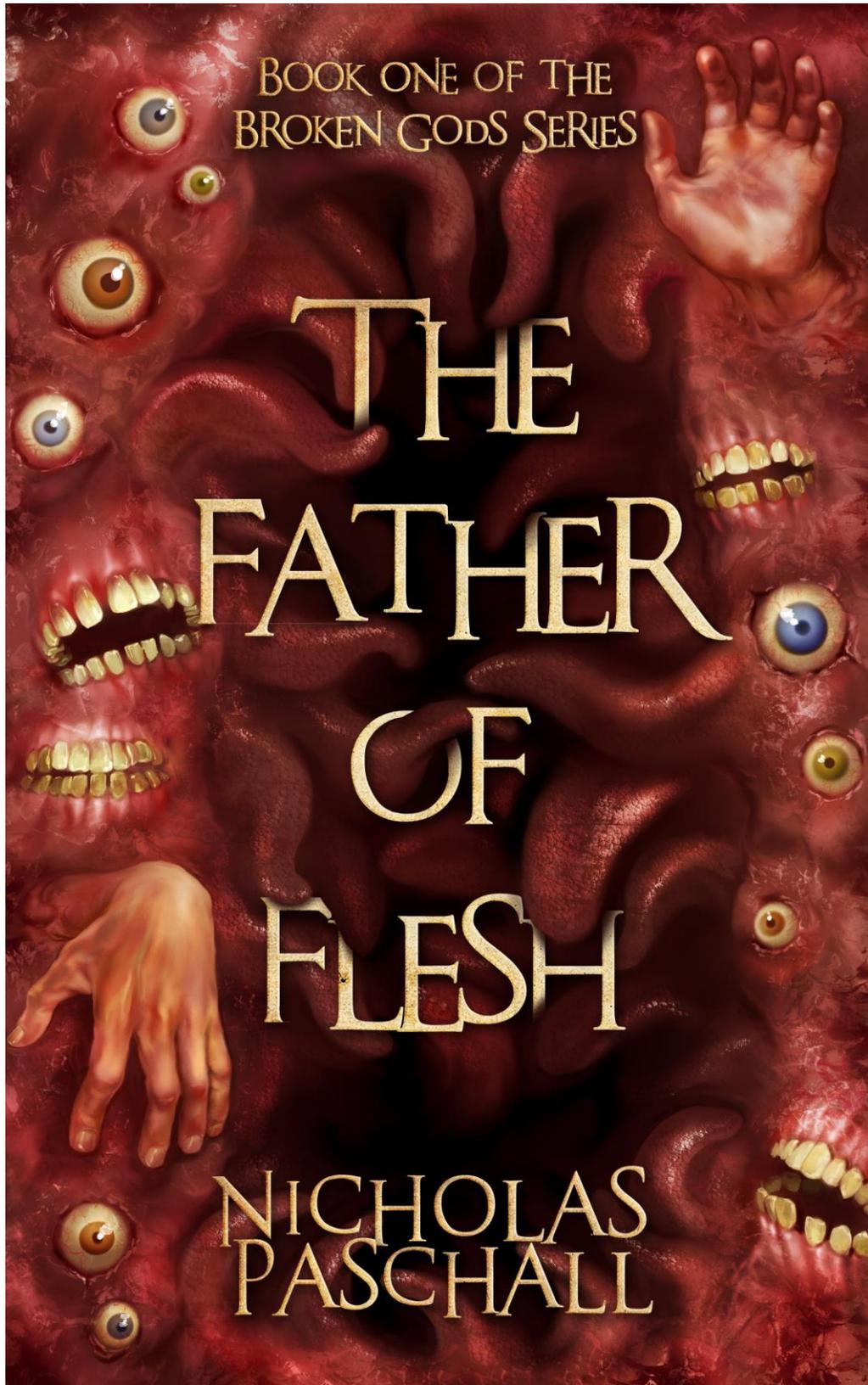


BOOK ONE OF THE
BROKEN GODS SERIES

THE
FATHER
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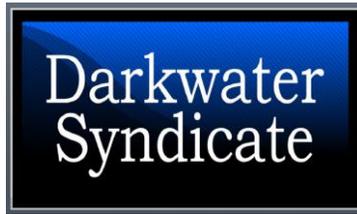
NICHOLAS
PASCHALL



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The Father of Flesh
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Postcards from the Void

DEDICATION

This novel is a direct result of a conversation I had with my father over what makes someone afraid. It was a long discussion had over margaritas before a James Wan movie. We debated what made fear something that manifested in your heart, where it could bring bile to the back your throat, make you look away from the page, or put down the book entirely because it's just too frightening. I took his advice for this book, and searched in the darkest corners of my soul for suitable material to present.

I would also like to thank Tricia Nelson for reading some of the earlier drafts for me. My wife and I have become inured to horror, and so I can't tell what's scary anymore.

This one's for you, Dad!

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CHAPTER ONE

Lying on a cot in his nameless village in the rolling hills of the Guangxi province, Kwan moaned in agony. He was sick, far sicker than he'd ever been.

The night before, he'd been walking the perimeter of his village, lantern held high so that he could see through the smothering darkness. They'd just had a birth in their community of seventy – now seventy-one – souls, and there were creatures that stalked the night hungering for young, unspoiled flesh.

Kwan had turned a corner and was heading back into the center of the village when he saw it sliding out of the village well.

It was vaguely humanoid in that it had two legs and stood upright, though the legs were malformed. Thicker than normal legs with corded muscle, the pallid things ended in a total of three toes, one long toe on the right leg and two stubby ones on the left. Its skin was a pulsating pink that seemed swollen with fluid, straining against its hide as if it were about to burst. It had eight tentacles instead of arms, three sprouting from one side, five from the other, each ending in a four-fingered hand. Veins throbbed visibly as the creature clambered out of the well, leaving behind a trail of viscous fluid that shined a brilliant fuchsia and brown.

Most horrifying of all was its face. The head had twisted until it was completely upside down, flesh bubbling up to replace the neck and lower jaw. An open maw dominated the upper torso; it didn't seem to be able to close. Saliva dribbled from the lipless mouth in great rivulets over the face; the eyes looked about wildly before they'd focused on Kwan. On its hunched back it had two multi-jointed arms that ended on pitted orbs, one of which turned as if regarding Kwan. Kwan had pulled the Soviet pistol from his belt and raised it as quickly as he could.

"Demon!" he'd shouted, alerting the village of the creature in their midst.

