

The Arkham Kids

By

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Five little girls stared up at me, their jeans, cartoon character t-shirts, and pigtails signs of an evil, midget barbarian horde that could disrupt the ‘Skins-Cowboys game starting in 10 minutes. My three blonde daughters – Alexa, eight, and the seven-year-old twins, Haley and Kayleen – stood next to two other girls of about the same age, also twins, with black hair, brown eyes, and skin the color of roasted almonds. I knew exactly what they *all* were thinking: can we take him?

Janie, her purse over one arm and her coat over the other, breezed past through the open door. “Thanks, Mike. Have a good time with the girls.”

I clutched my ex’s wrist. “There are *five*, Janie.”

She glanced at the pigtailed gaggle, back at me. “Yes. The girls have a couple of friends over.”

I stepped outside with her. “But—“

“Mike,” she pushed me back inside, “for God’s sake, can’t you handle a few little girls for half a day? They’ll entertain themselves, and you can watch your game.”

My eyes widened as I pressed my hand to my chest. “You think I would come over here to be with my girls and spend the time watching football?”

My ex rolled her eyes and said through the closing door, “Just make sure they behave.”

The door shut. Her heels clicked across the driveway, her car’s engine revved, and she was gone.

Alexa turned the deadbolt while beaming at me, her front tooth still missing from when the Tooth Fairy had nipped it last week. “I’m glad you’re here, Daddy.” She took my hand and turned me around.

“Me too, sweetie.” Maybe this won’t be so bad, I thought. “Who are your friends, girls?”

“Harmony and Bridget,” the dark twins said in unison. Their thin voices chilled me for some reason and made me want to warm up in front of the TV. “Great, great.” Four minutes ‘til kick-off according to the old Timex. With \$600 riding on this game, I didn’t want to miss a minute. “Well, I’m sure you girls want to go play....”

“Play with us, Daddy,” Haley said. She smiled so her adorable dimples appeared.

“Yeah!” Kayleen nodded, her dimples just as adorable. She took my other hand.

They pulled me a few steps down the hall. I even felt the new girls pushing me from behind. Again the chill. “How ‘bout this, everyone? Let’s play the game-game!”

“What’s that?” A concert of five little voices piped out the two syllables.

I kissed the soft hands holding mine and extricated myself. “You go in the play room and show Harmony and...um....” I’d lost the other kid’s name.

“Bridget,” said Harmony and Bridget together, like a single creature. *Har-Bridge* wafted into my mind unexpectedly as their dark eyes pierced mine. “Yeah,” I looked at the sunny, reassuring faces of Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen. “Show your friends your doll house and some of your cool pop-up books while I watch the football game on TV. It’s a competition. See?” I rubbed my hands together to ignite some team spirit. “After three hours or so, whoever has the most fun wins. Won’t that be great?” My voice ended an octave higher. I grinned at all of them, clapped, then shepherded them toward the back bedroom, my daughters’ frilly, pastel, stuffed-animal domain.

Har-Bridge studied me a moment before Alexa led everyone down the hall. They all giggled and spoke the secret language of single-digit-aged girls.

Finally. I repositioned a chair and ottoman in front of the television. Checking the hallway to make sure no pigtails could be seen, I unlocked the front door, retrieved a bag of chips and onion dip and a cold six-pack from my car since Janie didn’t keep “that junk” around anymore, tiptoed back inside, and settled in. Ah, middle-aged heaven.

My first inkling that the afternoon would not proceed according to design came during the kickoff. Just as the Cowboys receiver dropped the ball and scrambled for it, Har-Bridge appeared at my side with a cup of hot chocolate.

Two ideas popped into my head. First, I realized it had started raining in Dallas, making the ball slippery. Second, I considered calling my bookie, Joey, and upping my bet another couple hundred to take advantage of this unexpected gift from the weather gods. When I noticed that Har-Bridge was still present, two pairs of hands holding a steaming cup, two sets of eyes staring at me, I wondered if kids this young should be fooling with hot liquids.

What the hell, they weren’t my kids.

“Would you like some hot chocolate?” Har-Bridge intoned.

“No, thanks. You run along and play your game so we can see who wins.”

The cup moved closer. “Have some hot chocolate.”

“No thanks.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“Look,” I barked, “go play, okay?” I craned my neck around the chair to see if my girls were behind these dark twins, maybe egging them on. Nope. Har-Bridge seemed to consider me for another few seconds, then scurried off, whispering.

On the TV, the Cowboys had recovered not only their fumble but run 90 yards for a touchdown. And they kicked the extra point. “Hey, what just happened?”

“Would you like some orange juice?”

