

DISSONANCE

Volume I: Reality (EXCERPT)

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

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For Sweeps, Bren & AJ:
my true loves.

You've helped me to survive.

I remember when the gorgons first arrived in 2026. Admittedly, we were all enthralled. I was too. Sis was especially enthralled. Somebody in Guatemala spotted the first one, if I remember correctly. It just came drifting down, straight out of the sky, near sunset: so humanoid, and yet enshrouded in mist. They had angelic qualities to them. Some of us wondered if they were messengers from God. Their bodies were cloaked in that blueish-green vapor. It was really creepy, but for whatever reason it's the creepy things that draw us in the most. We just can't look away, like a moth to a flame.

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

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

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

In the sixteen years since then, they laid waste to pretty much everything, except the Blockades of course. Oh, they knew where we all were, and they didn't like it when we ventured out, for any reason. They got especially hot if they saw any of us heading in any direction that even *remotely* resembled going toward a coastline. No matter the continent, they wanted us pigeonholed far inland. We could never figure out why. Some straggled around by day still, but all we knew concretely was that they mostly reappeared every evening, near dusk. Where they all largely disappeared to

during the day no one ever really knew. Apparently, they didn't like sunlight, and they would almost entirely vanish for a month on end during the summertime when it got into the high eighties and nineties. Those were our reprieves. It was times like that that we actually praised all the ozoners that went before us: inconsiderate humans with their carbon emissions, fossil fuels, aerosols and CFCs; they didn't know it, but they were actually *helping* us. Warming up the planet. Making the atmosphere hotter and hotter: more inhospitable to not just us, but them as well. I heard recently that a team of guys actually wrangled a gorgon in the heat of summer, while wearing some kind of protective eye shields, and they stripped it down: it just flailed, writhed, and screamed as it baked in the hot summer sun. Sizzled and smoked even. Apparently, they had some vampiric traits too. Never found out any more about it because you can't trust all stories, and I for one don't plan to wrangle any gorgon to see if it tries to suck blood too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In a few years, eighty-five percent of the world's population was gone. The survivors lingered where they could, flitting from place to place, eking out a life of survival amidst the shadows. Since that time, the earth became a ghost town, abandoned, with overgrown ivy and out of control moss. Mildew and weeds. Vehicles everywhere, abandoned in mid-transit. Crashed airplanes. Trains off their tracks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes they wouldn't even need to paralyze you; they'd simply catch up with you, whisking behind you as you fled for your life: like me today just before the Blockade. They were just *fast*. Some people closed their eyes as they fought back, once we learned of their paralysis method. But that was pretty futile; you were just shadowboxing, swinging at nothing. One way or another, they would get you, and the best you could do was just to hide and ride it out and for God's sake, be quiet. One of them was just as bad as a swarm of them.

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

any of that. They're just predators like any other shark or cheetah or hyena.

A gorgon was no respecter of persons.

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

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

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

However, it wasn't a myth for me.

Losing my family wasn't a myth.

That cat today wasn't a myth.

The amulet wasn't a myth.

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

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

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