



POCKET FULLA SPIDERS

**VOLUME ONE
AND OTHER SHORT STORIES**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part One

Chapter 1 - The Paranormal Studies Club	Page 3
Chapter 2 - The Birth of the Squirm	Page 19
Chapter 3 - Club Meeting	Page 24
Chapter 4 - Samuel, Take Aim!	Page 28
Chapter 5 - Reddish Herring	Page 32
Chapter 6 - My Great-Great-Grandfather's Eyes	Page 36
Chapter 7 - A Step and an Ear Ahead	Page 40
Chapter 8 - Champion of Some	Page 43
Chapter 9 - Circular Roots: Part 1	Page 47
Chapter 10 - Circular Roots: Part 2	Page 51
Chapter 11 - Aquarium	Page 56

Chapter 1 - “The Paranormal Studies Club”

The door flung open until it bounced off the wall as Khluen rushed in with Thawee’s arm around his collar.

“Guys! We finally got one” Khluen shouted to the two other club members who were sitting calmly at their desks.

“No way! But what happened to Thawee?” Thien asked, worried at the sight of her half-conscious friend.

“I’m fine guys, don’t worry. The spider got in a bite right before Khluen could put it in the box.” Thawee replied.

“I’ll grab my journal, this could all be informative data,” said the final member So as he reached into his leathery black backpack to grab out one of the many notebooks that filled his backpack.

This was looking to be the most eventful evening yet for the Paranormal Studies club of Mountainside University. Normally, school clubs should be focused on harmless hobbies and interests that build community and lifelong friendships, not unimaginable horrors that teeter on the boundaries of reality and madness. This is the life that the members of the Paranormal Studies club chose from the start. For them, the unknown and unreasonable was as exciting, if not more, than what others were doing with their university life.

A normal student might be exploring their potential career prospects during their time on campus, but these students were probably discussing whether ape-homids most likely inhabited temperate or boreal forests. When love was in the air and other students were having awkward first dates or

pregnancy scares, the paranormal studies club pondered about a mysterious ball of hair they found in the park, now laid under a microscope. Could it potentially be the follicles of a nearly endangered and never before seen dogman? Or is it more likely a discarded beard, hastily shaved off by a student experimenting with a cleaner look?

Nonetheless, they always persisted, no matter how on the fringe of the school social hierarchy they appeared to be. Of the four members, nobody was an outright outcast that was putting time into studying the strange and mysterious as their way of coping with not fitting into society’s social norms. They were mostly not too weird for the world and more importantly, they were not so stupid as to waste their time.

So is a studious and star athlete for the basketball and football teams at the university, currently seeking a journalism degree. He stands taller than the other members with a very muscular build and keeps his hair shaved down about as far as you can go. His glasses always sit low on his nose, ready to be pushed up whenever he begins reading. He is always writing down his thoughts and observations in his diverse assortment of journals, collecting any potential evidence of the paranormal in his life or anyone else’s.

Thien is a medical student who puts great focus into her work, often overwhelmed with stress as evidenced by her blonde hair that’s typically hastily shoved in a bun and leaking out over her forehead and around her neck. She is an empathetic and caring member of the club that wears a worried expression, her eyes always wide and scanning.

Thawee is the most gifted student all around, with high grades across the board and an especially powerful connection to the paranormal, with many stories she has been trying to explain since she was a small child. Now an engineering student, she fills her schedule with school, martial arts and assisting the club during her free time. It is the place she feels she truly belongs.

Khluen was the de-facto president of the club as the founding member who dedicated the most time and resources to the club itself. He was studying physics at the university but often feels his time and energy is best spent doing dedicated research into paranormal events he reads or hears about. His club members often sit in admiration at the sheer amount of planning and time that he dedicates to the club.

Many prospective members had come and gone, some more unserious than others, but he was quite satisfied with the current group as they treated the club with real care and interest. Khluen wasn't looking for gullible believers of ghosts, aliens or demons, but for hardworking students who at least had an open mind to understanding the potentially unexplainable. There was no room for obsessive conspiracy theorists or folks that would so easily join a cult if it was edgy enough for them.

These four were right for the job that was ahead of them as they themselves were unexplainable, for each one had developed extrasensory perception over the years, making the Paranormal Studies club an organization of budding psychics.

So, with his foresight that allowed him to see nearly ten seconds into the future.

Thien, with her ability to sense, transfer and store spiritual energy signals from any living creature.

Thawee, capable of creating a three-dimensional astral projection of herself that interacts with the physical world.

Khluen, a well studied spiritual analyst with vast knowledge of reality altering enchantments.

These four had developed their psychic abilities by taking different paths but once they joined the club and shared what they were capable of, they began to try and explore how far they could push themselves. It was apparent as Khluen and Thawee entered the room that they had used their abilities to further investigate a case that the club had been discussing for quite some time over the past year.

"So where's the box?" So asked Khluen.

"Don't worry, I've got it right here." Khluen had walked Thawee over to a chair so she could now rest and he pulled out a slightly crumpled cardboard box from his pocket that was covered in strange symbols drawn in marker. A piece of paper closed off the bottom without any evidence of tape or glue. Khluen was often able to make due with what he had around him to make interesting enchantments on any object. "I can feel it still moving inside," he told the group.

“Hold on, let me try to get a good reading on it. How did you guys pull this off anyways?” Thien asked as she hovered over the box and began to focus her mind on the inhabitant inside.

“Thawee and I were walking together after class and saw Arath walking in a bit of a rush. As we turned to go up the stairs, one of his spiders fell out from his pocket and bounced down to the floor without him noticing.” Khluen began to talk more excitedly, gesturing largely with his hands and imitating all those in his story. His long, shoulder-length hair is constantly brushing directly in his face. “The spider didn’t seem in a hurry to get back to him so I quickly grabbed a chicken nugget box that I had in my backpack from lunch and wrote a lock-enchantment on the sides of it and on a piece of paper. Thawee then ducked under the staircase and created her projection and used it to scoop up the spider before anyone could see. I ran over to her so she could put it in the box but the spider bit her. Her projection immediately dissipated. Luckily I was close enough to clap the box around the spider, trapping it inside and activating my enchantment. It bounced around quite a bit but hasn’t gotten out yet.”

“Do you think Arath knows that it’s gone?” So asked of the group.

“I don’t think so. He didn’t notice when it dropped and he didn’t follow us here yet.” Khluen replied.

“We still have to confirm whether these are really paranormal and that he’s not just a weird guy with spiders in his pockets. I’ve seen weirder people before.” Thawee said.

“It’s certainly a possibility that this could just be nothing but we cannot forget what made us suspicious from the start.”

At the beginning of the semester, So was delivering pizzas for his part time job. Even with his position on the university sports teams, he was not a scholarship athlete and had to work evenings to pay his tuition and bills. It didn’t hold him back as he could record university lectures he attended during the day and then replay them while driving his routes to study. Arath was a frequent customer and ordered more pizzas than one person could possibly eat but he did live with at least another person that So had heard Arath call out to while he waited at the door.

So would stand there with anywhere from ten to fifteen pizzas and Arath would answer the door, wearing the same baggy purple hoodie that he wore every day that So had ever seen him. His jeans were emblazoned with painted flames and his left hand was inside the pocket, never to be removed. Regardless of what he was doing, Arath’s hand was always in the left pocket for reasons no one knew. So would hand over the steaming tower of pizzas, placing them on the ground next to the door while he fished out the bills to pay for the order. Arath was a quiet and polite customer, saying “Yo” and “Thanks”, then waiting until So started to drive off before bringing the pizzas inside.

So thought it was quite peculiar that Arath wouldn’t immediately grab the pizzas and bring them indoors, so he waited to see what would happen if he spent a few extra seconds in the car before driving off. Arath still waited, not

moving an inch until So's car began to pull away. Maybe it was So's curious nature, a trait that all the club members had, but he had to know why Arath wouldn't just grab the pizzas and bring them in. Would he finally bring his hand out of his pocket? So used his foresight ability just as he was about to drive off and his vision was just long enough to see a flurry of spiders erupt out of Arath's pocket that ensnared the pizzas and then carried them inside.

So's ability had its limits, with reality distorting the longer that he tried to see into the future but if he had timed it correctly, this should be an accurate account of what happens each time he drives off. After telling the group of what he saw, theories began to pour in from the rest of the group.

Was he some sort of gifted spider whisperer that had made so many eight legged friends? Could Arath himself be a spider trapped inside a human body? Or could there be something more sinister going on that would soon become a threat to not just the university, but the whole city? The Paranormal Studies club has kept their eye on him all these time, waiting for the moment that a new detail would reveal itself.

Arath didn't appear to be a hyper intelligent and sneaky person that concealed their every movement in a devious way, he seemed like a normal student that kept to himself without doing so deliberately. He could be seen out in the open, eating his lunch in the cafeteria or sometimes putting coins into the games at the arcade. This could be a sign that he didn't have anything to hide at all but it wasn't worth ignoring for the group so when this particular opportunity arose, they had to jump.

"What's the diagnosis, Thien?" Khluen asked his classmate.

"It's hard to say but there's definitely something unnatural about this spider. It's radiating a small level of spiritual energy that's trying to peak out of the box." Thien replied.

"The moment that we let it go, it'll surely try to escape. We won't be observing it for long." So thought out loud with the group.

"I agree," Khluen said, "But we have to learn something from this situation. Thien, can you copy enough of its spiritual essence?"

"I think so. Are we going to use your notebook?" She replied.

Khluen kept with him a special notebook, with each page containing a special kind of enchantment that was able to store the spiritual essence that it came into contact with. Thien was able to let other energies flow into her own spiritual field and then briefly could radiate imitation wavelengths. This allowed her to transfer spiritual essences that were different from her own so that the group could keep them for future reference when identifying other entities.

Khluen pulled the notebook from his bag and thumbed through to find an empty page. It didn't take long as there were only around ten entries so far from mostly dead end investigations. Thien let the tiny amount of energy that was coming from the spider enter her spiritual field as tiny beads of sweat began to trickle down from her forehead, down to her neck. It didn't take that much energy out of her but the amount of focus she had to put in as a still

novice psychic made her tense. The spider's energy began to freely flow and created new wavelengths in her spiritual field that she could now transfer a close enough copy of into the notebook pages. She placed her hand onto the notebook and the enchantment that was drawn on the page, unreadable to all in the room except Khluen, began to shine with a holographic glow for a moment, then faded away.

Khluen took the notebook back and wrote down some identifying text and put the notebook away for the time being. "Now, we're going to let it go."

The group all protested immediately, "Are you joking?!" Thien shouted, breaking out of her typically composed state, standing out of her seat and slamming both hands palm down onto the table.

"Absolutely. Think about it. What more can we do at this exact moment? Any suggestions?" Khluen said to the group, giving a moment for a response as they all looked down to the floor in thought except for Thawee, who was looking curiously at the president. "Exactly. We now have the spiritual signature of the spider so we can do research of our own by comparing the sample with other entities we may find but there is something even more important. Remember our fruitless search for an exorcist?" The group's heads all turned up as their faces turned more serious. "We've had no luck. Just folks that sprinkle holy water from questionable places or have a palm reading deal to sell. I think we try our new maneuver on Arath himself."

"That's too much. We can't just presume there's an evil spirit inside of him because it's spiders of all things leaking out." So protested.

"And what happens if it fails? Nothing right?" Khluen said to the group. "Thawee's astral projection is going to act as a magnet using Thien's collected spiritual energy from the spider. As she moves through his body, she will either pull out whatever the source of those spiders is or she will simply pass through and run back to us."

"What happens if she does pull a spirit out though?" Thien said, her expression growing even more serious. "No matter how confident we are of our abilities, we can't get too far ahead of ourselves."

"I can take 'em." Thawee said confidently, flexing her muscles in a smug but joking manner.

"You can barely walk, Thawee. How are you going to fist fight a monster you've never seen before?" Thien interjected.

Thawee stood up on both feet, then crouched down with a look of focus as she lowered into a squatting position and brought her arms to her side. She began to flex her arms with her muscles expanding slightly and beginning to slightly vibrate. From her skin, a gray fog began to seep out as if it were sweat that was instantly evaporating. A fine film formed around her skin from head to toe before it started to move forward, connected together in one piece that matched each detail of her body. This was her astral projection, a true copy of her body but in a spiritual form that was capable of interacting with the visible world.

"See, I'm already ready to go again." Thawee said, crossing her arms and smirking, the astral projection doing exactly the same.

“Ha, show off.” So said with a laugh.

The shape of the astral projection matched her body with great detail but there were some slight differences. For example, the skin was a dark grey, much different than her caramel-brown skin. The eyes were as black as they could be with a small ring of white where her pupils typically were. Her long wavy hair was now curling up to form small spikes in several places as if it were beginning to float.

“Are you really sure that you’ve got enough juice in that thing?”

Khluen asked Thawee.

The astral projection faded away back into Thawee’s body. “There’s no better time. Who knows what will happen when the spider returns to him. His guard might be up the next time we see him.”

“Then let’s recap one last time, I know we’ve gone over this plan before but just to be sure.” Khluen had gone full president at this moment. “Thawee leads the chase on foot, getting as close as she can until we see Arath. Thien will carry my notebook and quickly channel the spider essence into Thawee as she creates an astral projection. So will begin to monitor the situation and warn of any potential surprises that may arise. I will wait to see the result. If a spirit is pulled out of Arath’s body, then I take care of it.”

“*We* - will take care of it.” Thawee interrupted.

“You will be there ready to go but we have to try my binding enchantment first.”

Khluen had been perfecting a new technique over the last two years, using a special string made from the hair of a yak, he strings together an enchantment with his hands. Then he projects his spiritual essence through the string figure and a net is cast, wrapping around whatever energy it next touches. So far, he’d only practiced against Thawee’s astral projection with mixed success but the potential was clearly there.

“Fine, but make sure I’m clearly past him. I don’t want to get tied up with some weird monster.” Thawee said.

The group all stood up, taking a look at each other’s faces to gauge how confident and locked in every was in this moment. The club was several years old, with each member being a part for at least a little while, yet there were no successful investigations at that point. At most, they had debunked just about every haunted location and cursed objects by simply being present and nothing happening. Arath seemed a sure thing at this point with So’s vision lining up with the oddity of seeing streams of spiders crawling out of a teenager’s denim jeans.

They surrounded the desk that Khluen had placed the spider on top of and glued their feet to the floor in anticipation for what could possibly unfold. “So, can you start monitoring?” Khluen asked. So nodded his head and stared deeply at the box, attaining his visions of what was likely to unfold. Khluen then placed his hand onto the cardboard chicken nugget box as the spider ricocheted and bounced around the insides. And finally, he lifted it up.

“Gym!” So shouted.

Immediately upon release, the spider sat just for a moment on the desk to size up the four onlookers before rocketing off into space from the open door. The spider was dark black, from the tip of its head down to its spinner, moving too fast to see any further details. Thawee was already out the door before the others could even begin to move their feet. She was in a full sprint with her eyes locked on the spider, far ahead of the group as they began to follow. So made up the most ground being the athlete that he was but Thawee was weaving around the traffic of students almost too fast for his eyes to keep track of.

The spider was small and fast enough so that the students that were walking the hallways during the pursuit had no idea it was even there. From their perspective, they only saw a determined Thawee recklessly dashing through the hallway.

“Hey! Slow down!” An economics professor shouted out at her in vain.