I jumped. “No.” I waved away the glass Har-Bridge held out. They probably wouldn’t get off my back until I had accepted a beverage. What the hell. “Get me a beer.” That should keep them busy. The only beer in the house was the stuff I’d brought, one can almost empty in my lap and the rest on the floor next to my chair.

They returned promptly with an open microbrew.

“Oh. Thanks.” So, Janie did have *some* “junk” around. I placed the bottle on the floor.

“Drink ours first.”

Commercials were on so I glanced at the them. “It was opened second. It gets drunk second. Or drank. Whichever. I’m not an English teacher.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“Oh, for Christ.... Okay, okay. I’ll drink yours first.” I sipped. “There? Are you—” I spit the nasty stuff right onto the carpet. “Did you put something in this?”

Har-Bridge giggled. Their smiles were wide, toothy.

I went into the kitchen, emptied the bottle in the sink, and returned to find them messing with my other beer. “All right,” I said, growling. “Get out.” I flicked my hands at them.

They scampered off. I opened number two of my six-pack. The ‘Skins were down 16 and the first quarter was nearly over. Damn. “What happened?”

Right then I felt woozy. My stomach shifted. My eyesight blurred. I heard more giggling and turned in time to see Har-Bridge swinging a rolling pin at my head.

I awoke to chanting. My hands and feet were bound with extension cords. Gone were the little girl voices Har-Bridge had used to deceive me. They grunted and cracked their mouths on the awful sounds necessary to pronounce that which should never be spoken.

“Nyarlathotep! Nyarlathotep! We beseech thee!”

I edged up on my elbow. Stones from the front yard ringed my chair. The Har-Bridge things kneeled at the edge, palms up in supplication, eyes rolled into their heads.

Had I heard correctly? Nyarlathotep? Har-Bridge was calling to the Howler in the Darkness whose scream would shatter the world like an egg! Or, was it the Blind Crawling Eye? It had been a couple of decades since my Feminist Deities class in community college, and years since Janie had translated those passages from the *Necronomicon* for me. I struggled with the cords, then noticed the Cowboys were up by 22 points! Geez, the ‘Skins were falling apart. An overhead blimp shot of the stadium revealed a sea of waving blue and silver flags.

Har-Bridge dumped the contents of Janie’s vacuum cleaner on my head. The Crawling Chaos! I sneezed and coughed. That was it. Nyarlathotep was the Crawling Chaos, Opener of the Way. Once he split the membrane between our plane and that of the Elder Gods, Cthulhu, the World-Killer, would follow and destroy our world.

“Daddy?”

I wiped my face on the carpet and looked up. Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen kneeled next to me.

“Yes, girls?”

“May we have some hot chocolate?”

“Not now, honey. Daddy’s kind of busy.”

The chanting rattled inside my head. I scooted onto my other side, and yelled at Har-Bridge, “Who are you?”

They stopped chanting, their eyes rolled forward to pierce me again, and they spoke as one. “We are the Harbingers. We call forth Nyarlathotep who will open the Way for Cthulhu!”

“Well, stop. Stop right now or I’m giving you both a time out.”

They resumed chanting.

My daughters picked dustballs out of my hair. "Girls? Have you been playing with Mommy's books?"

They looked at my dirty polo shirt and not my eyes.

"Girls?"

"We wanted friends to play with," Haley said.

"Yeah," Kayleen nodded.

Alexa said, "May we have the hot chocolate or not?"

"Uh, sure. Just untie me."

She worked on the knots around my wrists while the twins untied my ankles.

The Harbingers ignored us. I guess I was no threat to them now that Nyarlathotep was about to appear.

I stood up, shook out the kinks in my muscles, and bent over, hands on hips, so I was eye-level with my daughters. "You understand that Mommy is going to be very angry when she finds out about this, right?"

Solemn nods.

"Get the *Necronomicon* and bring it here."

"Yes, Daddy." They trotted off toward Janie's bedroom.

The Harbingers quieted. The terrible sense of dislocation that preceded Nyarlathotep's presence assailed me. The air vibrated, heating like someone had opened an oven door. Smells curled from another plane of existence and they were enough to put me off barbecue for a year.

Had I shielded my eyes, I would've been fine, but I wanted to catch the game score. I accidentally glanced into the whirling void over my recliner, into the pulsing membrane that separated the Elders' plane from ours. I gaped. Hideous creatures slithered across its now-transparent surface. Waving, screaming stalks covered their bodies, their eyes grabbed, mouths blinked, row after row of living teeth gnashed and shivered. I turned away after noticing the last and most damning bit of insanity: the score read 32-0. How was that possible? The 'Skins were a four-point favorite!

By the time the girls returned with Janie's copy of *Necronomicon*, I was cowering against the living room wall.

