



Ambra

SPIRITS AND MONSTERS

Maximillian Mansfield

**Spirits and
Monsters**

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Introduction

Good evening, reader. My name is Saramisse Silier, and you hold in your hands (or perhaps on your reading stand) a quite unusual book: My very own *Spirits and Monsters of the Lothen*, volume one. Held within are choice tales from my own collection, gathered from years of travel to locations both urban and remote. Through methods ranging from interviews and interrogations to archaeologies, these choice stories range across the Lothen, stretching from the northern islet of the Inmisit to the southern reaches of Venator. My hope is that by reading, you will not only enjoy the fantastic tales of encounters with the supernatural, but also gain an understanding of what it means to deal with forces beyond humans' ken. I'm sure you aren't here to listen to me ramble, but I do hope you will indulge me a few paragraphs between tales. You may even learn something from it. Let us begin.

Our first story is a tale from the mountainous reaches of Craerith, where spirits and monsters are far from unknown. You would be hard-pressed to find a man or woman from the north who hadn't encountered a spirit of some kind, let alone heard the tales. Take that with the Craeritt love of storytelling, and it's easy to see why this entire book could have been stories from just the mountains. While this is not the *Spirits of Craerith*, the fact remains that a country where spirits roam freely yields some of the most hair-raising and awe-inspiring tales one can find. Stormbirds is but one such tale, told across villages in Craerith to this day.

Stormbirds

It was a terrible night for a storm.

It wasn't as though the small village hadn't weathered a storm before. Their isolated home had seen more than it's fair share of weather-related strife over the years; whether it was blustering winds from the coast, flooding from the nearby mountains, or the morbid chill of Craerith winters, they'd seen it all and more. It was a point of pride for the villagers that they were able to not only survive, but thrive amidst a world that seemed to have something out for them. With all that considered, one might be shocked to find that a simple thunderstorm off the coast had them all locked away, fearing for their lives.

But this storm was different.

It wasn't just the pouring rain, driving away at the walls of their homes and making the paths run with mud to the point of uselessness. It wasn't just the howling wind, whirling through the town at a pace that flung roofs off of ill-prepared homes and seemed willing to spirit a person away at a moment's notice. It wasn't even the lightning, driving streaks of light across the darkened sky as though spirits leapt from cloud to cloud, lighting the air despite the seemingly endless night around them.

No, it was the thunder that brought fear to the hearts of the villagers today. With every clap of lightning came a roar that seemed to beget more lightning. With every roar and clap of sound, the wind whistled harder and the rain drummed harder upon the buildings, as though competing to see who could earn the right to match the deafening thunderclaps. It was the thunder that drove this storm, the clouds pulsing with the beat of every sound and every pulse releasing more sound.

And it was into this fervent storm that one man found himself thrust, as the roof of his home was thrown off. Evidently, he had failed to secure the roofing after the last storm, and today he dearly paid the price for his hubris. Without the roof to protect him and his items, he lived at the mercy of the wind and rain. As if to drive the point home, one of his artisan's tools whipped away from its place on the workbench and whizzed by his face, missing a collision by a scant few centimeters. The point was clear; he had to leave, and fast. Find his way to somebody else's home, and hope to god they hear him banging.

That being said, it was much more easily said than done. Just getting to the door of his own home was a struggle; between the toppling shelves, the driving rain, and that oh-so-damned-distracting thunder, he considered it a miracle that he had made it in the first place. Opening the door was the easiest part of the entire ordeal, at least. It barely even had to be touched before the wind took over, taking it off it's (admittedly somewhat faulty) hinges and tearing it down the street. He knew his home was doomed the moment the roof had gone, but watching it fall apart was still distressing.

There wasn't any time for that now. Time to keep going. He made it several steps out into the storm, the constant lightning lighting his way, before the wind hit him like a truck. It was only a few more steps to the neighboring village, but the whirling and howling around him had other plans. One step, another...and then he was gone, being hurled down the village road by a gust. The constant rain transforming the ground into mud kept him from scrapes and bruises, at least, but the muck wasn't much better. Still, he had no choice in the matter, and he found himself in an inexorable mudslide towards the center of town.

He tried to escape. Oh, he tried. He passed countless houses, most of which would probably have let him inside if only they knew of his plight. But it was no use. The wind, rain, and thunder conspired together in order to drown out any hint of rescue his shouts may have given him, and the mud below kept him from locking himself down in any meaningful way. He was a toy in the wind, like a tree's leaf or his tools. Nowhere to go but where the world told him.

Eventually, finally, the whirlwind carrying him came to an end, and he was unceremoniously dumped into a junction. Here, finally, he was able

to find purchase; this junction was uphill, a high point in the city, and most of the mud was flowing downhill even as the rain created more. He found his footing, but remained crouching. Standing up might let the wind catch him again, after all. He quickly locked eyes onto a single house, determining it as a target. Just before he began making his slow, arduous way over, he spared a glance upwards-

-And froze.

His first instinct was that the storm was making his eyes play tricks on him. But a hand blocking his eyes from the rain, and another to wipe the muck from them, did nothing to stop the vision. Indeed, he was forced to accept what he was seeing as fact. Giant, feathered, gorgeous fact. Far above the village, only barely obscured at the edges by dark thunderclouds, was a bird. A massive corvid whose golden feathers outshone even the lightning that crackled around it, but a bird nonetheless. It rode between the clouds, a gorgeous golden herald among the infinite shadow that was the thunderstorm. At it's head, brilliant blue eyes looked down upon the terrain, regarding the village in the same way a human might regard an anthill.

For a moment, his heart stopped as he felt the raven stare at the village. At him, in particular. All at once, he felt the weight of the entire storm upon him, knocking all the air out of him. He became dimly aware that he had dropped to his knees, unable to do anything but stare at the figure above him. It opened its beak, as if to speak, but-

“KRAK-KAAAA”

The noise that came out of the bird's beak was more thunderclap than caw, an outrageously loud sound that made everything else in the storm seem pale in comparison. The man felt a sharp pain in his ears, and then nothing, the sound of the spirit above having ruptured his eardrums. That was all it could be, a spirit; a being of nature's bounty and wrath, a symbol of everything that humans needed to revere and fear all at once. He didn't have much more time to think about it, however, as his vision went dark.

The next morning, when people emerged to survey the damages, they were surprised to find the man among the wreckage, unconscious in the exact

spot he had passed out in. When he awoke, he immediately began to babble, but it was no use. His hearing was gone, at least for now, and he lacked the ability to convey the majesty of the spirit he had seen. As the villagers moved him to the village medic, he sighed. One day, he swore, he'd find that bird again. And he would grant it the offering it so deserved.