“Oh brother, the weirdos in *that* club again.” Said Geoffrey, president of the Conspiracy Theories club.

“Ah damnit, my dissertation!” A student yelled as his papers flew out of his hands from the wind behind Thawee’s running.

She kept pace all the way until she came to the west wing of the school, her feet stomping on the hard tan tiles, now in a part of the school where there were no students at the moment. The spider landed on one of the two doors to the gymnasium and then dropped down to the bottom and stuffed its way

through the small opening and out of sight. “Damn!!” Thawee said, right there at the doors a step behind her target. She grabbed the handles on both of the locked doors and began to shake them with all her might, doing nothing but causing noises.

“Hey! They’re not going to budge.” So said, now with Thawee and catching his breath. “They’re locked with a chain on the other side.”

“It’s going to get away! Where’s Thien?” Thawee pleaded.

Khluen turned the corner, now joining the two arrivals, “she’s right here,” he shouted.

Thien had a larger build than the others but had willed herself to move fast enough to not stay too far behind. “Just...a moment!” She said as she pulled out the notebook and quickly thumbed through to the page she was searching for. “But, how are you going to get through?” She asked.

“Don’t worry about that, just feed me the spider juice!” Thawee quickly told her.

Thien placed her hand above the page and used her ability to copy the essence of the saved spider energy. She then placed her hand on a very sweaty Thawee who was already preparing her astral projection but this time appearing to use much more of her strength.

“Wait, that’s too risky, Thawee! It already made you struggle to walk last time. What’s going to happen if you put all of your energy into it?” Thien asked with a weight of worry on her mind.

“If I put enough energy, then I’ll be able to separate from my body completely for just a little bit. I can go under the door just like the spider and catch it.” Thawee said to the group.

“But what if he’s not in there? What if it’s just cutting through the room to go somewhere else?” Khluen asked.

“It’s in there,” said So, using his foresight, “It’s completely dark in there for some reason but I can see someone in there, standing on the basketball court. Surely that’s Arath reconnecting with the spider, right?”

“Good enough for me.” Thawee said, ejecting from her body into her astral projection. Her physical body fell forward as all of her consciousness and energy had moved into her second form, Thien catching the body in her arms. Thawee quickly slipped under the door and continued her pursuit before quickly coming to a halt. She was separated from the group and was unsure if the silhouette she could see through the darkness was really Arath. It was upright and motionless. *Why would he just be standing there doing nothing at all?* She thought.

Thawee remembered what Khluen had said and that there really was no harm in using their strategy on even the most innocent of bystanders. At most, if they were spiritually aware, they would see her or feel her as she moved through their body like a cold wind swiping against your bare neck. The spider was out of sight so this was their only lead and it might not come again easily. So whether this was really Arath or not, she lunged forward and followed the plan properly, jumping into the body of the person standing there on the

blackened basketball court, phasing through their body as if she was walking through a fog.

Her heart creaked and crawled to a brief stop before firing off into a frantic thumping. She felt an overwhelming uneasiness surrounding her body like she had been caught on a hook like a fish. Her head began to turn to see what it was that she pulled out behind her but she felt nothing but dread before anything was even in sight. Whoever she had passed through, Arath or not, was now an opened box that contained a primal and sinister force. The room was a bed and Thawee felt like she was under it, shout to stare down the boogeyman face to face.

“Wait, that’s not Arath!” So shouted, banging on the doors in a mad panic. “Thawee get out of there!”

“Who is it then?! Khluen’s eyes widened with shock at hearing this from the normally calm So. Thien pushed Thawee’s physical body to Khluen and then placed her body against the door and tried to get a feel of the energy of whatever it was inside there with Thawee. Beads of sweat became bullets. She fell to the floor, her pupils becoming tiny dots and her limbs shaking with a mind of their own. “What...could that thing be?” She said, staring down at the floor.

“Guys, I don’t think she’s making it out of this.” So said somberly.

“Bullshit, you only see ten seconds ahead,” Khluen said, not to insult So but in retaliation against the fear building inside that he had devised a plan that put his friend in great danger. “Step back.”

Inside the room, Thawee's astral eyes began to focus as she adjusted to both the darkness and the body she was in. The silhouette of the person she saw standing in the room was now laying on the floor, face down. A new figure standing above him.

It rattled and shook as it stood above the still body on the floor, making noises like the clanking of bamboo bark. The outline of the body was abnormal, with no resemblance to anything Thawee had seen before, not human nor animal, nor reflective of any work of fiction she was familiar with. The plan appeared to have succeeded but with the wrong vessel, no purple hoodie or painted denim jeans to be seen. Arath's spider was long gone by this point. It was a newly opened case.

Her eyes slowly picked up more features with her spiritual form able to perceive other spiritual beings. Its head was egg shaped with a dull point near the tip of its crown and a large bushy beard at the base. Its eye sockets were empty of any eyes at all, with the bones around it making a large round ridge. Its wide smile showed with only three visible teeth poking out of the large and swollen gums in its mouth.

He had a human-like chest with two breasts and evidence of muscle and bones, protruding from underneath the skin as its emaciated body continued to shamle about in place. Near the shoulders were tatters of skin around bones that extended from where the arms should have been if it were a sensible creature. The bones were loosely lined with ripped tendons and pieces of meat but did not end with a hand, claw or hoof.

Finally, near its waist began a thick, rough hide that contrasted the loose, torn skin around its torso and up. Its legs were like those of a farm animal with double-jointed knees that allowed its legs to bend unnaturally backwards. Several parts of its thighs had loose slips of hide hanging off like feathers. Its feet scaly and large with pointed claws at each tip, three in the front one larger claw in the back.

The chimeric build of the creature defied science, logic and even the mythological. No creature from their studies resembled this unholy emaciated, egg-headed, cow-chicken beast. Thawee had caught something and she only wished she could mercifully throw it back but it was her who might be begging for mercy soon enough. She would rather die.

"Ahhhhh pelemukrorokan-kakelaro kuok kuok kuok" it spoke to her in a bizarre and incomprehensible language, appearing to laugh at the end of each statement. "malengtcherokezzorom kuok kuok kuok," it continued, Thawee stepping back, showing reluctance to fight for the first time in her life and assessing an escape strategy.

The chains that secured the gym doors dropped to the floor, clanky with a loud thud. Both sides of the entrance were flung open and the remaining members of the club had finally rejoined their desperate friend. Khluen was standing in the middle of the now opened doors with his hands down by his side, blood dripping down to the tips of his fingertips, smudging the ink that had been drawn on his hands.

"Are you okay, Khluen? That looked painful." Thien asked.

“I’m fine. The enchantment damages the body the more difficult the lock is to pick. Since I couldn’t even see it, it’s a pretty stiff price to pay.” Khluen replied.

The three stared at the beast who had not moved its head in their direction even with all the commotion of their entrance.

“This energy is so rabid. It feels like we’re being hunted for fun.” Thien was getting a feel for its energy, becoming more accurate the closer she got to it, something she would much rather not be doing.

“You two stay back. So, keep an eye and look for an opening.” Khluen asked.

“I’ve been trying, and I hope I’m wrong but in about twenty seconds, I don’t see a way out.” So replied.

“Twenty seconds is past your limit, hardly accurate, So. Stick to about five seconds and just shout out an opening. We’re sticking to the plan - THAWEE, COME HERE BUT GET READY TO DODGE, IT’S ONLY LOOKING AT YOU.”

Thawee looked at the group and back to the beast to confirm if Khluen was right. It didn’t have eyes but its face never turned from facing her. Despite the lack of hands and the wasted appearance, the creature’s presence held great weight over Thawee. If she did not lift up her fear and make a run for the exit, she was at its mercy, whatever its intentions might be.

She crouched down and watched its expression remain unchanged, so she made her move, jumping into the air in a mad leap directly towards Khluen

and the group but she gained no ground. Her movement was stalled the moment she left the ground, momentarily frozen in the air. She felt a stabbing pain in the back of her ankle that quickly climbed up to the level of a searing throb. Thawee turned to see that the creature had already made it all the way to her position and had sunk its repulsive teeth directly into the leg of her astral projection.

“How in the hell...” Khluen said, his arms falling to his side in disbelief.

“It’s...so fast...” Thien said defeatedly.

“It was inescapable...every scenario...” So, unfortunately confirming his visions to the others.

Thawee’s astral projection disintegrated away in the mouth of the creature, turning to nothing but dust that was then sucked into six holes on the top of its head. Each hole acting as a vacuum for spiritual energy. It leaned back grotesquely as if to show how full it was after the meal, making the same disgusting laughing sound as before. “Ahhhhh kuok kuok kuok.”

The lights to the gymnasium suddenly flipped on, momentarily stunning the three club members as if they’d seen a flashbang as their eyes were finally adjusted to the darkness.

“Hey...who the hell?” Khluen shouted while covering his eyes with his forearms.

“Coach Kevin said I could shoot hoops in here, are y’all trying to play?” Arath said, his hand on the light switch on the second floor of the gymnasium. “Woah, what the hell is that?”

“That’s Coach THOMPSON, don’t call me by my first name,” Coach Thompson yelled to Arath, putting his keys back into his pocket before looking at the scene that had unfolded in his gym. “Don’t forget to clean up what the...are those cosplayers again? Y’all need to quit wearing that shit in my gym! All the damn boots and high heels are scuffing up my floor! Arath, go tell ‘em off. They weird me out.” Coach Thompson turned around and slammed the door shut as he exited, not realizing that this was no costumed geek.

The group could now see the body of the student that was holding the creature inside previously. It was Druvy Darwinson, the famously incompetent third-year student who was still working on his first-year classes. He came from a very wealthy family who continued to make donations to the university in hopes of them not booting their son out despite his record-breakingly low scores. He and his friends eat together in the cafeteria, speaking in a completely incomprehensible language that was filled with internet catch phrases, new slang and general words that were evidence of brain rot. Why of all students was he the vessel for something so dangerous and terrifying?

“Druvy? The king of remedial classes? Well, maybe this explains it all.” Said Khluen, now with a working theory of the situation in his head.

The creature looked up, finally scanning the other people in the room. Its eyes squinted as if the light was actually interfering with his eye holes. It

started to shake more violently while standing there on the gym floor while more strands of meat poured out from the gaping cavity where the arm bone came out from. Most people would just call this a shoulder but there was more mangled meat than actual structure. The new pieces of muscle wormed around the bone and quickly began to grow gross patches of new skin on top. Now freshly nourished from sucking up Thawee’s projection, it appeared to be growing into a more complete creature.

“Kuok kuok kuok...fin...ally...sub...stance...” The creature now understandable to the group. All of them looked upon, growing more fearful to their own astonishment. “That...boy.....nothing...to eat.”

All of Druvy’s brainless activities had been starving the supernatural beast to a point that it nearly shrank to nothing, keeping it from fully crossing over from wherever it belonged. Now with a full meal of Thawee’s spirit energy, it was able to regain enough of its strength to start assimilating in their world.

Thien had rushed over to Thawee’s physical body and felt that her heartbeat was normal but she was not waking up nor did she have a spiritual essence to detect.

“Hey you guys should probably get away from that thing.” Arath said to the group starting to walk down the bleachers.

“Arath! Don’t come closer, it’s already taken out one of us!” Khluen said in warning.

“Oh dang, really? That’s not good.” Arath said, still making his way even closer.

“Kuok kuok, who...is next?” The creature said, the holes on its head pulsating.

“Hm, can you guys close your eyes?” Arath said to the club members. “Hey, boney-ass zombie thing, you can try me next.”

“Arath! No!” Khluen shouted, but he was too late as the creature turned its head to Arath to size up his target.

“Dude, I said close your eyes.” Arath said one last time, the club members all looked at each other momentarily and nodded in agreement, closing their eyes.

A loud whooshing sound could be heard by everyone in the room as the monster had taken flight just like it had to catch up to Thawee. Arath pulled his hand out of his left pocket, a place where it rested day and night as far as everyone else knew. The creature had just met him and was about to see the secret that the paranormal club had been dreaming of since they first saw those strange arachnids crawling out.

Khluen and the others heard a loud thud, like a sack of potatoes falling off a shelf onto the ground. Unable to keep his eyes shut, he took a peek at what he had just heard, unsure why it wasn’t the screams of Arath getting bitten by the sinister spectre. Arath was standing there, unshaken and unharmed, in front of a giant mound of meshed spider webs that encased a thrashing

monster inside its threads. A flood of spiders were returning to his pocket as they left the floor.

The club members all could not control their jaws as they fell open wide and low. They turned to each other and back to Arath to check to see if they were being fooled. How could he have disposed of the threat so succinctly after walking in totally unprepared and unaware of what was waiting for him inside. This was not his fight and yet he had finished it to the point of tying a silky bow on top. It was obvious now that the spiders were an extension of Arath himself, so in tune with his mind that they fired out to cast a web in an instant.

“You kept your eyes shut the whole time right?” Arath asked them.

“Yes...but...how...why?” Khluen said while too stunned to ask a complete question.

“Listen, this type of stuff is really annoying to me. Can we just forget about it? I still have time to shoot some hoops before Coach Kevin comes back.”

“Ignore it? How could we possibly ignore the fact that you just disposed of a monster using those...pocket spiders?”

Arath looked down at Khluen, “Those are just my pets. Nothing else. I train them like people train dogs. You know, shake, sit, that stuff.”

“You think we’re that stupid? Something else is going on and we’re going to find out.” Khluen said, hardly showing thanks to the boy that saved his club’s spiritual and maybe physical lives..

“Khluen, what about Thawee?” Thien asked, kneeling by the fallen comrade’s side.

“Yeah, we need to tend to her first. Arath, let’s just pretend nothing happened this evening. Sound good?” Khluen asked him.

“Dude, I already said that.” Arath agreed.

“Wait! Can you help our friend? You were able to stop that monster, surely you know more than us about what’s going on.” Thien pleaded to Arath.

Arath may have been their main source of suspicion moments ago but now that he had taken down the most, and only, true paranormal threat that they had come into contact with, he appeared to at least be more friend than foe.

“I didn’t really ask for any of this responsibility. I’m actually kinda the irresponsible type. Maybe you can go to a doctor or something first? Arath replied.

“How do we explain that some egg-headed demon ate Thawee’s shadow and now she won’t wake up? Do you know anyone that could maybe help us?” Thien tried to get anything out of Arath that she could.

“Well first off, that’s not a demon. I’m no expert but that’s what we call a psychic vampire and by ‘we’ I mean the internet. Classic case of spirit sucker. I don’t know what you mean about her shadow but is she some type of psychic?” Arath rambled.

“Yeah, something like that...” Khluen confirmed.

“Okay so what you’re going to do is close your eyes again, I’m going to...do something similar to what I did with this guy but because she’s a human, it’ll help her. I think.” Arath half-assedly concluded.

“How do we know we can trust those spiders?” So said with a serious expression.

“Woah, pizza guy...” Arath interjected.

“Yes, they’re full of spiritual energy. They don’t feel exactly friendly...” Thien added on.

“How do you know that?” Arath asked.

“We’re the Paranormal Studies club. It’s our job to know these things.” Khluen said proudly.

“Your job? How much does it pay? You’re kind of bad at it so far.” Arath said to the club.

“It doesn’t pay a salary.” Khluen said, with pride on his breath. “We provide a valuable service to all of humanity by studying the unexplainable and mysterious subjects that most people are too afraid to even begin to explore. We search for the truth that will set us a species free. That is what it pays. Honor. Knowledge. Evolution...and...”

