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Gallery  
of  
Nightmares

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# Untitled

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Dark Fantasy Stories by  
**DOUG HOPPES**



## Karma is best served cold

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I stood there staring at my cottage and couldn't believe I had done it. I had bought a home. Me. A home. Now look... I know that it wasn't the perfect cottage. The roof needed to be redone. The doorframe was a bit crooked, and several windows were broken. That was okay. It was my home.

Also... it was supposedly haunted. Oooohhhh.... Scary....

There were rumors among the old and overly religious townspeople about how the previous owner, Arthur, told stories about the strange basement where warriors and dragons fought and the demons that lived there. They told him that the place was evil and he needed to leave. If he didn't watch himself, he'd lose his other eye to the demons.

He didn't listen.

Now, I'd seen Arthur a couple of times at the local pub where he told the stories. Many of the patrons laughed at him but put up with his stories. He was a nice enough guy but tended to like the drink a little too much.

Eventually, the stories he told at the pub got wilder, and people avoided him. He drank more than when I first ran into him there, and the house became known as "that place."

"Jonathan," he slurred as he drained his beer, "I gotta show

you the basement. You'd believe me. I know ya would. You've got that look to ya."

"Sure, Arthur. Sure," I said uncommittedly looking into my own beer. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to get him another round, but that wasn't going to happen. He tried that with the other people in the bar and, over time, we all avoided him.

Then he disappeared.

More rumors spread around town about the thing in the basement that got Arthur.

After several months, the Merchant Center took possession of the home and put it up for auction. Before doing so, they employed the best mages from the sacramancer guild and found no evidence of Arthur or anything wrong with the house. They couldn't have rumors about a demon house affecting the sale of it.

It went up for auction.

I was surprised and not surprised when the well-off didn't even show up for the auction. From the outside, the place wasn't the type of place they would invest in, and I don't think they were the type to listen to rumors. The other bids were too low, but I had just enough to pay for it without asking for advances from my job.

It was mine now, and I was sure that I could take care of

what was happening in there. Besides, demons didn't exist. Sure, strange things were near the swamps, but I was in the middle of town, just off the main street. Stuff like that never happened here.

Inside the cottage, the air was damp and wet. I could see parts of the sky from the holes in the roof, so that, and the windows, would be the first task to get done. Other than that, the floor was in good shape. Thieves had already ransacked the rooms and taken everything Arthur had left behind. Several of the rooms looked like they'd been lived in for a while, with a couple of small fire pits in the center and a hole in the roof above it, but there was no one now. I'd also have to get the door fixed.

I'd leave the basement until later. Not that I was afraid to go down there. Not me.

By the end of the week, the roof had been repaired, the windows replaced, the doorframe fixed, and all rooms were cleaned and furnished. Nothing fancy. Just a table, some chairs, a bench for the living area and a bed. It would do for now. It cost me most of my savings, but I had a home. No more renting small rooms in boarding homes.

Well, it was time to see what was in the basement.

I wasn't scared. Really. I wasn't. However, when I pulled down the latch on the door to the basement, my heart beat a bit faster, and my right hand was a bit clammy. Those stories

in town really must have affected me.

Well... there was nothing to see other than a dark set of stairs leading down to an area of blackness.

I retrieved a portable light ball from my pocket, touched it to activate the light, and tossed it into the blackness. The ball floated to the bottom of the stairs, and I followed suit.

The basement looked like every other one: dirt floor, stone walls, damp smell, and wooden bins to hold potatoes and other vegetables. Nothing remarkable. Smirking, I looked around and couldn't believe I was so nervous. That'll teach me to listen to those old people.

I could have sworn, though, that a glint of light came from the far wall, and cautiously, I walked over to it and felt the stones. Felt like stone. Nothing special, but one stone on the right side was lighter than the others. I brought the floating light ball over; it was a different type of stone. Arthur probably didn't know how to properly repair it. I'll have to fix it later.

The light behind that stone flickered as I headed out of the basement. I walked over to inspect it again. A bright light pulsed behind the stone this time, even with the light ball next to it. When I touched the stone, it moved and fell out, and a tunnel appeared behind it.

It was easy to make a large enough hole to crawl through by removing a large portion of the stones. The air in the tunnel was fresh and clean and didn't smell musty like the rest of



the basement. With my light ball, I headed down the corridor towards...

The weirdest room that I'd ever seen. The side walls were made of silky white material that showed moving images of warriors and winged monsters fighting one another. When one died, it quickly disappeared and was replaced by another warrior or monster. Sometimes, one would look at me, wink, smile slightly, and then return to combat.

The wall in front was made of the same material but looked more like a thick black curtain that extended from the ceiling to the floor.

