

[ EXCERPT ]

**DISSONANCE**

Volume I: Reality

Aaron **Ryan**

*Plug your ears. And whatever you do, don't look.  
The war for humanity has begun.*



© 2024 Aaron Ryan

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For Sweeps, Bren & AJ:  
my true loves.

You've helped me to survive.



# | FOREWORD

I need to create. I've published seven books in my lifetime, under various pseudonyms. None of them has been fiction. However, this is actually my *second* fictional novel, and it is not under a pen name.

I began sculpting a fictional novel when I was in my early twenties, and I had actually reached about two hundred fifty pages. At the time, it didn't represent where I wanted to go in my life with Christ, and I wasn't dead-set on pursuing a vocation as an author. It was called "The Omega Room," and I ended up showing it the "omega" by intentionally hitting the delete button on my old word processor machine somewhere around 1996 or 1997. I daresay that a geek squad somewhere would have been able to undelete it and rescue it from oblivion. But that wasn't my interest at the time. The amusing thing is that I had accidentally deleted it once before that as well. I was using the same computer, and I don't know what I did. But when the file was nowhere to be found, I remember sitting, frozen, at that computer screen for ten minutes. I finally did the only thing I could do: press on and start all over. But it ultimately didn't last. I'm beyond thankful I didn't accidentally or intentionally delete this one.

In my life, I've pursued varying interests, all of them thoroughly satisfying: music, acting, voice acting, performing, poetry, graphic design, commemorative productions, videography, and other multimedia pursuits. After the death of a dream of mine to return to music in 2023, I was contemplating where I should go and what I should do.

I knew it had to be something creative, as that's the only way I would really thrive, be intrinsically satisfied and fundamentally fulfilled. As God's creations, I firmly believe we were created to in turn create. It's one of the ways that we mirror his mighty ability.

I set out to tell a story in November of 2023: one that represents two genres that I love: science fiction/fantasy, and dystopian novels. That was, after all, the direction of my ill-fated first attempt. I wanted to incorporate everything, or at least, as much as I could, about everything I had ever loved from novels or cinema. Things that inspired me. Things that terrified me to my core. Things that moved me deeply. There have been several passages in this novel that have fulfilled those in various capacities, and I'm grateful for that. In turn, it is my deepest hope that this novel inspires you. Terrifies you. Moves you deeply.

I love the writing process, and have a great respect for it. This book has evolved organically, through several iterations and plot corrections, and more than a few alpha readers. Thank you, to all of you, for your help. Thank you so much to Michael Babski for the invaluable Army insight and terminology. To Roland Kouhsen for your knowledge of ecology and nature. I have thoroughly enjoyed writing and editing this through and through. In addition, the lengthy research I've needed to conduct on all things military, Tennessee, weather and political have greatly helped. Thank you, Google. I certainly hope no one checks my Internet search history; I'll probably look very much like a terrorist with all the things I've had to research for this book. But it has shaped me very much into a detective, or a scholar, and I thoroughly approve of the process.

Due to my strong personal convictions, I wish to stress that I intended to reach verisimilitude in this book: to attain a level of gritty realism that perhaps authors who profess Christ and yet wish to write realistic fiction to date have not been able to attain. Therefore, *yes*, you will find profanity in places in this book. You will find sexually suggestive exchanges. You will find real-life scenarios that mimic the modern world, and popular culture. As a Christian and follower of Jesus, we are to be in the world and not of it. I have walked a fine line in trying to stay in the world, but remain out of it, and at times I am certain I will have missed the mark. For those who know me, or who name the name of Christ, on the one hand, forgive me if I offend you with my choice of narratives or dialogue choices. On the other hand, I rescind my plea for forgiveness, as in so doing, I maintain that gritty dose of realism. Let us for one moment not pretend to live in a world with no R-Rated movies...nor songs with off-color humor or language...nor friends whom we dearly love who possess the mouths of sailors...nor vote for those we think are professing Christians and yet are as fundamentally flawed as we ourselves are. We can remain in the world and not be of it. Let us know that we can hear – and bear – such things and let them reverberate off of us, impacting our soul not, and move forward with a clear conscience. That's what I've walked a fine line to do, keeping a clear conscience that I am

merely a storyteller: the story in fact tells itself, and I am just the carrier. The characters begin to take on a life of their own at varying points, and I would not be a good steward if I deprived their personalities opportunities to shine through.

Like the protagonist in any good story, I must proceed on a journey of awareness and change. I trust that you will see that process unfold as you read *Dissonance*.