His yell had appeared to startle the demon. The pitted orbs had convulsed at the end of the limbs, spewing into the air clouds of noxious gas that rolled with the gentle wind, washing over Kwan as he aimed his pistol at the creature's head. Firing off two shots, the bullets tore through the exposed flesh which bled chunky rivulets of fat mixed with pus. But the wounds quickly opened and split, forming mouths where the bullets had pierced, gaping toothless things that clapped open and closed as if they'd been taunting Kwan.

The creature had stumbled forward in an ungainly fashion, whipping its tentacles about to gain better balance. Kwan, who'd been coughing from the cloud it had discharged, had run behind it, almost slipping in the slime trail, and fired another round into the area where he thought the monster's spine would be.

The beast had swiveled in place, its body flexing as if it were made of rubber as it rounded on Kwan. The gurgling mouth atop the beast had discharged a great deal of spittle as it had roared at Kwan before rushing at him, dropping to the ground and clambering toward him on its eight tentacles as a spider might crawl along its web. Far quicker than Kwan had expected, the creature had set upon him, clubbing him with its thick, fleshy tentacles. One of the hands had grabbed Kwan by the hair, yanking him off his feet.

He'd unloaded the rest of his bullets into the creature's swollen belly, hoping to drive it off, but all that resulted in was more of the foul-smelling fat rolling out of the wounds which had quickly sprouted into mouths.

By then, several other men had been awakened and run from their homes, farming implements in hand to do battle with the demon. Kwan's neighbor Chang had stuck the beast in the back with a pitchfork, tearing away one of the stalks with a savage twist. This had enraged the monster, leading to Kwan being beaten harder, being drug along as the monster turned its attention to Chang. One of the Ho boys had a rifle, and had fired several shots into the "head" of the creature, rupturing its forehead and the rolling eyes, effectively splitting its only human feature in half.

The creature had dropped Kwan by this point. He had lain in the slime that oozed from the creature's legs as it began to grapple Chang, lifting him off the ground. Kwan had witnessed the maw expand, the ruined head splitting vertically to allow the jaws to open further as it rammed Chang's shrieking form into the toothless hole. Tentacles had battered everyone away, preventing them from coming to Chang's aid, as the creature straightened up and swallowed Chang whole, its bloated belly distending as a human outline pressed from within the strained envelope of flesh.

Everyone had gasped as Chang, who could be easily seen through the demon's thin skin, screamed from within. Lumps like serpents moving across the abdomen and grabbed onto Chang. His screams became an agonized gurgle as one of the tentacles audibly snapped his jawbone, breaking teeth as it forced its way into Chang's throat and deeper. Chang's screams, muffled as they were, had only grown in intensity with each passing moment.

Kwan, struggling with a broken arm, gripped his lantern and had swung up into the crook between the creature's legs, shattering the glass and dousing it, and himself, in flaming oil.

The creature howled again, this time with fresh pain as the fires licked all over its body. It shuffled backwards as its legs burned out from beneath it. The other villagers caught on and fetched oil canisters from their homes, splashing the creature's shapeless form with oil to fuel the flames that were crawling up the stinking mass. The split maw had spit up a chunky soup of raw bloody matter, as well as an internal tentacle popping out to lob Chang's bloody broken pelvis, before retreating to the well, dropping itself into the underground river that flowed beneath the village. With steam running from the well like a factory's

smokestack, the villagers had tended to Kwan as best they could, putting out the flames that had climbed up his arms.

One man, the village doctor, had examined the mutilated hips and buttocks, all of it covered in scratches and burns, the sphincter torn and dribbling some of the yellowed fat that had apparently been pumped into Chang before he was torn into pieces. The doctor didn't have long to evaluate the remains as they'd quickly begun to dissolve into a frothy mess of fat and molten bone.

Kwan had been given the next few days off from tending to his fields to try and recuperate from the attack. His broken arm ached horribly but had been set and wrapped tight with a splint, and his burns throbbed with even the slightest of movements.

Now, as he sweated in the cool bedroom of his home, all he could think about was the well, the running water and what lay beneath it. He imagined great things in his fevered dreams; villages of bruised skin and gaping maws with impossible architecture, all centered around a pyramid. Hundreds of the shapeless demons, no two alike, moved about the homes, the cavern floor thick with their slime, the air their stench, stretching beneath their feet like rubbery skin. The trees in the place—if they could be called that—were also made of the same pallid flesh, the branches ending in pitted orbs that would occasionally discharge spores and fluids that the others would flock to, lapping it all up in abject pleasure.

What haunted him the most was the low gong that rang through the cavern which signaled a halt to all activity. Kwan wiped his brow, his bones aching as he *felt* this strange dream's gong ring in his mind. He got off his cot to go and relieve himself, his body feeling sluggish as if he were ill. Stumbling to his chamber pot, he squatted over it and sighed as he did his business. Looking down at his arm, his eyes widened. The skin of his left arm seemed to ripple, as if it were melting wax.

On the verge of a scream, Kwan finished his bathroom break in record time.

* * *

The next few days saw Kwan getting sicker. He refused to have the village doctor come and see him and he barred his windows and doors from the inside, sealing himself in as if it were to be his tomb. His neighbors grew worried, so on the third day, the Ho boys brought their tools and with the help of the village carpenter, An Wong, they took to task the job of dismantling the front door to Kwan's home. It took them little time as, for some reason, the wood seemed to have rotted.

As they pulled the door free, revealing boards nailed over the entryway, they were assaulted by the stench of rotting meat and feces. An stood by as Bai Ho and Jin Ho emptied their stomachs into the nearby bushes that straddled the

porch. After they wiped their faces clean An passed them each a white cloth to affix over their noses, just as he began to tie one over his.

"The smell will be tolerable if we cover ourselves," he said. They each quickly wrapped the strips of cloth over their faces, now resembling bandits of old. Bai, partly due to frustration, took the crowbar they'd used to pry open the door and smashed one of the wooden boards apart. It crumpled like wet paper, falling with a squishy splat to the ground, causing the men to all look down at it.

Covering the wood was a thick layer of fleshy growths, pulsing with life and dribbling yellowed fat like molten butter from tears on the ends of the board. The smashed wood, much to the men's growing horror, began to mend itself, strands of fleshy veins growing out to reconnect the splintered wood, pulling and knitting the flesh and wood together as a bone might heal, only this took half a minute instead of months of recuperation.

