

## **Thin**

Doug walked down the street. His heart beat. His lungs pulled in air. Blood flowed in his veins. That was, at least, as it should be.

Everything else was so wrong. Well, actually, it wasn't that everything was so wrong; it was that nothing was right.

In the corner of his eye, he saw the man standing there. He wore all black. Like some postmodern monk with a thing for the Ramones. Sure, it sounded idiotic, but there it was. He wore a black, death-shroud monk's cloak, the hood up, the arms ripped at the shoulders.

Underneath, black jeans, finished off by gargantuan leather boots. The sort you see guys on Harley's wear. On his wrists were leather cuffs. In his right hand was a sword. A goddamn sword, of all things. A character out of Zakk Wylde's version of the book of Revelations. "And behold, I saw a metal-headed beast with a monkish cloak, and a mighty sword with which he cleaved Babylon. And yea verily; he did *rock.*"

Doug walked a little faster. Looked to his left again. The metal monk was gone. Doug breathed a little easier.

People lined the street, pushing, shoving and elbowing their way past one another like flies on a dead body. The noise was enough to occupy Doug's mind for the moment. A woman ran into him. "'Scuse me," Doug said. The woman didn't even turn. Three men walked down the sidewalk in a straight line, one was big with a cranium skinned so bald you could read marquee signs off it at night, the other two, just big. People got out of there way. Doug was thinking about the metal monk. They flattened him.

"Hey, what the hell!" Doug shouted as he hit the concrete sidewalk. The bald one turned. Doug said nothing else. He got up, dusted himself off and resumed walking. He was on his way to see a movie, that was all. Being pile driven by three psychos was not something he wanted to experience. He had enough on his mind.

Reality was thin. Aged parchment that we somehow depended on to keep our tiny worlds compartmentalized and protected from whatever existed that we didn't know about. A few centuries ago, mankind had names for the things we didn't know about. Demons, spirits, angels, ghosts; pick your particular favorite and run with it. Science renamed everything now. Bosons, molecules, strings, radio waves, light waves, sound waves. It was all the same. Speculation with empirical data that seemed to back things up. In reality, wasn't science also faith?

No one likes to think about the paper thin reality we live in. We bury those thoughts in a hell of a lot of noise. Television, music, conversation, movies, our cell phones, PDAs and computers; whatever keeps the demons at bay. Whatever it is we can't see, we assume the parchment of reality has a handle on. Someone's doing something about those things, right? Doug was no different. Only Doug was different. Someone had torn a tiny slit in reality for Doug. And holy shit, it was scaring the hell out of him already.

Doug was also gifted at a particularly human vice: denial. The metal monk? Doug just assumed he was seeing things. And he was too scared of that fact to see someone about his now daily visions.

It would get worse for Doug. A lot worse.

The movie was boring. He'd come to see a new horror film he'd heard about. One of those Asian films that was bad to begin with. An American screenwriter and director had taken an already bad film and made it worse. You could nearly see through the characters. Cardboard gives better performances. And the moment the supposed monster had shown up, it had been one hundred percent computer-generated.

Which left Doug feeling completely disconnected. He couldn't be scared of something that his imagination did a better job of rendering.

An usher tapped him on the shoulder. "Could you please remove your feet from the back of the chair, sir?" "Sure." Doug removed his feet. The usher left. Doug waited five minutes and put his feet back up. For eight dollars and fifty cents, he would put his feet wherever the hell he wanted to.

A very tall woman walked down the aisle and sat in front of Doug. She was at least six and a half feet tall. Her blond hair blocked all view of the screen in the old-fashioned theater. No stadium seating. He should have known better when he saw that the movie was playing in this theater. It was where they always put the second rate films.

Doug moved over one seat. Two minutes later, so did the giant woman. Doug pondered the back of her head. He'd never seen a woman that large. And why had she moved? Was she also rude? He moved again, two seats to the right. Like clockwork, two minutes later, the giant woman moved, also two seats to the right. Now Doug was getting miffed. He tapped the woman on the shoulder. "Ma'am? Could you move over one seat? I can't see the movie." The giant woman only turned her head slightly away from Doug. Not much. A couple of

degrees. She swelled slightly. Doug assumed she had drawn a deep breath, but he heard no sound. Then again, there was a movie playing and all.