I wrote the first draft of this story beginning on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023, and was finished with it on December 16<sup>th</sup>. In less than a month, I had come up with the basis for a new series of stories that I felt needed to be told.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for partaking of this story I've sought to tell.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aaron Ryan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Aaron Ryan



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# 1 | REALITY

There was no way I was going to make it. That was my reality.

I had had this damned thing in my pocket for seventeen days, and had successfully evaded becoming anyone's dinner so far, but for how much longer? I had no idea. It was getting hot, whatever it was, and it wanted out of my pocket. Markus didn't even tell me what it could do or why it was so important. Just gave half to me and half to Rut, and then bolted. I only got a few brief looks at it, but it was some kind of stone or gem, about the size of a silver dollar, flat, and encased in some kind of silver circlet with strange glyphs on it. Now I kept it wrapped in a rag.

The back of my throat scratched as I muscled down a swallow, and I feverishly swiped away whatever bug it was that I suddenly felt on the back of my neck, hiding there behind that dumpster. I was pretty sure they had passed by already, but with gorgons, you could never be sure. The way they would glide noiselessly across the ground was just plain creepy as hell.

I remember when my little brother Rutledge, aka "Rutty," and I would skip rocks across the alleyway during the heat of the summer when it was safer, and Jackson would come looking for us to whisk us back into school. It was all fun and games until he forgot to keep it down and yelled at us. Then that berserker gorgon got him. We called those ones berserkers because they were just weirder than the rest: flailing and twitching, but also faster, and much, much meaner. It was weird; they came a few years after the original gorgons. But no one ever saw where they came from, apparently.

I never understood how any gorgon could hear a rock ricocheting across dirt up to 100 meters away, but it got there fast and then did its thing. Jackson never saw it coming. That

trippy Medusa-esque stare they give you: I don't know what it is that comes out of them, but it's some kind of paralyzing telepathy...something psychological...and it got him fair and square. Slap a few snakes on their heads and it would have completed the ensemble, straight out of Greek mythology. But these things didn't slither...they sliced through the air at you. There was of course nothing we could do once it had zeroed him.

We tried to look away as it came in, and then just ate him slowly. I'll never forget that. The sound of it. That was seven, no, eight and a half years ago now. I can still remember his stinky coffee breath when he'd catch us playing. Kinda wished we could wake up and find him skulking around the alleyway trying to catch us again. But that'll never happen.

Rut had scouted up ahead, and I could see the occasional green pings of his laser-pointer: a priceless treasure we had ransacked from a home on a previous recon. Last name *Ramsey*, I think. They had the good sense to clear out before all hell broke loose. I envy them, but I thank them more that they left some goods behind. Where they were now was anyone's guess, if they were even still alive.

Twenty-three-year-old me took one last look back and mustered up the courage to raise myself up over the lip of the dumpster, hardly daring to breathe. The night air betrayed me and revealed my slow steady fog breath in short wisps. *No fair*. I pulled back. It just didn't feel like it was time yet. Good thing too. I checked myself and started. Just as I did, another gorgon came floating down from above, not twenty feet from where I was.

I was trying to remain calm, but it just stayed right there, hovering. I glanced at my watch. I only had six more minutes and the Blockade would close for good for the night. I'd never make it out of this zinc plant and back in time. I looked back and Rut glared at me open-eyed, silently mouthing "Come on!" I shook my head and looked back.

For whatever reason that gorgon just wouldn't move. It was like it had gone to sleep or something. It wasn't looking my way, at least not yet. I looked down at my watch again. Five minutes. The Blockade had to be, what, six hundred feet away, out past the alley of the zinc plant and over the yawning field? Six hundred feet divided by three hundred seconds. That's two feet per second. I could do that like nobody's business. My stomach growled. I needed to get in there. It was getting colder. I shivered.

I looked back at Rутy. He was watching it too. No one in their right mind would mess with a gorgon. We looked up at them when they came, admiringly somehow, trusting naively that this would be the dawn of a new era of intergalactic growth and some kind of evolution. What hubris. I'll never trust again.

Rut looked at me and back at the gorgon. It had started to slowly shift somewhat to the left, like it had detected something. I scanned the ground over where it seemed to be looking. Was it a rat? A mole? No way to be sure. Those gorgons had *such* good hearing; but they could only track something if it moved. All I could do was stay still.