I placed Stormbirds as the first of our tales to show the diversity of our world's spirits. No doubt many of you picked up this booklet expecting tales of monsters and ghosts, and rest assured, there are many and more of those. But to understand, to truly appreciate the world behind the veil of humanity, you need to see the creatures beyond the known. There is so much more to this world than a mortal's eyes could ever see. Even something simple as a rainstorm can have the force of a spirit behind it, and even the faintest knock in the night could be a sign of the world you do not see. I hope, reader, that you take this lesson to heart as we continue our tales.

Onwards. The next tale is a story from a contemporary of mine, a hunter of monsters and protector of villages named Ylva. Admittedly, we have never quite seen eye to eye; she would destroy what I would rather understand, after all. But she does what she does out of necessity, nothing more, and our paths have crossed many a time over the years. I would be remiss not to take her experience into account. Her contribution to the tale comes from the southern swamps of Southern Venator, where she encountered one of the strangest beasts I have yet seen.

Night Hunt

Dusk.

“You sure about this?”

“As sure as ever. You saw the village.”

The pair sat at the edge of the swamp as the setting sun cast long shadows around them. The taller of the two, a young man in clerical robes, had a worried frown on his face. “I saw the village, yes. But that doesn’t mean you need to walk into a swamp in the dead of night.”

The shorter of the pair, a scarred woman with just the first wrinkles of age, shook her head. “You saw the villagers, and you heard them. The monster attacks have been coming from the swamp, after the sun has gone down. The attacks don’t come every night, and we can’t afford to dally here. So, we go after them instead.”

“Yes, but...” The man paused. “Ylva, are you sure? We don’t know what the monsters are capable of, beyond preying on innocent villagers.”

“I’m sure,” the woman, Ylva, replied. “We have a schedule to keep to, Mikla. My brother needs us both to be in Falcon within the week. We both know we can’t let this village alone, or it won’t be here next time we pass through. So we have to get a bit reckless.”

The young man’s frown deepened. “If you’re sure. I trust you, Au- Ylva.”

“You better,” Ylva replied with a crooked smirk. “I’ve been doing this since you were a kid crawling at my brother’s feet.”

“Yes, yes, you say that enough.” Mikla rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a pair of pouches. “Take my salt and iron dust. Should be enough for whatever you find out there. I’ll stay with the villagers, just in case.”

Ylva nodded. “Smart. A priest will keep them calm, and you can tend the wounded while you’re at it.”

Mikla placed his hand on his chest, then on his companion’s shoulder. Ylva could’ve sworn that she had seen a brief glow at the moment he touched her. “Tenebris protect you, Ylva. Stay safe tonight.”

Ylva nodded. “You as well. Keep the village safe, Mikla.”

Ylva turned and vanished into the swamp. Mikla watched the spot behind her for a few moments and mouthed something under his breath before making his way back to the village.

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Nightfall.

The sun had just set above, and Ylva was in position. It had taken a while to find a tree that wouldn’t creak ominously beneath the weight of her and her gear, but now she had a vantage point. Not for the first time, she thanked her lucky stars for the strip of cloth tied around her eyes like a blindfold. A gift from her father, it’d been. Contrary to appearances, not only did it not impede her vision, it actually increased her sight. Despite the weak moonlight being the only source of light in the clearing, the swamp was clearly outlined to her. In her hands rested a crossbow, a light thing that she handled with the ease that years of practice would birth. In other words, she was perfectly poised to strike.

That being said, it was another hour or so before anything stirred in the swamp. It was quiet, at first; vague chanting, almost like her nephew was holding a ceremony back at the village. It was coming from completely the wrong direction for that, however. Ylva’s grip around the crossbow tensed as she reached to the pouch at her side, and pulled out a bolt that barely shone in the moonlight. Pure iron. Good for supernatural creatures, and not as shiny as something like silver. Perfect for an ambush.

The chanting intensified, but as it approached, the tone of it began to change. Or maybe it was just Ylva's perception of the chanting changing. As it approached, it began to sound less and less like a solemn chant, and more and more like a droning chorus of beasts. It reminded her of the sounds whales would make, albeit from a much smaller source. Ylva slipped into firing position, aiming generally towards the source of the noise, even as it got loud enough to start echoing in the swamp.

It was another few minutes before something entered her visual range. Two furred forelimbs attached to a large, blubbery torso that resembled a seal more than anything else. The hind legs were furred, but the paws were webbed, almost like a cat had stolen a duck's feet. And the face...Ylva could barely make out the front, but it seemed like the face had a muzzle, a maw packed to the gills with teeth made for slicing flesh. It certainly seemed like she had found her quarry. As she watched, several of them made their way towards the village from a good ways away.

Ylva's finger tensed around the trigger, and she fired.

The reaction was twofold, and almost instant. First, the bolt soared across the swamp with ease, embedding itself into the neck of the frontrunning monster. It howled, and even from here Ylva could hear the sizzling. Sounds like iron did the trick. The other reaction, however, was much less heartening. Instantly, the other monsters snapped to look directly at Ylva. From this angle, she could see their eyes, tiny specks on the monstrous visage of blubber and teeth that made up their faces. They barreled towards the woman with speed that belied their form, as the droning intensified into a thunderous roar that made Ylva want to close her ears.

Ylva only got off one more crossbow bolt before they reached her, an iron-tipped bolt sprouting out of the forehead of one beast. It paused, roaring and sizzling like the other one, but that still left two charging her position. Ylva slung her crossbow and reached into her pocket, pulling out the spare pouch Mikla had given her. Iron dust, hopefully. With her other hand, she pulled out her blade, a shortsword with a wicked edge.

The beasts collided with the tree below her, sending it shaking and rattling. Ylva kept her footing, but it didn't matter; the collision and the razor-sharp maws of the beasts combined to send the tree toppling, and Ylva had to

abandon the tree before it crushed her beneath it. That was rough. She hit the swamp feet first, sinking a bit into the muck as she turned as best she could to face her opponents. For their part, the beasts had circled around her, and they dove at her from opposite angles, knowing she couldn't deflect both.

With fewer and fewer options, Ylva decided to go the risky route. She lobbed the pouch of iron dust upwards and drove through it with her sword as she lunged at the beast in front of her, coating both parties in iron dust even as she drove her sword through it's throat. The droning roar from it gave out suddenly, replaced by a ferocious sizzling as the iron dust began wasting it away. Of course, such a frontal attack left her open, and the beast from behind landed atop Ylva, driving her into the mud. It reared backwards and bit down on her skull...