“Ma’am?” he tapped her on the shoulder again. “Ma’am, could you please move over one seat? I’d like to see the movie.” The woman whipped her head around toward Doug. He slapped his hand over his mouth to muffle the scream. She had no face. Just a huge mouth with a rictus grin showing far too many sharp and filthy teeth. The sort a predator has, with colorations as if she’d just finished a meal. A raw meal. Doug began to back over his chair, and fell right into the lap of the woman behind him. She was no giant, and she had a face, one that was now spewing forth foul language. Doug rolled out of her lap and ran down the row until he was in the aisle. He began to run towards the exit. Before he burst through the door, he looked back at the row he had been sitting on. No one was there. Of course not. Now Doug knew he was seeing things. And, much more of this, he’d have to see a doctor.

He ran down the hallway, past the restrooms, past the concession stands and past the big cop standing at the front door. “Sir!” the cop shouted. “SIR! Slow down. Stop running!” Doug didn’t even hear him. He was thinking only of six and a half feet of monsterish woman.

What was happening to him? Was he losing his mind? Because it sure felt like it. Everything seemed to be unraveling right there in front of his surprised eyes.

Doug slowed down and walked at a normal pace a couple of hundred feet from the theater. He'd walked here from his apartment, which wasn't that far. Still, he was not enjoying the night air. Not tonight. Not having seen the things he had in broad daylight. There was no telling what kind of madness would step out of the night breeze.

On the way home, Doug passed the minacious church. Methodist, with enough homage to Catholicism to render it nearly indeterminable from the cathedral a few blocks down past his apartment. The spire protruded into the night sky as though pointing a massive finger toward the heavens. The stained glass effectuated religious iconography depicting an anything but comforting ideal. A strange looking man with a beard and halo. A woman with a baby at her breast. It was all benign. And yet the overall feeling was overcast; shrouded in something Doug could not quite define. The images drew a pall over his senses, heightening an already melancholy state.

Doug had tried faith and found it lacking. He believed in a God. Surely there was some being that had brought the universe into existence.

Random occurrence was too much for him to accept. And yet, so was religion. Religion demanded faith in men and books. Words and sayings passed down from generation to generation. Changed a little each time. It demanded acceptance of the deeds of a God who often seemed angry and vengeful. Over the years, Doug had heard all the arguments for religion, from the most conservative to the overly casual liberal. But it was all the same to him. A leap of faith is a leap of faith. Distance is irrelevant when it's marked over a chasm.

To believe what he was seeing now (thought it was tonight right in front of his face, smiling at him from a death grin) was one hell of a leap of faith. And this chasm, should he hurtle it, would perhaps mean the last thing he ever did in his waking life.

Doug was knocked to his rear-end by something. Whatever it was hit him so hard that his vision blurred for a moment. He got up, almost expecting to see the monster woman standing there. But there was nothing there. Above him, he heard the sound. A rustling. Wings? He looked up. Something almost human flew above him, wings spanning at least twelve feet and pummeling the air around it into submission. As it hovered above him, he wondered if this was an angel. Why the hell not, after what he'd seen today?

But it was no angel.

The thing descended. Doug saw a face behind the long hair falling forward. But it was not human. Whatever it was, God help him, there was nothing either human or angelic about this creature. Doug ran.

Behind and slightly above him, wings beat the night air. Doug didn't dare take time to look back. His apartment was only a few hundred feet now, if he could only make it into the foyer, maybe this thing couldn't follow him. Maybe. Hope was a foolish thing, Doug knew it. But it was all he had at the moment. The creature drew closer. Doug swore he felt its breath on his neck. There was his apartment building! Only a few more feet now! The creature grabbed Doug by the shirt, instantly hauling him into the air. As if he weighed nothing. Doug screamed as he was lifted past the second story window. That new couple. The ones who'd just moved in. Through the window, Doug glimpsed them. They sat watching television. If they heard him scream, they made no move to show it. Panicking, Doug lifted his arms above him. Felt the shirt slip. He wriggled now, willing his body into rubber. The shirt slipped off and Doug fell twenty-five feet to the ground. He rolled as best he could (wasn't that what the movies said? Roll with the fall?) and managed not to break anything. But he was going to wake up bruised tomorrow. If he woke up tomorrow. Knowing he had no time to

sit and nurse his wounds, he ran into the foyer of his apartment building. He didn't stop running until he was at the top of the third flight of stairs. He had to stop then and take a breath or he felt like his heart would burst.