“Ah, nevermind. I was looking for at least enough to buy some new games.” Arath interrupted.

“What? Are you joking?” Khluen began to say.

“Wait! I’ve got some money in savings. What about...two hundred dollars?” Thien added.

“Deal!” Arath quickly said, pulling his hand out of his left pocket once again. A swarm of spiders flooded out of his pocket and alongside his leg and abdomen. He pointed at Thawee’s body and hundreds of them darted off and surrounded her body, emptying loads of webs all around her before spinning her like wrapping a rotisserie chicken.

“That’ll be two-hundred dollars!” Arath said to Thien.

“But how is this going to help her?! You just did it to the bad guy!” Thien shouted.

“Yeah, but that guy isn’t from this world. I’ve done this several times before although he is definitely much more scary than the others. Usually I just catch them by accident, or at least the spiders do by leaving their webs everywhere at home. These ghosts or whatever lose all their energy to the web eventually and then poof. I think they go to the next life or something like that. Now your friend, she’s a human being. She’s supposed to regain energy in a pretty normal way. I think if she’s in the web cocoon, then she will absorb the energy, not lose it.”

“So you’re saying the webs act as a transistor of spiritual energy and that spiritual energy follows the same laws that heat and energy follow in thermodynamics? So the energy out will balance with the ghosts losing energy to their surroundings and by humans gaining energy from the system?” Khluen said matter-of-factly, raising his fingers to his chin

“...when the hell did I say any of that?” Arath said, stunned at the barrage of advanced physics.

“Nevermind...Thien, can you monitor her energy that way? Didn’t you say she was empty?” Khluen asked.

“Pretty much but...I think I’m starting to get something. It’s small but I can feel it.” Thien replied.

“So like I said...that two-hundred dollars...?” Arath made sure they wouldn’t forget.

“Of course, but can it be like tomorrow because of, you know, all of this,” Thien said to him, gesturing to Thawee’s newly cocooned state.

“That’s cool I guess. Can y’all leave the other web lump to me though? The coach would kill me if he saw that left in here. My uncles swinging by to pick me up a bit so we’ll take care of it.” Arath replied.

“Wait a minute. The world needs to see this. This is the shock the world needs to wake up and see that the supernatural is here!” Khluen proclaimed.

“What good comes from knowing that there are more monsters than just humans out there?” Arath argued.

“People deserve to know how their world works. The good and the bad.” Khluen said.

“That sounds nice but you know the truth. So do I. We also have had the technology to document it all for years and years. So why is everything related to the paranormal so half-assed, misinformed or debunked?” Arath debated.

“People are just one video upload away from believing. They can’t unsee the truth, no matter who tries to silence us after we show them.” Khluen said, raising his voice.

“Fine, go do it. I hope your club has an army as well.”

Khluen was beginning to understand where Arath was coming from, giving up on taking any physical evidence or documentation from the scene. He could always change his mind and take pictures later. Arath was the most experienced of them all, even though he was more casual and laid back about it all. There might be something more that he knows and it was better to stay on the same side.

The club finally parted ways, now acquainted with Arath and destined for more meetings in the near future. The group was surprised at his calmness, stepping foot into a room with a figure of hell itself and dealing with it in only a matter of seconds before returning to shooting a ball through a hoop, alone in the gym. Arath was shorter than all of the paranormal studies club members and was missing nearly every shot they saw him take as they dragged Thawee out. There was so much more to learn but taking care of their bound and unconscious friend came first. .

“Where should we take her? People are going to ask questions. She’s covered in webs...” Thien asked Khluen.

“We can take her to my house. I don’t have any neighbors close by so no one will ask questions.” Khluen replied. “She lives alone in her apartment so

let’s just keep her phone out in case someone tries to come looking for her. Hopefully she’s not out too long.”

“Emergency meeting at your place then, huh?” So said, throwing Thawee’s cocoon over his shoulder.

“I’ll order some food.” The president said to his deputies.

Outside the gym, a horn blasted a few times loud enough for Arath to hear it in the gymnasium. “Hey fool! Let’s get out of here.” A voice called out from an old black funeral hearse, its paint lightly faded just about everywhere, engine puffing and growling as it sat lowly on top of the asphalt. Its tires flashed with their chrome texture, extending out with long wiry spokes from its rims. Arath’s uncle was a time capsule of just a few decades earlier, driving a twenty year old hearse that was customized to his lowrider tastes, still the same all these years later.

His uncle was from his mom’s side, so much different of a person than what he had heard about his mom. Arath wished he could compare them side by side. Uncle was what Arath called him but his real name was Emilio. None of his friends or family called him that either though. He had more nicknames that most people have letters in their names, mostly due to all the different lives he seemed to live concurrently. He held a steady job as a musician at a night club, playing mostly covers and slipping in his mostly panned solo material that was a little too experimental for the crowd he played for. Often he picked up side jobs as a one-man funeral show. Everything from escorting the casket to its

destined hole in the ground to a back-up pallbearer to the musician that played church hymns or songs listed in someone's final will and testament.

A few times a month, he still helped out his old wrestling buddies by getting his ass kicked in the ring to boost their careers as the once legendary Águilas Gamberras, the dirtbag eagle of the night, soaring his way into a vicious pile driver from the top rope, right in front of your wife and family. If he didn't have to pay the bills that he had each month, he'd do it full time. Even at thirty-three, he still had aspirations, not of fame but of championship belts and world tours. But he was still as happy as he could be as a fly on the wall of the coolest places he knew and as especially as Arath's uncle.

"Oh come on Arath. What the hell is that?" Uncle asked regarding the lump of web that Arath was pulling, a trailer of spiders below doing most of the work.

"Man, you know, annoying stuff as usual." Arath replied.

"Well, tell me about it on the ride back. I guess we'll throw it down in the basement along with the others."

"A couple of them have already moved on. Down to just a couple. This one might take awhile though."

"That big huh?"

"Yeah, nothing like the small fries that keep getting caught around the house."

"Bigger than that egg-headed punk we ran into after the night market last month? That ugly son of a gun was tall. I can't believe no one could see him but us."

"You know, this one had an egg shaped head too. No eyes as well..."

"Ay, that's not good nephew. Bad vibes."

Uncle easily picked up the lump of ghost-flesh that was wrapped up like a cased sausage and chunked it into the back of his hearse. He turned the radio back on and old thrash metal played them off as they left the scene to go home and toss their new roommate into the basement. At least until he went back to the hell that he belonged to.

Chapter 2 - “The Birth of Squirm”

The ghostly corpse rolled freely in the back of the hearse, bumping into the sides of the wall and other boxes that were carelessly stored in the back. Beneath it was a large and empty casket that would be used tomorrow to forever contain the flesh and bones, eventually all bones, of an elderly man to be laid in his final resting place. Uncle was presiding over the service, a stranger to the family but the source of comfort and strength during their dark and vulnerable time. He'd place the casket on a stand, opened for all the guests to have one final look of a man they would only barely recognize, shriveled and gaunt in places where there was once a full smile. Then Uncle would repeat some words from their religious texts and slowly lay the body down in the hole opened deep into the soil.

But for now, the dead man's velvet palace was just a box in the back of an old car with an ensnared vessel of a past-dead creature clunking on its roof. Arath looked into the back a few times throughout their drive to refresh his confidence that there was no exit for the beast that was inside. There was probably a proper term in some paranormal educational textbook that defined what exactly this creature could be classified as but for now, Arath and Uncle only referred to them as ghosts. This was the eighth ghost that the two had dealt with so far, all unintentional and more burdensome than exciting for Arath especially. He had never asked for the life that he was living and while others would kill for the chance at seeing these supernatural apparitions, he was

not a fan even while having the proper tools to deal with them without worry or fear of succumbing to a nightmarish end.

The spiders were the least of his concerns. Arath was once outgoing, spending everyday with different friends as they would ride bikes throughout the city, deposit bags of coins at the arcade and play in short-lived bands. Over the last five or so years during the transition from the end of high school to the last year of his time in college, Arath had not been able to maintain these friendships for a number of reasons but mostly simply put, the result of time moving forward and life taking people to places where they had to go. Another school, another city or another job, one by one until he was the only one left. He hadn't formed any life-changing friendships since starting college, just casual acquaintances to pass the time, learning their name and no more than two or three interesting facts about each other. Now, Arath had the spiders to keep him entertained. Though they were attached to him in a way that most people would only wish on their most hated enemy, they counted as company and would fill the room with life, dulling any aching silence that had cursed the young man before. Friends. Eight-legged, demonic and otherworldly friends.

The part of the curse that annoyed Arath a great deal was that the spiders attracted beings that were typically beyond human perception. His once quiet stay in his Grandma's house would occasionally be interrupted by a vengeful passerby that he had no connection to, yet they called for his blood and soul nonetheless. Every time, he'd remove his hand from his pocket and the spiders were beyond quick to recognize the danger, weaving a powerful tomb

that would subdue them quietly and permanently. They didn't act as an extension of his body directly but somehow they listened to him, without words or instructions, as if the synapses in his brain were firing off their signal to them as well. He could only watch and try to learn from them as they were in action. Only through talking with his Uncle did they begin to put some theories together.

Uncle was the perfect person for Arath to share this information with as he was the only one who was standing with his nephew as the curse became reality in a stoneladen room inside a tribal temple with a 'Do Not Enter' post clearly at the entrance.

Back then, they had traveled outside of the city to a nearby countryside town with a history of indigenous civilization. Trophies of monumental achievements, centuries old at this point, were spaced out among the provinces in their ruined state. At this point there were more fragments scattered and difficult to find but a few temples remained put together despite all the years of weathering and erosion. This particular location that the two had traveled to was probably the most famous of all, much larger than modern churches, with tall and wide stone blocks that built the foundation in a rectangular shape. No one was allowed inside the building itself but they could walk the steps to the top and see the many shrines that were on the outside on various levels. Each floor decreased in size until the summit, where it peaked like a pyramid but with a glass ornament that allowed the sun to send its light inside to dance along the mysterious, ancient ritual rooms.

Arath and his Uncle stopped by many of the shrines and took a few pictures on a disposable camera, still making photo albums the old-fashioned way. They explored attractions such as this more like explorers rather than tourists, trying to find the answers themselves to any curiosities that came to mind.

Alongside one of the shrines that appeared more broken down than the others, Arath and his Uncle noticed a tiny walkway that extended to the inside. No one was around to deny them access but they knew it was off limits like the rest of the rooms. It was only a few steps to get inside and appeared to be a balcony that provided a better vantage point for the overall room.

They carefully kneeled and ducked their way in, carving their way around the glacially collapsing stone structures, making sure as to not create any noise or break any of the ancient columns. The sun shone through the top and bounced around on mirrors then dimly lit the inside. It looked like the indigenous ancients that erected the temple had a deep understanding of geometry. Triangles of light showed the earthly skeleton but nothing more. There were empty stone clips on the wall that appeared to be holders for torches but alas Arath and his Uncle were torchless. Except for a lighter his Uncle had in his pocket. They thought twice about and decided they would light it just to see if anything else could possibly be seen on the balcony they stood on.

Uncle flicked his lighter to life and disappointingly, nothing more about the temple revealed itself. A few moths flew over to see the flame and a

frog hopped right behind them, making a loud, wet thud, looking for food amongst the hovering insects. The frog stared at both of them but the two men didn't scream or make any big sudden movements, just looked at each other with relief that the amphibian was the only one that had discovered them.

They expected the frog to sling its tongue outside of its mouth and onto one of the moths but it remained shut with cheeks bulging, like something was trapped in the back of his throat. Arath reached out and grabbed the frog to see what he might be able to do to help. It was girthy and large, and didn't put up a fight to run away when grabbed by this human. Arath stared at the frog and examined to see what might have been making it so puffy and strange. He gave its belly a small squeeze and its mouth opened, showing that the frog was fully stuffed with an assortment of shiny objects. Arath held the frog upside down and began squeezing to eject all the misplaced treasures onto the stone floor. The frog shrunk with size as its financial future was now in jeopardy.

Arath and his uncle were shocked to see just how many coins, about 45 or so, had been in the frog this whole time. Could it have eaten them one at a time and realized too late that they weren't going down? Or did someone use the frog as a purse and it hopped away? Whatever the case was, the frog, now empty, was eager to hop away and return to where it came from. Arath and his Uncle surveyed the area outside to see if anyone was running towards them after hearing the clanging of the coins as they fell to the floor but the coast was clear.

They both looked at each other and uncle nodded with his eyebrows raising, suggesting that they had found a worthy souvenir. They picked the coins up one by one and placed them in their pockets, knowing they'd share whatever the find was once they talked about it later. After their pockets were stuffed, they quickly made their way back to the outdoor portion of the shrine and began to walk back to the stairs.

There was no point in risking their find by exploring more of the temple so they hurriedly strolled back to their ride. Before they reached the truck, Arath's pocket had begun to tighten and it felt like several threads of his pants had begun to tangle themselves around his hand. He tried to pull away but it only got tighter, he looked at his uncle with a sense of urgency.

"Hey uncle, I can't take my hand out of my pocket. Something's holding it inside," said Arath.

"Huh? Did you grab a snake or something" Replied his uncle.

"No way. Come on, it's starting to pull my hand in deeper."

"Come on Arath, stop kidding around. Here let me see what's going on here."

Uncle at first tried to grab Arath by the arm and pull his hand out but he saw that his nephew wasn't playing a prank, it was really stuck in there.

Uncle stuck his hand in Arath's pocket to see what was binding him to his denim and was met with several insects that quickly bit his hand and began to crawl out of the pocket and onto his arm.

“Arath! It’s damn spiders! Pull out before they bite you too. Son of a gun that hurts.” Yelled uncle.

“What?! But nothing’s biting me. I can feel the crawling on my hand but no pain yet.”

“Look at my hand! You see those bite marks right? Let me squash them, they must have bitten your hand or something and made it numb.”

Uncle began to swat, punch and kick Arath’s hand in his pocket and tried again to pull his nephew’s arm out of the pocket.

“Uncle stop! I can feel everything. It’s not budging!” Arath said with uneasiness finally reaching his voice.

Arath began to move and wiggle his fingers around to see how many spiders were actually in there and to see how they could possibly be holding his hand down. There were countless arachnids amongst the coins and they’d build a silky prison that might as well have been steel threads. One of the coins jingling in his pocket felt vastly different than the others. It felt almost hot to touch and the moment he touched it, it felt like his eyes blinked but he hadn’t blinked at all. Grazing the coin with his fingers was blacking out his vision each time.

The two men were already near the truck and uncle decided to pick Arath up and run for it. They were either going to get in trouble for stealing from the temple or Arath was going to die from some strange species of spider.

They arrived at the truck and uncle was going to take Arath to the hospital. They would have to worry about the bigger trouble they might be in

if it came to that but he only cared about saving his nephew at that moment. Arath said next to him, contemplating what he might be able to do in the meantime. The spiders were not biting him after all.

“Don’t worry kid, we’re going straight to the emergency room. Surely they’ll have some type of anti-venom for ya. Damn, I’m starting to feel a little sleepy too. I think these bites are starting to knock me out.” His uncle said, eyes starting to slowly droop down.

Arath could drive them if he could get his hand free and help his uncle move over. He started to forcefully shake his hand around and pulled as hard as he could. In the struggle, the warm coins slipped into his palm and Arath felt compelled to squeeze it with all his might. In an instant, his vision turned to black.

