

Not Of Your World

By Miles Adedjouma

It was a beautiful spring day in Hazleton. Practice had ended just as the sun was setting behind the empty bleachers. The bluejays were singing, and the sky was turning a lovely shade of red as Alden felt an unholy chill in the air. He shivered before shaking his head. Probably just climate change. He adjusted his duffel bag and took another step.

Something was behind him. Alden could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Yet when whipped his head back, he found nothing. Alden scanned Hazleton High's baseball field. Save for a few stragglers running home on the other side of the field, there was no one. No Lake being creepy, or Ryan shoving his latest 'findings' in his face. Everything was as it should be.

Alden tightened his grip on his bag's straps, and continued to walk away from the field. The chill was only getting worse now. And he swore he could hear something taking a step just as he was. There was a turn up ahead to the shopping district. He would bolt right and jump into any random store. He could lose the would-be stalker there and-

The thing behind him growled as the air grew colder.

Alden stared ahead. Just a few more steps. Then in Five.

It got closer.

Four.

It breathed on his neck.

Three.

A thick, rough tongue licked his cheek.

Two.

Alden clutched the straps of his backpack.

One.

The thing chuckled in his ear.

Zero.

With the speed that got him into varsity baseball in the first place, Alden dove right and began running like a maniac. Whatever was behind him roared, a sound that was somehow both human and beast. Alden dared not look back, even as he heard the beast charging behind him. Alden dove into a disgusting alley between a bodega and a family shoe store, holding his breath for a moment to not breathe in the dumpster fumes. He made his way to the other side just as a bus rolled to a stop in front of a comic book shop. Alden jumped in, just as the doors closed. He waved his student pass and collapsed into a seat.

He shivered in fear, but he was sure that he managed to get away from that....thing. What was it? It was too big to be a wolf, and there was no way in hell it could be a tiger. He rubbed his eyes, trying to gather his thoughts, just as his phone dinged. Pulling it out, he groaned. It was a text from Ryan, with a link to a video. Opening his phone, he already knew it was a video about.....

Alden was once again greeted by the familiar image of a mysterious figure with red glowing eyes, black horns, and hind-legs like a beast. Yup. Another damn video about the mysterious “Red-Eyed Vigilante.” Ryan had made him watch 50 different shaky-cam videos of some red-eyed monster saving people for months now around Hazleton. The last thing he needed was some boogy-man stories about some mystery hero that was probably a hoax or a marketing stunt. Alden rolled his eyes, pocketed his phone and glanced out the window.

His blood quickly turned to ice.

That....thing was staring at him from an alleyway, hiding in the shadows. Alden didn't get a good look at it, but one thing stood out. Yellow glowing orbs that seemed to peer into his soul to instill one idea into it.

It was hunting him.

His heart had turned into a jackhammer, and bile rose from his throat. Alden slammed the stop button without thinking. He could feel the orbs bore deeper and deeper as he slammed the button over and over again. Finally, the bus rolled to a stop in front of city hall. Alden leaped out the bus doors as they opened.

He ran down main street, past the new shopping mall, past dozens of people who simply raised an eyebrow at the panicked teen, as the chill grew more and more suffocating. He could hear it coming, feel the heat from the monster's breath. He just needed to keep running. He didn't care where he was going. He barely noticed the sign for the town park, or that the sun was low in the horizon, the sky now dark.

He was tripped by a rock and rolled onto the park's baseball field, getting sand all over his uniform. The lampposts on the field glowed to life one by one, as if to present him to the monster. Alden stumbled up, took a few more steps, before collapsing back onto the sand.

He was spent. The beast growled.

Alden looked up, and his heart stopped for a few seconds.

The beast sauntered onto the field, revealing a wolf-like skull with long horns on top of its 'face.' Its body was bigger than a bear, and longer, almost like it was a stretched out gorilla. Its maw was twisted into a cruel grin, as its eyes stared at its prey, exhausted and weak. Its paws were a horrific fusion of a human hand and a wolf's paw.

Alden feebly tried to crawl away, looking around for a weapon. His duffel bag was at the pitcher base, which might as well have been in another country in his state. Gathering sand in his hand, he began throwing it at the beast. But it simply sauntered towards him, not even flinching as sand fell into its hollow eyes. Its grin only grew wider as it raised a paw, its claws gleaming in the light of the moon. The fear of death seemed to petrify Alden's body, as the monster tensed, prepared to strike.

Then, it froze in place. Slowly, it placed its paw on the ground and turned to one of the lampposts. It was glaring at something on top of it. Alden followed its gaze and his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

A figure was crouched on top of one of the lamps, red eyes glaring back at the beast. Even though he couldn't make out much, Alden had seen those horns and those eyes a dozen times.

The Red-Eyed Vigilante leaped from the lamppost, and gracefully touched down on all fours between Alden and the beast.

