**Dreams and Nightmares**

Azrael was tired at the end of the day. It was his seventh birthday and it had been a fun day with his friends and his twin brother. He was in his room going through his nightly routine of brushing his teeth and changing into his pajamas. Azrael had burning blood red eyes- standing out like rubies against his pale skin- that surged with childlike curiosity, warmth and excitement. However, there was an odd lack of depth to them, with an occasional glimpse of something hidden beyond. His face had a shade of childish roundness to it, with very faintly rosy cheeks. He had a small, sharp nose and thin lips. Another distinct feature was long, straight and startlingly white hair that fell in a sheet to his waist. Fairly small for his age, Azrael seemed like the epitome of childhood innocence. He looked about as threatening as a baby panda. After going through his routine, he clambered into bed and pulled the covers over his head. He was asleep in minutes.

He was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of laughter. It was a child laughing, probably a girl. It had an odd reverberating ring to it. He looked around his room, but there was no one there. He checked in his closet, under his bed and even outside his window, but he found nothing. His brow furrowed in concentration as he debated whether or not this was worth waking his mother for. He had decided to just try and get back to sleep when he saw a flicker outside his window. When he looked outside again, he saw what appeared to be an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus floating just in front of his window. At this point, most children his age would have started calling for their parents but Azrael simply looked at it for a while before reaching out to touch it. It faded into smoke before he could reach it, and he decided he was having a dream of some description before settling back into bed.

His sleep was no longer peaceful. He had a series of strange and confusing dreams. In one, he was walking along with a crowd of people who seemed to be chanting something. In the next moment, he was alone in a room with the sarcophagus. Shortly after that, he was in a cave with a large, shadowy creature that seemed to have tentacles and bat wings. This was a relief to him because it was finally something familiar. But the moment his lips formed a smile, he woke up. He was very curious at this point because he had an idea of what he was dealing with. He reached under his bed and grabbed an old, leather-bound book. He leafed through the pages until he found what he was looking for. He looked at the name and squinted in concentration as he tried to pronounce it. Nyarlathotep. It was a fairly difficult name, but he sounded it out until he could speak it aloud. He was very excited, but he forced himself to calm down and go back to sleep.

When he woke up again, he waited a while to open his eyes. The presence became noticeable after a few seconds of concentration. It felt very powerful, and unspeakably ancient. He decided it was time to open his eyes. When he opened them, he was unsurprised by what he saw. However, he did have to fight to suppress the manic grin that threatened to grip him. At the foot of his bed was a girl, probably the same age as him. She wore an old white nightgown. Her hair was almost as long as his, except it was inky black. Her skin was bluish grey. It seemed more fitting for a corpse. Of course the most noticeable aspect of her appearance was that she did not have a face. Where it would be, there was simply a blank mask of skin. Azrael did what he felt was the most sensible course of action at that moment: he dove out of his bed and tackled the girl to the ground. Whatever she had expected, it had not been that. After a few seconds of frantic scuffling, she managed to free herself from Azrael’s grip and sit up. However, as she soon noticed, she was still trapped. Somehow, Azrael had managed to tie their hair together in a simple knot. After Azrael sat up, his face broke into a smile. He clapped his hands together and said, “With my white hair and your black hair tied together, we can become invisible! I know because Mickey Mouse said so!”

This was apparently too much for her, because after a brief shimmering of her head, she had a face, with a very clearly bewildered look on it. She stammered for a bit, before she managed to compose herself and take a breath. She finally managed to speak. “Do you know who I am, child?!”

“Of course I do! You’re Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, the Haunter of the Dark, the Outer God whose mere presence drives most people to madness! I’m probably your biggest fan! This is so exciting! Is this a birthday present? You should have come to the party. We could have had a lot more fun then. It doesn’t matter now, I still want your autograph. Can you sign my copy of The Tome of Eldritch Lore?”

With that he reached under his bed and pulled out the old, leather-bound book, along with a pen. He presented them to her with a fierce smile. “Sign it to Azrael, your biggest fan!”

Nyarlathotep simply stared at him in confusion, before standing up and dusting off her gown. She scowled at him and began to turn around. “Very well, then. My presence is unnecessary. Insanity is already upon you. I hope you destroy many lives in the future.” She attempted to melt into the shadows, but she felt a tug on her hair. When she looked back at the knot, her eyes widened. It, along with the rest of Azrael’s hair, was wreathed in white and green flame. Azrael stood up so that they were at eye level with each other. He could not seem to stop smiling as he spoke. “Silly Nyarlathotep, you can’t leave yet! Bob won’t let you!”

She narrowed her eyes and looked intently at the fire and his hair. She was treated to an image of a massive, green humanoid form at the bottom of an ocean. It had a bulbous head with closed eyes and a mass of tentacles covering what was presumably its mouth. She saw the folded outline of what she knew were bat wings, before the image vanished. “Cthulhu?!” she demanded as she pulled at the knot that held her in place, “You have bound the high priest of Yog-Sothoth to yourself!?”

“Not Cthulhu! More like a modified clone of Cthulhu. I found him as an egg. He’s sleeping in the ocean now, but he dreams in my hair. I can do all sorts of useful things with it, like cut through flesh and bone, and make chairs! All I need to do is feed him a little blood every day.”

Nyarlathotep began seething with rage. “Trifling little child! I will show you the meaning of insanity! Behold, my true form!”

The image hit Azrael like a truck. It was indescribable by any sapient language. It had length, breadth, depth and several dozen other things of that nature. It was enough to destroy the mind of anything that looked upon it. Azrael simply stood there with a blank look on his face as blood trickled out his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. Only for a moment though. His face slipped back into a smile, as he began rubbing the blood from his eyes with his knuckles. He seemed at a loss for words for a few moments before he blurted out, “You’re really pretty! I was going to call you Gnarly for short, but you’re too pretty for that!”

Nyarlathotep looked on with blank disbelief. She made small choking noises until she managed to stammer incoherently. When she gathered herself, she blinked rapidly as she looked at him. “Wha- What are you?”

His smile changed. It became sad and thoughtful and made him look much older. “I am more than you bargained for, child.” His pupils became feline slits, and massive black feathered wings burst from his back in a shower of torn cloth. Nyarlathotep could only look on in astonishment as a massive eye as red as Azrael’s own opened on each wing. There was a grinding sound as a massive, spiked ring of bone emerged behind his wings, wreathed in the same fire as his hair. His smile stretched again, this time almost impossibly wide. His teeth had become sharp and jagged, and startlingly white. Then she felt his presence. It extended far outside his body and threatened to engulf her. For the first time in an incomprehensibly long life, she felt fear.

(1516 words)