...Only to be repelled by a blinding flash of light and heat that even silenced the droning, for a moment. The beast went rearing back as Ylva sprang back to her feet, thanking the stars for her nephew's assistance. She stumbled a bit, however, as her viewing blindfold remained in the muck, torn at the edges. The spell was strong, but it didn't seem to have protected her belongings. A shame. Still, there was enough light left from the flash that Ylva was able to land her own sword slice at the remaining monster, pulling out her own iron dust pouch to salt the wound.

The beast howled its droning howl as the iron worked its magic, and soon enough Ylva was the only one left in the swamp. The drone finally stopped; save for the sizzling, the swamp was completely silent.

Morning.

"Fascinating," Mikla muttered, even as his hands worked to re-stitch the blindfold. "Do you think the drone was their way of finding threats? It sounded as though their eyes were not suited to night vision."

"Who knows?" Ylva answered, still cleaning the swamp muck off of her gear. "They were damn ugly, that's for sure. I can only hope we don't run into them again for a while."

"Well, Father is waiting for us in the next town," Mikla replied lightly. "He can replenish our iron dust supply, for sure, and he might be able to re

-enchant the blindfold, as well.”

“Yeah. He’s a crafty one, that’s for sure. And you seem to have some tricks up your sleeve, too. Why not just tell me you gave me armor?”

“Well, then you’d be even more reckless than you usually are. I’m trying to protect you, not to make you cocky.”

“Hah! Fair enough.” Ylva grinned. “Didn’t work, though.”

“Yeah…” Mikla sighed. “Ah, well. When you’re ready, we’re going to head out. We got plenty of supplies from the village, so the trip should be easy.”

“With the two of us?” Ylva’s grin grew wider. “Always.”



Ylva never named the beasts that prowled the swamp that night. It never mattered to her; they were simply obstacles to be removed, as they threatened the village. In my own research, I discovered that the nearby villages simply called them swamp walkers. They represent a question that has plagued my work since its beginning: What is a monster? The swamp walkers are beasts driven by base desires and instinct, who eat natural food and follow natural laws. In most respects, in fact, they are hardly different from any other predator. Only two things set them apart: Their complete indifference towards humans, and their weakness towards iron. Either could be noteworthy, I would think, in finding our answer.

The next story is an extreme rarity, one of the jewels of my collection. Part anecdote and part folk tale, it circulates in a very specific area, where the plateau of harsh Kalendia meets the mountains that eventually taper into Falcon and the wilds of The Westmere. It also happens to be one of the first tales I ever collected, as my path when I left my homeland took me directly through the narrow stretch of land where it is so common. It is a small world of farmers and folk tales, where tales are told not for entertainment, but for necessity’s sake.

Rule of Three

One, two, three.

That was the pattern of life, Reina noticed. One, two, three, one, two, three...over and over again, sets of threes echoing through the universe. Her heart beat in threes. She and her younger siblings were a set of three. When they slept, the family set out three charms to keep away evil fairies. Bad things, good things, the list went on and on: Three, three, three. It was hard to not feel like the number dominated her life. But she could hand her life over to worse things than the dominion of threes, at least.

Even her current farmwork was set into threes: Dig, plant, cover. It was her natural rhythm of things, even moreso when her younger brother insisted on doing the rest of the work himself. Honestly, that kid. It's a good thing that he was learning to take responsibility, but when was he going to learn to have some restraint? She was worried about him, and she was sure their mother was too. Especially after what happened to their father-

"Reina!"

Reina's head snapped up at the familiar call, as she saw her mother out on the porch. She had the telltale wrinkles and grey hairs of age, sure, but Reina had rarely seen her more active. "Yeah, mom?" She called back.

"It's time to make dinner," came her mother's reply, her hands on her hips in the usual stern way. "I'm glad that you're helping with the farm work, but we need to eat!"

Reina sighed. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, you do. Evzen is busy with the goats and fetching water, and Josef can finish the garden. Now come inside, already!"

“Yeah, yeah...” Reina pushed herself up to her feet and stepped lightly towards the home, careful not to let her boots trample the seeds she’d worked so hard to plant today. She dropped the seeds and tools in the usual place and stepped inside, taking her spot beside her mother for prep time.

The work passed in silence, mostly; way out here in this lonely farmstead, not much changed, so there wasn’t much to talk about. Aside from the trip to town every three weeks for supplies, none of them went out of sight of the farmstead that much. Not after their father had left for five minutes and vanished into thin air more than a decade ago. And not to mention the countless bumps in the night after the sun set. After all these years, this much was certain: There was a power here, one that nobody at the farmstead much spoke about, that spirited the curious and the foolish away. Over the years, they had learned to simply put out the keepsake charms for warding away evil spirits, and let them futilely try to break in.

But there had only been two disappearances.

Reina hadn’t traveled much, but she knew enough to know that the number three dominated her life. And there were only two major disappearances: Her father, and the tax-man who had come one night when she was young. She could feel it in her bones: They were long overdue for a third. She just had to hope it was a visitor, and not just some-

“Reina, focus!”

Reina zoned back into reality just in time to keep the dull kitchen knife from digging into her fingers. She shook her head. “Sorry, Mom. I’m okay.”

Her mother sighed. “Honestly. How old are you now? Two decades, at least. When are you going to stop spacing out?”

“It’ll be better when I get to three,” Reina quipped idly before focusing back in on her work.

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The meal and the evening passed uneventfully after that, and Reina soon found herself bundled up tight in her blanket of goat hide for the night. Or at least, the first part of the night. She must have only slept for three hours

when a loud banging sent her springing up, looking around with the frenzy only a panicked awakening could cause. Her mother, the source of the distraction, was banging on the door, practically howling. “Mom?!” Reina half-slurred, half-shouted in her groggy state.

“He’s gone!” Her mother whirled around, panic and tears welling up in her eyes. “Josef is gone!”

Reina’s eyes went wide, and pretty soon she was on her feet as well, leaping towards the door with gusto. She practically slammed into it, but it wouldn’t budge. “What the-?!”

From the other side of the door, Reina could hear something...snickering?

“Open the door!” Reina shouted, stepping back and ramming into the door again. “I’m gonna kill you so bad when I get out there!”

More snickering, this time with a much more sinister tone. Reina could practically feel it echoing supernaturally.

“One, two-” Reina charged again, hitting the door with all her might. “-THREE!” This time, the door gave way, practically flinging itself open with no resistance. Reina hurled herself out the door, took three steps forward, and whirled around, trying to find the source of the snickering. She found nothing, but she did see their warding charms, one of which had toppled over and crumbled to pieces. Well, crap. The other thing she saw was a faint light, heading away from the farmstead. “Get back here!” Reina practically bellowed, taking off after the target at full speed.