Contrasted to the walls, in the center of the room was a dull brown rug where each corner had a symbol of three overlapping circles with a ring around them. The symbols on three corners glowed bright blue, but the fourth corner was a dull grey and did not glow. In the center of the rug was a glowing red symbol of a body covered in flames.

When I stepped onto the rug, the blacked curtained wall moved as hands came from the center of it and peeled it back to the side. The area behind the black curtain appeared obsidian, and I could see a dull reflection of me.

On the rug, dozens of small playing-card-sized cards rose from each glowing corner symbol and, floating, formed into a single stack vertically in front of me at chest level.

Naturally, I jumped back off the rug, the far wall returned to

solid, and the cards disappeared.

The rug returned to its normal state.

Cautiously, I stepped back onto the rug, and, as before, the curtain parted, and the cards returned to their spot in front of me.

Now what? Do I touch the cards? Do I wait for something to happen? For several moments, I waited, and then, I saw it.

The obsidian wall shimmered slightly in front of me, and it looked like an empty room similar to the one I was standing in. Although the side walls were white and showed fighting scenes, the rug was not present, and in the back corner of the room, a strange spider-like monster huddled against the wall.

The creature looked like a misshapen man melded into a spider form. His bulbous abdomen was dull white, and a shadow of a man-like figure extended from it. There was no face to be seen, but dark red roots caressed the shadow along the head and torso to create a human form. All eight legs were scarred and torn.

I couldn't tell if, like the walls on the side of me, this was a picture or if it was a physical room in front of me. When I left the rug to approach the wall, as before, the curtain closed, and the cards disappeared.

I couldn't pull the curtain aside to see what was behind it. It was as solid as a flat wall. Just an illusion.

I returned to the rug and returned to viewing the strange creature in the room.

Bored, I hesitantly grabbed the stack of cards floating in front of me. Some cards showed pictures of edible food like sushi, steak, bread, and fruits. Other cards possessed pictures of razors, needles, nails, and other small dangerous items.

I wasn't sure what to do, but I drew a card showing unagi nigiri sushi—a piece of cooked eel on a small rice ball— and held it up to my face. At that point, the card disappeared, and a long table appeared in the room holding the spider-like creature. On the table, several large ornate plates of the unagi appeared.

The creature got up from the corner and moved slowly toward the table. Its steps looked hesitant, but eventually made its way there. In front of the table, one of the red roots on its torso reached out, picked up the sushi, and placed it into the shadowed area where a face would normally be. Faster and faster, as if it were starving, more roots grabbed what was left of the sushi and shoved it into its “mouth.”

I flipped through the cards again and drew a ribeye steak this time. Several platters of steaming steak appeared, and it consumed those as fast as it did the unagi.

Hamburgers. Porridge. Eggs. Didn't matter. Whatever I put on the table, the monster consumed the food as fast as it appeared. As it ate, its abdomen would grow larger and

larger, and I could see sores appear and dark black lines work their way until it split open. From the sores and cracks in the abdomen, unconsumed food poured out, and it would crawl away from the table.

Lying near the table, shivering, the sores disappeared, and the abdomen reformed as if nothing had happened. It would prop itself up, look at me, and then crawl back to the table. Slower than before, but It would always go back and consume more food.

I couldn't take it anymore. It didn't matter that this was a video. I stopped, and it returned to its corner once the food was gone.

I stood and watched the thing shivering in the darkness. It had to be real. It felt so real.

I left the room and headed back through the tunnel to my basement. Once there, I cleared out more of the stone wall to make access easier.

For the next month, I returned to Samuel—I had to give him a name because calling him an “it” didn't seem right. I didn't know if I was projecting, but I felt we were becoming friends for that month. Sometimes, I brought my dinner down as if we ate together. I also stopped drawing too many cards because I had no real evidence to prove that I had overfed him the first time, but I did notice that he was no longer going to the corner and shivering. Also, he seemed to get up and

approach the table faster each time I showed up.

By the end of that month, honestly, I became bored.

I didn't have any friends that I could hang out with. I hoped that when I bought the cottage, the neighbors would stop by, say hi, and then hang out. That didn't happen. My so-called "friends" from the bar never came by. No one wanted to come to "that place." A month later, it was just me and Samuel.

The problem was me. I began avoiding people. I couldn't tell them about Samuel because I remembered how they and I treated Arthur. But, I needed someone to talk to.

Mazram, forgive me, but I was in a foul mood that night. I got up the courage to meet the neighbors, but my temper got the better of me when they were dismissive about being neighborly. I complained to them about not wanting to come over and called them stuck up and selfish. I was trying to be nice, but it didn't work.