I looked down at my watch again. It had fogged over a bit. Stupid mist. Wherever a group of them gathered you could always count on misting. That's what we called it when that

translucent fog came rolling in. It clung to the gorgons and swirled around silently as if to mask their approach and presence. It was theatrical, for sure, but super freaking cold. And we had all learned to control our breathing and our heartbeats, like we were taught, in the name of zero volume.

I wiped the moisture off of my watch face. Four minutes. Two point five feet per second. My strides would have to be longer and loping. It would be close.

I reached slowly into my pocket. My mouth creased into an open o as I monitored the gorgon. My fatigues were damp from the fog, and I couldn't get my fingers around the rock. It was even hotter than before. What the heck was this thing anyway? Markus never said what exactly it was before he handed it to me and ran off. He just screamed to get it back to the Blockade. I have no idea if he even got away, as I've been living in the shadows to keep it safe.

But that's what he wanted us to do.

Was now the time though? He never said.

My fingers touched it and as they did, my right sneaker lost its grip on the pavement and skidded out past the dumpster with a God-awful cement scratch. I stiffened.

The gorgon whirled around and hissed. I hate that. It's the most spine-chilling sound they make. My heart stopped as I kept my leg bone-still on the pavement. I slowly moved my eyes and shifted my head ever so slightly to where I could see Rutt: his eyes were ringed with fear. We both knew that if they were going to get me, then that meant that he had to leave me and take off, so that at least one of us could make it. After all, he had the other half of it. They would be preoccupied with me. That was the whole plan. If we got separated, maybe our Blockade's luck would hold and at least one half of it would make it back.

I could feel the gorgon staring down the alley. Good thing they couldn't see worth a damn in the day *or* night. But their smelling and hissing, I'd had just about enough.

Rut shook his head at me as if he guessed my thoughts and knew what I wanted to do. I could tell he was flashing his eyes back and forth between where I was and where it was at, hovering silently there yet moving closer, every hiss making its freaky neck bob down and up as it tried to zero me.

I didn't really have any other option. My ammo was spent, I'd lost my Beretta, and Rut had the RPG launcher. It was too dark to see if he was even loading it, and now that the gorgon was practically staring us down, it might get him before he even had a chance to cock it.

The menacing shadow drew nearer. I couldn't see it, but the sniffing grew louder and louder. I tried to keep my leg perfectly still as I slowly extracted the amulet from my pocket, willing my bones to stay in a state of suspended animation. A single bead of sweat fell from my lanky hair onto my neck. I knew then that I was in deep fear. I looked at my watch. Two minutes and ten seconds. Four point six feet per second. This was going to be close.

I could dimly make out Rut lifting the launcher up over his shoulder from under that tarp.

Without warning, the object of the gorgon's previous fascination across the street revealed itself again, causing the creature to whip around and sneer at it with that spine-chilling

hiss. It was an innocent tabby cat, hunting a mouse or some other poor morsel. The gorgon's back arced reflexively as it moved away from me and back toward the cat. Gorgons aren't picky, and a cat is a dainty morsel for sure. I didn't waste any time, and neither did Rut. Everything appeared to slow drastically, and more sweat beads cascaded from my hair onto my neck. My left sneaker pushed me up with the speed of a gazelle, and I lifted my right leg, which had just started to tingle.

The gorgon, fixated on the cat, heard all of our commotion of course, and whirled right back around. I was still holding my breath, but the rest of my body screamed to *run*. That's when the gorgon saw me and let out that bone-freezing shriek that they do.

And that's when Rut launched. The torpedo sailed right past me at a hundred and twenty meters per second, and my face was baked in the heat of its exhaust. I could feel my hair thrown back and the sweat get hot on my neck. We called them torpedoes because they just did so much more damage than your typical RPG. Our guys had souped them up. They were incredibly incendiary when they met their mark.

Ain't no way I was gonna get eaten today.

Rut launched that sucker, and then immediately tore away up the alley in front of me. I wasn't gonna look back.

Then, the explosion.

The gorgon was vaporized instantly of course. Pretty much anything can be vaporized. *Sorry, Cat*. But where there's one, there's more. And now they were on to us. And they could move like the wind. They don't like heat, and their power is in thin air where they can move quickly.

But so could we. I was never quite as fast as Rut, and every single race we had relegated me to second place once more. But I nearly caught up with him this time, and the sweat was dripping down into my eyes as I bolted. I clutched the amulet hard, and the heat of it burnt my hand.

The hisses grew louder.

They taught us to run fast, and they taught us not to look back. "Always listen," they said. "Just... listen." I had seen what happened when you looked. *You just... don't... look*. Jackson taught me that.