"What in the world...?" An said, low enough that the Ho boys barely heard him. An had served in the army during the Japanese invasion, and had seen horrible things done to his fellow countrymen. He'd endured, and come out stronger because of it. To hear him startled frightened the young men.

A low sucking noise came from the darkness within the home, drawing their attention to the partially opened doorway. Through the remaining boards and the waning sunlight, they could see Kwan moving in the darkness, shying away from the light.

"Kwan!" An shouted. "We're here to help! Come, let us take you to Doctor Jingshu! He can help!"

"No... help... leave now!" Kwan's raspy voice growled, the words sounding odd as if Kwan were speaking with his mouth full.

An looked to Bai and Jin, who nodded, and they began tearing away at the fleshy boards, kicking them off to the side into the bushes so that they could enter the wooden structure. Their sandals met with a mushy, muddy flooring of the same pulpy flesh, veins pumping fluids through the strange membrane. Looking around, they saw the flesh had grown over the walls and ceiling, and that in some places it split off into small limbs, each with three or four fingers, which opened and closed of their own accord. Jin nearly squealed when an eye opened on the wall next to him, the pupil spilt into a three-pronged crosshair, purple with flecks of gold.

Kwan was over by his cot, leaning over it as if he were eating. An took a careful step forward, crowbar in hand.

"Kwan?" An said trying to get the man's attention, his voice barely above a whisper.

In the dim light, Kwan was barely visible, but when he stood up all three men shouted in surprise. He no longer had arms, only a long fleshy tentacle extending from where his head had been, a lamprey-like mouth underneath it. The body was riddled with sores and openings that all opened and closed like a

gasping fish, letting out wheezing noises as Kwan struggled to rise to his feet, his legs thick and powerful now.

"Told you... to leave!" Kwan shouted from the orifices, a multitude of voices crying a symphony of obvious pain. He lashed out with the tentacle, slamming An in the chest and knocking him to the ground.

Where the tendril had struck, there was now a tear in An's cotton shirt, the ripped fabric sticking to the tentacle, slowly being absorbed into the mass. Kwan charged forward, spittle flying from his spiral mouth as he hissed angrily.

Bai reacted first, choking up on his crowbar as the tentacle reared at him. He swung, knocking a foot off the stubby end of the tongue-like muscle with his tool. He didn't notice how the tentacle reacted until it was too late, when it twisted and came at him again, this time with the split forming a two-fingered hand. It gripped him around the chest, crushing his biceps into his frame with a horrid snapping noise. Bai screamed as his bones splintered beneath the strength of the monster that Kwan had become. His scream cut short as he was stuffed into Kwan's distended jaws. What they had thought to be small teeth lining the mouth proved to be flexible nodules the size of a big toe, which wriggled about, moving Bai's body quickly down the gullet and into Kwan, who bulged in the midsection as he consumed the young man.

An pulled an old pistol from his belt and fired into Kwan's groin. A low hanging tendril that had once been Kwan's penis flopped out as the pistol shots blasted holes into Kwan's legs and crotch. The tentacle lashed forward like a viper, biting into An's arm with a fleshy barb that began pumping... *something* into An. It made his right arm numb and heavy.

Bringing his pistol to bear, he shot the tentacle in half, liquid fat spattering out in a torrent before the tentacle reshaped, sealing itself up. An ripped the severed half off his arm, which was taking on a waxy look and swelling painfully. He looked at Jin, who had yet to move as he watched all this unfold.

"Go!" he screamed at him, waking him from his stupor. "Get help! Bring fire like we did with the demon!"

Jin nodded before turning to go, falling flat on his face into the writhing floor. Looking down, he gasped at the sight of the floor, pulpy and pallid, having grown up over his sandals and onto his pants. Sucking at his legs like a child at his mother's teat, the floor was slowly pulling him into it, as if it didn't have a bottom.

"I can't move!" Jin cried, tugging at his right leg with visible strain. "Something just bit me! Oh, spirits, something just bit me, and I can feel it pumping something into me!"

"Kwan!" An cried, raising a hand to cover his face. "Why are you doing this? We are your friends!"

"Friends...? No... not friend... offerings... offerings to Father!" Kwan cried out as the last of Bai's sandals slid down Kwan's gullet, disappearing within the man-monster. "He will be... pleased. So very pleased..."

Bai's screams grew muffled as the muscles contracted, pushing his lower half against the wall of skin separating Bai and the foul air. A writhing tentacle wriggled from below him, striking as fast as a serpent before pushing into him, despite Bai's screams of pain.

"Kwan, no! Don't do this!" An pleaded before the head-tentacle reached down and grabbed him, lifting him up high into the air. An raised his pistol and fired three rounds into the top of Kwan's shapeless body. The rivulets of fat that drained from the wounds quickly formed into miniature tentacles, which writhed happily from their sprouting points above the bullet holes.

An screamed in agony as his right arm twisted, snapping with the sound of dry timber popping in a bonfire, as the swollen limb curled. He looked over at it and in what little light there was, he could see that his fingers were purple and straining, looking like over-stuffed sausages, while his wrist had split open, bleeding out a watery slime in place of blood.

An watched, horrified as his biceps began to swell, ripping his sleeve before popping once more and growing longer, distending away from the bone within, which felt as if it were on fire.

"Soon... you will all see... soon," Kwan said, gently rocking An in the air as if he were a toddler, despite the man's screams.

The rest of the villagers heard the screams and had come to investigate, stopping at the door to peer in at the strange battle taking place. The elderly, who had survived so many wars, told their children to pack their belongings quickly. Those that listened ran home while their elders watched in morbid fascination as blue and red veins extended up from the floor and jabbed into Jin, piercing his flesh like a knife before visibly joining with his circulation.

Jin's screams, louder than An's by far, began to wane as he lost what little blood was left within his body. Most of it was being replaced with a viscous fluid that was pasty white and pink, his body bulging where the veins connected. An was slamming his pistol down onto Kwan's vice grip, trying desperately to free himself.

The villagers cried out as they heard a sickening snap and a final cry from An, watching as his shadowed form bent at an awkward angle, his back clearly broken. A low grumbling from within the cabin made all the villagers shudder with just the one raspy word.

"Run..." Kwan hissed, Bai's howls of agony doubling in intensity, broken only by his retching sounds.

CHAPTER TWO

“... and so if you open your textbooks to the third chapter, you’ll see we are going into Central America around three thousand BCE.”

