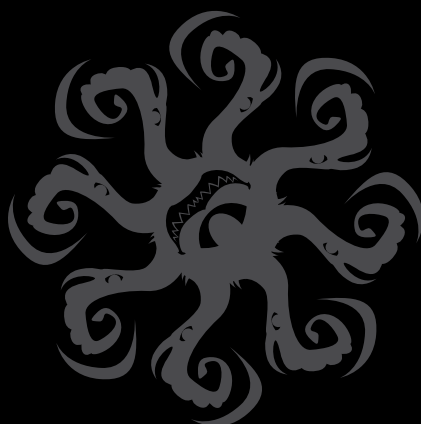
And the one fictional character who encompasses that idea more than any other.

Who I've detested since my childhood because of this.

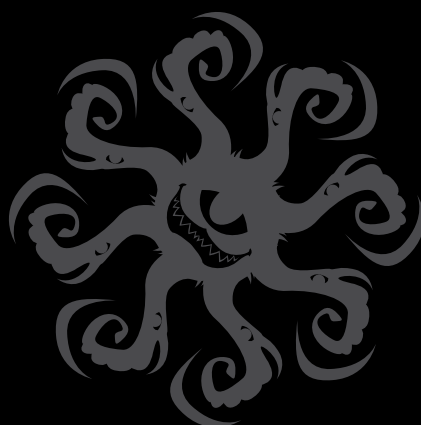
Peter Pan, that creepy, gangly, kid-stealing asshole. Makes sense now, as I write this. I never liked him.



The King Out of Darkness *by Penny Cobb*



VIII



Long ago, when the world was still young, she had taken something from him. An eye for an eye. Time to die.

I

In the beginning I looked out upon the vast expanse of the void overhead; a calm, colourless sea looked back down upon me, a thousand shivering lights like eyes glittering in the dark. I stood in awe, transfixed by the sight. Slowly, very slowly, my awe turned to despair; a thought had come to me. A deadly thought. A maddening thought.

As I looked out among the stars I began to realize that they were not stars.

They shivered and they glittered, glinting and then gleaming, winking in an out, and moving constantly . . . The points of light, always grouped in pairs, were fixated upon me.

Too late.

II

In the beginning, as the fog lifted from my mind, there was darkness. My mouth made to move, but refused to obey. There was a deep ringing in my ears, like static, like grinding metal, like squealing wood as it burned. My heart began to race. Not one part of my body would obey my silent command—I could not move at all; I was paralyzed.

Slowly, very slowly, my despair died.

There was nothing to feel anymore. My eyes were open wide, but I saw nothing.

There was only darkness.

So I wept.

There were no tears. There was nothing.

III

In the beginning, I stood outside myself—beside myself—from within looking out.

And there was darkness.

And there was silence.

I saw that it covered me, surrounded me, threatened to choke me, to devour me.

There was nothing for me to feel, no way for me to feel; and yet I knew that I was cold with fear. As I watched myself I began to see my surroundings more clearly.

Below me was the colourless earth, a halo of dead leaves around my head.

Like a halo.

A pair of pin-prick lights slowly moved through the darkness. I watched them warily, wondering where I had seen them before. There was no doubt I had seen them before, no doubt that I knew them. I shifted my gaze back to the ground; my body lay still, rigid, my hands placed upon my breasts as if in peace.

As if in death.

Once there was nothing to feel.

Now there was the whole world to feel.

A rage flared up within me.

I could see their hands and feet within the shadows.

Clever, I thought.

IV

The distant fogs of memory lifted then cleared for a final time. There was the void overhead, dark and menacing this time; its silence was not lost upon me.

It weighed down upon me with a hideous strength.

One by one, bit by bit, I began to see those stars. They were not stars . . . Stars were warm and bright, while these lights were cold and hard—they shone with a steely glint. If I concentrated hard enough on any pair I would begin to see a face.

My focus wavered for a split second; I felt my eyes roll into the back of my head.

When I regained control I picked out his eyes.

His face became very clear to me, a young face, a face that would never show the passage of time. However, while I recalled a softer face, a harder one looked down upon me. Whatever it was that had turned him so cruel, I was innocent of it.

Whatever it was that had made him hate me so, I had no part in it.

I had known him once, when the world was a bit younger.

Now he was killing me.

V

Marianna.

Marianna.

Marianna.

One by one, bit by bit, I began to see stars.

Stars . . . I thought, confused. Something was wrong, but I couldn't remember what. A stranger from the past . . . Things crawling in the shadows . . . Stars that were not stars . . .

Was that it? Were those the things I had forgotten?

Nothing comes from something, something comes from nothing, and nothing comes from nothing,
a voice said.

I could not move, but that did not stop my skin from prickling. What a horrible thing to say, I thought. There was something inherently wrong with the way it was said, as if to suggest some secret knowledge that I didn't quite understand.

I wasn't quite sure if I should.

Marianna.

Marianna.

Marianna.

VI

He lingered as they all brushed past him—brother and sister alike—looking down upon the woman. She had been so young . . . Young when he had first seen her, and still young as she died. Now she would never taste the bitterness of old age.

He knelt beside the body; with a long finger he touched a cheek. It was warm to the touch. He brought his face—an eerie, mocking face, humanoid yet bestial—close to hers—a very human face, beautiful and familiar. Where he was wild she had been chaste, virtuous, moral, fair . . . What did she have to show for it now? With a careful hand he pried open her eyes.

They were empty now, belying little of what had been underneath the surface. As they tortured her, plagued her, she had not cried out. Only once had she wept, and not for herself.

And what did she have to show for it?

Da’Kiri slid his talons behind the soft, gelatinous orbs.

As he set about his gruesome task the world moved on from that event.

She was one person among many; she would not be missed.

The thought felt hollow . . .

Marianna.

Marianna.

Marianna.

Her blue-green eyes would make a wonderful gift.





Fin