So, amidst the stamping thumps of my Reeboks on that cold alleyway, with nothing but thin, decreasing night between me and my assailants, I listened. If the hisses grew louder, you just tried to run faster. I had already seen enough to know what was happening behind me. Their arms would be outstretched right about now, and their lower jaws would be descending, straining at the thin dead skin under their hollow eye sockets. If you thought they were getting closer you were supposed to drop, then get up and change course like greased lightning. Hopefully they would skid past you.

Maybe two hundred and twenty-five feet now?

My watch buzzed softly against my frantic arms. I could feel it amidst the pounding rhythm of my desperate feet. The one-minute alarm, and then the Blockade would close. I could see the tree line approaching, framed against the night sky, yawning up as I drew closer.

And there it was, ahead...that great and glorious wall. Ruttu was almost there. The gorgons knew not to come too close, or they'd get hammered by the guns. They were flesh and bone creatures like most other lifeforms, and they could be blown apart, sure. But their most powerful weapon was fear.

I wasn't going to look at my watch, and I wasn't going to look back.

The Blockade drew nearer. My best guess was it was still some hundred feet away. It was a wide gaping hole in a berm, and underneath was our sanctuary.

Gritting my teeth, I began to hear them behind me, slinking closer and closer. I could practically feel one of their arms wafting behind me. That hiss...oh that freaking hiss. They also have this unnerving hum when they can sense they're going to eat soon. It was almost like singing. A horrible song.

In my peripheral I was sure that was the blueish-green mist overtaking me as they drew closer and closer.

Thirty seconds. I had never run so fast in my life. Each little sound behind me was like a death knell to my courage and stamina. I could feel the tears coming, mixing with my sweat, and my heart labored. *God, please don't let me trip.*

Twenty. Eighteen.

I kept running.

Fifteen. Twelve. Nine.

I kept running.

I felt the hair stand up on my neck as one reached for me and scratched my shoulder through my shirt.

And all of a sudden, like a mist driven away by the wind, they sailed upwards and departed. Whether it was the sound of the Blockade blaring its horns, or the Captain screaming for men to lock and load, I don't know.

Four. Three.

I kept running.

I jumped across the threshold as a shaft of warm air blew over me: my own exhaust as I bellowed across the last few feet of open field and hurled myself past the door, slamming into Rut who had landed just ahead of me with his gun drawn, pointing at the door. He grunted as I knocked the wind out of him.

Two. One.

Clang.

The Blockade had closed. I was in. I heard the momentary muted thunder of gunfire above me, and guessed that at least one of those things bought it, but they collect and eat their own, so of course we'd never know.

For now, I was in.

*Sorry, Cat.*

• • • • •

“I wasn’t going to use it; I wouldn’t even know how.”

My defense rang hollow, as they could see it all on the security cameras, and they knew what I was going for in my pocket. Many years ago, they were able to tap into the zinc plant cameras, so now that worked against me.

“You *were!* You were going to try to use it! You were given one charge: keep it safe and bring it back here. *Not* to use it. You don’t even know what it is or what it does. You were going for it in your pocket, and Rut saw the whole thing!”

I sighed and rubbed my aching shoulder. Medical had patched it up after the gorgon scratch, and I now sported a nice white rectangle. But arguing was pointless. So, I argued. “*So?* Doesn’t mean anything.”

I looked at Ruddy. His face sank, and he sighed. He was a brave brother, but he did see it, and he knew what I was going for. And Ruddy always told the truth. The truth was one of the very last things we all had. Besides, I didn’t even know what to do with it once I pulled it out. There was no denying it. Especially when Halcyon Crew takes you to task. They know better than all, because they’re glued to those monitors 24-7, and they can spot a pixel flinch in a drunken stupor.

“The city was crawling with gorgs, and you knew that. You and Rut were supposed to get your asses back here and *not* engage them. If that meant you had to stay in the cold and stick it out one more night until they floated off to God knows where then *that* was what you should have done! I don’t give one shit if that requires you to stay out seventeen *more* days, Jet!”

“Captain, I don’t even know what it does. Markus didn’t say a word. He just bolted.”

“I don’t care, Sergeant! The point is that you’re still a loose cannon, and you think you know better than all the rest of us what to do in a pinch.”

I sighed. Whatever. I could see the amulet in the next room, and Harrison and DuPre poring over it like some newfound treasure, their greedy grubby little hands pawing at it. They were practically salivating. The two of them had literally snatched both pieces right out of our hands a few seconds after we had crossed the threshold, without even asking if we were okay. I sighed.