He was not unconscious. His senses were working fine and were picking up all kinds of strange signals. He heard a rustling noise all around him that only got louder the more he paid attention to it. His eyes darted around where he was and tried to make out any shapes but only hill-shaped silhouettes appeared in the distant horizon.

He was unable to yell or call out to anyone. Even opening his mouth to breathe was impossible. The light must have slowly trickled into his eyes and he could now see the hills were vibrating and moving. He looked down to where his feet should be and the ground was squirming and moving in strange patterns. It wasn’t grass swaying in the wind or water washing onto a beach. It was spiders. Everything, everywhere, was spiders, as far as his eyes could see.

This was the first vision Arath had into their world.

At Arath's Grandma's house, Uncle got out of the hearse to unlock the squeaky metal gate, opening it up so he could back the hearse into the driveway and park in front of the garage. If it wasn't for Uncle's unique self-employment, the neighbors eyes might have been lookingly onto the two men worriedly as they unpacked a silky casket bag and walked straight into their front door.

Grandma was tending to her garden in the backyard, paying no attention as they walked straight to the bottom of the basement. She never went into the basement, leaving it to Arath as a space of his own, where he and Uncle would play music together or spend a late night in a video game session. She hadn't seen the cocoons that were down there, tied to the floorboards using the web from Arath's pocket spiders.

This was the eighth overall phantom that he had collected and there was no sign of slowing down. Uncle slapped it one time on the side after it was tightly secured in place and he left to go play a late night gig, to sing background tunes for drunken partygoers. Arath wouldn't spend another thought on his new prey this evening. He grabbed the remote, sat down on the couch and so began another episode of a decades old sitcom.

Chapter 3 - “Club Meeting”

The club arrived at Khluen's apartment, about fifteen minutes away from the gymnasium. Khluen unlocked the door and walked inside with Thien and So following behind, with Thawee still thrown over his strong shoulders. Reasonable people would've gone straight to the hospital to have her vitals checked out but the club had placed their faith into a cocoon weaved together by a strange guy with spiders in his pockets. Thawee herself would've accepted the choice; she had tremendous faith in Thien with both her medical studies and metaphysical abilities to guide her back to a full recovery.

Walking into the living room of the apartment, So laid Thawee down onto a couch; he and Thien would sit on each side of her while Khluen paced in front of everyone and began his debriefing. “Well we knew that it wasn't always going to be easy. Thien, how is she doing?”

“No major changes. I can still feel a slight life signature with her energy, growing stronger but very slowly. I can't check out her physical vitals without unwrapping this...thing.” Thien concluded, her hands hovering above the webbed sack.

“Good, good. I must say, it doesn't feel completely right to trust Arath at this point but he did save us.”

“That's true.” So chimed in. “If what he said about the webs is true, then it sounds reasonable enough. She suffered a spiritual injury so incubating her in a hub of spiritual absorbent material does sound like it will do the trick.”

“I wonder how the webs pull in energy though.” Thien asked.

“Well from what I've seen with my studies in using enchantments, it's all about the wavelengths at which objects vibrate with. If these spiders are from somewhere with higher spiritual frequencies, then it only makes sense that their webs would be the same but when they're used in a lower frequency place, the energy will spread outwards like a pressure adjustment.” Khluen postulated.

“So Thawee's near-empty spiritual state should make her like a sponge. Hm. How do you figure it takes energy from that monster though?” So said to Khluen.

“Just an idea but since ghosts are beings in transitional states, there's distortion and chaos in their fluctuating spiritual energy and wave patterns. The web's vibration balances it out, expanding into the collection of energy that forms their figure until it's formless and without chaos, a dilution. But this ghost had a more concrete physical form, possibly due to assimilation of its energy inside of Druvy's human body. ”

“I think we need to talk to Druvy to see what he knows about his own possession.” Thien said to the group.

“I think so. I wonder if he was conscious at any point or if he saw us, Arath or the ghost. I guess we should make sure he made it home safe. I feel bad that all we did was tell the janitor that he was knocked out in there” Khluen replied.

“It was either that or we get seen with a body bag and have to answer a lot more questions about everything.” So said. “Anyways, I’m starving. Y’all want pizza? I’ll call in and use my discount.”

The group waited for half an hour after So called in for an order of pizzas from *Spanko’s Pizza Pies*, his place of work. The group turned on the TV and watched a few episodes of an old TV show they had been watching together in down time after club activities. They often bonded together over more relaxing and normal activities, despite their binding foundational purpose of friendship lying in the weird and unusual world of the paranormal. They were still just students at the end of the day.

After a few hours into their evening, their calmness was interrupted.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

Three consecutive knocks rang out into the room, the pounding of the wooden door startling all of the group at once.

“What the hell? Who is that?” Khluen thought aloud. He and So glanced at each other, nodded and stood up to walk to the door together. Thien stayed with Thawee as her primary caretaker at this point.

“I’ll check the peephole.” Khluen told So as they approached the door together but a white envelope was passed underneath the door and onto the tiled floor inside before they could look who it was. The two men stared at it for just a second before Khluen leaned down to pick it up. On the front was the first and last name of all four of the club members.

“Don’t open the door.” A low and gruff voice said from the other side of the door. Khluen finally looked into the peephole but all he could see was black, despite the sun still being out for about another hour.

“I think they’ve got a finger on the peep...” Khluen whispered to So before being interrupted.

“Read it.” The voice outside instructed.

Dear Paranormal Studies Club,

Effective immediately, you are to cease all operations of club activity in and out of the university. As of now, the club has officially been terminated and all four of its registered members are placed on a temporary extracurricular suspension, barring each student from all school activities outside of in-term enrolled classes.

It has come to our attention that you have bullied and harassed another student on campus during your club activities. This type of behavior is completely against our university code of ethics and has put all four of you students near the line of expulsion. Only at the special request of the bullied student in question are any of you receiving a final chance to remain enrolled.

You are not to contact Druvy Darwinson through any communication method. Breaking this rule could result in your immediate removal from campus as well as filing an official complaint with the police department.

We do not make these disciplinary decisions lightly. It is in your best interests to be model students from here on out to protect your futures as well as showing respect to your fellow students.

Enforcefully,

Paulson Perostaffoulus, Head of Disciplinary Affairs

“What the hell is this?” Khluen said to the visitor through the door, grabbing the handle and beginning to pull. He had unlocked it, yet it would not budge. The person standing on the other side had an oppressively strong grip and didn’t allow Khluen to crack the door in the slightest. “Hey, this is my apartment. You can’t keep me inside. Who are you?!”

So had also grabbed onto the door and began to pull in desperation to see the face of the person delivering the surprising letter. It was true that they had been there to see what happened to Druvy but they had in fact saved him from the ghost that was possessing him. He wasn’t conscious at any moment that they saw him during the conflict.

“That’s enough.” The voice said firmly. “Let go of the door and listen up. You’ve made a tremendous mistake against a member of the Darwinson family. Do not interfere with him again or the consequences will reach much farther than the university itself. You’re lucky Druvy showed kindness. Don’t make me visit a second time.”

“You’re talking to the wrong people. We didn’t do anything to Druvy. What did he tell you?” Khluen shouted at the visitor.

“That’s all I have to say. Goodbye for now.” Footsteps echoed in the hallway as the visitor walked away and Khluen immediately grabbed the door handle again, opening up to get a good look at the person threatening the club. There was no one standing there in front of them. Khluen looked to the left and then the right and at the staircase at the end of the hall, a figure with black hair wearing a dark coloured tweed suit was descending the steps.

Khluen and So sprinted without a second thought towards the figure, not taking the threats of a stranger without having a real conversation. The head of the visitor turned towards them just before it was out of view but the face was covered by strands of their hair. Khluen and So were about to shout at him to stop walking away when they themselves were stopped immediately by two fingers suddenly touching their foreheads. They looked up and saw that the hands were not attached to a body, floating in the air with a dark swirling mist at the wrists.

Both of them were frozen in place at the shocking sight of the disembodied hands but were suddenly forcefully moved from their position when the pointed fingers reeled back and tucked themselves under the thumb before flicking both men in their forehead with enough might that they were lifted off their feet and thrust into the air and onto their bottoms. One of the hands simply waved side to side in a dismissive motion, communicating that not one more step should be taken. Then the hands sunk back into the mists that surrounded their wrists and just as quickly as they came, they had dissipated into the dusk air.

Khluen and So were once again powerless when faced with danger. For now, they could only retreat and tell Thien about their defeat and the club's demise.

Chapter 4 - “Samuel, Take Aim!”

At his Grandmother’s house, Arath was finally fast asleep after he and his uncle had lugged the cocoon down into the basement, where it was now hung alongside the various others, all at different stages of their decomposition. Arath had particularly strange dreams after encountering each of the ghosts that had begun haunting his daily life. These interactions with the paranormal were enough to set him off balance, no matter how comfortable he felt he had become in dealing with it all and even when shutting his eyes to reset his body, inside his mind still turned unexpectedly as if from an outside influence.

This particular nighttime slumber had placed Arath in the body of a sailor on a whaling ship over a hundred fifty years back into the past. He stroked a new beard while looking into the crashing waves that collapsed around the gliding ship, floating over the big, blue ocean with an endless horizon. There were men everywhere tending to varying duties such as manning the sails, preparing meals and loading harpoons into the ships on the side to be ready at a moment’s notice. How long he had been a sailor in this lifetime was unknown but Arath accepted whichever fate he had been forced into in the nighttime hours.

During the dreams, he was lucid enough to explore and interact with other people, playing his part and finding out his current role in each situation. Dreams are often interpreted and studied with an intent to explain underlying motifs and themes but this was of no interest to Arath. It was like a derivative projection that resulted from emptying the contents of his mind. It might as

well have been a soup made from emptying the fridge and pantry into a giant pot and setting the burner to boil.

A crew member of the ship shouted out to Arath to get back to work. “What are yer lollygagging about the place fer Samuel? Eyes on the sea. I feels her somewhere abouts these parts.” Arath, or in this timeline, Samuel, was scouting the seas for their prey. He looked down to his hands and saw that he was holding a spyglass that collapsed into itself in wooden layers with a metallic ring around each piece. He gazed into the ocean, looking for a sign of the grey beasts that lurked just beneath the surface, coming up occasionally to burst from their spout and bathe momentarily in the warm sunlight.

Some of the sailors had begun to sing a song as they had drifted into their robotic motions doing their repetitive tasks. One group was passing along wooden crates down a line to each other, throwing them down into a cellar below, contents not obvious to Arath. Another was unwinding a vast net and rerolling it around a cylinder that kept it tidy and without tangling. They hummed along to a song with lyrics that ached with loneliness that comes with the life of a sailor at sea:

The blisters on my tired hands

Are swollen around a wedding band

She waits at home while i’m with men

Who’re sailing on the tides again

Arath shouted down to the man who had reminded him of the work he was supposed to be tending to, curious about who he was in this life.

“Hey mister, have I ever told you about my wife?”

“Oh yer married are ya? Haven’t heard about the lady. What’s her name.” The sailor responded.

“Daffodil. She’s a seamstress.” Arath named her on the spot, giving her the first job he could think of for the time period. Maybe there was a real wife but the dream would hardly last long enough for him to return to shore and take a carriage to whatever place was home.

“Ah, that’s the flower of yer heart is it, Samuel? If only ye could see a bastard whale in that glass of yers already so I could get back to my sweet Adelia. Find a big’n won’t ye? I want her to have enough cabbage to make us both fat.”

“Sure thing bud.” Arath had a hard time keeping up with timeworn language that was spoken by the man, ending the conversation in the middle and looking back into the glass.

Out of habit, Arath reached his free hand into each of his pockets, inspected to see if the spiders of his reality had been realized in this alternate life as well but nothing but dust and lint were found among the worn denim insides. In this world, the pockets didn’t have spiders and maybe that was for the best.

In the far distance, puffs of foam and water misted into the sky as air was bursting through the surface in brief pulses. Arath gazed through his

spyglass as intently as possible and saw the gray and shiny back of a whale now breaching the surface.

“Whale!” He shouted out to all that could hear his voice. Boxes were dropped, songs were hushed and feet began to pound on the wooden planks as they hurried to prepare the whaleboats on the side. Adelia’s husband shouted out to Arath, “Where is she, Samuel?!”

“Um, that way!” Arath was not familiar with the terminology to effectively communicate.

“How far?!”

“Like 50 meters I think?”

“Meters? Did you bake yer head in the sun too long, son?” The man complained to Arath but carried on regardless, passing freshly sharpened harpoons to the small ships that the hunters would be riding in to duel with their prey. “Now get yer arse down here!”

Arath jumped down the crow’s nest that he was perched in, sliding down the wooden pole below him with speed. He landed on the ship’s deck with a thundering thud, his body much taller and heavier than in his real life. The man gave him a big shove in the direction of one of the boats that had its share of men already seated.

“Hurry up! We don’t have time!” One of the men shouted at Arath as he arrived and sat in one of the back of the ship, grabbing an oar that was passed to him. The boat was lowered into the lively sea and the men quickly

pierced the water with their oars and began to row in a synchronized team effort, Arath catching on as they moved towards the whale.

All four of the boats that had dropped into the sea in pursuit of the whale nearly came to their final destination, approximately where the whale was last seen. Arath looked back to the ship and calculated in his mind how far they had gone and imagined if this was the correct distance but he was quickly proven correct as the whale again moved through the surface of the sea, causing all of the boats to shake and drift in different directions.

“Harpooners ready!” A man shouted as each boat had a man dressed down to his bare essentials with the gloriously sharp harpoons in hand, now held in an attack position to bring their whale to its demise. “Now!”

Each of the harpooners had taken aim and heaved their giant metal arrows into the direction of the whale. Two of the harpoons had missed entirely; another had just grazed the whale, leaving a long red and bleeding line; the last harpoon had punctured the blubber of the whale enough that it stayed in place as blood sprayed in spread mist into the air. “Hit! More! More!”

The whale groaned a mighty groan as it whipped its body around in the direction of its assailants, diving down into the water and causing a large disturbance in the waters that tipped one of the boats over completely. Arath’s boat nearly turned all the way in a full circle before stabilizing. The whale would have to come back to the surface for air sooner than later so the whalers had only but a brief moment to readjust themselves. Arath was scanning the sea for the reemergence of the beast before he heard it rising through the waters

directly behind the boat he was in. The whale soared half of its body length into the air before crashing down directly onto Arath’s ship, shattering the boat completely and sending the men down into the depths.

He opened his eyes to try to see through the burning saltwater in his eyes; next to him was one of the men, totally smashed to pieces that would quickly float separately back to the surface of the ocean. Arath had miraculously survived the slamming of the whale but he was now sinking down into the waters. His body should have floated back to the surface but he felt a mighty force pulling on his leg. When he looked down, he saw the harpoon that had landed in the whale had now caught onto his pants, dragging him down with tremendous speed alongside the whale. At this rate, the pressure of the sea would crush him or he would run out of air but the whale kept diving deeper. Arath looked above to the surface as the light shone through the layers of the ocean less and less.

He felt himself falling out of consciousness before the whale finally turned itself back into an upwards path to the surface. Arath’s eyes were failing him, falling more and more to a close as the whale soared upwards. When the whale finally ascended beyond the blue veil, Arath, as Samuel, had shut his eyes and faded out of that particular existence, immediately seeing once again that he had returned to the world he was meant for.