I fixed dinner and headed into the chamber to have dinner with Samuel. He got up and shuffled over the table as usual but did it slower than expected. I started with the usual steak or lobster, and he consumed it, but he seemed pickier. I could have sworn that I saw his head turn toward his corner several times.

It was as if he didn't want to be my friend.

Well... if he wanted to be that way. Fine!

I looked through the deck, and one of the cards had a... razorblade.

No... I couldn't do that.

Forcing someone to eat a razor blade. But... is Samuel... really someone? The warriors and dragons on the white walls were just images. Could he be a sophisticated image? What would happen if I didn't show up for weeks? Would he starve? No one had been down here for a long time. He looked okay. He was eating just as fast as the first time I saw him.

He's not real.

I drew the card with the razor blade and held it before me.

On the table, a small wooden bowl of razor blades appeared. They gleamed in the light, and Samuel grabbed a couple without hesitation and put them in his mouth. No matter how many times the blades cut him while he picked them up, he kept shoving them in his mouth.

Soon, the bowl was empty, and Samuel fell backward. He tried crawling back to his corner but didn't make it. He convulsed, and his abdomen split open again, and razor blades and black ichor flowed out onto the floor. After several moments, his abdomen reformed, and he crawled to his corner.

I fell to my knees when I understood what I had done.

Every time I showed up for the next month, I selected cards with sushi, steak, vegetables, and other stuff I thought he would like. It took a while for him to approach the table after the razor blade incident, but he always consumed whatever was on it.

I don't know what was wrong with me.

I got bored again.





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He survived the razor blades, which told me he was not a living creature. Nothing could do that. He was just like the moving paintings on the wall.

As before, my curiosity got the better of me.

Mixed in with the edible food, I fed him razors, nails, bugs, and anything that seemed inedible. Every time, his abdomen was destroyed, and every time, it repaired itself.

You know what?

I'd gotten to the point that, honestly, I liked doing that to him. He wasn't real. This was some sort of sick game.

Then it happened. One month after I had started feeding Samuel the inedible items.

June 2, 3157 of the Third Age.

That was the day that was burned into my mind and I realized that I wasn't a good person.

As our usual routine, I headed down to the basement. For the last several weeks, I'd forgo bringing food to have dinner with Samuel. He wasn't real. This was just a magical game that was part and parcel with the house.

When I stepped onto the rug this time, however, no cards appeared. The black curtain was pulled apart, and behind it was not Samuel but a masked winged creature with long talons hovering over a spinning ball floating in the room.

She pulled her mask off, and underneath was the cruel face of an old woman with stringy grey hair and no left eye. Her smile unnerved me as she spoke in a gravelly voice.

“Jonathan. Have you been having fun?” she said.

Unlike other times, I jumped back off the rug, but the curtain didn’t close. She was still floating in front of me.

“Don’t be shy. I know that you named the poor creature Samuel. That’s so cute. You people always want to name them,” she continued.

“Are you having fun?” she said.

I looked at the warriors and dragons on the white walls beside me, and they all stopped moving. They were all looking at me, also.

“Uh... yeah... kind of... but, it gets kind of boring after a while. This is a game, right? He’s not real, is he?” I asked, tentatively. I hoped her answer wasn’t what I thought it was going to be... but my heart told me I was wrong.

“Oh. He’s very real. He’s just not like you and me.”

My heart sank when I heard what she had said. I’m not that

type of person. It was just a game. Nothing more.

“Uh... can he do anything else other than eat? Can he play games or talk?” Maybe there was a way that I could be kind to him so that he could forgive me.

The ball in front of the creature spun faster and faster, changing from blue to red to purple and back to blue.

“Yes and no. Many things can happen to him, but he can never talk to you, and he can’t be hurt. I know that is what you want. Forgiveness. Those before you all thought the same thing. What would you like?” she said.

I wracked my brain. I could make him comfortable but...

I didn’t know what was wrong with me.

I wondered how strong he was.

With a gleam in my eye, I asked, “So, he can’t be hurt, right? He’s pretty strong? So, if he was crushed by... I don’t know... a tree or something, he could just shrug it off?”

A wicked smile crossed her face as she said, “Yes. He can’t be hurt, and he is quite strong. A tree falling on him would squash him for a bit, but he’d survive without a problem. Want to try?”

The globe before her spun faster and faster and turned pure white.

“Is that what you want?” she asked again.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes. That’s what I want. I want to see how strong he really is. I’m curious, and since you said that I can’t hurt him, he won’t mind.”

“Done! The next set of cards will be all things that can crush. Have fun!” she cackled as she smiled broadly.