“Yep, you got it. You’re right. I’m just a loose cannon. You’re absolutely right.”

Captain Stone – “Stoney” to close friends and compatriots - bristled and sighed out of his nose. He crossed his arms. I gave him a few seconds. But then I could see the smile creep into



the corner of his mouth, and his crossed arms betrayed his true sentiments. He couldn't hide that he was glad to see I'd made it after all.

"Cameron," he began, using my real name instead of my callsign, and shaking his head. *Jerk. No one calls me that.* They called me "Jet" ever since I outran a senior officer at age 15. But Rutty was faster than me; they should have called him that. He just never got the chance, I guess. "You never cease to amaze me." He took a few steps closer, until I could feel the hot breath coming out of his nose as he laughed. "Glad you're back home, son."

"You too, dad. Don't call me Cameron." I smiled.

My "dad" was a high-ranking Captain, almost a Colonel, and he maintained order, but he did love his kids. I knew he loved me, even though I wasn't really his: he had adopted me after, well, after everything went down. And I also knew that he wanted to keep whatever this thing was safe, and figure out how we can use it against the gorgons. Letting him down was the last thing I would want to do. And deep down, he knew I was a fighter.

The Captain looked me up and down. "Welcome back, Jet."

"Thanks, dad."

"Get outta here."

"Sir, yes sir."

Captain Stone play-slugged me in the shoulder, and I turned to Rutty and winked. All clear. We walked out together and snickered. The Captain turned back to face Harrison and DuPre in the next room. His smile faded as he watched whatever it was in there, pinning his hopes onto it, and sighing once more.

After all, it was that or nothing.

• • • • •

"Man, you're so lucky dad is a softie."

"Dude, he ain't no softie. There's just too few of us left to be mad at. And he isn't our dad."

"Yeah, I guess." Rut took a huge messy bite out of the candy bar that he had stowed away. Can't remember where he had found it, but it was on the way home. Completely unopened too, and that's a rare surprise. Said "100 Grand" on it, and that one was a new one for me.

"What kind is that anyway?" I asked, pawing at the wrapper. "100 Grand? What is that?"

"Oh man, you've never had one of these? They're *gooood*. Too good to share, if that's what you're thinking." Rut pulled his hand away, resource guarding like a mutt. But just as swiftly his expression changed. "Nah, just jokin.' Have a bite."

I wiped away his disgusting spittle from the edge of where he'd gnawed off a chunk, sniffed at it suspiciously, and then exacted a meek portion of it for inspection. *Wow* that's good, I thought. I could taste the crisped rice, and a flood of memories came back to me from when I had had my last *Whatchamacallit*: a bit stale but still sweet and somewhat crunchy. "Whoa, that is really good." Before he could intervene, I stole an actual bite-sized bite.

"Hey! Get your own, butthead."

We snorted. I loved Ruty: he was half compatriot, half punk, and that's a good balance. He was four years my junior, so I always felt like I had to take care of him, but he didn't need it. Rut was awfully good at getting himself out of (and into) trouble. And he was great company. Of all the partners I've cycled through – had to, as the gorgons picked off the rest – he was seriously the best, and not just because he was my baby brother. I never thought I'd consider him as an upgrade from the ones before, God rest their souls. But I loved him crazily. He had this incomparable swagger to him, and this overly mature confidence that made you love him or revile him. I picked the first one. After all, I had been told more than once that I was quite swaggerly myself... so Rut and I were more or less two peas in a pod. And no matter how you sliced it, he was the last surviving part of my family with me, and that made for an inseparable bond.

We had been through a lot together in the last six months, and we had had some close shaves. Ruty had kind of a paint-by-numbers approach, which is why him grabbing that candy bar utterly surprised me...he didn't even wipe it down. But hunger does that to you, and we were *hungry* on that patrol.

We walked down the corridor and rounded the corner past the giant hum of the data room with its warm drafts baking us as we approached. A small gust made my hair flick back as I turned to look in.

There it was. The Beast. It was always running, computing possible scenarios, number-crunching, analyzing, trying to find a way past the Sentinels at the ocean shore. Whatever it was they were guarding out there, we just could never seem to get a clean look. Whatever drone we launched, no matter how high up, the enemy flew higher. After all, they came from up there. Satellites over the ocean were disabled, so aerial recon was impossible. Whatever mission we launched, no matter how clandestine, to figure out why it was they wanted us to stay here so far inland, was lost on us. But the Beast would figure it out. It had to figure it out. This thing was powerful, and it had been fed so many AI computational algorithms, it might just figure it out and then decide to destroy us all. We'll see.