He was once again lying in his bed with warm covers spread over his body and his head resting flat on a pillow. A lifetime ending just as quickly as he came to know it. It wouldn’t be so easy to shake off such a wild ride but maybe

he could at least let it slip away from his memory as dreams quickly do when waking up. A walk to the bathroom was often just enough to ground a dreaming person back into reality enough so that they could return to sleep and potentially begin a new adventure.

He opened the bathroom door and began to pee, his eyes half open with the lights not even turned on. He stared forward half asleep and heard the bubbling of the toilet water as he relieved himself but overcoming the sound was a thud from the floor below. He stopped midstream to focus and again heard a thud coming from just below. He finished his business and walked down the hallway and to the top of the stairs. In addition to the thud was now a ripping and tearing sound. It was as if t-shirts were being torn apart by bare hands. Arath walked down the stairs and could hear the noise more specifically coming from beyond the door of the basement. He put his ear onto the door and there was silence for a moment, then loud thudding footsteps and silence once again.

Arath pulled his hand from his pockets and spiders began to crawl onto his arm and he opened the door. The basement was pitch black until Arath flipped on the light switch to see who the intruder was. All along the floor were tatters of the webbed cocoons, their casings ripped and torn to shreds that littered all across the concrete. Each one torn apart and emptied until nothing remained. Arath walked down and looked for any remaining signs of the inhabitants but saw no ghostly remains.

Finally, he looked to where the newest addition was and there, kneeling down in front of the emptied silk casket was Druvy, a knife in his hand with tiny fragments of webs falling off the edge of the blade.

Chapter 5 - “Reddish Herring.”

Arath walked carefully down the staircase in the basement to meet the shaking Druvy, still gripping the handle of a kitchen knife with webs falling off gently to the ground. This immaculately incompetent son of wealth had never before caused someone to identify him as a threat but Arath had no idea what to make of the connection between the young man and the now released ghostly prisoners.

“Hey man, what’d you go and do that for? Why the hell are you in my grandma’s house?” Arath asked.

Druvy looked at Arath with wide eyes and a quivering lip, “I...don’t know...I was called here...by the thing in those webs...” He replied.

“Huh? How’d it call you? It was wrapped up tight.”

“I heard it speak to me but like, in my brain.”

“In a human language?”

“What do you mean? Of course. What else would it be?”

“A new voice in your head comes in and the first thing you do is come running to it?”

“I don’t think I had a choice. It’s like I was being forced to come along.”

“So it told you which one it was in? What about the rest?” Arath took another glance to make sure he first observation was correct. Every last one was cut down with no trace of anything inside.

“That thing opened the rest...and then it ate each one.”

Arath turned back to Druvy, his eyes now wide and vibrating inside his skull.

“I opened up the webs and it fell out, walking like a baby horse. I yelled at it but it ignored me and used its claws to open the other sacks. Then, it bit into whatever was inside with a really gross chomping and slurping sound. Then it looked at me, I was so scared that I couldn’t move. I could only piss my pants in fear. It’s like I was a tiny child again and the monster had finally come out from under the bed. I could only await my fate as it started to grow meaty shreds of flesh that wrapped around the before exposed bones.”

“It finally looked away from me with its newly armored form and leapt through the wall, fading into the bricks like a fog. Why I was the one to see its brief but unholy buffet, I have no idea yet here I am, awaiting the answers, waiting to see if I unleashed something that will bring doom to other innocent people. Please, do you have any idea what’s going on?”

“Ah man you pissed in my basement?” Arath looked down to the now slightly faded yellow stain on the floor.

A door creaked loudly upstairs.

“Ah damnit, did I leave it unlocked again?”

Arath heard the voice of his uncle upstairs, coming into the house talking to himself after a long shift at the bar of playing tunes and entertaining the patrons. Uncle saw the door of the basement ajar and went to check who was down there as Arath was normally asleep by this time, despite being a night owl himself, and grandma was always asleep shortly after the sun went down.

“Boy, what’re you still doing up? Oh, you’ve got a friend over huh. Wait.” Uncle stopped himself to think.

“It’s him Uncle.” Arath replied.

“Oh shit, is that so? How are you feeling kiddo?” Uncle asked.

“Huh? I’ve never met you guys before. Why are you acting like you know me? I think I’ve seen you around school before though.” Druvy replied.

“Wait what happened to all the cocoons?! Arath, why did you bring him here.”

Uncle began to sweat in every place that he had the pores to do so because at this point, he figured the secret was all but out. There was officially a witness to the weirdness that had invaded their lives and without a reasonable explanation, this type of rumor would wreck their lives or put them straight into the scope of the strangely curious or worse, on the internet.

“Druvy here let them all out. The new guy apparently speaks telepathically.” Arath informed.

“No, I said he spoke to me through my brain.” Druvy replied as informed as ever.

“Why would he do that?!” Uncle replied excitedly.

“I just want to go home! I don’t know why I even came here but I don’t want any of this!” Druvy began to panic. He was accustomed to a lackluster and lazy lifestyle, only guided by immediate dopamine rushes from refreshing social media feeds and flipping to the next fifteen second video on his phone. He lived in an alternate reality that comes with being terminally online

so something based in reality was enough to knock him off center. Now forces beyond reality were right on his footsteps and Arath and his uncle were forced to push him along or face the potential reverberations.

“Hey kid, don’t worry, we’re on the same side. We know just about as much as you.” Uncle assured the frightened Druvy. “But you gotta promise to keep this a secret between the three of us.”

“Fine. I just don’t want any more of this stuff. I’ve had enough trouble at school with the paranormal studies club today but my Dad is taking care of them. I’d hate to ask him for help again because of whatever’s happening here. He’d be so pissed.”

Uncle and Arath looked at each other confused, turning the gears in their minds to think about how they avoided Druvy’s attention when they were in the gym as well. Regardless of the fact, Druvy had already told his father about the others and Arath was now connected with them. Druvy’s dad was an all-powerful business man with connections that only being filthy rich can get. To be on his bad side meant they’d be up against forces just as powerful as the supernatural.

“Let’s get him back home, nephew. We’ll worry about the rest later.” Uncle said, Arath nodding in agreement. They walked Druvy to the front door, he was still clearly on edge and twiddling his fingers in anxious anticipation. As the three approached the front door, a gentle tapping noise filled the air. Someone else had beat them to it.

Uncle and Arath looked at each other, both shrugging their shoulders, neither of them expecting another guest on this odd evening. Druvy shrank even further into himself, now on the verge of total collapse from fear and dread.

“Druvy, don’t keep me waiting any longer.” A woman’s voice said from the other side of the door.

“Alaria!!” Druvy shouted before running to open the door himself. A tall woman wearing a formal suit was standing there with her hands now in her pockets, her expression unamused. Her eyes were half open and the bottom of her lip punching out just enough to show her annoyance. She had bushy auburn hair that was bound by braids and bands to suppress the fluff.

“Whose that Druvy?” Arath asked but Druvy had already ran to her side, hugging her from the side without reciprocation.

“Your dad is going to kick your ass, kid.” Alaria said sternly, her gaze turning to Arath and uncle. “I don’t know what y’all were doing here this late but it won’t happen again. Luckily your phone GPS alerted the house security.”

“We didn’t invite him here either.” Arath said, uncle bumping him from behind to not talk to the suited visitor.

“Then what were you doing here Druvy? Who are these people?” She asked.

Druvy looked conflicted with Alaria staring him down. He was a young man of weak convictions and the night’s events had him already

saturated with conflict, he could only spill what was inside his mind at that moment.

“There was...a monster. But these people don’t have anything to do with it.” He turned and winked. “It was just in their basement.”

“Is that so? Mind if I take a look?”

“No way. He must have just been sleepwalking. We’ve had enough guests tonight.” Uncle deflected.

“Maybe you should show her the webs. Alaria can definitely help us.” Druvy tried to convince uncle.

“It’s too late. Grandma’s already asleep and you broke into our house. Whatever you were hallucinating is not our problem. Just go home and get some rest.”

Alaria looked at the two men inside the house, unamused at their fictitious detour. She had hardly moved a centimeter since the door opened, holding her composure to a strikingly fixed position.

“It’ll just be a moment. Druvy’s father will want to know if he’s gotten into something that he shouldn’t have. He’s a very good boy with a bright future, some blood-related people might say.” Alaria said and began to try to let herself into the home but uncle stood face to face with her, blocking her from moving any farther.

“Hey lady, we’re not the type to call the cops but I can tell you this, you ain’t getting into this house.” Uncle said.

She looked into uncle's eyes, as stonelike as she had been throughout the interaction, and her hair burst out of the braids that had held them so tightly before. Tiny particles of light bounced into the air behind her like a glittery balloon had just popped, then in a sudden rush, all the particles were blown by an invisible gust to move inside the house. Each of the specks had moved around uncle and Arath and moved forward towards the basement. Both of them turned to see where the mysterious dots were moving towards but as soon as they had turned back to Alaria to ask what she was doing, she had begun to walk forward, between the two, the men unable to move to impede her progress. They tried to protest her intrusion but even their mouths were unable to move. Arath wished he could only move his hands out of his pocket so that the spiders could come to his aid but it was a denim prison, sealed by an outside force.

She walked straight to the basement and down the steps, exploring the now untangled webs with their secrets long gone. Her mysterious ability was evidence enough of her supernatural capabilities but beyond her power was the same spiritual perception that Arath and uncle had come to know. She only spent a moment there before coming back to the group stranded at the doorway. By then she had seen all that she had to know to understand where the situation was going.

“Druvy, looks like your father will finally be pleased with you for once. Let’s get you back home.” She turned her gaze to Arath and uncle. “Let this be

the only time we meet. You’ve played your part and any further curiosity will lead to answers that are not worth their cost.”

The two visitors walked away from the house and got into a black sedan, driving off into the night as Arath was finally able to start to move again.

“Damnit. We’re in deep huh.” Uncle said.

“Yeah. What a psycho.” Arath replied.

“I like crazy but this might be somewhere near the limit. Maybe passed it.”

“I’ve got free time.”

Uncle took a moment, staring into the now empty street and sighed, bowing his head. “Yeah, me too. Let’s just hope grandma is still asleep.”

Chapter 6 - “My Great-Great-Grandfather’s Eyes”

The next day at the university crawled along for all the members of the paranormal studies club. The events that had transpired so far in the last twenty-four hours were almost too tough to digest, despite their lives revolving around studying the very types of subjects that were suddenly making their presences known. It was one thing to read well researched literature, see pictures of circumstantial evidence and listen to experts pontificate in great detail about life beyond the living veil but now they lived in the grey area where facts could not simply be accepted at face value. From here on out, their worldview had to be reassessed to include each new revelation and see where did they fit amidst the grand scheme that was their spiritual and physical existence.

All of the existential dread was only further challenged by the otherworldly affliction that had sent Thawee into her unexpected rehabilitation. Thien had convinced Khluen that the premise of the cocoon was backed up with enough energy evidence so that they could put their faith in previously uncertain places. The webs were friendly, much more so than the very beast that sank its transcendent fangs into her astral body. Only time would vindicate the group of their battle efforts and rid Khluen of his guilt for masterminding the very plot that incapacitated his club member.

For now, Khluen was absent minded attending his thermodynamics class under the well regarded Professor Faulk, drawing on his paper unrelated ramblings rather than the integrals being discussed on the board. He was a

straight A student who could get by with the bare minimum attention span during class as he was fully capable of not only absorbing but applying the topics into work examples almost immediately. This was the way his mind worked when patterns and formulas were involved, slipping things into their place in a free-flowing and intuitive manner. It was this skill that allowed his enchantment abilities to flourish at a young age. The wave-like essence of spiritual energy flowing through material objects spoke to him, revealing their variables so he could analyse and rearrange their pathways in a transformative application.

He, like all the others in the club, saw his abilities appear out of nowhere during his childhood; the same way kids discover they’re good at kicking balls or keeping rhythm with a musical instrument. For Khluen, he was always tracing his fingers on surfaces and objects, tapping into the vibrations that were reverberating through the spiritual mesh that connected all matter. His family had attributed it to a stimulation need, potentially being a sign of possible neurotypical conditions but it was too unfamiliar for them to recognize the habit for what it was. It wouldn’t be until he saw science fiction or fantasy movies depicting magic or fantastical technology that he would consider the fact that he had a gift that he was supposed to nurture, despite it only being a sensation of the flesh at this present moment. He was old enough to know these movies and stories were fiction but there were movies based on

lived experiences with cowboys, mafiosos and athletes; it should be possible that somewhere in human existence, there were people inspired by strange lived experiences, seeing reality in a way that others were unable to see.

Eventually, he interacted with a locket in his home, a family heirloom from a distant relative, and felt a particularly strong energy field resonating off the stone that was lodged in the top cover. Inside was a picture of his great-great-grandfather, a photograph taken the best way that was possible at such a time in the past with its faded colors and blueish hues, and it was passed down to the first born of each batch of children down the family bloodline. Khluen's mother was given the locket and by now, the stories behind the man in the picture were far too removed to carry detailed lore, for he only was told that he was a grain farmer who was particularly good at constructing and maintaining his own farm tools, a rural engineer with a family and the rest was a blur.

When Khluen touched this locket, he could feel a pulse as if it was a beating heart. At this point in his young life, he had tried and failed to have his family relate or recognize his metaphysical ability but he passed it to his mom anyways for her to have a chance at feeling what he did.

"Yes son, that's probably where you get your smarts from. That man could do everything and didn't need anyone's help. Except for your great-great-grandmother of course." She told him. "Do you know what this stone is for? I believe it's opal. People back then were superstitious of rival farmers placing evil eyes on them that would taint their crops. Supposedly, all

you'd need to place this curse was an image that resembled the person well enough. So just in case it got into the wrong hands, this stone is supposed to ward off anyone using his picture to place a curse on him. These were not the days of modern science, anyhow."

She had no idea how effective the stone actually was serving its purpose, or so Khluen theorized, not knowing how to place an evil eye and not having been cursed himself as far as he knew. The fact that there was a tangible presence, at least to him, meant that there was some truth to it. Day after day, he'd trace his fingers around the stone and relive the strongest sensation that he'd felt at this point so far, seeing if it had the means of helping him elevate and explore the gift he had. During his sleep one night, his eyes opened but there was no certainty in consciousness as Khluen's body was unable to move. He was fourteen at the time but felt the primal fear that only a four year old hearing an uncomfortable noise underside the bed could have. No matter how hard he tried to move his limbs, only his eyes were capable of movement and when they adjusted to the darkness of the room, a slim figure with no eyes was seen, perched on his bed post and hunched over like a primate behind a cage at the zoo.

The figure didn't move close to him the first time he saw it, only licking its lips with a long, grey tongue covered in lumpy granular obstructions and scratching its legs with pointed fingertips. However, he'd eventually fall back asleep and when he awoke, nothing remained but the nightmarish memory. This unknown entity returned for a second visit, this time beginning

to slowly crawl towards Khluen locked in his stale state, unable to open his mouth and scream. Just as the previous visit, it ended when his eyes shut and sleep returned. There would be more visit but this time, the locket of his departed ancestor was in his hand. The wingless gray gargoyle-like monster stood up earlier than usual and began to crawl on top of the bed covers with no eyes to peer into. Khluen was incapacitated once again but he could feel the locket in his hand as if droplets of water were being absorbed into his skin. With every synapse in his brain focused on this reverberating energy, his body gained movement back and he sprang to his feet and stood before the monster.