The room was dark, a single projector illuminating the room as a hundred students scribbled down notes. The room was built like an auditorium of old, with seats rising in concentric rings around a central platform where a podium stood. A crooked old man stood on a low stepstool up on the dais, conducting the day’s discussion. He paused to advance the slide machine, in the meantime adjusting his thick glasses. His bushy eyebrows bobbed as the next slide came on screen, depicting an image of ruins amidst jungle.

“Now, you may not realize it, but there was plenty of activity here during this time. Tribes forgotten by man were building great cities dedicated to their gods, some sacrificing captured warriors in bloody rites atop pyramids, as seen here.”

Hopping down from the stool, the old professor slowly walked with his gnarled hands held behind his back. He looked over the class with wide eyes, looking all the larger by the thick lenses of his glasses.

“You there!” He pointed to a random student, who jerked in his seat in alarm.

“Y-yes Professor Nickels?” she replied, earning snickers from the people around her.

“Tell me the name of one of the earlier tribes that settled in this region, without looking at your textbook!”

“Uh, the... Zohapilco?” she guessed.

He clapped his hands and laughed before wagging a finger in her direction, looking as though he were chastising a young child caught stealing candy. “You’ve been reading ahead! *That* tribe is not for another five to seven hundred years from when I’m talking about! Bonus points for being prepared for next lecture though.”

The girl blushed and sank a little lower into her seat as the class chuckled along with the professor. He cleared his throat to get their attention once more, his bullfrog voice carrying across the room.

“The truth is nobody knows for certain. We have very few artifacts. We have some ancient corn that we uncovered, along with some broken pottery, but that reveals very little of the people who lived here. Foundations indicate they were skilled stoneworkers, and that they knew how to build large structures, as represented by the pyramid behind me.”

Professor Davis Nickels walked back to the podium and pressed a button, flipping over to the next slide which showed a system of caves adorned top to

bottom with cave paintings. The art depicted crude figures with spears around a flowering plant, or perhaps a vortex of water.

"Now, what you see here are some caves close to the site in question. The art shows these men, or women, dancing or moving around this figure. Who can guess what it is?"

A dozen hands shot up and Davis laughed. "It was rhetorical, I'm sorry. The answer is correct with each guess, as well as wrong. We simply don't know. It could mean anything! But with the way these ancient people acted, one can surmise that it was something religious in nature."

The girl he questioned earlier piped up. "What do you think it is, Professor?"

All the eyes in the class swiveled between her and Davis, who fixed his stare on her. He spoke in a distant voice, as if remembering something long-since forgotten. "I have an idea... nothing more. But I worry if I'm right..."

The class grew silent as the old man stared off at nothing for several moments before he turned to the girl. "I believe it is religious in nature, though not in reverence. I believe that the people of this region believed something foul lingered in their lands. And I believe this was an artist's rendition of the people dealing with their demons, so to speak."

The class was furiously scribbling down his words, earning a chuckle from him. "Now, pencils down as I have an announcement to make. The rest of the class is going to become essay based."

The class groaned and he held up his hands.

"I know, essays are the devil's work and I am but his minion, but you are all graduate students and as such you will be faced with miles of paperwork if you wish to take over my job once I finally keel over. Now I am going to assign three essays, each worth thirty percent of your grade. The final ten percent will of course be your final exam, an in-class essay. I know most of your other classes offer to let you work at a much more relaxed pace, but I'm from an older generation, where you really must keep your nose to the grindstone until you're down to bone."

Davis reached into his vest pocket, fishing out a golden pocket watch to check the time. "And with that, I'll release you all early, seeing as my throat is tired and the next segment is best done in one sitting. I'll see you all Thursday, read up to chapter six!"

Davis turned and retreated to the podium, where he turned up the lights and clicked the ceiling mounted projector off, before shuffling some papers about and sliding them in his satchel. He stepped down from the stool only to come face-to-stomach with the young girl he'd questioned earlier. He looked up, smiling genially.

"Yes? I'm sorry, you'll forgive me for not knowing your name quite yet..." he said, offering a hand.

The girl adjusted the books in her hand, her pale skin glowing beneath the lights of the classroom. "Oh, sorry! I'm Huan, Huan Zi."

"Oh, an old kingdom Chinese name, how very nice to hear one in this modern age," Davis replied in clipped Mandarin. Huan looked startled for a moment before bowing slightly.

"I didn't realize you spoke Mandarin," she replied in the same tongue. "My family speaks Cantonese; do you know that as well?"

"Of course," he replied in Cantonese. "I learned while doing a dig over there in nineteen thirty-one. Found some amazing relics, great excavation."

"Oh my, how old were you?" Huan asked before covering her mouth, clearly embarrassed.

Davis smiled at her. "Calm yourself, I was nineteen at the time. Yes, I'm old, but I'm still spry. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I was told that you go on digs on occasion and that you bring graduate students along with you, offering them credit for your classes and some recognition in your field work?"

Davis nodded happily. "That I do, though I don't have anything prepared for another year or so."

"Oh," she said, crestfallen. "Do you have room for another volunteer?"

"Always!" Davis chirped in English, reaching to his satchel and fishing out a form. "Just fill this out real fast and leave a phone number and I'll call you when I am ready, all right? I'll speak with your advisor and take you under my care since you're showing an interest in my work."

"I went to see the exhibit with the relics you pulled from the Ubaid ruins in Iraq. How did you get a permit to go into such a... an unstable country?" Huan asked as she walked over to the podium, pulling a pen from her jeans.

"Simple, I went down to Mexico and then called up the Iraqi government. I spoke with some of Saddam's people and bartered a few relics I had in exchange for the chance to explore the ruins. I offered half of what I pulled out of the ground to them, with them getting first choice."

"You mean what I saw was only half of what you collected?" Huan gasped, looking up from the form.

"About a third. I keep a few trophies for my personal collection," Davis replied.

Huan hummed as she scanned the form over. "A release of liability? Why would you need that?"

"If we're to go to ruins and delve deep into caverns and such, I have to make sure I'm not liable should the worst happen," Davis replied with ease.

"Oh," she said before signing the bottom and filling out her information. She handed him the form and smiled, clutching her book to her chest as she began to walk off.

"Oh, and Miss Zi?" Davis said, carefully sliding the paper into the folder with the other filled out forms.

"Yes sir?" She turned, looking at him.

"Bear in mind that in addition to credit for a dig, I offer a single artifact found to you, providing you do your thesis upon said artifact about its properties and history," Davis said, smiling as her face lit up.

