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MONSTERS

by Frank Montellano

Chapter 1

I've not always slept on a bed. Sometimes I've slept on a canvas cot, or the floor, on the hard ground, or slanted on a roof (don't ask), or a few other, even stranger places. All by choice. But no matter where I laid my head, there have always been monsters nearby.

When I was younger, the monsters were big scary spidery things, like the Brown Recluse and its deadly venom that punctured a deep oozing hole in my leg when I was seven; or snakey things, like the pretty boa that slithered up my stick and almost bit me when I was four; or ghostly things, like the blond Kender's girl that died when I was eight and haunted the swampy dale south of the village where she was drowned by her awful uncle. They made me shiver with dread and hide under my blanket. Some nights I would wet myself.

As I grew older, the monsters of my childhood year sort of faded into the background. Oh they were still there, but they bothered me less and less. I was too busy working the farm, or finding out about girls. On certain nights, when the rain and lightning bolts fell fast and furious my nightmares would come and parade around, a motley monster parade of venom, fangs and death, reminding me of the countless ways to die in my narrow kid world. But I knew them now to be childish fears. This realization made me feel like a grownup. I was bigger than these fears.

At least that's the way it was until I went to war.

Like many of the other boys I was young, brave, bold, newly married and a little fearfully excited of my first war. We didn't realize back then how bad off the war had become, that our generation still in its tender teens was all that was left to raise arms. Grandfather had already followed after dear departed Father into the west. I hurriedly kissed my war bride goodbye and ran

off with the other boys from the village. I went to sleep that night with a hard weapon, a lopsided smile on my face still from my first time with a girl.

All us novice fighters slept together in abandoned tents. We dug through the kits left by the dead, divvying up the small treasures we found of knives, shields and keepsakes. Pecking orders were established quickly and reinforced by our instructors, who were all missing a limb or two but nevertheless mean, battle-hardened and quick. We trained from dawn to dusk on the days we didn't travel toward the frontlines in wooden wagons stained with blood. That's how life was, that is until the dreamkillers drifted through the canvas walls and slaughtered us by the tentful. We kept each other awake, pricking with daggers if we had to. To sleep was to die.

“Another Blasphemy committed by the Enemy!” our chaplain shouted at morning service and we all nodded along, gripping our crosses tight. We had lost half our company that first night. What evil had the Enemy done, to create these unholy things?

I stood in the back, barely able to keep my feet under me. What did the chaplain know, I thought to myself. He had one leg shorter than the other and didn't even shave yet.

Slipping right into our dreams, the dreamkillers would take over and turn normal dreams into killer nightmares. Bodies twitched in cots as hearts and minds burst, and then were still. The most defenseless amongst us were turned into lethal sleepwalkers. I only survived because I woke up as the ethereal creatures attacked. I had to kill my own cousin as he stood over our squad leader. I could sense the presence of the dreamkillers somehow. When they were close I felt a pain, like the ache of a suddenly remembered injury. Something deep inside me could feel when their dream bodies floated near. I could fight them in a fashion too, using my own monsters to attack the

otherwise untouchable. Spider, snake, and even the Kender girl came to my rescue and saved my squad more than a few times during those deadly days. The horrors of my childhood rescued me as a teen.

I was given the war name Dreamer and wore it proud. After the first wave of attacks I was removed from the frontlines and spent the rest of the war pulling guard duty at the officer's quarters. There were few of us with the dreamguard talent. Sleepy and Headcase were the other two who made up our three-man squad. We took turns pulling eight-hour sleep shifts, followed by an eight-hour guard duty over the active dreamer. We were pretty popular until the enemy realized their dreamkillers weren't as effective anymore. The monsters from that time in my life were dark, deadly things that would come swiftly, out of nowhere. But with the help of my own personal nightmares, I survived my tour. The battlegrounds shifted out to sea and we were told to go home for now.

When I arrived back home, I slept in the backyard for a month. This was for the safety of all concerned. I felt comfortable out there in a tent. I couldn't handle all the softness I found in the house. The softness of my bed, my wife, the food. I would twitch, howl, and punch randomly in the night. Didn't trust myself, not even with a knife. My monsters would prowl around my sleeping body, 'protecting' me from anyone who came near, even my own kin. It took a little bit, but my war-sharp edges began to dull. I know it sounds funny, but even the pillows were too much. I couldn't sleep unless I rolled up an old shirt or something thin to lay my head on. By the end of the second month I was able to sleep in the house and make it through most nights. Those monsters were the hardest to ignore and the ones that seemed the most real. They had the faces of family and friends. They were shadows of lost war-mates, imagined wrongs, unfaithfulnesses and other things that a mind dwells on after a long absence. I missed the front lines. I didn't tell my wife that though, couldn't tell her I yearned for the intensity of the war. Her love, the love of my beautiful bride

helped bring me back to a sense of normality, as did the pregnancy. A young, growing belly made the world a brighter, happier place for all, including me. It's hard to see the dark sides of the world when faced with smiles, love and hugs, when the worse things happening are cravings and tiny belly kicks. The monsters from this time eventually too reached the point of fading away, coming back every once in a while as a friendly reminder more than anything. We left the tent standing up in the backyard though, just in case. I pledged to take it down after the baby was born. Bad nights came back fewer and fewer.

On one of those nights; one of those dark, stormy, emotional nights when all of my monsters came back to visit, I awoke and stumbled outside to sleep in the tent. I thought I was the danger. I thought I was protecting my family by exiling myself to a safe distance. That was the night that the dreamkillers revenged themselves upon me and took my family. All gone in one terrible night. That was the night when I acquired the scariest monster of all. Scariest than all the evils of childhood and war. The one monster that makes me cry and howl to this day. The one that makes me howl and yell, "I DON'T KNOW YOU! I DON'T WANT TO KNOW YOU! AND I WANT TO FORGET YOU EVER EXISTED!"

When she bawls, sometimes I wonder how I know what she would have sounded like if she'd been born.

And I do know, because I hear her heart-breaking cries every night from under my bed. The piteous cries, the hungering bawls, the mewlings that tear through the heart of every parent and make them want to do anything they can to stop the crying.

Some days I think she's a dreamkiller.

I don't know what is worse.

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