It stood up as well, its deceptive shape elongating as it unfurled vertically. Khluen should have felt more fear than ever at the sight of the beast but instead he puffed out his chest and clenched the locket tighter than ever. He held the locket out at arms length, just mere centimeters away from the monster's torso when it began to clutch and writhe in pain. Khluen couldn't be sure if this creature was the physical embodiment of a curse or an escaped demon from hell but the stone that bore his grandfather's wishes of protection was doing what it was destined to do.

Eventually the figure dissolved in the shadows in the corner of the room, without so much as a whimper. Khluen set down the locket and maintained his mobility, feeling the shift in the room's energy returning to the comfort that he'd always known.

The next morning, he looked into the locket to observe the stone and noticed several cracks that were not previously there, showing that the service it

provided last night wasn't without cost. Now Khluen began to fear that the figure could return again and again, until the stone was rendered useless.

For this reason, he sat and meditated for several days while holding the locket. He had never been instructed on proper technique or methods of meditation but just followed his gut and let his mind memorize each of the sensations that coursed through his body while holding the stone. Then he began to let go of the locket and tried to maintain the sensations with nothing in his hand at all. Each time, the period that the energy remained tangible extended longer and longer. It was at this level of familiarity that he decided he would try his first enchantment, repeating the same methods but holding a new object in his hand of something that held great importance to him.

First, a trading card from a game that was based off a fantasy tv-show, then a cloth patch with his favorite band's logo printed on and finally, several action figures that his dad had gifted him each birthday since he was seven. Now in his meditative state, it was as if the entire room was now in a bubble of the energy that was once stored in his locket. Even though the life of his great-great-grandfather had mostly faded away from living memory, his presence could not have been more alive at this moment, as if his breaths were still being drawn on this plane.

This was the only time before that Khluen had felt the presence of an otherworldly figure invade his life. Since then, he was inspired to continue his efforts of researching and developing his own enchantments, exploring the world during school vacations thanks to his well-off financially family and

coming into contact with people who claimed to feel similar to how he felt. He had gone to rural villages and practiced medicine with witch doctors; he traveled to third world nations where spiritual guides unbothered by modern technology recognized him for his natural talents; he had come face to face with scamming psychics who peddled bogus, for-profit trinkets onto the vulnerable clients that were only searching for help. The good and the bad, he had developed his own style of psychic ability and for this, he was a fitting candidate for club president, even though it was his by default of founding the club and being its only member in the first year.

But with today's club being the largest iteration so far, each member still recognized Khluen as the studious and fearless president that the club deserved for the work that he had already put in thus far. It was his time to prove his worth by guiding the club through this most turbulent time and into a renaissance movement that would change the world's own perception of reality.

The only problem now was the club is officially dead. At least as far as the university was concerned. The club's operations would have to go back to where all paranormal investigations historically took place - some guy's basement.

Chapter 7 - "A Step and an Ear Ahead"

In the communication wing of the school, So had just finished the prepwork for his next article that would be released in the university newspaper, an analysis of a survey regarding student opinions on an upcoming election. This year's election was particularly exciting as the school was getting a massive budget increase thanks to some new donors. Normally the paranormal studies club would apply for sponsored trips to places they'd like to investigate on the off chance an eccentric candidate won but this year's race came down to the president of the Dance Crew club and the top student of the Architecture program. Neither particularly invested in what the club did.

Despite still carrying the honorary title of 'newspaper', it was essentially a short magazine, filled with halves of articles and their scannable code to read the rest online. It was said to be done for environmental reasons and saving paper along with pushing technological innovation but why the budget committee surely realized half a paper is cheaper than the whole thing. Most of the writers still had an old love for putting pen to paper and reading things the old-fashioned way but this is the path that the school had chosen for them.

So packed his belongings into his backpack and set off for lunch in the dining hall a few buildings over. On Wednesdays, he had to eat alone as time was limited and the other members of the club were still in class. He had other friends but none that he was as free to be himself around. None of the paranormal studies club were deliberately anti-social but there's only so many

people who are willing to listen to supposed stories of farmhouse alien visitors or hairy handed cryptids when there's career decisions, burgeoning flings and final exams to discuss. So was capable of juggling all these thoughts in his head, fitting enough for a multi-sport student athlete.

As he strolled across the grassy squares that separated blocks of cement in the urban-park designed common area, So spotted Druvy across the courtyard. Before the events in the gym, Druvy most often seen with his eyes nearly attached to the screen of his phone, with massive noise canceling earphones that went over his years to block out the sound of organic life on the outside of his attention span. He would burst out laughing with nobody in on the joke besides the friends online that would be forwarded the content - but this time he was without his headphones and his eyes facing forward; the expression on his face could not be more blank. So knew there was now a mandate against any interaction, quickly turning his head and rerouting his path to the hall.

He took one more quick peak to ensure that his presence was still unknown but Druvy's eyes had widened and he was already standing up and walking straight towards him. So thought to himself, *why does he have to come now?* They'd only met one time before, when he was only somewhat conscious and So thought surely he had been made aware of the threat that his father sent to the group through the dean.

So turned and weaved through the students that were making their commute to various places on campus, trying to peek and see where Druvy was

in his pursuit. All he had to do was lose him in all the foot traffic but his pursuer was resolute in speaking with him. Pushing through the crowd and nearly jogging after him.

“So! Hey, wait just a moment!” Druvy shouted from far away, just loud enough to be heard by So and startling all those around him.

He still pretended not to hear as he turned into the business department building and started walking up the stairs. There were four floors that had large rectangular hallways, with no particular place to hide but in the classrooms themselves. So saw that no one was walking in a particular hallway that he peered into as he dashed quickly up the stairs; he turned and entered the third floor hallway and began to lightly jog to increase the distance between the two.

Once feeling comfortable with the separation, he turned into an empty classroom and locked into his foresight ability, peering down into the hallway near the stairs and seeing what the future might hold for the persistent chaser. So’s ability had the unfortunate limit of only peering five seconds at most into the future but that might be enough for him to predict the next move. Out of all the buildings, however, this was one that he was most unfamiliar with so he’d have to play things very carefully. After about twenty seconds of gazing, So saw that Druvy would be turning down this hallway, still hot on the trail but now walking at a much slower pace.

So realized that if he walked out of the classroom now, there wasn’t anyone around to shield him from sight. Druvy would surely shout out once

more and there would be no reasonable way for him to deny hearing him. So didn’t mind if he had to hurt the guy’s feelings to save his own academic future by ignoring him but the strings that he held due his father’s influence made any interaction unpredictable. So searched around the room and jostled the handles on each of the cabinets as well as the closet before finally finding an empty cabinet that only housed coat hangers. He hopped in and had no other option but to look into the potential futures and see if he would be found out.

The relentless Druvy peered into every classroom that he walked by before finally walking into the classroom just across the hallway, where he sat down and tossed his bag on the table. He was in pursuit of So but it appeared that his upcoming class was conveniently close to the object of his hunt, temporarily giving up for the sake of attending an upcoming lecture. So began to creak open the cabinet from the other room, begging in his thoughts to the inanimate object that they would not squeak and give his presence away. Just as he had tip-toed out of the cabinet, So heard the loud clacking that accompanied leather dress shoes with powerful heels. The footsteps smacked the floor with a powerful strike each time, worn by someone who was walking with intensity that only could be birthed from anger. They neared closer to the very classroom that So was in as he tried to hurriedly but quietly get back into the cabinet.

“Druvy. What are you doing still looking after that student?” It was one of the associate administrators of the university, Dr. Thomas Piller. “We

have already notified them of the university distance order. Why are you trying to break it yourself?”

Druvy crossed his arms and looked down, agitated with the surveillance that was taken with his best interest but not his permission. “I just wanted to ask him some questions.”

“Your father has already opened and shut the investigation and the punishment has been delivered. There’s nothing we can do now but we need your cooperation.”

“I’m not so sure I believe exactly what happened though.”

“But you were the one *with* the story! We listened to what you say you saw and acted accordingly. Were you telling the truth?”

“I...’m pretty sure. Almost a hundred percent but I’m still not sure what exactly happened.”

“They left you on the floor during what I believe is either a freak medical episode or a horrific prank. They’re negligent at best or criminal at worst but our solution keeps things civil. You know how your father is so unless you want chaos to break out on your behalf, think carefully about what’s most important Druvy. Now if you feel bad about their punishment, just know that meeting them will be much worse. For them and not you.”

“...” Druvy was a career loiterer, distractor and lacked any relevant thoughts on most pressing issues in the world, choosing his circle of friends based on sense of humor and media interests over everything. He didn’t need to care so much about the burdens of life because of the extreme wealth that keeps

him washed and clean of stress or pressure from outside forces but not enough money in the world kept him safe from the monster that took residence in his very soul. Even now removed, there was a great fear inside him of what was next to come and who would be there to protect him. He only had faith in Arath at this point as he reflected on the fact that only he had the creature captured and bound. Druvy held deep regret inside that it was his subconscious impulses that brought him to the basement to free the beast. Only Alaria saw the aftermath and she had informed his father, but what could his father do about this? Druvy had never seen a superstitious side of the man in all of his life but the recent years of cold distance seemed to shrink as his father finally showed concern after hearing of the new threat. His father had the means to further dive into the matter so all Druvy could do was wait. How he wished to speak to the paranormal club to see if the events were related, only retaining semi-consciousness in the gym until he hit the floor, knowing nothing of the heroic efforts of Arath. He was finally connecting to the real world as a matter of both curiosity and survival, the same forces that drove humanity out of caves and into the wild beyond.

“Do we have an understanding, Druvy?” The administrator asked.

“Absolutely.” Druvy said without conviction.

Chapter 8 - "Champion of Some"

Arath had finished studying early as usual due to the schedule that he made for himself that placed all four classes back-to-back in the morning. Though he was a man of midnight goofing off, it was better to wake up and take care of business so the other hours were left to be enjoyed his way. Buttons were being pressed and the arcade stick jostled in a controlled motion to input a special move that extended a combo, executed by his main character while playing *Chain of Command*, his favorite fighting game series. There was dedicated time to this machine cabinet that Arath spent every day, playing anyone that dared challenge him but often playing alone, perfecting his strategies and execution. His grades were high and he enjoyed studying in general but competition was the driving force in his life, but only in areas where he was passionate about such as gaming and music.

Thien would often blow off the stress that comes with being a medical student by also coming to the arcade but spending her time belting out nostalgic songs from her teenage years in a room with no one but herself. Though she was hardly an adult, just a few years removed from being a teenager, the songs she sang were reminiscent of the times before the stress and anxiety of adulthood, what felt like ancient, pre-historic times at this point. She often saw Arath in here but they had no personal connection until now. Today, she wasn't at the arcade to sing but instead to talk with the previous subject of the club's investigation.

"Hey Arath, how are you?" Thien said standing next to him as he clacked on the game's controls.

"Good, can you wait a moment?" Arath said hurriedly, his mind focused on the game instead. Thien leaned down to the coin slot and put in a token so that she could play against him.

"Oh, you play? Cool." Arath's attention was so easily bought this way. His match with the computer opponent interrupted to allow player two to join.

"Yeah, me and my sister grew up playing the second game in the series."

"Hell yeah, Chain of Command: Barbed is a classic. I mained Yurlanda and secondaried Beux Hurnel. What about you? He said while being unusually chatty.

"You play the bikini diva and the giant slob? Interesting combo. I just play Tieralessa. Something about characters with whips intrigues me." Thien replied, happy to go back in time in her mind to a childhood hobby for a moment.

"Man, her commands are really hard. Let's see 'em."

"Round 1: Break the chains!" The announcer shouted as the electronically styled thrash music began to blast through the arcade cabinet speakers, their hands responding instinctively to the strategies that were programmed into their muscle memory. Arath's hands moved much quicker as he had never stopped playing the game the way that Thien did but she held her

own as someone who had previously played for countless hours. Arath was using Yurlanda this time, a bikini-clad masked wrestler who wore revealing clothes but fought with deadly intentions, using punishing grappling moves that were easy to execute but had devastating damage and cinematic presentation. Yurlanda grabbed Tierlessa, piloted by Thien, and jumped in the air and back down into the ground like a striking meteor. Fire erupted upon impact and Yurlanda jumped back to a neutral position, as did Tierlessa, defying all real-life laws of physics where she would all but assuredly be a pile of barbequed, shattered bones.

“Nice! I forgot how much damage she does.” Thien said.

“Yeah, but she’s pretty slow so you can exploit that.” Arath replied.

Thien used Tierlessa’s whip to keep Yurlanda at bay, eventually inputting a hard command of down-back, down-forward-down-back, forward, A+B and grabbing the opponent by the ankles and slinging her side to side, smashing into the ground each time.

Arath made a huffing noise as if the damage was done to his own physical body and he had to exhale the damage out. They were going fairly even, to Arath’s dismay, before he finally hit a key combo starting move that led into one of his favorite sequences that ended in a powerful super-move that required most of his character’s built up special bar. Yurlanda jumped on Tierlessa’s shoulder, wrapping her legs around the character’s head and bent backwards with tremendous force that propelled Tierlessa into the ground headfirst where she was now bound to the dirt. Yurlanda jumped once more

high into the air and gave a pose to the camera before diving headfirst down to the ground where she collided head-to-butt with the armored fighter, who was then sent into an early grave, 3 meters into the planet’s crust. The camera panned onto a cheering Yurlanda as she struck one more pose, exclaiming “Hope you like worms! I’m more of a noodle girl myself.”

“Sounds like a nice lady.” Thien joked. “Hey Arath, I came to talk to you about something.

“Fine, but that was only round 1. There’s still two more to go.” He replied confidently.

“It’s best of five. Don’t think I’ll go that easily.” She said playfully.

They played two more rounds as Arath’s experience proved to be too much, adapting to all of Thien’s strategies with more accuracy and precision each time. Once they finished, Arath nearly put in another coin before Thien kindly protested. “Please, just a moment and then we can play more.” They stepped away from the cab and sat at one of the tables in front of the concession stand.

“Firstly, I want to say again how grateful we are that you saved us and our friend. She’s still not awake yet but the last I checked, her energy is nearly at where she was before the incident.” Thien began to say. “Any idea why she’s still not out? She’s definitely not dying at least.”

“Well me and my uncle have a working theory but it’s hardly science based. The web can interact with things physically despite their spiritual source and it has special magnetic properties. It seems to draw energy in from the

outside. Not anywhere specifically but the whole, well, everything. The cocoon seems to act like a concentration of life energy itself, which is why the ghosts or whatever seem to be sucked into it and filtered out into something else.”

“Hm, makes sense from at least what you’ve told us and what I’ve seen in Thawee’s recovery. Where did you get that idea from though if you’ve only captured ghosts so far?”

“Well I sit in my basement where I keep the cocoons of other ghosts that I’ve captured. It’s honestly just a gut feeling. I have this sense that I’m sitting in a crowded room unlike when I confront the ghosts where it feels more like there’s a gaping hole sucking everything up.”

“There’s more of them? We thought you just had the one. We have so much more to learn I guess.”

“We? Listen, I’ve been happy to help but I had some pretty unwelcome visitors the other night and I think I’m out. I’ll never finish recording my album with all these distractions.”

“Visitor? Who was it? We got one too the other night. He had an official message from the school. The club has been shut down for something we didn’t necessarily do.”