Whatever web archives it could salvage and rummage through, it would do so, day and night. The satellite data they fed into that thing, the loads of wiki garbage, presumably meaningless to us, needles in haystacks, were fodder for investigation. Previous aerial reconnaissance before they came, geothermal scans, activity history, maritime routes, deep dives, offshore drilling, transportation, commerce, coastal patrols, incidents, accidents, sunken vessels, tide patterns, underwater venting, cable routes, trade zones, international borders, all of it:

constantly pumping through those cores, a trillion bits of minutiae crossing over and under each other in its highways and byways, and us, silently waiting...and hoping. It was long since we really had any tangible hope.

It was warm in the data room, and it was warm outside the Blockade. It was warm everywhere from the heat of battle and loss.

Rut hit his bunker, flashed me a peace sign with one hand, and playfully slugged me in the shoulder with the other. “See ya, bro,” I winked, and kept on walking.

I hit my own bunker forty feet down the hall and around the bend. Block 237. In the Blockade, it was easy to get lost, but as we were part of patrol, they liked to move us around and keep the fittest runners closest to the front doors, so that we didn’t have far to go to rest – or perhaps it was so that we didn’t have to go far to report. The numbers started on the right side and ran counterclockwise around to the left, climbing higher. Mine was 237. Ruty’s was 218. It was well on half a mile from the front door to The Mound at the opposite end. All that garbage out there made the mound one helluva stink, so no complaints from me about being positioned far from it. And when runners came in, you’d always get a whiff of fresh air once again through the front gate...if it were a strong enough gust to make it past the heat of The Beast, that is.

We’d been in here a while.

I unslung my pack and hoisted it on the hanger on the wall, and then peeled off my boots with a grunt of relief and comfort. “Hey mom,” I pensively greeted as I did so. “Hey dad. Hey sis. I’m back.” I stared at their empty bunks.

I don’t know why I always do that. Their bunks would never be inhabited again. At least not by them – nor me. Didn’t matter if I really needed to stretch out or if I had Ruty over. Sleeping in their bunks meant that they weren’t coming back, and I wasn’t ready to acknowledge that to anyone, much less myself. When Ruty slept over, he stayed in my bunk and I slept on the floor, inhaling my reeking boots... but preserving their memories in honor. I’ll take the stench over forgetting *any* day. Plus, having him over was like having a little bit of a home again. I can’t remember much of that time anymore. I wish that I could. War and tension do that to you.

I gave their bunks one last reverent look and then turned over on my side, facing away. I needed sleep. But my eyes wouldn’t close.

• • • • •

I remember when the gorgons first arrived in 2026. Admittedly, we were all enthralled. I was too. Sis was especially enthralled. Somebody in Guatemala spotted the first one, if I remember correctly. It just came drifting down, straight out of the sky, near sunset: so humanoid, and yet enshrouded in mist. They had angelic qualities to them. Some of us

wondered if they were messengers from God. Their bodies were cloaked in that blueish-green vapor. It was really creepy, but for whatever reason it's the creepy things that draw us in the most. We just can't look away, like a moth to a flame.

Then there was another. And another. And five more. And then more. And then twenty more. Fifty. Four hundred. More kept coming, just slowing down to a geostationary orbit fifty feet above the ground all over the earth.

The dogs were perpetually screaming and howling; some of their ears were reportedly even bleeding. They were running mad, whining and cowering in terror, fleeing to dark corners with their tails between their legs.

I was only seven then. Ruttu was just three. Sissy was six. But I remember it all.

In the sixteen years since then, they laid waste to pretty much everything, except the Blockades of course. Oh, they knew where we all were, and they didn't like it when we ventured out, for any reason. They got especially hot if they saw any of us heading in any direction that even *remotely* resembled going toward a coastline. No matter the continent, they wanted us pigeonholed far inland. We could never figure out why. Some straggled around by day still, but all we knew concretely was that they mostly reappeared every evening, near dusk. Where they all largely disappeared to during the day no one ever really knew. Apparently, they didn't like sunlight, and they would almost entirely vanish for a month on end during the summertime when it got into the high eighties and nineties. Those were our reprieves. It was times like that that we actually praised all the ozoners that went before us: inconsiderate humans with their carbon emissions, fossil fuels, aerosols and CFCs; they didn't know it, but they were actually *helping* us. Warming up the planet. Making the atmosphere hotter and hotter: more inhospitable to not just us, but them as well. I heard recently that a team of guys actually wrangled a gorgon in the heat of summer, while wearing some kind of protective eye shields, and they stripped it down: it just flailed, writhed, and screamed as it baked in the hot summer sun. Sizzled and smoked even. Apparently, they had some vampiric traits too. Never found out any more about it because you can't trust all stories, and I for one don't plan to wrangle any gorgon to see if it tries to suck blood too.

