

DREAMS
of GODS
and
MONSTERS

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H
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*For Jim,
for the happy middle*

*Once upon a time,
an angel and a devil pressed their hands to their hearts*



and started the apocalypse.



NIGHTMARE ICE CREAM

Nerve thrum and screaming blood, wild and churning and chasing and devouring and terrible and terrible and terrible—

“Eliza. Eliza!”

A voice. Bright light, and Eliza fell awake. That’s how it felt: like falling and landing hard. “It was a dream,” she heard herself say. “It was just a dream. I’m okay.”

How many times in her life had she spoken those words? More than she could count. This was the first time, though, that she’d spoken them to a man who had burst heroically into her room, clutching a claw hammer, to save her from being murdered.

“You . . . you were screaming,” said her roommate, Gabriel, darting looks into the corners and finding no sign of murderers. He was sleep-disheveled and manically alert, holding the hammer high and ready. “I mean . . . really, *really* screaming.”

“I know,” said Eliza, her throat raw. “I do that sometimes.” She pushed herself upright in bed. Her heartbeat felt like cannon

fire—doomful and deep and reverberating through her entire body, and though her mouth was dry and her breathing shallow, she tried to sound nonchalant. “Sorry to wake you.”

Blinking, Gabriel lowered the hammer. “That’s not what I meant, Eliza. I’ve never heard anyone sound like that in real life. That was a horror-movie scream.”

He sounded a little impressed. *Go away*, Eliza wanted to say. *Please*. Her hands were starting to tremble. Soon she wouldn’t be able to control it, and she didn’t want a witness. The adrenaline crash could be pretty bad after the dream. “I promise, I’m fine. Okay? I just . . .”

Damn.

Shaking. Pressure building, the sting behind her eyelids, and all of it out of her control.

Damn damn damn.

She doubled over and hid her face in her bedspread as the sobs welled up and took her over. As bad as the dream was—and it was *bad*—the aftermath was worse, because she was conscious but still powerless. The terror—the terror, *the terror*—lingered, and there was something else. It came with the dream, every time, and didn’t recede with it but stayed like something a tide had washed in. Something awful—a rank leviathan corpse left to rot on the shore of her mind. It was remorse. But god, that was too bloodless a word for it. This feeling the dream left her with, it was knives of panic and horror resting bright atop a red and meaty wound-fester of *guilt*.

Guilt over what? That was the worst part. It was . . . dear god, it was unspeakable, and it was immense. Too immense. Nothing worse had ever been done, in all of time, and all of space, and the guilt was

hers. It was impossible, and with any distance from the dream Eliza could dismiss it as ridiculous.

She had not done, and nor would she ever do . . . *that*.

But when the dream entangled her, none of it mattered—not reason, not sense, not even the laws of physics. The terror and the guilt smothered it all.

It sucked.

When the sobs finally subsided and she lifted her head, Gabriel was sitting on the edge of her bed, looking compassionate and alarmed. There was this pert civility about Gabriel Edinger that suggested a better-than-fair chance of bow ties in his future. Maybe even a monocle. He was a neuroscientist, probably the smartest person Eliza knew, and one of the nicest. Both of them were research fellows at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History—the NMNH—and had been friendly while not quite *friends* for the past year, until Gabriel’s girlfriend moved to New York for her post-doc and he needed a roommate to cover the rent. Eliza had known it was a risk, cross-pollinating life hours with work hours, for this exact reason. *This*.

Screaming. Sobbing.

It wouldn’t take much digging for an interested party to ascertain the . . . depths of abnormal . . . upon which she’d built this life. Like laying planks over quicksand, it sometimes seemed. But the dream hadn’t troubled her for a while, so she’d given in to the temptation to pretend she was normal, with nothing but the normal concerns of any twenty-four-year-old doctoral student on a tiny budget. Dissertation pressure, evil lab-mate, grant proposals, rent.

Monsters.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Gabriel. “I think I’m okay now.”

“Good.” After an uncomfortable pause, he asked, brightly, “Cup of tea?”

Tea. Now there was a nice glimpse of normal. “Yes,” Eliza said. “Please.”