Almost immediately, Reina realized what a bad idea this had been. She wasn’t properly dressed for the cold Kalendian night, nor was she wearing shoes, nor had she taken a light or even a weapon to fight whatever this evil spirit was. But she couldn’t turn back now. Not after she was gaining on them like this. As she approached, she could make out the faint silhouette of a figure outlined by the light, and a sack that was clearly moving. Her brother had to be in that. He just had to.

So she drove forward, ignoring the pain and the piercing rocks on the ground, until she finally reached the light on the plateau. The figure turned just as Reina threw a punch, like she’d been taught by her father.

Nothing. It passed through like air. Another punch. Same result. Reina grit her teeth, anger roaring. Like hell she was going to let somebody else be taken from her. Not after her dad. “Let him go!” She roared, rearing back for a third punch as her blood roared in her ears.

This time, with a fizz of energy, her fist found its mark, making a noise reminiscent of wading through mud after a day of hard raining. Even through her closed eyes, Reina could sense the light going off, and hear the sack falling to the floor and Josef scrambling out. “Reina!” He practically cheered.

Reina opened her eyes and blinked once, twice, thrice to get her bearings. There was no sign of whatever light had been there, aside from a bit of dampness on her fist. And, of course, her brother clinging to her. What the hell had that been? And how had she been able to hurt it? Everything had worked on the third try. Could it be that-

“Reina! Josef!”

Reina became dimly aware of her mother again, shouting from a distance. Turning around revealed her amid lantern-light, waving the lantern to guide her children home. Reina smiled. “Come on, Josef,” she muttered, helping the teenage boy to his feet. “Let’s go home.”

“Yeah.” The two siblings set off back home, towards the farmstead. Tomorrow, a lot would need doing. They needed a new charm, probably a new door, and Reina’s injuries would need to be looked at. But for tonight, they were just glad to be together again.



The Rule of 3 is a tale that best illustrates the place where it comes from. The local superstitions can almost all be traced back to this one tale, from the leaving of charms to the near-reverence of the number 3 to the importance of family ties and even the fear of the night. It is also a wonderful example of the unknown, where the spirit of the story is never named nor particularly described.

It is a very human tale, filled to the brim with terror at the unknown and the dark, and rife with the anxiety of unpreparedness. Yet it still ends well, speaking not towards inevitable failure, but of hope towards overcoming these fears. It is one of my favorites, even if there is little to be gleaned about the monster itself.

Would that all spirits were so easily deterred from their course. Not all spirits are as base in their desires as the swamp walkers of Venator or the spirit thief of southern Kalendia, and not all are wholly disconnected from humanity. Humans grossly underestimate their own spiritual power, even after death, and many a lingering grudge wanders this earth, seeking vengeance on those that have long since passed on. Sometimes, all it takes is one wayward spark to ignite a tragedy, and it was while passing through the desolate lands of northern Dacey that I learned of such an incident.

Midnight Oil

The skritch of quill against parchment was the only defining noise in the candle-lit library. Or what passed for one around here, anyways. There wasn't much to speak of in regards to the actual books here. A few survival manuals; a couple musty tomes burnt nearly to cinders from some siege or another during god knows when; and a few general living books, for good measure. Cookbooks and the like. All things the scholar had seen before, and absolutely nothing useful for his purposes.

To be fair, most of the area was like that. This cold, barren fortress beyond the mountains was one of the worst places Aleksei had ever seen in his life. Shatter Point Castle, they'd said. One of the safest fortresses in the world, they said. They neglected to mention that the 'safe' aspect came from being so far away from conflict that nobody cared to bother it. The whole place was falling apart, and none of the lunkheads holding down the fort knew how to fix it.

When he'd heard about it, Aleksei had taken the leap past the border mountains. After all, it had seemed like the perfect place to set up and turn his notes on Daceyean wildlife into a cohesive research proposal. But now he was stuck here in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by meatheads who only knew how to drink and gamble, until the next supply run came in two weeks. What a disaster.

The lunks were so annoying, in fact, that this late hour of the night was the only time Aleksei could get any actual work done. For such a derelict fortress, one of the few things that it still carried was sound. Even now, he could hear the wind starting to pick up outside as though it was in here with him...

"Maybe it is?"

Aleksei whirled around suddenly. “What the...?”

Nothing. Empty space.

Aleksei sat there for a while, turned to face the entrance, eyes squinted in suspicion. Was it one of the lunks playing a trick on him? No way. They didn't care enough to even give him the time of day, so why would they stay up so late to pull a prank on him? Besides, none of them had a voice that...lovely. It was suspicious all around, no doubt about it. The wind continued to pick up, whistling slightly through the stone walls as though it were piercing straight through. Aleksei stood up and straightened out his clothes, ruffled from sitting too long, and prepared to step outside. Give whoever had done that a piece of his mind.

He barely made it two steps, however, when the wind suddenly intensified. Despite himself, Aleksei felt a chill run down his spine. It couldn't be anything but a prank, could it? He wasn't in danger, right? He soon got his answer, as a book flung itself off from the shelves towards him at rapid speed. He barely managed to duck under it when another came out, one of the cookbooks, ramming into his midsection at full speed. He toppled over with a small yelp as more books fell from the shelves, flipping open and pouring out page after page of parchment into the room. Aleksei opened his mouth to yell, only to find one of the pages crammed over his mouth. Gagged.

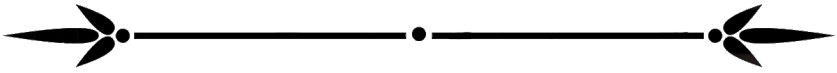
As Aleksei grew more and more panicked, a figure started to manifest on the chair he had left. A ghostly, lithe figure, not totally corporeal but definitely there, sat in his seat, watching the man with a bemused expression on their face. Aleksei looked up at the figure, eyes filled with equal parts terrified and pleading, but the figure only laughed, a light trill that brought to mind the voice from earlier. Still with a mysterious smile, they reached for the candle, gingerly picking it up with a slender hand that suddenly seemed more material than before. The candle moved over slowly, over the table, towards the mess of papers and books. Aleksei began to squirm, flailing about as he recognized what was coming. For their part, the ghost simply smiled. Their lips parted, and a single word escaped.

“Goodbye.”

The candle fell down, and the flames rose up.