“Uh oh. Did it have anything to do with Druvy? He was one of the visitors.”

“Yes! Some man came on his behalf. Left us a threatening letter and walked away. So and Khluen tried to talk to him and were attacked. They’re fine but it was definitely a warning beyond the club’s cancellation.”

“Hm, me and Uncle weren’t necessarily attacked but Druvy was alone at first and then a woman came to pick him up and really messed us up for a moment with some weird magic or whatever. We’re supposed to stay away from him ‘or else’ I guess.”

“What does the ‘else’ mean? We were warned about school expulsion.”

“Not sure, she didn’t say but she did see my basement. Told Druvy that his dad would be really happy to know about what she saw.”

“His dad definitely knows more than we do and is blaming us but we were honestly searching for you before all that mess. Sorry.”

“Me? Y’all were trying to take me out first? Figures.”

“We thought the spiders coming out of your pockets were more in charge of you instead of the other way around. This is all a first for us. All of the research and studying has ended up making us more paranoid than informed but that’s what we’re trying to change. Now there’s a real problem and we’d like to team up and solve it.”

“Hm, from attempted kidnapping to friendship, not sure if that’s possible. Plus that means you guys would have to come to my house and it’s really annoying to have visitors. It’s my grandma’s house after all.”

“We’d make it worth your while. Just let us inspect the cocoons and we’ll find another meeting place afterwards. We’ll share our notes and findings with you.”

“Oh the cocoons? All gone. Druvy slashed them open and the ghost that was inside him at the rest and escaped.”

“What?! That same night?! Seems like you could’ve led with that.”

“Well like I said, I don’t really want to be more involved than I already am. I have an album that I’m trying to record. It’s a mix of funk and -”

“There’s a monster eating other monsters that knows where you live, along with some mysterious lady that’s protecting a rich kid from a snobby family that’s threatening anyone he comes into contact with through hired soldiers or whatever?”

“Well she told him to not come to my house again. Problem probably solved?”

“And if not?”

“Okay, fine. One night, one meeting, you guys can come over. But for one reason and that’s because it’s my grandma’s house and if I bring any trouble to her, I’m dead.”

“Is she really strict or something?”

“No, loveliest and kindest woman on the planet. To me. Ask my uncle though and see what she’s like without grandson privilege. Still mostly love but with more deadly sandals.”

“Well let me get your number and we’ll set it up. I’ll even bring my old console with *Chain of Command* over and we’ll get in some games.”

“Nah, I already got them all so we can definitely play. Tell So to bring some pizza over though.”

The two exchanged numbers and Arath returned to the cabinet while Thien left knowing that she finally had befriended the previously most

dangerous and intriguing student on campus. Now cleared of all suspicion, there was a new number one most terrifying person and he was not only a powerless individual, but also famously unmotivated yet Druvy’s familial connections felt like he was an apple on a tree lined with barbed wire and armed with artillery, waiting to defend any fallen fruit with permanent consequences.

Chapter 9 - "Circular Roots: Part 1"

Druvy arrived at his family's mansion after school that evening, already dreading the meeting where he'd be confronted by his informed father of his attempt to interact with a member of the paranormal studies club. Kenneth Darwinson had already responded to the last encounter, leading to a severe punishment and near expulsion from the university for the club members, which would all but assuredly have altered their lives for the worse.

He was driven to his home as usual by one of the two bodyguards that worked for the family. Alaria didn't speak much to Druvy on the ride home, only responding to conversations if he started them. She was generally cold and distant, focused solely on the work at hand of transporting him safely to the home where she would see him during the evening only during her security rounds around the home. She was one of many people in the home that lived as an island, in sight but acting in isolation, coming into orbit for mandatory business purposes.

Even Druvy's father seemed to treat him as a business asset of the family, despite his lack of contribution so far to any causes. When Druvy was younger, his father was an intense catalyst in his life, forcing him to experience everything under the sun that might improve him physically, mentally or spiritually. From sports to extra study classes, to lengthy excursions in foreign lands and long stays under instruction of masters of certain crafts. Wealth gave him the opportunity of an exposed worldview but this overexposure conflicted with Druvy's apathetic attitude to anything that he wasn't interested in,

becoming addicted to watching television instead and then eventually social media and his smartphone. With a world of diverse opportunities, he opted for a plugged in lifestyle where he could craft his own path and personality without the interference of his father.

Kenneth Darwinson had his own intense childhood, where his father had put him on a particularly brutal path where survival despite the obstacles was the goal. Unlike his son, Kenneth saw the challenges as something to overcome that would one day make him a stronger human than his father in every aspect, not living out of spite or hate but for the love of competition, even against his own blood.

He had spent months in a jungle outpost, learning from military commandos on how to make it through a night with limited resources, under attack by swaths of mosquitoes and with the most dangerous animals on the planet lurking amongst the shadowy plantlife. He'd meditated with monks in isolated caves, he'd been mercilessly pounded into a bloody pulp by martial arts masters and taken exam after exam to gauge the absorption of scientific knowledge taught to him by accomplished professors. Whatever money could buy and whatever experience money could bring him, his father wasted no expense as his legacy would be stained if son couldn't measure up to the family name. And so father Darwinson did for his son as well but unsuccessfully so far.

The Darwinson bloodline wasn't rich in royalty or distinguished with nobility but instead was a relatively new rising force in the last century, starting

with Druvy's grandfather, a multi-faceted entrepreneur with a hand in many different baskets such as real estate, oil and general investment. He was a shock to other wealthy persons of the time, increasing his social capital at an astonishing rate that most of the others couldn't quite understand. They hired private investigators and searched every rumor mill to see how someone could grow their wealth so independently from all the others but it was a credit to his cunning business acumen alone. He'd started his family in his late twenties, marrying a woman from a high-status family that dealt with precious minerals and metals, and found a purpose greater than his own success and wanted nothing more than to secure their security and freedom from any outside forces.

It was in this pursuit of transcendent prosperity that he would become polluted by greed and driven to the darker corners of his own mind. Before his push to compete with other filthy rich individuals, his morality was unremarkable, no saint but no terrific sinner either. It became obvious to him how easily the financially well off could manipulate the lives of those without stability and so he exploited his renters with extortion level rent raises; he threatened his debtors into signing contracts with high interest rates that would keep them hooked on his line and at his mercy; he cut deals and brokered backstabbing deals that betrayed all those involved, leaving him the victor in the political games. His reputation withstood the high pressure tests and he kept the trails of his corruption so well hidden, that those who dared to question or

tried to out influence the Darwinson businesses were left famished and remained ignorant.

Where mortal beings were unsuccessful in touching the sacrosanct family, wicked spirits hidden in dimensional rifts were drawn to the family like maggots to a rancid piece of meat. Morally average people are typically visited by tame specters that are more bothersome than the traumatic beasts that feed off of the tainted energy that comes from men with great sin. The more often that grandfather Darwinson dipped his fingers into the wounds of those affected by his growing and great deception, the more drawn into his family life were these soul sucking creatures of another realm.

Their effects on his life manifested in bad health; he'd often become so ill that he was left heavily fatigued and with a much longer than normal recovery. When the best doctors that money could buy couldn't provide the relief that he desperately searched for, he turned to alternative treatments and he even asked for help from people he had considered his business rivals. Several of these prominent, wealthy men in his network of associates had confessed to turning to dark places, where deals could be made with beings wielding strange powers thought unattainable by humans. He'd followed the advice of the others and tracked down the type of person who could help him, a man who regularly carried out grand rituals that briefly bridged the gap between dimensions. This accomplished mystic had found the means to communicate the desires of others to these abnormal beings and a bounty would be decided to satisfy the deal.

On the first occasion that the elder Darwinson made contact, the mystic from an eastern nation, residing in a remote mountain village had prepared the ceremony by drawing intricate markings on a wide, brick floor, throwing an assortment of herbs and animal remains on top of it all. The man said several phrases with an unnatural rhythm and made peculiar motions with hands and body that would sync with the spiritual wave frequencies of this dimension and of theirs. Once the energies were aligned, a being slowly phased into the physical reality that they knew.

It had white bumpy skin that stretched over its entire bulking body, its size much larger than a typical human but with the same amount of limbs. There were black slits on its face that nearly resembled eyes, a large bony protrusion above them that resembled a long gone neanderthal's eyebrow ridge. Its mouth was agape, showing enormous rounded teeth all throughout a widelipped grin, the expression undecipherable by the amazed eventual grandfather, now middle-aged man unprepared for the incoming changes to his family's life.

Its mouth opened further and communicated with sound unlike any natural sound made by humans, primates, cats, birds or otherwise. The accompanying mystic was able to point to the ailing man beside him and motion with his hands some type of command. The albino abomination nodded its head and stroked its chin with long talon-like fingers, then speaking once more.

"It requires quite a bit of energy before it will honor your request."

The man said to grandfather Darwinson. Then the strange beast tossed a nearly spherical rock with an obsidian blackness that had a shimmering effect throughout the surface. The man caught it and handed it over to grandfather Darwinson, instructing him, "Two human lives and you will be cured of your inhuman affliction."

"What kind of deal is that? What's the good of having my health if I'm thrown in jail? Can't it take an ox or a rhinoceros or something?" He pleaded.

"The deal is the deal. Otherwise your sickness will return again and again until you die from natural causes as your body can no longer hold on." The beast had slowly faded away just as smoothly as he appeared.

"It's gone? How's it going to know if I even complete the condition?"

"The stone carries its will and absorbs the energy of our world. Its ultimate wish is to assimilate so that it may feed at will on lifeforms in this dimension."

"That's a heavy price to pay and with an unfortunate result for the world. What makes us special to them?"

"It's not that we are special, some might say it's quite the opposite. The being you saw before you was a bottom feeder in its dimension, a weakling scrounger searching to grow in strength so it might survive and fare better among the more powerful creatures it competes for against for survival."

"If the gap between us and them is so far then why can't it just invade on its own? It must be strong enough."

“All life vibrates with specific wavelengths. If a being like that were to make the transition here before its wavelength more closely resembled ours then the resulting dissonance would cause widespread destruction and even the creature itself would dissipate in the chaos. If it does cross over, most people would never even know unless it personally attacked them. Instead, a giant ripple would move through our world and potentially onwards, however far it needs to go to reach a harmonious balance. Those in tune with their spiritual energy and elevated vibrations will feel the shift but would be unable to interfere.”

“And all it needs is two more humans...”

“Not exactly. Throughout history, it’s extraordinarily rare for one to crossover as the price they must pay is quite high. I assume they only make these trades because the tradeoff is a stable enough transition of energy that it can consume an optimal amount. I also don’t believe death exists in their world the same way it does in ours, making them very patient.”

“And when it does come to this world, there will be a massacre.”

“Yes, most likely in another’s lifetime.”

“So why would you help them bring about an apocalypse?”

“There is nothing I pursue with greater purpose than the evolution of the human race. Interacting with these higher energy beings brings us closer to our real potential.”

“Without the direct consent of those that will be consumed.”

“There are far more humans doing worse things to their own people. Consider why you’re asking me for help.”

“You’re in no place to judge a man like myself. Anyone in my position would act accordingly for the sake of survival. I keep my family fed and safe from the very people that would rip us to pieces like cannibals.”

“We both serve a purpose that we feel justified in doing. You benefit my cause as I benefit yours. We shall see in the long run who has a greater sin.”

Grandfather Darwinson gazed down at the physical remainder of the otherworldly encounter, balancing the value of his life’s longevity against the lives of people who would be devoured by a horror surpassing their imagination. A few months later, a terrible fire would engulf two of Edward Darwinson’s employees in a reported workplace incident. One of the employees was determined to be at fault, leaving a lit cigarette near some gas canisters by the only exit of the room. His wife was not even aware that he smoked at all, never seeing him do so in all their years together. It appeared he began the habit just in time for Edward Darwinson to be cured.

Chapter 10 - "Circular Roots: Part 2"

Towards the end of his childhood, as he was beginning his teenage years, Kenneth had often been bothered by night terrors and suffered bouts of sleep paralysis. He blamed his stressful upbringing, with his father's brutal schedule keeping him in survival mode at all times. He was away from his family for months at a time, under the supervision of a diverse cast of specialized instructors that would guide him through formative experiences. His father was grooming a successor that would take the proud family name and push it even further than he could. In his childhood years, Kenneth feared the day would come sooner than he was prepared for due to his father's battle while chronically ill but in recent years, Edward was revitalized and appeared to become more refined with age.

Kenneth finally asked his father about his trouble sleeping and a visit to a specialist was scheduled. There, he underwent a series of tests and sleep studies that ultimately resulted inconclusively. There were abnormal neurological patterns during his sleep cycles, indicating more intense REM cycles than what they typically see but this was not a particular concern from a medical perspective. Edward's studying of the metaphysical had continued after his brush with the white phantom so many years ago and although he was tempted to ask for assistance once again for the sake of his son, he preferred to give the decision to his son when he was mature enough to decide. This was not out of affection for his son but instead arose from a fear of spoiling the product that he had carefully but rigorously taken care of all these years.

Edward was unaware, however, that these nighttime challenges were already one foot forward into his son's journey of acclimating with unnatural, parallel worlds. While Edward was guided hand in hand by a trained professional, his son was exposed by the proximity of his father's actions, accumulating strange wave patterns that were engrained in his spiritual signature. Kenneth too was unaware of how involved he truly was, with most disturbances logically considered to be part of a dream sequence. It was only when these visions became too tangible to deny that he began to wonder what exactly was becoming of his life.

On one of the occasions, he had awoken with his body paralyzed and only his eyes able to move. From each pore on his body, a gray liquid began to seep out, forming small streams that collected near his feet. The puddle began to take shape and began to form a lump tower, legs-like limbs protruding first as stumps and then walking with a stride; it collapsed in a splash, reforming the shape again and again. It walked over to the edge of the room and twitched wildly as its form finally began to lock into a humanoid configuration. It turned to Kenneth and stared at him with glazed over makeshift eyes that had trouble maintaining their position on the face. Slowly, it began walking towards him but he was unable to react other than stare. It placed its now shimmering silvery hand on his chest and the frame of its body disintegrated into streams of liquid once again, pouring straight into the very pores that birthed it moments ago, until nothing was left. Immediately after it was gone, Kenneth was able to stand as he shot up from his bed, jumped to the side and

ran his hands over his skin. Nothing remained of the visitor yet it still remained inside.

Kenneth was still too young to grapple with the conflict inside of him but he feared the response that might come from his father if he was aware. His father had put him through so much when everything was perfect; he could only imagine what he might be put through in search of a solution for something as bizarre as his private battle. But even on his own, there was a powerful confidence instilled inside of Kenneth from all the preparations he had already gone through over the years. He recalled the time he spent in the wilderness or amongst monks or under the instruction of academics, focusing one's thoughts in meditation was a common thread between all the disciplines. So he sat in his room before bed and focused his mind, knowing there was a lurking presence somewhere inside that was capable of rendering him immobile. The fear had to be confronted head on and he searched his body, thinking about his arm and flexing the muscles one by one in a controlled manner, waiting for an irregular response. Kenneth did this for months, only occasionally having brief bouts with night terrors and sleep paralysis, still awaiting the return of the liquefied ghoul.

While completing his nightly routine one evening, he entered into a more deep state of meditation than he had previously achieved. It was as if he had slipped into a new plane submerged somewhere inside his mind. He looked outwards with a new pair of eyes. Every inch of the room had a fuzzy texture and the colors shined with saturated tones. Kenneth looked down to his

stomach to get a glimpse of what he himself looked like with this new type of vision but where his skin should be was a shining light that radiated like a star in the sky. He brought his hand to feel the light, touching nothing solid at all.