As he stood there, feeling as though every breath burnt holes into his lungs, he listened. No doors opening downstairs. The creature hadn't come inside the building. Maybe it wouldn't. Talk about faith. Doug was making the leaps like an equestrian right now.

After another moment or two, Doug walked to his apartment, placed the key in the latch and opened the door. A smell like nothing he'd ever encountered assaulted him as he stepped through the door. He flipped on the light. There stood the metal monk, hood still drawn, boots and its sword covered with a black substance, the winged creature hanging half way out the open window, slaughtered. The thought went through Doug's head like lightning: "the enemy of my enemy?" But Doug knew better. This man, this thing that had slain the winged beast, he'd done it for sport. Doug knew. He didn't know how he knew. He didn't have to know. It was nothing more than another enemy. Not a friend. An enemy that had lain in wait for him to come home. Just as the man with the sword started to walk toward him, Doug slammed the door shut and ran down the hall, down the stairs and out the back door of the

complex. There was an abandoned building one street over. He didn't know if it would do any good (God only knew what he'd see there), but he was going to hide there anyway. Not ready just yet to roll over and die.

He climbed over the privacy fence and dropped into someone's yard, nearly spilling their smoking grill. "HEY!" a man with a beer shouted. "What the fuck, man? HEY!" But Doug kept running. He crossed the street as horns honked and he was flanked slightly by a Mercedes, the driver blowing the horn and giving him the middle finger. But Doug kept running. Doug had no choice. There was a man with a sword. A goddamn sword, of all things. And he was coming to kill Doug.

The building was large. Maybe fifteen stories. There would be somewhere to hide.

As he stepped into the old building, Doug tried to notice any odd smells. None here. Just dust, dilapidation, piss and age. There were bound to be squatters here. Some of them dangerous. But Doug had a man with a sword after him. Squatters didn't seem to matter a whole lot at the moment.

He wasn't even going to try the elevator. No telling what sort of death trap it was. There was enough death following him around right now to add any more to it. He walked up the stairs, listening for sounds both above him and below him. He wanted to be ambushed by squatters no more than he wanted to come to rest on the hilt of a sword. As he rounded the stairs, stepping on to the fifth floor landing, a voice spoke from a dark doorway. "The fuck you want, motherfucker?" "Nothing," Doug said quickly. "Nothing. I swear. I just need somewhere to hide."

"Stay the fuck off my floor. I don't know you, motherfucker."

Doug didn't need to be told twice. He kept walking up the stairs until he reached the eighth floor. He stepped on the landing, listened for anyone, and stepped through a door slowly. The windows lit a cavernous, blank room. Probably an office floor that never was completed before it was abandoned. Or maybe one that was about to be renovated, and the funding ran out. Quietly, Doug made his way into the room, looking around and listening carefully for anyone who might take umbrage to him being on their floor and ambush him. But there was no one here. First lucky break he'd caught since the movie theater. He walked to a large window, ducked down and peeked his head over the sill. But it was no use. He could see nothing below but life. What he was searching for was death. Coming for him. So he found

the darkest corner of the room, huddled down and waited. For what, he wasn't sure. But hiding was the only thing he could think to do.

Doug wondered over his options. Right now, he knew he was only safe for the moment. He'd seen these things. *And they had seen him.* And tracked him down. Maybe they had been watching him for some time. Learning his habits. Where he lived. It didn't make sense. But so far today, sense and reason had waved a fierce goodbye to Doug. Why him? In the grand scheme of things, Doug was basically no one. He worked at a mediocre web development firm, did his job in a mediocre fashion (because the idiots upstairs didn't seem to know how to make one smart decision when you got right down to it) and lived in a mediocre apartment. He drove a Nissan Altima. No more status quo person existed. No wife, no kids, no family alive anymore. What did he matter?

Maybe it simply was because he'd seen them.