"Really?" she exclaimed.

"Really. For the work I'd have you do, it's the least I could offer," he said. He looked around, as if hiding something. "Just make certain not to brag about it, okay? It's not exactly above the board, so to speak..."

She squealed and hopped from foot to foot. "That's so exciting! Please, bring me on your next dig!"

"I'll see what I can do," Davis said. "Now run along, I'm sure you have better things to do than talk to an old man."

"Thank you Professor!" she said before racing up the stairs.

"You're welcome Huan," Davis said, watching her as she darted out of the classroom. "You're welcome."

* * *

Unlocking his office door, Davis heaved a sigh as he took the mail from the slot and began rifling through it. He had a home to go to, this was true, but all his home was used for was to hold relics from the past and to host dinner parties. He paid a lovely woman named Rebecca to come and clean up three times a week, something he felt was beneath him. Walking into the room he looked up and smiled.

Being the oldest Professor has its advantages... he thought.

He had a large room that he didn't share with anyone besides his assistant, Lawrence Wilks, who had a small desk next to the door. Davis dropped the mail on his desk and slowly made his way over to his own, a large thing that he'd had shipped from the Ukraine after he'd discovered it in the ruins of a castle rumored to be haunted. He'd taken great care to preserve the artifact, and was often caught polishing it when he had nothing better to do.

The desk in question seemed as if it'd been carved from a single tree as there were no seams or pieces that could come loose. Great reliefs jutted out, demonic faces leering at anyone who dared look, while the rest of the desk was covered in ancient carvings of some forgotten language. Davis had ordered and placed a glass top for his desk so that he could write and work without worry of damaging the precious thing, his computer sitting on the edge with a large monitor that allowed him to better see what he typed.

The chair had come from the same find. High-backed with actual skulls built into the armrests, the chair was warped and bent at odd angles that forced anyone seated in it to sit up straight. He'd had it outfitted with padding and painted over with lacquer to preserve the foreboding chair, and loved the results.

Placing his satchel on the desk, he hopped up into his seat and sighed as he heard the whispers enter the back of his mind, praying for release.

“Sorry my friends,” he murmured back, rubbing the skulls soothingly, “but not today.”

Sitting up straight, he pulled his keyboard over to him and logged into his computer. While it was booting up he glanced around his office, smiling at the relics he’d collected over the years.

Hanging from the wall was an Ubaid sword within a verdigris-ridden sheath of spoiled copper, the blade peeking through in a few spots. He loved showcasing it to students from its plaque on the wall. It’d served in many battles, Davis imagined, its last one four years ago in the ruins against servants of a great evil.

Below it was a small bookcase with a vase from the Song Dynasty, a jade tortoise from India that served as an incense sconce, and a chunk of green stone taken from the temple steps in a lightless cavern where Davis had seen the horrors that the universe had to offer. Below these items were books of mythology from all the continents as well as several on the history of the Catholic Church. Behind him was a window that allowed him to look out onto the rotunda, where the fountain gurgled happily into a large pool while students sat at tables eating their meals, chatting about exams and deadlines and the various things students were wont to chat about.

Turning back to his computer, he smiled when it greeted him with a pinging noise and opened to his e-mail. He scanned over several documents that had been forwarded to him from colleagues all over the world, but one stood out to him. Leaning in, he clicked on an e-mail labeled: “Old God Evidence.” Opening it, he saw still images taken from what looked to be a village on a hill, covered in what resembled pink flesh. Several trees were engulfed in the mass and now seemed to be sporting human hands instead of leaves, while blurry images featured various humanoid figures that were not of this world.

Looking at who sent the e-mail, he frowned. Doctor Shen was a medical professional who had served the People’s Republic of China for years and was a consummate politician. He rarely did anything out of the kindness of his heart, and hated Davis with a passion, seeing as Davis had killed his brother Xian on an expedition into a tomb cavern nearly eighty years ago. Xian had become afflicted by a sudden madness and had become a threat to the entire archaeological team; Davis did what he had to and shot the man in the head, ending his life.

Much as he’d regretted shooting Xian, Davis never doubted it was the right thing to do—the tomb they’d explored bore an ancient curse, and Xian’s erratic behavior stemmed from it. Still, justified or not, the act never sat well with Shen. That was not the only souvenir of Davis’s visit either—to this day Davis spent every January twenty-second in horrible agony thanks to the curse, and always made certain he could remain in bed for the duration of its aftereffects.

Clicking on another image showed that the village well seemed to have become a gaping maw with a circle of eyes, possibly as large as soccer balls, and that they were staring straight at the camera. Their pupils were violet and split

the eye into three segments, causing Davis to shudder at the very thought of what could be the source of the corruption. Looking to the text of the e-mail, he began reading it softly aloud.

Professor Nickels, it has come to my attention that since your time in our country you have become an expert on the occult and all that it entails. As such I will defer to your expertise on what this could possibly be, as our own experts agree that it belongs in the field of the paranormal. I've stationed military around the site and ordered them to halt the growth of the matter on the ground using mortar-fire and napalm. The creatures you see seem to be vulnerable to light and fire, and have taken great lengths to shroud the village in darkness. The enclosed photos were taken by a drone that was equipped with a powerful light to allow us to see the spread of this infection. I ask you not as a friend, but as a colleague, to come and find the source of the problem and put a stop to it.

Sincerely,

Minister Xiao-Ming Shen

Davis studied the images for a few minutes before getting up and walking over to his bookcase, his gnarled finger tracing the spines of the books before selecting one and pulling it off the shelf. It was a green book, withered with age. It bore no title and was apparently written by hand. Opening it, Davis flipped through the pages and read the passages silently, looking for any indication as to what paranormal manifestation it could possibly be.

After nearly ten minutes of searching, he gave a despondent sigh and closed the book.

The text was a copy of a book written by a possessed monk from the third century detailing the old gods and what they wished to do with Earth and the souls that lived here. He was certain it would hold the answers he sought, because whenever events such as these cropped up, consulting the book often pointed him in the right direction. This time, however, it turned up nothing.

His thoughts were derailed when the doorknob of his office turned, and a young man wearing a green vest with brown slacks walked into the room, a book bag slung over his shoulder and a coffee from the campus Starbucks in hand. He was well groomed with short blonde hair and light blue eyes.