In the morning, the guards of Shatter Point Castle were astonished to find that their library had burned down overnight. There was one casualty, a charred corpse recognized as the scholar who had appeared at the fort a few days prior. There was a suspicious lack of blood at the scene, but it was chalked up to the heat of the fire powered by parchment. They were unable to find a culprit, nor a family to give the bad news of the scholar to. He was buried at the fort, death chalked up to naught but a sad accident.

And from the castle ramparts, a soft voice laughed and returned to waiting.



Midnight Oil was a difficult tale to piece together. This may indeed be the first account of the full story. Nobody else saw the event beyond the deceased, after all, and it was initially written off as simply a tragic accident. But it is part of a trend. Stories abound of lonesome scholars buried or burned, one after another, across northern Dacey. And in another, similar tale, the culprit was shown as the spirit of a young and cruel being, a lingering grudge of some form or another. Herein we see the dangers of humanity's current course. By refusing the supernatural, they give it free reign. Rejecting them does not mean they stop existing, it simply means they refuse to see them. They neglect the supernatural at their own peril, as do you, dear reader.

But not every supernatural being is hostile. Quite the opposite, in fact. The massive corvid of Stormbirds, for example, brings rejuvenating rain with it, even if it cares not for the whims of the humans below it. For its existence, it brings prosperity to the soil, which in turn enriches humans' lives. Other spirits stand poised to do the same, if only the humans would acknowledge them. One such story lives on in the story of several ships of the Natua...

Snowblossom

Winter. A time of cold, of bitter chills and long nights. Some may even call it a time of fear, of famine, or of loneliness, depending on the harvest before and the speaker's place within the Lothen. But for many, it is also a time of celebration and stories, where children sit around the warmth of the fire while the elders tell tales of their youth and of their forebears. So it was one fateful evening, as the Winter Ship Nara docked for the night...

"Gather 'round! It's time for tonight's story!"

The elder's voice boomed out, echoing around the rest stop's large resting room. This was a normal occurrence. Rest stops like these were exceedingly common among the Natua as their ships needed to stop to resupply, and as such they were always filled with noise as the various ships intermingled. The elder, the leader of the rest stop, sat in his large, fur-lined chair by the fire as he so often did, old bones and sagging skin sinking into a well-worn imprint of himself from his younger days. As he watched, the youths all scrambled at his call, almost competing with one another for the closest spots to his chair. They all wanted to listen to his tale. It brought a smile to his face, knowing that the children of the next generation were so eager for wisdom.

As they settled in, he spoke. "Ah, I see you've all arrived! Has the trip been good for you?" Despite his age and seemingly decrepit appearance, his voice remained strong; in fact, several of the passing adults turned their heads, surprised at the force this seemingly ancient man held in his words. Meanwhile, the children all cheered in affirmatives, matched only by the whistling wind of the snowstorm outside. He nodded and smiled, his gentle smile that had disarmed so many weary and cranky travelers in the past. "Good, good! Now, settle down, and let me tell you a tale befitting the snowstorm outside. Of a good friend of mine, and his encounter with the unknown..."

“There once was a man, a strong man, who lived and worked on a ship just like the rest of you. His ship travelled all along the coast: Down past the Sword Coast, and up towards the Inmisit warriors. It was while he and his fellow were visiting the Inmisit to sell their work when this happened.

It was a night just like this one. The Wind howled, shaking the home with its whimsy; the snow fell, covering the earth with white and blinding the watchmen; the clouds gathered, blocking our Moon from seeing the Wind’s pranks. On a night just like this, the strong man had spent the night drinking and laughing with his family, and they had taken to sleeping in a spare house the Inmisit had until the weather cleared. Until, of course, there was a knock at the door.”

The elder reached out and rapped his knuckles against the wooden armrest of his chair, slowly but firmly. Knock. Knock. Knock. The children were enraptured.

“The strong man stood up, looking for his family, only to find them all asleep. None of them had heard the knock. Still, the strong man was strong of heart as well as body, and he couldn’t leave somebody outside in the storm. He walked through the room, to the door, and opened it to see who it was.

When he opened the door, the Wind saw fit to blow ferociously into the home, but the strong man stood his ground and refused to give in to their tricks. And as he stood, and watched, he saw a woman, lying on the ground before him. The strong man was strong, of course, and couldn’t leave somebody out here. He picked her up, easily, and took her inside, to the other room of the house.

There, he placed her down and cooked her a delicious meal in the dead of night, using nothing but what they had remaining from dinner. They would have nothing left to eat tomorrow, but the strong man couldn’t bear to see another person suffering. Wrapped in blankets, the woman took the meal and warmed herself up, saving herself from the Wind and clouds’ trickery. And when she had finished, she looked up at the strong man with eyes as deep as the Stars. And she asked, ‘Would you dance with me?’

The strong man was confused, of course. She should sleep, he said. Keep

warming herself up. But the woman refused. All she wanted, it seemed, was to dance with him. And eventually, even the strong man's strong will was ground down, and he agreed. The two danced in the other room, his family unaware, until the weather began to clear and the clouds parted to reveal the moon. The woman had to return home, she said, but she would repay the strong man for the kindness he had shown her. With barely a word from the strong man, she left the house into the clear night sky, and vanished into the night.

The strong man continued to work and sell, not telling anybody about the woman he had met that night. But on the final day, as the man was preparing to leave, he saw a treasure, peeking out from the snow between the trees. It was a rose, as beautiful as could be, but crafted of the purest clear ice that he had ever seen. The strong man, of course, knew that it could only be a gift from the woman of the snow; he took the flower, keeping it close to his heart. And for the rest of his days, he and his ship found that the snow and Wind would never impede them for the rest of their days."

"And thus finishes my tale," the elder continued, a warm smile across his face. "Remember, children. Be kind to those who need it, and you may find your kindness returned tenfold."

The children cheered, as always, and the man felt the usual sense of pride welling within him. This generation of Natua was growing to be respectful, knowledgeable, and most importantly, open to others. He couldn't ask for anything else. And, of course, his gaze flickered towards the mantle of the hearth, where the imprint of a singular rose was hanging; the only memory of the ship that had been his grandfather's. The ship that had been rechristened to the Snowblossom, so many years ago. But this was no time to reminisce.

"It seems the night is still young, children. Who would like to hear another tale?"



Snowblossom is a heartwarming tale of human and spirit coexistence. Small variations exist among the various Natuan ships who hold the tale close, most notably regarding the woman herself. Was she actually injured? Was she simply testing the man's character? Was she from the Inmisit that they were visiting, or a stranger to the land herself? It varies for each teller, but the core message remains the same: Show compassion, and it will be rewarded. An excellent tale for the young Natua for whom cooperation and kindness may mean life or death on the sea, and for the curious traveler who seeks to poke their nose where it doesn't belong.