And when he ambled off to put on the kettle, she composed herself. Pulled on her robe, rinsed her face, blew her nose, regarded herself in the mirror. She was puffy, and her eyes were bloodshot. Awesome. She had pretty eyes, normally. She was accustomed to getting compliments on them from strangers. They were big and long-lashed and bright—at least when the whites weren’t pink from sobbing—and several shades lighter brown than her skin, which made them seem to glow. Right now, it chilled her to note that they looked a little . . . crazy.

“You’re not crazy,” she told her reflection, and the statement had the ring of an affirmation often uttered—a reassurance needed, and habitually given. *You’re not crazy, and you’re not going to be.*

Deeper down ran another, more desperate thought.

It will not happen to me. I’m stronger than the others.

Usually, she was able to believe it.

When Eliza joined Gabriel in the kitchen, the oven clock read four AM. Tea was on the table, along with a pint of ice cream, open, with a spoon sticking out. He gestured to it. “Nightmare ice cream. Family tradition.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, actually.”

Eliza tried, for a moment, to imagine ice cream as her own family’s response to the dream, but she couldn’t. The contrast was just too stark. She reached for the carton. “Thanks,” she said. She ate a

couple of bites in silence, took a sip of tea, all the while tensed for the questions to begin, as they surely must.

What do you dream about, Eliza?

How am I supposed to help you if you won't talk to me, Eliza?

What's wrong with you, Eliza?

She'd heard it all before.

"You were dreaming about Morgan Toth, weren't you?" Gabriel asked. "Morgan Toth and his pillowy lips?"

Okay, so she hadn't heard *that*. In spite of herself, Eliza laughed. Morgan Toth was her nemesis, and his lips were a fine subject for a nightmare, but no, that wasn't even close. "I don't really want to talk about it," she said.

"Talk about what?" Gabriel asked, all innocence. "What is this 'it' you speak of?"

"Cute. But I mean it. Sorry."

"Okay."

Another bite of ice cream, another silence cut short by another non-question. "I had nightmares as a kid," Gabriel offered. "For about a year. Really intense. To hear my parents tell it, life as we knew it was pretty much suspended. I was afraid to fall asleep, and I had all these rituals, superstitions. I even tried making offerings. My favorite toys, food. Supposedly I was overheard offering up my older brother in my place. I don't remember that, but he swears."

"Offering him to who?" Eliza asked.

"*Them*. The ones in the dream."

Them.

A spark of recognition, hope. Idiotic hope. Eliza had a "them," too. Rationally she knew that they were a creation of her mind and

existed nowhere else, but in the aftermath of the dream, it was not always possible to remain rational. She asked, “What were they?” before she quite considered what she was doing. If she wasn’t going to talk about *her* dream, she shouldn’t be prying into *his*. It was a rule of secret-keeping, in which she was well-versed: Ask not, lest ye be asked.

“Monsters,” he said with a shrug, and just like that, Eliza lost interest—not at the mention of monsters, but at his *of course* tone. Anyone who could say *monsters* in that offhand manner had definitely never met hers.

“You know, being chased is one of the commonest dreams,” Gabriel said, and went on to tell her about it, and Eliza kept sipping tea and taking the occasional bite of nightmare ice cream, and she nodded in the right places, but she wasn’t really listening. She’d thoroughly researched dream analysis a long time ago. It hadn’t helped before, and it didn’t now, and when Gabriel summed up with “they’re a manifestation of our waking fears,” and “*everyone* has them,” his tone was both placating and pedantic, as though he’d just solved her problem for her.

Eliza really wanted to say, *And I suppose everyone gets pacemakers when they’re seven years old because ‘manifestations of their waking fears’ keep sending them into cardiac arrhythmia?* But she didn’t, because it was the exact kind of memorable factoid that gets regurgitated at cocktail parties.

Did you know that Eliza Jones got a pacemaker when she was seven because her nightmares gave her cardiac arrhythmia?

Seriously? That’s insane.

“So what happened to you?” she asked him. “What happened to your monsters?”

“Oh, they carried off my brother and left me alone. I have to sacrifice a goat to them every Michaelmas, but it’s a small price to pay for a good night’s sleep.”

Eliza laughed. “Where do you get your goats?” she asked, playing along.