"Professor Nickels!" Lawrence exclaimed, depositing his backpack on his desk. "I was unaware you would be in this early. I would have thought you'd still be with your graduate students..." His voice dropped an octave, sounding overly conspiratorial. "...teaching them the theories you have on how the ancient people of the world worshipped forgotten gods."

Davis smiled at the sarcasm in his assistant's voice. "Dear Lawrence, I must say I'm surprised at how closed-minded you are! Here you are, looking through my collection for the third consecutive year and yet you still don't believe. The evidence is right in front of you!"

"That's what the bible-thumpers say about Jesus, you know," Lawrence said as he took a seat at his desk. "Anyway, I have the papers from your Introduction to History class ready for you; most were duds but a few showed promise."

"Those must wait," Davis said as he opened his e-mail, addressing the Dean of the University. "I'm going to be traveling for a while and will need you to take over my duties teaching the lower years the basics while I am away. For the graduate students, send out a mass e-mail with the assignments I gave you, and tell them to do self-study, and when to turn in the papers."

"Sir?" Lawrence asked, clearly confused.

Quickly typing up a letter to the Dean explaining that an emergency had cropped up and he was going abroad, he sent it before opening his browser to a travel site. Punching in his destination, he paid with his saved credit cards information and shut down his computer. Then, sliding out of his chair, he grabbed his satchel and marched to the door, not looking at Lawrence once.

"If you need me," he said, "I'll be in Boston at their university. I'll have my cell phone with me and I'll be gone for the foreseeable future, so carry on as if I were here."

CHAPTER THREE

Stepping off the plane, Professor Nickels adjusted his clothing. The flight from Austin had been a long one and his joints ached, his muscles twitching and straining with each movement. Reaching into his satchel for his prescription meds, he fished out an orange bottle and shook out two pills. He bought a bottle of water from a vendor and took the tablets, chugging the entire bottle to wash the taste away before tossing it in a nearby trash can. Walking slowly through the terminal, he made his way out of the airport to the taxi line. He hopped into the back of a waiting cab, smiling at the black man in the driver's seat.

"Where're you going, sir?" he asked, looking at Davis through the rearview mirror.

"To Boston University, if you would."

"Main campus?" The cabbie asked as he adjusted his rearview mirror.

"Yes. Take the direct route, as I've seen the scenery before and would like to give you a big tip," Davis replied with a warm tone. "No hurry, but I've seen all the sites I wish to see."

"Fair enough," the cabbie said, pulling out of the terminal loop.

Meanwhile, Davis opened his cell phone and dialed the number to B.U.'s library. After two rings, it was answered by a young voice, probably a student worker. "Hello, university library, how may I help you?"

"Yes, my name is Professor Davis Nickels and I'm calling to reserve a study room in your library for one of your rarer items."

The man on the other end was silent for a moment. "Rarer items? I'm sorry Professor, but our collection of rare books is strictly controlled and only certain people can access them."

"You'll find my name on the list," Davis said with a smile. "Go ahead and check, I'll wait."

"Okay, let me look." The man sounded unsure. Davis could hear the clicking of keys coming through the line. "What do you know, you are on the accepted list. Which book do you want to see?"

"The *Grimlocke Chronicles*," Davis said without hesitation.

"Oh, um... we don't usually let people read that book, it's, uh, it's one of the oldest texts that we have."

"I'm on the list, aren't I? I need it for a research project I'm working on and would hate to go over your head for this. I know the rumors about the book being cursed, I've read it before."

"You have?" he asked in genuine surprise.

"Yes, and I'm still quite alive and sane as you can tell. So please have one of the locked rooms ready for me within the next hour and bring the book out upon my arrival. I'll leave my wallet with you as I know that's protocol."

"O-okay, I'll just look in with the head librarian to double-check and then we'll get you set up, professor."

"That sounds great, Jeremy. I appreciate it," Davis replied.

"You're welcome – wait – how did you know my name?"

"Oh," Davis faked a surprised tone. "You must have said it earlier."

"No, I would have remembered that. How did you know my name?" he asked again, sounding agitated.

"I'll see you soon, Jeremy, and you best have the room ready for me," Davis said before handing up.

"You sure sound like an interesting guy," the cabbie said as he drove through traffic.

"I like to think I am," Davis replied. "I teach archaeology down in Texas, though I taught here for a brief period."

"Really? I don't hear any accent," the cabbie said.

"That's because I move around a lot, going from dig to dig. Getting financing is tough sometimes, but it's always worth it in the end," Davis replied, staring out the window.

"I hear that! Payday is coming and I am looking at a fat check this month!" the cabbie exclaimed with a laugh. "Gonna take my lady dancing and have a blast!"

"Ah, youth. Enjoy it while you can young man, enjoy it while you can," Davis said with a knowing smirk.

They drove in silence the remainder of the way to the university, with the cabbie taking a few back roads to get them there quicker. Traffic snarls were always a trouble in Boston and the fact that the cabbie could see them coming by a mile was a handy trick. Davis was contemplating how best to approach the subject at hand when the cabbie pulled to a sudden halt. Looking up, Davis realized he was at the university steps leading to the main building, which was flanked by two much larger, sprawling wings.

"Ah, here we are then," Davis said, reaching for his wallet and pulling out a slim card. "I trust you accept credit cards?"

"Of course. That'll be seventy dollars and ten cents," the cabbie said, taking the card and swiping it into his reader. As he was handing the card back, Davis passed him a twenty-dollar bill.

"Your tip, under the table so to speak," he said, grinning. The cabbie smiled back through the rear-view mirror.

"Thanks old man, you're all right!" The cabbie laughed. "You need help getting out or anything?"

"No, I'm not that old yet!" Davis laughed back, thankful that his medication had begun to kick in on the ride over. "Now, you have a wonderful day, and drive safely."

"Sure will, man; I sure will. You take it easy old timer, and have fun doing what you're doing!" the cabbie said as Davis exited the vehicle, pulling his satchel along with him.

Davis waved the cabbie off and turned to examine the buildings with a critical eye. They hadn't changed much in the forty years since he taught here, though several new buildings had been erected that he didn't remember. Walking slowly up to the front steps, he took them carefully as his knees were hurting. Once he reached the top he opened the door and stepped inside the air-conditioned lobby, where many students were milling about.

"Slothful!" he exclaimed as he walked through the crowd and down one of the hallways leading towards the library.

He exited the building and walked across campus, the many trees and blue-green grass enchanting to behold. The weather was cooling down and his muscles creaked with each step, but he persevered. The library was within sight. Notwithstanding that he was an expert in his niche, he knew he'd be able to dig up the answers he sought within the library's walls. Sometimes, he mused, what separated the professionals from the amateurs was not knowing the answer but simply knowing where to find it.