In the far corner of the empty floor, Doug saw something shifting in the darkness. A long hiss sliced the air. Doug froze. "What do you see, human?" The thing spoke in a long, breathy voice. Like a hiss with syllables. Doug felt sweat bead on his forehead. He strained his vision, but whatever he'd seen was no longer there.

“What do you see, human?”

This time, whatever spoke the words was in the corner directly across from him. It seemed to have a human shape, but the shape wasn't quite right. It leaned forward slowly into the light from the window. Doug let out a moan. Like the monster woman in the theater, this creature had no eyes. There were two holes where a nose should have been and a mouth that was two big for its head. It smiled, showing rows of razor-like teeth. It turned its head to the side slightly, and again spoke. “I see you, human. I see everything about you.” As Doug strained his vision to see more of the creature, it was gone.

Cold breath tickled Doug's right ear.

“And I see you dying.”

The door burst open and the metal monk with the sword walked into the room. The creature beside Doug hissed and was gone. Now it stood and faced the man with the sword. It was at least nine feet tall when standing straight up. Spikes ran down the length of its back. Its head was smooth, without hair. The fingers on its hands were nearly twice the length of a normal man's hand. It leaned back and thin tendrils

burst from its chest, seeking out the man with the sword. The metal monk swung the sword, slicing the first wave of tentacles away with little effort. The creature hissed and a second wave of tentacles burst from its chest. The monk was too slow bringing the heavy sword around and these found their mark. He screamed, blood beginning to flow from the places that the tentacles latched on. He brought the sword around and down, slicing these tentacles as well. But the creature was no longer connected. It had disappeared. The monk looked directly at Doug and fairly smiled, though blood ran on the floor and began to pool. Doug saw the creature reappear behind the monk, and as his eyes widened, the monk saw and ducked just as the creature swung its elongated arm at his head.

The monk brought the sword up behind him, impaling the creature on it. He quickly turned around and, with a force that mesmerized Doug, brought the sword upward, through the creature's body, slicing its upper half in two. It fell to the ground, cleft in two. It would never hiss a death threat again.

Doug's bladder released. He was too terrified to be humiliated. The monk turned and looked at him. The monk drug the sword across its pant leg, wiping away the dark blood. And it walked toward Doug.

“What the hell happened here?” The landlord looked at the police officer, then at the door, broken into little bits. “Hell if I know,” he said. “Doug was always quiet. Too quiet, you ask me. Don’t even own a television. What kinda nutcase don’t own a TV?”

“Robert! You’d better come see this!”

The police officer who was standing outside talking to the landlord walked into the apartment. “What the fuck?”

Doug woke up. Woke up screaming at the top of his lungs. What had happened? Where the hell was he? He looked around and realized he was still in empty floor of the abandoned building. He wondered to himself which was the dream. What had happened last night or this moment now, alive and not cut to ribbons by that damn monk freak. He looked over and saw the black stain where the creature had been killed. The stain was all that was left. Then, he gasped as someone walked into the room. This guy *looked* perfectly normal, but Doug has ceased trusting his eyes.

The man looked down at Doug, puzzled. "How is it that you see me," he asked.

"I...I don't know. You're standing there, right? Or am I dreaming this?"

"No dream. I'm just amazed that you see me. I walk around here a lot. In the last thirty years, you're only the fourth person to see me."

"Who are you? Did you save my life?"

"In a way, I suppose I did. Call me James. Works as good as any other name."

"What are you, uh, James?"

"Just a man like you," James said. "Didn't catch your name."

"Doug. And if you claim you haven't been seen, then I guess you are a little like me after all. But you're nothing like me if you managed to get rid of that homicidal maniac with the goddamn sword."

“Him? The only thing about him I fear,” James said, “is some of his smell getting on me. He’s gone. Wouldn’t worry about him anymore. I would not, however, go back to your apartment. I’d suspect by now the police have a few more questions for you than you’ll be able to answer.”

“Where the hell do I go?” Doug asked. “That was my home.”

“Not really,” James said. “It was just where you lived. Anywhere will do, don’t you think?”

“Awful cavalier,” Doug said. “But it seems I just lost my apartment. And I was assaulted by things I can’t even believe exist. *And how the hell do all you people know where I live?*”

“Simple,” James said. “We’ve been watching.”