I remember the first time I saw one for myself. Back then they weren't really evil to behold; they just had this sort of ethereal quality to them, angelic almost, and they just sat there and hummed. Floated. We tried to make contact with them, of course; but they never moved. For two months they just stayed there, as more and more of them slowly floated down. Taking up positions. We all got uneasy, of course, because what the hell were they? Why were they here? Where did they come from? What did they want? All those questions piling up stunk more than The Mound, frankly.

But then, we got our answers, sure enough. Whether through some kind of telepathy, or some primitive form of timing, they all began to move. One by one, they clicked on, like a countdown had finished or a switch had been flipped.

And that's when they started hunting us down. Nothing we did mattered. Hiding was of little use. Shooting at them only made them move angrier, and they'd get faster. And that high-pitched shriek and dropped jaw thing. Lord. I remember a man kept shooting and shooting at one perched on the corner of a pretty tall building – I think he had a sniper rifle – but with each shot the gorgon hurtled downward faster and faster, until both it and the man disappeared in a thunderous cataclysm of concrete and dust. The gorgon was the only one that came out of that pit, a little fatter than it had been before it smashed down.

There were thousands of them in the air, swooping in all directions. Airplanes were overwhelmed and thrown out of the sky. It was pandemonium to the power of frenzy, to the power of chaos. The earth was upended on that day, and in the days following. The military had no time to mobilize... these things were everywhere: those poor souls who had to man helicopter gunships: they didn't stand a chance. And then the news once reported that a swarm of them passed – *passed, mind you* – an F-35 jet on patrol. Frozen pilots plunged into the sea...the ground...the history books. All our hopes went up in blazes of glory. There were *so* many jets and commercial airliners at the bottom of the ocean now.

Each nation responded in whatever way they felt they should. There was no consensus in the United Nations, because there was never time or safety in order to mobilize a gathering: and many world leaders were already filling the bellies of the gorgons anyway. North Korea shot missiles in vain; thankfully, their nukes were intercepted before they killed us all while trying to mount a meager but impotent counterattack. Iran was the same.

The saddest part of it was the Gaza war just a few years prior. The Israelis and Palestinians had never quite afforded each other full truce; they would throw one another at a gorgon if it meant they would escape with their lives. Traps were set by one side or the other to lure in gorgons and devour whole households of their enemies. Despicable. Same with Ukraine and Russia. People desperate to sabotage their fellow humans just to get a few paces ahead. But the gorgons were faster than all of us.

The subject of nukes was never off the table... there was just no one who could get them mobilized, and where were they even supposed to detonate one? The chances of the entire human race getting wiped out by friendly fire were all too high.

Everyone everywhere was impacted. Every nation had thousands of them flying around. Those that could shelter in place could find out a little bit here and there on the news, but eventually there was no central news, and nothing to find out what was happening at other outposts. No CNN, no MSNBC, no news sites...I mean, they were there, but none of them were updated. VPN's hosted phantom sites that were frozen in time years back with no updated content. Their content and IT departments had been eaten.

The gorgons just caught, froze, and ate us, one by one. Rinse and repeat, in a grisly shower of cataclysm.

In a few years, eighty-five percent of the world's population was gone. The survivors lingered where they could, flitting from place to place, eking out a life of survival amidst the

shadows. Since that time, the earth became a ghost town, abandoned, with overgrown ivy and out of control moss. Mildew and weeds. Vehicles everywhere, abandoned in mid-transit. Crashed airplanes. Trains off their tracks.

Animals roamed the streets freely after a while, escaping their enclosures. Most were picked off right there in their zoos. Even the king of the jungle was eviscerated by a single gorgon. Cheetahs couldn't outrun them.

Sure, automated systems still ran: sprinklers, night lights, ac systems, etc. We still had power and utilities; just no humans to routinely man them, so, eventually, several systems failed. Fuel rods in some nuclear reactors, unattended to by human intervention, heated out of control; in some countries they failed, and the prevailing winds from radiation killed off many of the survivors over time as well. At least the radiation got some gorgons with that too, though.