Of particular intrigue to this tale is the mention, but not direct involvement, of the Inmisit. They are a northern tribe of much import in the world of spirits, for like their continental cousins in Craerith, they acknowledge and respect the power of the supernatural on their own terms. The island they live on, however, plays host to a much darker cadre of spirits than the mainland. Theirs is the home of demons of the Gloam, with whom the Inmisit maintain an uneasy partnership, both in work and in creation. The following tale is but one such example.

Storm

A crackling peal of thunder rang through the island, shaking the trees and foliage with the ferocity only nature's unbridled force could achieve. Outside, rain and sleet fell in sheets, wind propelling them to land on the roof in waves of sound and fury. The wind howled, the storm raged; outside, no doubt, was a ferocious battle for life to stay safe.

A perfect storm, then, for what was about to happen indoors.

The man indoors was humming away, working whimsically despite the fierce whirl of nature outside. On the floor of this windowless, belowground workshop lay the intricate signs of what could only be a magic circle, albeit one nobody on the mainland would be familiar with. Their magic was so...trite, after all. It could hardly be expected that they would know anything beyond their basic spells and rituals. None of the artistry that was on display here, for certain.

On the desk, the one the man had just stepped away from, lay a large variety of herbs and other materials, sliced up in deliberate but uneven methods to achieve specific shapes. The familiar blue and red petals of Brelas, that lethally poisonous flower; the small but frigid branches of the frozen-white Idax plant; the hallucinogenic Ikiln flower, a pale lavender. All these and more lay on various states of dismantling on the desk, and in the man's hands. As he stepped gingerly around the intricate circle, he cautiously removed certain materials from his hands and placed them within the confines of the circle. With each placement, an aura of foreboding began to grow, one similar but altogether different from the weather outside. It was not dissimilar from the beginning forebodings of a storm itself.

After a full rotation, the man stepped back to admire his handiwork, making sure to not step on the intricate furs of his uniform. This outfit,

while not his favorite, was indispensable in this ritual. The protection it offered, both physical and magical, simply couldn't be beaten by anything else the Inmisit could offer. That was beside the point, however. What mattered was that he was ready, finally, and so was the world around him.

He clasped his hands, as though in prayer, and began to chant. The words were long forgotten by the rest of the world, a language that would seem so alien to the mainland of the Lothen. But here, within this foreboding atmosphere, they felt right at home. As the chanting intensified, so too did the atmosphere in the room, becoming darker with every word. Within the first few lines, it was almost as though the storm had broken. Dark energies swirled around the room in a torrent, focused mainly within the confines of the magical circle. Certain wisps, however, escaped and lashed outwards, and it was then that the man knew that his furs had been the correct choice. Each lash that made its way towards him found its energy beaten back, bouncing off of the enchanted furs with reversed force and finding itself confined to the circle once more. Safety was the most important after all, it seemed.

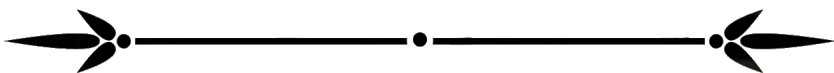
As the chanting continued, the room became more and more alike with the storm outside. The darkening energies within and the ferocious storm without had more in common than it would seem at first glance. With the ritual, however, came a spiritual strength that was utterly horrifying. If given a choice between the raging storm outside or the ritual inside, many would be hard-pressed to choose the ritual. And yet, the man continued to chant, imposing his will into the shadowy storm while at the same time encouraging it to rise up.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the energy began to coalesce, forced into a smaller and smaller space. It started taking on a shape of its own; something bestial, yet horrifyingly human. Long, articulated limbs with too many joints that ended in spindly, unnerving claws, a torso entirely too thin to support them, and a face with too many eyes and teeth for anybody's comfort. Even the summoner, the man in furs, averted his eyes so as not to make eye contact with this monstrosity.

Eventually, the storm within subsided, leaving simply the man and the

monster. The demon looked around, blinking its many eyes with trepidation, before speaking in a multi-tonal voice. “Are you the one who has summoned me?”

The man nodded solemnly and stepped forward. “Of course, demon of the Gloam. I am your summoner. Now...shall we get to work?”



Storm is another oddity in my collection, for it was not born of a story passed from mouth to mouth, but of a magical recording. In my one and unfortunately only visit to the Inmisit isles, I stayed with a man who happened to be a rival of the one in the story. In ingratiating myself to him with my own tales, I gained access to his spy archives, and wove a story out of the most interesting of them. It illustrates one of the darkest, but most effective interactions of man and spirit: Summoning.

The conjuring of spirits from outside the Umbra itself is a dark and often forbidden art, not least of all because many of the realms of man would sooner erase it from existence. I myself find it distasteful, if only because many ‘summoners’ style themselves as masters of their spiritual allies rather than an equal performing a transaction. But it certainly exists, a facet of the supernatural that cannot be denied if one wants a full perspective. Once the spirit is summoned and a contract is sealed, they work as mercenaries for a time, performing occult deeds in their partner’s name. Our next story tells the tale of but one such deed...

Mimic

Alrick practically fell into his chair, his lackadaisical topple sending the barstool sliding slightly against the stone floor even as he settled in. “This job sucks,” he grumbled.

His partner, a much sharper-looking woman, shot Alrick a glance. “It’s our job,” she declared simply. “Boring or not, we have to make our rounds of the fort. So get yourself back up.”

“But Jera, what’s the point?” The younger guard replied. “This fort’s deep on the inside of Falcon. It hasn’t been invaded since my grandpa started walking on his own two feet. Even if there’s some hotshot nobleman inside making peace talks, what’re the odds of a force making it all the way here?”

Jera shook her head slowly. “That’s beside the point. Patrolling like this helps to put the higher-ups’ fears to rest, and if we’re diligent, it reflects well on us. A nice administration job in the fort sounds cushy, doesn’t it? And if something does happen, you bet I’m not going to be found dead over it. So get off your bum and let’s get back to patrolling.”

Alrick sighed. “You’re right, I guess.” He hauled himself back to his feet, whimsically sliding the stool back into its place on the floor. He turned to face his companion, gesturing forwards. “Lead the way, ma’am.”

“Of course.” Jera set off through the fort again, listening for the telltale signs of clanking footsteps to tell her the lazy bum was following her. Sure enough, he was a few paces behind her, armored boots tapping against the floor. They continued in silence for several minutes; given how much Alrick had complained earlier, it was a welcome reprieve. After a short while, however, it almost began to become...ominous. The only sounds outside were the noises of both pairs of boots against the floor, and the vaguest background noise of voices from within some doors. Otherwise,

Otherwise, they were on their own.