Kayleen tugged on my pant leg. A cyclone stretched down from the membrane. Through it a hairy, warty, sinewy arm unwound the pigtails from the girls' hair. Nyarlathotep was coming through.

"Read it!" I yelled and swatted at the arm.

Alexa dragged her flying hair from her eyes and shook her head. "No, you do it!"

"I can't, sweetie! Only girls can read the words, remember?" This time the arm reached for me. I saw it had fingernails like a dirty mechanic.

She shrugged and opened the heavy, black, leather-bound book. She ran her finger down the table of contents and struggled to reach the required page. Like the girls' hair, the book's pages whipped and flapped.

I tried to stay upright and aimed a kick at Nyarlathotep's other dirty, warty hand as it snaked from the cyclone. Alexa read the first ancient verse. To me, of course, the words sounded like gibberish, but the Harbingers caught on right away. They screamed and counter-chanted. The cyclone heaved in and out of the membrane, like a drunk vomiting up too much tequila, then rewinding and swallowing it back.

I looked away this time – God only knew what the score was – but I could feel Nyarlathotep hurl himself repeatedly against the membrane, trying to force the rest of his body through.

“It’s not working, Daddy!” Alexa said.

She wanted to hand the book to me, but I reminded her that I couldn’t read it. “You’re going to have to call the Harbingers back! They belong to Soth!”

“Nuh uh,” Haley said.

“Yeah, nuh uh,” Kayleen agreed. “They belong to Azathoth!”

I slapped my forehead. “Right, you’re right. Alexa, invoke Azathoth!”

The cyclone threatened to explode the walls of the house. Lamps, vases, and more of Janie’s junk spun through the air. I protected my daughters as best I could while Alexa found the correct page.

All three girls invoked Azathoth, bringing the Harbingers into contact with their master. Theoretically, the connection would yank the whole mess back to the Elders’ plane.

The Harbingers screamed as if stabbed. Nyarlathotep attempted to anchor himself by seizing my shoulder, his ragged, grungy fingernails digging into my skin. Only my toes touched the carpet now. Another second and I would be sucked away. The girls grabbed me around the waist and knees. They screamed for me to stay and I screamed at them to let go. I couldn’t bear it if they were sucked in too.

Then, Nyarlathotep disappeared with a loud *pop*, the cyclone spun away into wispy tendrils, and the membrane vanished. Gravity returned. The four of us fell to the floor in a crying, groaning heap. Lamps, vases, and everything else crashed earthward too. After a minute, my ears rang in the silence. I checked the girls for cuts and bruises, gave them all huge, sloppy kisses, and surveyed the remains of the living room.

On the TV only four minutes remained in the game. The totally lame ‘Skins were down 35 to nothing.

I sighed. “Okay, young ladies.”

My three beautiful blondes looked up at me, and as usual, I went soft. “First, I want you to promise me that you won’t ever touch Mommy’s books after today. Promise?”

Earnest nods.

“Second, we will clean up this mess before Mommy gets home.”

More nods.

Alexa’s voice wavered, “Are you going to tell Mommy?” Her eyes were shiny. Haley and Kayleen glanced at their older sister, and tears slipped down their cheeks.

I thought about it. “Girls, what you did today upset the balance between the worlds.”

Three heads sank and I heard sniffles.

“But,” I touched each child under the chin to lift her gaze, “here’s what we’re going to do to make things right. If this works, then I think it will be safe to leave Mommy out of it. Okay?”

“Okay.” They brightened like three sunflowers.

I couldn’t help it, my heart brightened too even though I’d flushed \$600 down the toilet and my shoulder felt like it would never fit in its socket properly again. “Good. Alexa, open the book to the section on the Grazer in the Clouds.”

An hour later, Janie returned, clutching numerous shopping bags. She dropped them in the hallway and studied the living room, the hall, the girls, and me. I was lying on the sofa and the girls were playing with their dolls on the floor nearby and sipping cups of hot chocolate.

“Did everything go all right?” I heard a suspicious edge in the curt question.

I sat up and stretched. “Yeah, no problem. The girls were great.”

Alexa, Haley, and Kayleen turned as one and smiled at me. I winked back.

“Well, good.” Janie’s shoulders relaxed. “And did you girls have a good time?”

“Yup.” “Yeah.” “Yes, Mommy.”

“Where are your little friends?”

“They had to go home,” I said. I hugged my daughters, smelled the freshness of their hair, and kissed each one on the forehead. On the way out, I gave my ex’s arm a polite pat. “See you later.”

She blinked, but smiled. “Thanks again, Mike.”

“You’re welcome.”

In the driveway, I glanced at the white, red, and black magnetic sign on the door of my pickup and rubbed my shoulder.

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and
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