“Great little farm in Maryland. Certified sacrificial goats. Lambs, too, if you prefer.”

“Who doesn’t? And what the hell’s Michaelmas?”

“I don’t know. I pulled that out of the air.”

And Eliza experienced a moment of gratitude, because Gabriel hadn’t pried, and the ice cream and tea and even her irritation with his scholarly jabber had helped to ease the aftermath. She was actually laughing, and that was something.

And then her phone vibrated on the tabletop.

Who was calling her at four AM? She reached for it . . .

. . .and when she saw the number on the screen, she dropped it—or possibly *flung* it. With a *crack* it hit a cabinet and bounced to the floor. For a second she had hope that she’d killed it. It lay there, silent. Dead. And then—*bzzzzzzzzzzzz*—not dead.

When had she ever been sorry not to have broken her phone?

It was the number. Just digits. No name. No name came up because Eliza had not programmed *that number* into her phone. She didn’t even realize that she remembered it until she saw it, and it was like it had been there all along, every moment of her life since . . .since she’d escaped. It was all there, it was all right there. The gut-punch was immediate and visceral and undiminished by the years.

“All right?” Gabriel asked her, leaning down to pick up the phone.

She almost said *Don’t touch it!* but knew this was irrational, and

stopped herself in time. Instead she just didn't reach for it when he held it out to her, so he had to set it down on the table, still buzzing.

She stared at it. How had they found her? How? She'd changed her name. She'd *disappeared*. Had they known where she was all along, been watching her all this time? The idea horrified her. That the years of freedom could have been an illusion . . .

The buzzing stopped. The call went to voice mail, and Eliza's heartbeat was cannon fire again: burst after burst shuddering through her. Who was it? Her sister? One of her "uncles"?

Her mother?

Whoever it was, Eliza had only a moment to wonder if they'd leave a message—and if she'd dare to listen to it if they did—before the phone emitted another buzz. Not a voice mail. A text.

It read: *Turn on the TV.*

Turn on the . . . ?

Eliza looked up from the phone, deeply unsettled. *Why?* What did they want her to see on the TV? She didn't even have a TV. Gabriel was watching her intently, and their eyes locked in the instant they heard the first scream. Eliza almost jumped out of her skin, rising from her chair. From somewhere outside came a long, unintelligible cry. Or was it inside? It was loud. It was in the building. Wait. That was someone else. What the hell was going on? People were crying out in . . . shock? Joy? Horror? And then Gabriel's phone started to buzz, too, and Eliza's unspooled a sudden string of messages—*bzzz bzzz bzzz bzzz bzzz*. From friends this time, including Taj in London, and Catherine, who was doing fieldwork in South Africa. Wording varied, but all were a version of the same disturbing command: *Turn on the TV.*

Are you watching this?

Wake up. TV. Now.

Until the last one. The one that made Eliza want to curl up in fetal position and cease to exist.

Come home, it said. We forgive you.



THE ARRIVAL

They appeared on a Friday in broad daylight, in the sky above Uzbekistan, and were first sighted from the old Silk Road city of Samarkand, where a news crew scrambled to broadcast footage of . . . the Visitors.

The *angels*.

In flawless ranks of phalanxes, they were easily counted. Twenty blocks of fifty: a thousand. *A thousand angels*. They swept westward, near enough to earth that people standing on rooftops and roads could make out the rippling white silk of their standards and hear the trill and tremolo of harps.

Harps.

The footage went wide. Around the world, radio and television programs were preempted; news anchors rushed to their desks, out of breath and without scripts. Thrill, terror. Eyes round as coins, voices high and strange. Everywhere, phones began to ring and then cut

off in a great global silence as cell towers overloaded and crashed. The sleeping slice of the planet was awakened. Internet connections faltered. People sought people. Streets filled. Voices joined and vied, climbed and crested. There were brawls. Song. Riots.

Deaths.

There were births, too. Babies born during the Arrival were dubbed “cherubs” by a radio pundit, who was also responsible for the rumor that all had feather-shaped birthmarks somewhere on their tiny bodies. It wasn’t true, but the infants would be closely watched for any hint of beatitude or magical powers.