A chilly puff of air met him as he walked through the automatic door leading into the library. He headed for the desk, staffed by a young man with green-tinted hair and a shirt bearing the name of some music band, large circular earrings in his ears and a pierced lower lip. All in all, he looked out of place in an institution of higher learning, but Davis told himself that times were changing and people were evolving in how they presented themselves.

"Hello," Davis said, greeting the strange boy like an old friend. "You must be Jeremy."

The boy looked nervous and clicked something on a computer in front of him. "And you are Professor Nickels, then?"

"Yes sir, I'm glad that we've been introduced. Now that the pleasantries are out of the way, allow me the chance to look at the book I requested. I assume the room I asked for is ready for me?"

"About that... the head librarian said that he'd like to speak with you before letting you look at the *Chronicles*," Jeremy said, glancing at a black phone sitting on the desk. "Do you want me to call him down?"

"Yes, please do," Davis replied before moving to the side to allow a student to walk up and check out a book. Jeremy did this while speaking in hushed tones on the phone, and the young woman who checked out the book gave Davis an odd look as she walked away.

Oh, good, Davis thought bitterly, my reputation precedes me. The last head didn't care when I came in, why should this one?

Jeremy hung up the phone and smiled at Davis. "Professor, if you take the second elevator up to the fourth floor you'll find the Dean of Library Sciences waiting for you."

That surprised Davis, who merely nodded and walked over to the elevators Jeremy had indicated. The dean was waiting for him? How very odd.

"What could the dean want with me?" Davis wondered aloud as he rode the elevator up. "I'm on the approved readers list after all, so I shouldn't have to go through this..."

The doors slid open to reveal an atrium with long sofas against the walls and a desk sitting beside a pair of large double doors. A woman in a spotted purple shirt sat behind the desk, glasses perched at the end of her nose with red hair pulled into a bun as she typed away at a computer.

Davis walked up and cleared his throat, hoping to catch her attention.

She seemed to ignore him for a moment before holding up a hand, one index finger raised as she finished typing out another sentence. She finally turned and looked over the desk at Davis. "Are you the visiting professor?"

"Why yes, I am. My name is Professor Davis Nickels; how do you do?" he said giving a stiff bow in her direction. She raised a well-manicured eyebrow and sighed.

"Dean Reynolds is a very busy man but has requested to see you before granting you access to our special archives," the woman said without introducing herself. "If you'll head through the double doors, he'll be waiting for you."

"Why, thank you! And I hope you have a pleasant day!" He said, saluting her with two fingers. He walked up to the door, pushing it open, grumbling about incompetent secretaries beneath his breath.

The room was large and lavish. Deep, dark wood chairs sat before a desk with red velvet and gold filigree, a small plaque sitting on the clean desk bearing the simple title of "Dean of Library Science." There were several bookshelves lined with books, but judging by the thin layer of dust on them they didn't see much time before hungry eyes. A man was standing behind the desk, bald save for the edges of his head like a friar of old, though his hair was black with streaks of silver, showing his advanced age. He was pouring a short crystal glass full of amber liquid, not bothering to look up at Davis as he entered.

Davis took this as a sign to approach and perhaps take a seat in one of the two chairs before the wide desk. The man turned on his heel and set the decanter on a shelf without offering a drink to Davis, which bothered him slightly. Not that he would have accepted, but manners would have directed at least an offer. Already, this man annoyed him.

The man adjusted his plain black tie and picked a piece of lint off his matching black suit, before pulling up his rolling leather chair and sitting down. "Please, have a seat, professor," he said in heavily accented English. It sounded as if he were Russian, or someone from one of the former Soviet countries that

had been engulfed in civil wars for years. Davis eased himself into a chair and leaned back into the seat's padding. Surprisingly comfortable!

"If I am to understand correctly," the man said with little aplomb, "you wish to access the occult section of our collection, specifically an older text that is considered a prize by many."

"Only to those like myself who research the occult," Davis replied before smiling sweetly. "Or practitioners of the dark arts themselves."

The man frowned before leaning back in his seat, sipping his drink as he studied Davis. "I've heard of you, you know? The globe-trotting archaeologist that always seems to find a seemingly forgotten tomb or catacomb that everyone else has overlooked. Your work in the catacombs of Paris is the stuff of legend; fighting off cultists while gathering artifacts at the same time."

"People who devote themselves to dark entities are rarely strong or smart. They usually have one or two leaders worth noting."

"And you handled them both with a knife you... liberated from their own ritual, if the stories are to be believed." The man took another drink, staring at Davis with dark eyes. "Do you still possess the knife?"

"That I do. It had been used to sacrifice over a dozen children to some nameless entity that I never was able to discern," Davis replied. "Why?"

The man set his drink down before running a finger along the rim. "As you very well know, our university holds the largest collection of occult material in the Americas. From pottery to books, scrolls to weapons, we have it all. But you've been spending the last fifty years..."

"Eighty-two," Davis commented idly.

"...swinging in and scooping up treasure for your own collection and donating the rest to your university's library. Now, I could outright purchase many of your finds using our generous funding from our private benefactors, but you and I both know that you've kept the best of your stash for yourself. The knife, for example... I would like a chance to have my researchers study and catalogue it."

"Why?" Davis asked.

The man leaned back in his chair. "Because that knife belongs with us and you know it. I would love to buy it from you," he offered before frowning as Davis shook his head, "but I doubt I'll be able to offer a substantial enough amount for outright purchase."

"So you want time to study the dagger in exchange for me to study the *Grimlocke Chronicles*?" Davis deduced.

The man nodded. "And they said you were growing slow in your old age! I know you're on the approved list, so that means you're safe to read from the book, but I have final say on who sees it."

"So how long do you wish to examine the dagger?" Davis asked, clearly uncomfortable with parting with the blade. "It has several paranormal properties that I'd rather keep in check, if it's all the same."

"I assure you, my researchers are well versed in how to handle possessed, cursed, dark, or otherwise paranormal objects. We won't even try to remove the curse, just find out how it works so that we can record it in case you suddenly die and your goods go up for auction. I would hate to see a truckload of anomalous artifacts being distributed to the masses due to an estate sale."

Davis chuckled at the thought. "Yes, I can see how that would be dangerous. So, if you'll have someone come and pick up the dagger from my assistant? I'd rather not mail it."