Finally, Jera felt the need to speak up. If she didn't, she'd psyche herself out. She waited until they reached a silent space within the keep, so as not to bother others. "So why did you decide to become a soldier, anyways? What drew you towards the war business?"

"..."

"...Alrick?"

Jera turned, just in time for the cloaked figure behind her to lunge. She leapt to the side and swept with her blade, colliding with the cloak solidly. "You bastard! What have you done to-"

She was interrupted as the cloak flowed like water, sweeping around the blade like she had just tried to slice through rapids. The cloak continued this flow towards Jera, pinning her against the wall with supernatural force. Under the cloak, Jera swore she could see teeth; rows upon rows, sharpened to vicious points. As they parted, the noise that escaped sounded identical to the clank of boots against the floor.

Panicking, Jera leapt up and lashed out with her boot. "What the hell are you?!"

"What the- What do you want?"

Once again, Jera's own voice was thrown back at her, but halfway through, it swapped to another. Alrick's voice. "War! -Some hotshot nobleman inside -found dead!"

Jera's face twisted. "Oh, I get it. You think you're clever, stealing our voices with some damned witchcraft? Well, try this!"

With the remaining movement left to her, Jera tightened her grip around her pike as much as she could. Then, with a roar, she suddenly threw all of her weight backwards, into the wall. She'd been here long enough to know that this part of the fort was normally abandoned, and for good reason. This was the oldest part of the fort, and it showed; some of the walls threatened to fall whenever a storm struck. Now, backed by a powerful

guard and a supernatural being, these threats came true. With such a sudden velocity change, the wall behind them toppled, sending both parties sprawling in a mass of stone and splinter.

Jera was the first to her feet a good few seconds later, having used her pike to steady herself. The cloaked beast was next, whirling back into a standing position just as the pike embedded into the earth where it had been. Even as they glared one another down, the sounds of shouting came from within the fort. Jera smiled. "Seems like the tables have turned, eh? Think you can handle the whole guard, you damned witch?"

The figure paused for a moment, then began to shudder. The teeth parted again, wider than ever before, and from it erupted a multifaceted howl that struck Jera down to her bones. With this roar, it vaulted backwards, speeding supernaturally over the crest of the neighboring hill. Just as it vanished, another soldier burst out from the wreckage, carefully maneuvering through the ruined wall of the fort. "Report! What the hell happened?"

"He's running away!" Jera shouted in response. "We've got a witch! After her!"

The other guardsman nodded. "Understood! Let's go after it!"

With a nod of her own, Jera turned to face the hill. She let the other guardsman go first, this time.

In the end, they never caught the cloaked one. It was simply too fast, too hard to spot among the inky blackness of the night. However, within the keep, other guards had spotted another suspicious woman, who was taken into custody. Later on, Jera was informed that the captured woman was the true witch; the cloaked figure had simply been a monster, bound to the witch's service. It all went over the veteran guard's head, but she was glad enough that the culprit had been caught.

With her swift actions taken to protect the keep, plus her many years of service, Jera had been promoted to an administrative position. She would never have to patrol again, if she did not want to. Alrick, meanwhile, was found unconscious in his room, having no memory of the entire day, let alone the events of the night. Even when taken by the chief practitioner,

he could not be made to remember anything that happened. Which only left Jera to ponder...

...Had she ever really been speaking to Alrick that night?



The mimic is a fearsome creature, as Jera had told me. I found myself in her company in a tavern one night along with a few others, and we swapped stories over a few glasses of mead. Needless to say, her tale was easily the most chilling of the ones exchanged that night. Such monster attacks are more common than most would believe, but to have one so well documented is a special occasion, and I was glad to add it to my own repertoire of tales. Would that I had found her again after her disappearance several years later, but that is a story for another day.

Our final story requires a slight reorientation. Many spirits and monsters out there are all too willing to encroach upon the world of man. Each has their reasons, from swamp beasts seeking a meal to predators seeking sustenance to spirits seeking what they lacked in life to demons entreating mortals in return for offerings. One could, and should, argue that their motivations are as myriad as those of the humans they come into conflict with. But there are those creatures who pursue the exact opposite. Weary of the strife humans and other spirits bring with them, they retreat to the furthest and deepest corners of the world, so that they might live out their days in peace. Tales of such beings are rare, of course; a being that avoids humans will obviously be seen less than one who seeks them out. But we return to the frozen north of Craerith, to the twisted paths between mountains, for a glimpse of a hunter's doom and the tale of a bloodless behemoth.

The Frozen Valley

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

The sound of boots of snow was the main accompaniment to today's wind as Saemar tread through the frozen forest, cursing his luck. The harsh leather coat surrounding him did little to shut out the harsh, brittle breeze cursing the woods this day, while the bow on his back seemed stuck to its sling, unwilling to part with its own weak shelter against the frigid onslaught. The sounds of birdsong echoed from the tops of the trees, calling to him. Taunting him. Reminding him that the meal he was seeking was close, but oh so far.

To top it all off, the Craeriv hunter was far from home. Too far. All his life, he'd been taught more than anything else: Don't enter the mountain valley. Dark things lurked past the mountain valley. Always hunt in the local woods, lest the terrors of days past consume you. But there were mouths to feed, coffers to fill, and skills to prove, not to mention a wicked winter to live through. So, here he was, past the mountain valley, treading through unknown woods as the sun hung high in the air and the still-erie birdsong pierced the cloudless sky.

If it was any consolation, the snow he tread on was far from fresh. It was well-packed, a clear mainstay of the frozen north, and more than a few footprints of various animals dotted and crossed one another as they weaved between trees. One of those threads was his target now, tracing the steps of what seemed like a large elk as it walked elegantly through the woods. Well, perhaps 'elegantly' was too strong of a word. Saemar had been a hunter long enough in these snow-clad lands to know a limping gait when he saw one, and this one was worse than most. It may even have collapsed up ahead. Although, there was no sign of blood...

The hunter brushed such concerns aside in his head as he reached back,

willing himself to pull his bow out of the sling it had attached itself to. With a bit of finagling and a light touch, it slid free from its restraints, as Saemar turned the bend around a copse of trees and found just what he was looking for. The elk was collapsed between two staunch trees, breathing heavily with a leg that was turned completely the wrong way. Saemar had to marvel at the fact it had even gotten this far, if its leg had been twisted like that the entire time. But there was no blood, and he had a job to do here, anyway. He pulled out an arrow from the quiver at his back, nocked it carefully, took aim, and-

Just then, a tremendous noise echoed through the trees, from Saemar's right. Years of experience took over as the hunter dove forwards, rolling in just the right practiced way to come up with his bow at the ready, aimed towards the noise. The source, a particularly large brown bear, slid around a tree on the slick snow and barreled forward towards both Saemar and the elk behind him. Saemar swore loudly, the coarse Craeritt barely tearing through the air in comparison to the roar before him. Of course such an easy meal wouldn't have just one hunter after it. A bear, though...it'd been a while. And it was the dead of winter, meaning this was a starved one. He'd have to be careful.