Kenneth continued to try to grab some part of his ethereal body but was unable to find corporeal flesh. Upon further inspection, while pulling his hand away, there was a black slime that stuck to his hand. The blackness of the ooze was so dark that it felt like he would be sucked into it if he gazed at it for too long. He reached in again and again, scooping more of this ooze and flinging it off on the floor in front of him. Just like the liquid being had done before on that most terrifying night, the slime began to coagulate into a humanoid shape, forming a torso, then limbs and finally a head. It appeared to be the same creature from before but a different color in this plane of existence.

Kenneth was able to stand in his illuminated form and confronted the spectre; it stood at least a meter above the boy, absorbing the light of the room with its befouled body. It moved closer and leaned down to be face to face but Kenneth slammed his forehead into the creature's, pushing back against the procession. It moved to grab both of his arms and again he rebelled, placing his hands on the beings chest and pushing with all of his might. His hands moved right through the body and the liquid solidified, binding Kenneth's arm inside. The creature then vomited a fluid that was the same color as its body on top of the boy's head. Still he fought back.

Kenneth tried with all of his might to lift up the swampy beast, moving it a few inches above the ground and then turning his shoulder to drive

it back down to the surface with a powerful slam. It splattered into a large puddle, finally freeing Kenneth's arms in the process and revealing a pulsating piece of meat, the only solid piece that remained. He leaned down to pick it up and once in his hand, the fleshy object began to burn from the light that surrounded it. The puddle on the floor began to boil and turn to vapor that returned to Kenneth's body, such as the liquid did once before. The vapor covered his body until the light was no longer visible and he opened his eyes. Despite the feeling of having his eyes open the whole time during the confrontation, now he saw the room as it had always appeared to him. He covered his real eyes with hands and then his body, to confirm his humanity once again.

At first, he was unable to feel any different and questioned whether this vision was just a hallucination but the next time he meditated his way into that same trance, he began to cast the slime voluntarily from his body, it no longer moved independently. Using his mind, he could manipulate into a humanoid form once more and then instruct it on where to move about the room. With enough practice, he was able to freely move into this state of mind rather quickly and could improve his piloting of this strange vessel.

He attempted to create the vessel while conscious and in his physical flesh and bones but was unable to produce the same results, relying purely on the meditative method to conjure this extension of his body. He learned that he could even make the figure walk outside of the room and was able to see through its eyes so that he could navigate the rest of the house. The final test

was to see what it appeared to be to other people, if they could see it all without being in Kenneth's special trance. He walked the shadowy vessel into the hallways and down into the kitchen where his father's private cooking staff would be prepping food for the next day. He peeked around corners but no one seemed to feel that they were being watched. Then he walked through the doors and into the room where four of the staff stood. He reached out and touched the shoulder of the staff member who then stood up and brushed off their shoulder, looking around the room for a perpetrator.

"Is there a draft in here?" The staff member asked.

"Nah, I don't feel anything." Another staff member replied.

"I swear something just touched."

"It's been a long day. Let's hurry up and get the hell out of here. I'm beat."

Kenneth stayed vigilant in his practice over the next couple of years, reading more into concepts of the paranormals by studying reported ghost sightings and possessions as well as looking into religious interpretations of life and after death. This was one area where his father had not prepared him; Edward focused his son's time on real world applications and hadn't yet admitted to any of past experiences. Kenneth was not certain whether or not his father believed in the supernatural but he would find out himself in due time.

In his room, now at age fourteen, he was able to create his apparition in a matter of seconds and this time sent it crawling on the walls and into his father's study where he was seated by the fireplace, drinking from a glass of whiskey to end the evening. Immediately upon entering, his father's head had turned, sensing the disturbance of spiritual energy in the room but returned to reading a book, brushing off whatever had come into his personal space. Kenneth's puppet inched closer and then dropped onto the floor, his father once again taking his eyes off of his book briefly. The puppet then walked right behind his father with Kenneth prepared to dissolve it the instant that he was found out but he was desperate to test his father's perception. He placed the puppet's hand on his father's shoulder, which then was immediately grabbed and thrown off. Edward Darwinson stood up from the chair and looked right into the face of the puppet.

"Get out, right now." Edward said sternly.

The puppet remained standing.

"I said get the hell out." He began to shout, turning his head from side to side to look for the puppet's exact location. He was able to sense its presence but was not able to see its shape. Kenneth began circling his father with the puppet, still Edward couldn't pinpoint where exactly it was. He began to swing his fist in the air like he was swatting at mosquitos, hitting the puppet once in his mad and wild tantrum but unable to detain the strange entity stalking him.

"Get out of my house! I'm done with all of you! Leave my family alone!"

Kenneth retreated for a moment, grappling with the thought of his father including him in his concerns while shouting at an unknown threat. It wasn't often that he felt the care of his father, only following his orders like he was the family soldier. He was so much closer with his mother, getting all his parental affection and support from her. When he looked at his father, appearing helpless for the first time since his terrible sickness so long ago, he felt ashamed for what he had done. Yet as easily as he began to empathize with the man who was helpless to defeat the interfering phantom, he couldn't forget all the challenges he was forced to go through for the sake of his father. This was the one way that he could push his father back and get some satisfaction that he was not the only one being torn apart and rebuilt. He held out his hand, just as the silvery monster had done to him as a child and began to spread out the puppet's liquid limbs into tiny wire-shaped streams that surrounded his father before phasing inside his body the same that had been done to him two years before. Kenneth let the puppet fully enter his father's physical body, which then allowed him to sense another human's spiritual wavelengths for the first time.

The vibrations of the puppet assimilated within his father's, feeling so familiar as if they were his own. Yet there was a deeper presence still further into the spiritual network that felt odd to Kenneth. He focused all of his concentration on this alien energy and attempted to let it assimilate back into the puppets spiritual network so he could attempt to identify the source. From the moment that they intermingled, Kenneth began to feel afraid with the

overwhelmingly negative force that he had seemed to tap into. The puppet's body began to tense up and slowly disintegrated the longer that he concentrated on absorbing the wavelengths, finally deciding to end this experiment without seeing it to the end result.

Kenneth was conflicted about his father's spiritual prowess as he showed awareness but remained helpless when face to face with his own son's solidified spiritual energy in the puppet. Yet deep inside, a foreign seed with a sinister presence was sown into his very soul. This untapped source of energy would be his prey, becoming another step in Kenneth's evolution.

Chapter 11 - "Aquarium"

"My son, please sit down." Druvy walked into his father's office inside of their extensive mansion, trying to get a read on how much trouble he could potentially find himself in. "Stop shaking, I'm not angry." His father said with an uncharacteristic smirk, clearly in a good mood and strangely showing it.

Druvy sat down on a large chair with a firm leather seat and a carefully detailed wood frame. His father sitting across from him, hands clasped and resting on his large black desk, with papers, books and writing materials littered about, the smell of freshly roasted coffee filled the room. His father was dressed professionally well despite being alone in his office, without any of his company staff working nearby, other than personal housekeepers, security and chefs. He wore a designer polo shirt with long striped black slacks and dark-burgundy colored dress shoes from a foreign brand. His hair was slicked back, held together by some organic product that bound his long hair enough for it to stick together and shine all the way down to the bottom of his neck. His graying beard was long but trimmed; he had a tendency of stroking it with his hand during breaks of conversation.

Kenneth Darwinson had a carefully crafted image but it was not a false one. He exuded masculinity by letting nature dictate his style as much as it could but indulged himself in fine clothing and jewelry, establishing his status among other wealthy people in his network. It was quite the counter to Druvy's lazy university student chic, messy hair resembling the head of a broccoli stock; an oversized shirt with at least a few unrecognizable stains;

baggy jeans with unintentional holes; gray sneakers, once white and with all the grip on the bottom. Druvy had multiple closets in his home, filled to capacity with clothes that could pay off some people's entire debts, yet he chose his style, allowing him to fit in the best he could despite his classmate's awareness of his familial ties.

Druvy was seldom the object of his father's attention, it hadn't been so for many years now. In the same way that Kenneth's father had put him through a grueling childhood, intent on crafting a worthy heir, so did he for his own son with lackluster results. Druvy's failure to launch with a favorable trajectory sent his father into a depressive spiral, spending many nights pounding his thoughts together to search for a reason why his son didn't have the drive that he himself seemed to be born with. Kenneth's sense of self-purpose arose not from hatred of his father, but from the desire to eclipse his father's expectations and take over the business with a commanding grasp. Kenneth tried to instill the competitive spirit in Druvy but this was the age of shorter attention spans and separation from survival instincts; finding the spark among younger people required excavation.

Kenneth pressed a button on his desk and a member of the kitchen staff walked into the room and placed a beverage before Druvy; his favorite apple flavored soda, poured into a glass with several cubes of ice. He took a sip as his father began to speak.

"I thought we had already taken care of those bothersome students for you, my son." Kenneth said. Druvy still remained silent, struggling to make eye

contact with his father. “If you don’t look out for yourself, then I have to step in. Do you want me to baby you, time and time again?”

“No, that’s why I tried to talk to So. I wanted to figure things out for myself.” Druvy broke his silence.

“From what you have told us, they’ve already shown their true colors. Remember, you are a Darwinson and the target is on your back, from competitors to jealous punks at school. These kids are not your peers. You are supposed to be a cut above them.”

“That’s not true, father, I’m not you. I’m just a normal person.”

“And what makes me different? I have given you everything that was given to me and more.”

“Well I got the wrong mix of genes or something. I don’t have the same brain, just look at my grades.”

“There are a thousand different reasons for your disappointing scores but your bloodline is not the reason why. Your grandfather built a foundation and I have grown for it and taken us to new levels. We evolve each generation. That means you are meant for something much greater than even I.”

“I don’t want to follow in your footsteps. You’re going to have to have another kid if you want to try and get what you want.”

Kenneth relaxed back into his chair and sighed. Druvy expected a fiery reaction from the rejection of his father’s will but Kenneth still remained at ease.

“As much as I have tried to keep you on a track that benefits the both of us, it appears someone else has done the work for me.” Kenneth leaned forward with his arms on the desk. “These students from this club finally awakened something inside you. You haven’t told me everything have you?” Druvy sat once again in silence. “Try and deny it all you want but thanks to Alaria, I have a better picture of what has been going with you. I thought you might have a little bit more of the situation figured out but again, nothing.”

“You see, I once held a great secret from my father and without his knowledge, I began a different path than what was intended but let me be honest my son, I don’t think you have the tools to handle the secrets you’re keeping. Despite my best efforts to raise a well disciplined young man, you have drifted into this – phase. Lazy, ignorant, unwilling to take a challenge. But now you have an opportunity. Tell me, my son, what did it feel like to have a monster birthed out of your very soul?”

Druvy could only sit and ponder the meaning of his father’s statements. There were unexplainable forces interfering with his life but the worst of it all was the fact that he was either unconscious or in a hypnotic trance during most of the action. Seeing Arath’s basement was the only time he came face to face with what could be considered a monster but his father knew more than he did.

“Don’t think too hard, son, your brain will turn to mush. I think those kids in the club are more gifted than you know. It appears that they’ve found the seed inside of you,” he looked into Druvy’s eyes with his face

morphing back into the sternness he was accustomed to, “one of the many that I have planted, over and over again, time and time again.”

“You did – what?”

“That monster appears to be a miracle that evaded its impending abortion. The only one out of many to finally survive in that wasteland mind of yours. I would thank those lucky fools for doing what I could not but they know more than they should now. In the end, it shouldn’t matter, but for now we must move with caution, which is why you won’t be seeing those kids ever again.”

“Father, what’s going on?” Druvy’s eyes began to swell with tears; he couldn’t handle the thought of his own body being used for producing diabolical beasts of unknown origin. “I have a right to know...,” he said through his quivering lip.

“Ah, you’re still so weak, as expected, but don’t worry, this is a happy day. I wished for you to discover this new frontier in your own way, the way I did, but you have often been unproductive so I had to gamble. Since your sixteenth birthday, I have used new scientific methods and the assistance of spiritual practitioners to develop spectral embryos attached to your spiritual energy. You may think of it like a connection between our world and theirs, with your body being the bridge. It would never work without input from both directions so the creature would slowly try to crossover and begin to assimilate in our world but that’s where you failed them. Because of your lack of spiritual awareness, they writhe and starve until they slowly dissipate into

nothingness. Emotions, desires, dreams, these are the fires that supply the furnace inside of our soul. I tried again and again to find the right being that could match your wavelengths and spark the hidden senses, the way I did it many years younger than you, but each one shriveled into sparkling dust somewhere in the void. Those intrusive students somehow saved the only creature that miraculously was still resonating inside of you. Now it grows, feeding on other transdimensional beings, walking about the town and becoming one with our reality as it consumes ghosts of our dimension. We have one more task at hand my son, for if we waste this opportunity then I will never regain my gift – the very thing that separates me from all these other boring humans.”

Druvy’s mouth had fallen more agape by the second but he couldn’t conjure up any words that could move past the shock he felt at his father’s betrayal.

“I need you my son, but most of all I need that monster back inside of you so that it can grow to its full potential. It still resonates with your wavelengths, you can merge again. Then, due to our genetic bond, I will finally have a chance to undo these bindings that keep me from rising to my own potential.” Kenneth lifted up his shirt to reveal hideous scars that covered nearly all of his torsos. Several groupings of stones were lodged into his skin, with scar tissue surrounding each of them in a meaty layer.

“I – don’t want this. I don’t want any of this...” Druvy attempted to stand but his legs shook too hard for him to stand still. He wavered under the

weight of his own body and finally collapsed forward, his head colliding with the desk before he reached the ground.

“My son, it felt good to finally tell someone about all of my suffering. If only your mother was still here, well she wouldn’t want to know anyways. Sad that your drink will wash away most of what you were told anyways but it’s the only way that you won’t go throwing a fit.” Kenneth picked up his son and threw him over his shoulder, walked over to the side of the room and reached into his bookcase. He tilted a few books on a particular shelf and a panel of the wall shifted to the side to reveal the doors of an elevator. The father and son rode the elevator for nearly thirty seconds to the bottom, where the doors opened to a massive hallway with large metallic paneling covering each side. Kenneth Darwinson walked to a large door at the end of the hallway and input a code on a keypad; the doors separating to reveal a large laboratory with several scientists awaiting for his arrival by their stations. In the middle of the room was a large water tank, the size of an aquarium. It had several wires, tubes and harnesses inside, with a lustrous, full-faced helmet attached to the center tube.

“Let’s get him settled, Dr. Shovany.” Kenneth relinquished his son to the arms of the woman in charge.

“Absolutely. We have finished preparations on our end and will await your return.” The scientist said. Kenneth grabbed his phone from his pocket and keyed in a number. After a single ring, the call was answered.

“Yusuro, have you found it yet?” Kenneth asked.

“Not yet but I’m on its trail.” Yusuro responded, moving his messy black hair out of his face to look at the fading energy radiating from the footsteps of where the Kuokuok monster had been some time before.

“Good. Don’t be long.” The call ended.

Yusuro put the phone back into his jacket and placed his hands in his pockets where they belonged, both reappearing through a smokey portal thirty meters away to cover a CCTV camera scanning where he was about to walk next.