The old woman returned her mask to her face and looked down at the spinning white ball. It spun faster and faster as she chanted. I couldn’t quite make out the words, but I did catch a couple of them that sounded like “fate,” “karma,” or “retribution.”

The faster the ball spun, the brighter it glowed as the old woman turned into a white mist and faded into the ball.

The room took on the form I was familiar with: Samuel was in the corner, looking at the spinning white ball in its center. Faster than ever before, he sprung up on his eight legs and skittered over to the spinning ball.

The closer he got to the ball, the faster it spun.

When Samuel reached the center of the room, the ball floated above him and plunged into his abdomen. Convulsing on the ground, his white bulbous belly split open, and white smoke poured out and covered his entire body.

Everywhere the smoke touched him, his skin cracked and

dissipated into white smoke. The more he shook on the ground, the faster the process. Moments before the final parts of his body were consumed by the smoke, his face showed through the inky blackness of his fading form, and he smiled at me.

It was Arthur!

“Arthur! I’m sorry!”, I cried out.

Would he return? What is happening? Will it be someone else?

As Arthur was fully consumed by the spinning ball, the old woman appeared behind it without her mask. She dragged one talon along the top of the ball that floated in front of her and, in a flash, it flew above my head.

Four glass walls formed on the edges of the rug and encased me. Startled, I pushed against the walls, and even though they gave a bit under pressure, they returned to their solid form when I removed my hands.

I was trapped in a glass cage, with the white ball spinning above my head.

At the other end of the room, the old woman cackled as she clapped her hands and disappeared.



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As the ball above my head spun faster and faster, thin white filaments flowed out and crawled down the seams of the glass cage. Like tiny arcs of lightning, the filaments spread from the seams to cover the glass and, from there, flowed in the direction of my chest and body.

I tried pushing on the glass as hard as possible but couldn't break it. As if it were made of rubber, it gave way under my pounding fists and kicks and then reverted to its normal surface.

As more filaments covered the cage, I squatted down to get as far away from them as possible, but I knew it would not work for long.

Then one filament touched me... then another.... and then more. I screamed as a cube of flesh fell off of every part of my body where the filament touched. The cube was only an inch or so in size, but I'd never been hurt that much in my entire life. Where the cube fell off, my body was sealed so that no blood was apparent, but I could see inside of my body.

Desperately, I tried pushing harder on the glass wall but to no avail.

More filaments touched. More cubes of flesh piled up around me on the floor. I could no longer stand as my legs and arms

were lying in various piles around me.

The glass cage faded and melted into the sides of the rug. It didn't matter. I wasn't going anywhere.

The strangest part of this scene was that I could still feel and think even though my body was rapidly turned into quivering cubes. My senses were overstimulated because I could feel the rug under one touch point and over hundreds of little touch points.

My eyes weren't looking in the same direction, and considering that some of the cubes created from my tongue touched the rug and some touched other flesh cubes; I was confused about what I was tasting.

After my body had been fully converted, the pieces that were once my body floated up and flew toward the obsidian wall before me. Each cube stuck to the center of the wall, and all of the white walls, the floor, and the ceiling changed into mirrors.

Fascinated, I watched the cubes move along the obsidian wall, creating a mosaic as if I were looking at a stained-glass window in a church. It was me, and it wasn't. My brain somehow detached from the situation and could view it without going insane.

Some of the cubes changed colors as they moved. Some turned black, and others turned white. In one area, closer to the floor, I could see most of the cubes form into a white



circular shape with a dark man-like shape above it. Eight white legs splayed out to the sides.

The mosaic of me on the wall was... Samuel.

This must be what happened to Arthur!

When all the cubes finally reassembled into my new form, I fell backward into darkness. I didn't know how long I fell, but it felt like an eternity.

Then, one day, I woke up in the corner of a dark room with a black curtain covering the far wall.

Two hands appeared in the center of the curtain and pulled it toward the edge. On the wall, there was the room in my cottage. The room with my rug! In the room, a couple stood on the rug with a set of cards floating in front of them.

They looked like they were arguing since the woman kept trying to pull the deck out of the man's hands. He eventually calmed down and held the deck out to her. Hesitantly, she drew three cards from the deck and held them to her face.

Three cards floated on the wall between me and the couple. The first card showed a tree falling and crushing me. On the second card, I was running down a hill with a large boulder gaining on me. The final card showed me lying in the middle of a street, and a wagon was rapidly approaching.

I tried my hardest to stay in the corner but couldn't. I couldn't

find anything to grip on, and, against all thought, my body rose and skittered to the center of the room.

I felt cold in the center of the room as a shadow fell over me, and I looked up. A giant tree was falling, and there was no area in the room where I could escape.