Electricity went out over whole swaths of the earth for some survivors; then hypothermia and disease did the rest. We figured the gorgons killed off eighty percent of us almost straightaway; then, the ensuing natural calamities got another roughly five percent after that.

Someone was still creeping around and running things where and when they could. Independent heroes or troops ventured bravely into dangerous territory to keep things running, or to jumpstart failed hydroelectric, solar systems or power plants. Clandestine operations were springing up all the time all over the globe, desperate to keep us running.

Those with nursing or doctoral backgrounds stemmed the tide somewhat, but they had to learn fast. We weren't lacking in medical supplies, as long as we could conduct a raid on a hospital or clinic; it was just ramping up quick education to those who could actually wield them.

But for the most part, it was like trying to pour a cup of cold water on a raging inferno. Eventually, we would lose. Earth became unoccupied and barren, a desolate wasteland of lifeless quiet and a graveyard of ominous vacancy – except for *them*.

Once a gorgon had you in their sights...you just froze. At first, we thought it was just out of primal fear or terror. But no: there was actually something emanating from them that paralyzed the viewer: at first, we thought it was some chemical agent, energy transference or something like that that seemed to be taking place. We had scientists working on it. That's why we called them gorgons: the power they had to literally stick you to the ground right where you were, and you couldn't move, and then they could float over and have their way with you, all the while whispering with that spine-chilling hiss: the sound of countless breaths of voices mingled together in wordless agony. I don't know which is worse: knowing that you can't run, or being eaten alive while you can't even scream. I remember the little girl though: she was about my age, and I could tell she was crying while that gorgon ate her. She definitely felt it. All of it.

Sometimes they wouldn't even need to paralyze you; they'd simply catch up with you, whisking behind you as you fled for your life: like me today just before the Blockade. They were just *fast*. Some people closed their eyes as they fought back, once we learned of their paralysis method. But that was pretty futile; you were just shadowboxing, swinging at nothing.

One way or another, they would get you, and the best you could do was just to hide and ride it out and for God's sake, be quiet. One of them was just as bad as a swarm of them.

The most unnerving thing? You just don't think of humans as a food source. We have memories, souls, history, purpose. We aren't just some wild gazelle or antelope out on the Serengeti: we aren't just some prey. When you eat a human, you destroy purpose, memories, sanctity, and life. It was an abominable act. But of course, gorgons don't know any of that. They're just predators like any other shark or cheetah or hyena.

A gorgon was no respecter of persons.

I shivered and turned over, pulling a thin, ratty blanket up over me. It felt like a scratchy Brillo pad, but it was something, at least.

You know that point where your body craves sleep, and you know that you need it, but your eyes just won't stay closed? Yeah. That's where I was. For sixteen long years we've lived under the shadow of these things: wishing to high heaven that they'd just go, and hoping to hell that they wouldn't find us out in the wild out there. Our world had been forever changed. My life had been forever changed.

I was one of the "lucky" ones who happened to be born at the right time in history so as to witness all of this, to live it out, and to have to accept it as just how life was. The ones who came after me – and there weren't many, because why would you? – would never know what it was like to see them all drift down out of the sky. To hear them all suddenly start to move into action as if a switch had flipped: it was the switch that was labeled "annihilation of man." To actually watch one of them eating one of us whole. To hear that bone-chilling slimy hiss. You don't ever forget that sound. These babies were lucky enough to be born inside the Blockade, and to be kept far in, near the center, away from the threat that for them lingered only on the edge of legends and myth. But if they could sleep in peace because of our tireless labor? Fine with me. Ignorance is truly bliss.

However, it wasn't a myth for me.

Losing my family wasn't a myth.

That cat today wasn't a myth.

The amulet wasn't a myth.

The amulet – even now I wondered what they were doing with it...but more so I wondered what it would do for us. What would Stoney do with it? Where were the rest of them? What would the Beast reveal? It was unearthly, to be sure, and they had found a few of them before, but only recently had scientists discovered that they arrived at the same time the gorgons did. There had to be some kind of tie-in. At least, that's what we all seemed to now be pinning our hopes to.

With these and a million more questions pouring through my mind, somehow, I was able to fall asleep, though I don't know when, as it was pretty fitful. The room hummed with an unearthly rigor, the sound of countless engines throbbing throughout the Blockade. I was uneasy.

There was no way we were going to make it. That was our reality.