Saemar loosed his arrow, the sharpened tip driving itself through the bear's thick shoulder fur. It paused and roared in more frustration than anything, but the opening was there. The hunter sprung to the side, sprinting through trees even as he scrambled to grab another arrow. The bear followed close behind, sliding on the thickly-packed snow and clawing onto trees in order to keep close behind its target. Its roaring mingled with the cracking of wood ever so closely behind the huntsman, as well as the telltale crashing of trees against one another. Getting back to the elk after this was going to be rough, for sure. But he had to get out of this first.

The chase continued for a solid minute, Saemar waiting for a chance to unleash another arrow, until they emerged into a huge clearing. End of the line; swift as he was, the huntsman couldn't outrun a bear flat. But there was no choice left other than to try. More running, and more roaring, as they fought to move as fast as possible. Not enough. Definitely not enough. The bear was right behind him, roaring, clawing, tearing him to shreds-

No. Time for action. Saemar breathed in, made his peace, and gave his life

to his instincts. One moment, a whirl of fur, and the telltale twang of a bow later, and an arrow was loosed straight into the bear's eye. It roared and reared its head, blood flying out of its wound, and Saemar realized for the first time that it was the first blood he'd seen since he had passed the valley.

No sooner had he realized that than an ear-splitting bellow erupted, not from the bear, but from the tree line. Turning revealed a sight that the huntsman could scarcely believe. A man - no, a behemoth - stood there, hands clutching a massive and ornate blade in one pale hand. A ragged face twisted in anger stood at least a full ten feet off the ground, regarding both the bear and the huntsman with the same rage. To top it all off, heavy clothes not unlike the ones Saemar himself wore adorned the body, although far more ornate than anything the human would ever have considered.

This titan roared forward, crossing the distance between them in record time. For a moment, Saemar could have sworn he heard the bear whimper, as though the giant's sheer presence had cowed it in a way no human ever could. The moment was short-lived, however, as the titan's enormous blade came down, carving the bear in twain with a single smooth motion. Saemar watched, shocked, as the giant removed its blade from the bear with pristine quality. No blood, no blemish, not so much as a scratch. Then, it turned to him, and spoke in a growl that could be mistaken for the rumble of a mountain. Speaking was only used in the loosest sense; the words that tumbled out of the giant's mouth were only barely understood by Saemar, both from accent and from intonation. It may as well have been a different language, but the hunter could still make out a few words, along with the sword being slowly leveled at him:

Sacred...Blood...Leave.”

And like that, the shock wore off. Saemar's feet went into action before he could even think about it, a full sprint towards where his instincts told him the mountain valley was, and then home. He ran for what felt for days, his very self recoiling in fear.

Saemar's family never got him to tell them what happened in the mountains that day. For years, until he breathed his final breath, he never told the tale of the frozen valley, where blood didn't flow and giants tended

the land. But until his dying day, he passed down the sage advice he had received from his parents, and them from their parents before them:

Don't enter the mountain valley.



And thus ends our parade of tales for this book. This is, of course, but a choice selection of the stories in my own personal archive. Each and every one was handpicked for this task; some, like *Midnight Oil* and *Storm*, were even handcrafted. What task, you might be asking yourself? I've already told you. We are here to answer one question: What is a monster?

While woefully incomplete, these stories alone weave for us a complex tapestry. Up in the northlands, beasts like the storm spirit and the giant go about their lives with nary a care for humans. Just a stone's throw away among the *Inmisit* and *Natua*, spirits and demons live and breathe among the people like nothing. In the south, things become more complex, as vengeful spirits seek catharsis and kidnap children for their own nefarious purposes. Even the swamp walkers are certainly ones humans would call monstrous, even if they are little more than hungry beasts following their instincts.

Is the qualification physical? Many of our spirits today have features that one would consider grotesque. From the mimic's maw to the swamp walker's gait to the demon's...everything, it would be easy to avert your eyes and call them monstrous. But there are also many who would call *Midnight Oil's* phantom a monster, despite her innocuous appearance. *Rule of 3's* kidnapper is also often construed as a monster, even with no physical features to speak of. So our answer does not lie here. Nor does it lie with the mental; the swamp walkers alone are proof enough that one does not require cunning intellect to be a dream-haunting monster.

Our solution, I believe, lies with *Snowblossom*, our only truly beneficial spirit of the night. The phantom of *Snowblossom* is far from passive. In fact, she is the instigator of the vast majority of the events within her tale; the other main character simply reacts to her, most of the time. But never

once is she thought to be monstrous, or dangerous. Why? Because not once does she ever pose a danger. The only other person involved is a veteran sailor of the Natua whose defining trait is his strength in body, mind, and heart. In other words, she is never a threat.

That, my friends, is what I believe a monster is. Not a creature of the supernatural, or a spirit from beyond, but a being with a perceived threat to one's life and livelihood. Men can become monsters just as bankrupt as the most malicious spirit. For evidence, one need look no further than the summoner of the mimic, who willingly beset a murderous being onto their fellow human, or to the woman turned vengeful phantom of Midnight Oil. The swamp walkers and demons are monsters not because of their looks, but because of their callous disregard for humanity. The giant and the stormbird are monsters because they have no desire to be understood by humans, and fear of the unknown flows as naturally as anything.

A monster is built on fear and the sense of danger, nothing more. Until one strips those away, they will remain monsters: Fearful creatures of the night, every bit as dangerous and enigmatic as they seem. But once you look past the veil, you can see these monsters for what they truly are: A rich tapestry of all three worlds' most unique denizens, deserving of our respect and scrutiny.

That isn't to say they aren't threatening, however. Even without the label of 'monster', there is no shortage of spirits and beasts that would like nothing more than to see humans flounder, and they work tirelessly to see it so. And on these cold autumn nights, they scheme more fiercely than ever. So I warn you, reader, to stay vigilant but know your limits. Understanding is important, but sometimes a bump in the night should stay just that. Curiosity kills a cat, and everybody is a kitten to something out there.

Stay safe, and enjoy your evening.

-Saramisse Silier