On this day in history—the ninth of August—time cleaved abruptly into “before” and “after,” and no one would ever forget where they were when “it” began.

* * *

Kazimir Andrasko, actor, ghost, vampire, and jerk, actually slept through the whole thing, but would afterward claim to have blacked out while reading Nietzsche—at what he later determined was the precise moment of the Arrival—and suffered a vision of the end of the world. It was the beginning of a grandiose but half-assed ploy soon to fritter to a disappointing ending when he learned how much work was involved in starting a cult.

* * *

Zuzana Nováková and Mikolas Vavra were at Aït Benhaddou, the most famous kasbah in Morocco. Mik had just concluded bargaining

for an antique silver ring—*maybe* antique, *maybe* silver, definitely a ring—when the sudden hubbub swept them up; he shoved it deep in his pocket, where it would remain, in secret, for some time.

In a village kitchen, they crowded in behind locals and watched news coverage in Arabic. Though they could understand neither the commentary nor the breathless exclamations all around them, they alone had context for what they were seeing. They knew what the angels were, or rather, what they weren't. That didn't make it any less of a shock to see the sky full of them.

So many!

It was Zuzana's idea to "liberate" the van idling in front of a tourist restaurant. The everyday weave of reality had by this time become so stretched that casual vehicular theft seemed par for the course. It was simple: She knew that Karou had no access to news of the world; she had to warn her. She'd have stolen a helicopter if she had to.

* * *

Esther Van de Vloet, retired diamond dealer, longtime associate of Brimstone and occasional stand-in grandmother to his human ward, was walking her mastiffs near her home in Antwerp when the bells of Our Lady began to toll out of time. It was not the hour, and even if it had been, the tuneless clangor was overwrought, practically hysterical. Esther, who didn't have an overwrought, hysterical bone in her body, had been waiting for something to happen ever since a black handprint had ignited on a doorway in Brussels and scorched it out of existence. Concluding that this was that something, she walked briskly home, her dogs huge as lionesses, stalking at her sides.

* * *

Eliza Jones watched the first few minutes on a live feed on her roommate's laptop, but when their server crashed, they hurriedly dressed, jumped in Gabriel's car, and drove to the museum. Early though it was, they weren't the first to arrive, and more colleagues kept streaming in behind them to cluster around a television screen in a basement laboratory.

They were stunned and stupid with incredulity, and with no small amount of rational affront that such an event should dare to unfold itself across the sky of the natural world. It was a hoax, of course. If angels *were* real—which was ridiculous—wouldn't they hew a little less closely to the pictures in Sunday school workbooks?

It was too perfect. It had to be staged.

"Give me a break with the harps," said a paleobiologist. "Overkill."

This outward certainty was undercut by a real tension, though, because none of them were stupid, and there were glaring holes in the hoax theory that just grew more glaring as news choppers dared to draw closer to the airborne host, and the broadcast footage became sharper and less equivocal.

No one wanted to admit it, but it looked . . . real.

Their wings, for one thing. They were easily twelve feet in span, and every feather was its own lick of fire. The smooth rise and fall of them, the inexpressible grace and power of their flight—it was beyond any fathomable technology.

"It could be the broadcast that's faked," suggested Gabriel. "It could all be CG. *War of the Worlds* for the twenty-first century."

There were some murmurs, though no one seemed to actually buy it.

Eliza stayed silent, watching. Her own dread was of a different breed than theirs, and was . . . far more advanced. It should be. It had been growing all her life.

Angels.

Angels. After the incident on the Charles Bridge in Prague some months earlier, she'd been able to maintain a crutch of skepticism at least, just enough to keep her from falling. It might have been faked, then: three angels, there and gone, no proof left behind. It felt, now, as though the world had been waiting with held breath for a display beyond all possibility of doubt. And so had she. And now they had it.

She thought of her phone, left intentionally behind at the apartment, and wondered what new messages its screen held in store for her. And she thought of the extraordinary dark power from which she'd fled in the night, in the dream. Her gut clenched like a fist as she felt, beneath her feet, the shifting of the planks she'd laid across the quicksand of that other life. She'd thought she could escape it? It was there, it had always been there, and this life she'd built on top of it felt about as sturdy as a shantytown on the flank of a volcano.