"Understood, make the call here and now and I'll grant you the access you want," the man said, swirling his drink back and forth.

Davis pulled out his cell phone and dialed Lawrence's number. On the fourth ring, he answered. "Yes sir?"

"Lawrence, I'm going to have a visitor come down from Boston. They'll have a note from me to take possession of the Mar'tuck dagger. You'll have to fetch it from the house, feel free to store it in the office until it can be passed over."

Lawrence was silent for a moment. "Sir, I'm not exactly comfortable touching that particular relic. I know what effects it can have..."

"The effects only occur when skin contact is made, so handle it with a cloth and keep it in the briefcase I keep beneath its case in my viewing room," Davis said, looking over at the dean and rolling his eyes. "It isn't that hard, Lawrence, just please have it ready. Thank you!"

He hung up without another word and looked at the man expectantly. "You know, I never introduced myself."

"Your reputation precedes you. Plus, I was a student here when you taught. It's strange, you don't look a day older than you did thirty years ago. Odd, isn't it?" The man said, putting his drink down. "But forgive my manners, I'm Dean of Library Sciences, Harvey Reynolds."

"Pleasure to meet you again. I must say, I don't recognize the face, and I'm normally quite good at remembering my students," Davis said.

Reynolds shrugged. "I sat in the back and took notes. I got a B in your class as I wasn't a stellar student. I remember you issuing the challenge for anyone to list every U.S. president for an A in the course. I also remember you laughing as people tried to recite them and failed."

"It's a test I've discontinued due to laptops and wireless Internet," Davis said with distaste. A knock on the door caused Davis to jump in surprise. A young man opened the door and peeked inside, his shoulder length black hair falling around his face to frame his gray eyes. He was slender and in a button up white shirt with black slacks and suspenders. The glasses hanging from his collar danced as he walked into the room confidently.

Davis frowned as Reynolds accepted a stack of paperwork from him before turning to face Davis once more. "Professor Nickels, this is my assistant James Walker. He'll be accompanying you to your reading, and if you will accept my invitation, he'll also come along with you on your next dig that is bound to occur

from this research. I assure you he's well versed in the old languages of Asia and Asia Minor, and is an expert in the field of paranormal research."

Davis frowned, looking the boy up and down. Reaching into his satchel, he fished out a form and laid it on the luxurious countertop, setting a pen on top of it. "Read and sign, and you can come."

END OF SAMPLE

**DISCOVER OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE
THROUGH DARKWATER SYNDICATE**

A Moon Called Sun

By: Christopher F. Cobb

"This is intriguingly different science fiction/fantasy/horror, wildly ranging, sometimes hard-hitting, not for maiden aunts."

– Piers Anthony, New York Times bestselling author

A botched alien abduction sends modern-day Trace Jackson to north Florida in the year 1818, where he meets a beautiful Seminole woman, and the two strike up a relationship. Unfortunately, Trace's distant ancestor, General Andrew Jackson, is hell-bent on driving out the Seminoles by whatever means necessary. Can Trace survive to fulfill his destiny in another dimension where time no longer has meaning, on a moon called Sun?

The Gullwing Odyssey

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

"The Gullwing Odyssey rests solidly on the shaking shoulders of a good laugh – and that's what sets it apart from ninety percent of fantasies on the market."

– Midwest Book Review

A four-time award winning fantasy/comedy adventure. When an unusual assignment sends Marco overseas, he finds himself dodging pirates and a hummingbird with an appetite for human brains. Little does he know the fate of a civilization may rest upon his shoulders. In spite of himself, Marco becomes the hero he strives not to be.

Postcards From The Void

By: Various Authors

The places in this book are shunned, abandoned and forgotten. They do not exist, and yet here you will find the stories of people who have gone and survived to tell their tales, complete with photographs. These are the postcards from the void, frightful evidence of places that should not be, and yet exist in our nightmares. Should you dare to venture into these blighted places, remember: don't talk to strangers; don't stray far from home; and never, ever go in alone.

Shadows And Teeth, Volume One
Ten Terrifying Tales Of Horror And Suspense
By: Various Authors

*"I highly recommend **Shadows And Teeth** for fans of horror... Each story is uniquely written by a talented author, and the writing styles varied so that each story stood out on its own... I really look forward to future volumes in this fantastic series."*

–Reader Views Reviews

Prepare for extreme horror. This collection of ten stories features a range of international talent, award-winning authors and new voices in the genre. Take care as you reach into these dark places, for the things here bite, and you may withdraw a hand short of a few fingers.

Slasher Sam

By: Simon Petersen

Slasher Sam writes a killer blog. When Sam isn't gutting victims, the serial killer/blogger is posting it to the Internet for the world to see, putting readers so close to the action that they're practically in the splash zone when the blood and guts go flying.

Holy

By: Abbie Krupnick

Gus Stevens has the worst of both worlds. By night, he resides in the Dream World, a place steeped in magic and chock full of exotic dangers, with hardly a way to defend himself. By day, a giant snow-lizard, the ravenous personification of Winter, stalks him in the Real World, looking to make Gus its next meal. Author Abbie Krupnick blends the magical and the mundane in this avant-garde dark fantasy where nothing is as it seems.

Chasing Blood

By: R. Perez de Pereda

A briefcase full of money lies on the floor. Would you take it? What if the money belonged to a crime lord, and taking it set you running for your life? Still sound good? It did to Ryan, who had nothing to lose.

Born a child of the streets, Ryan Cantril learned early on to fight for his keep, and sometimes just to keep what he earned. Now in his thirties, the self-proclaimed king of the sucker punch fights to keep the cash he rightfully stole from a powerful crime syndicate – and if he's lucky, his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Texas, Nicholas Paschall started his career in writing at an early age, jotting down stories on scraps of paper when he could and saving them to read aloud at lunch to all his friends. The teachers, upon learning this, asked him to stop as the stories weren't exactly school-friendly, but this only spurred him on to continue his career as a writer.

After a stint as a journalist and editor, he started his career as a horror author. It was brought on by reading a book he found dull and listless, which, after lending it to a coworker, he was informed it was terrifying. He thought he could do better, and has been publishing ever since. He's been published in nineteen different printed anthologies and magazines, served two years as a recurring columnist for *Dark Eclipse Magazine*, and is a current columnist for *The London Horror Society*. His work can be found across the web, where he spins new yarns for all to enjoy on a daily basis.

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