The skull monster growled at them, and took a few steps forward. The Red-Eyed Vigilante roared back, a horrifying sound that seemed to shake the beast and Alden to their core. The air seemed charged with electricity as the two beasts glared at each other. Finally, the skull monster lowered its stance, glaring at Alden. It growled something, and Alden was sure it almost sounded like 'Mr. Perfect.' It slinked off the field, fading into the shadows.

The Red-Eyed Vigilante glared where the creature was for a few seconds and sniffed the air. He made what sounded like a confused growl before shaking his head. His stance became more relaxed. He...sighed. Alden began inching away before Red-Eyes' head twisted in his direction. Alden froze, as the Vigilante crept right in front of his face, red eyes staring at blue.

“You good? No bruises or anything?” Red-Eyes asked.

Alden gulped and managed a quick nod, shivering as he did so. Red-Eyes sighed, ruffling his violet hair.

“Well that’s good. Name’s Onyx, nice to meet you!” Onyx said, holding out a clawed, sky-toned hand. Alden stared at it for a few seconds, checking if the blue on his skin was makeup. The dark-blue tone was the same on both sides, and the skin looked calloused all around. His fingernails were black and sharp on each end.

But they had to be fake. Just really good cosplay. It had to be, there was no way that was real, or that any of this was real. Lake probably just spiked his water bottle before practice or something. Probably why he skipped out of practice, the jerk.

Onyx held out his hand for a few seconds before waving it in Alden’s face. “Gonna leave me hangin?” he asked, giving a toothy grin. Curved tusks poked out from the top and bottom of his mouth, and rows of shark-like teeth that could likely turn him into a bloody mess glisten under the light of the lamps. The little blood left on Alden’s face drained.

Onyx’s eyes widened with understanding before he covered his mouth. “Right, sorry, hang on.”

Onyx quickly ran back to the lamppost and grabbed a ratty jacket from behind. Dusting it off, he put it on as, with a small grunt, he started....changing. Alden looked on in awe as Onyx’s horns and fangs began shrinking as his legs bent into more human shape. The extra hair fell away, as the rest began turning a dark, almost black, violet. His skin took a pale ivory complexion. He looked....human. A...teen around Alden’s age. The teen that was a monster a few seconds ago gave a wide goofy grin, revealing normal human teeth. “That’s better.”

He walked back to Alden and crouched in front of him, holding out a normal human hand. “Sorry, I know that my,” he bared his teeth and made a mock growling sound, “freaks most people out. Again, I’m Onyx. And you?”

Alden wasn’t sure what to think. But he literally saw Onyx break the laws of physics in front of him so.....

“Alden,” Alden replied. Despite himself, Alden took Onyx’s hand. Then, in a single yank, Alden was pulled up to his feet.

“Alden, huh? Weird name. I like it!” Onyx said.

Alden dusted some of the sand off his uniform and simply nodded.

“Thanks.”

The....former monster demon person smiled before a growling sound nearly gave Alden a heart attack. Onyx clutched his stomach and his smile turned bashful.

“Sorry, I’m hungry.” His expression brightened as he pointed behind him.

“Hey, there’s this great diner not far from here. My treat. You....look like you could also use something to eat.”

Alden nodded before the words finally processed.

“Wait. What. Are you crazy?” Alden asked.

Onyx furrowed his brows for a moment before shaking his head. “No.”

Realization struck Alden and he began to chuckle. It all made sense now. “Okay, okay. You can come out guys! The jig is up! This is some weird ass reality show.”

Onyx tilted his head like a confused dog. “A what?”

Alden made his way to his duffel bag, dusting off the sand before swinging it over his shoulder. “Reality show. Yeah, some weird ass reality show that drugged me up, and...and....”

Alden's knees gave way, landing on the pitcher's base. He clutched his chest, his breathing uneven.

Onyx quickly ran over and bent down, staring into Alden's eyes.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, it's okay. You're going through a lot, I get that. But it's not safe here. That thing or its 'friends' could come back at any time. So long as you're under my protection, they won't go after you. I promise."

Alden looked into Onyx's eyes. He imagined they would be fierce like that beast that attacked him. Instead, they were filled with sincerity.

Alden took a breath in, counted to five, then exhaled. In for five, out for five. Finally, his breathing evened out. He rose, dusting himself off again and let out a long sigh. "Alright, let's go to this...diner. Where is it?" Alden asked.

Onyx pointed to the right of the field. "This way, it's not too far away. I'll explain everything there too."

Onyx took a few steps forward, stopped, and turned to Alden. Alden hesitated for a moment, looking into the darkness where the beast had disappeared. But there was no sign of the monster's yellow orbs of death. Gathering all his resolve, Alden took a few steps as well, standing beside Onyx.

"Lead the way."

They made their way out of the park, and after a short walk, found the fabled diner. Onyx's face became almost as bright as the diner's neon sign. "Griffin's Diner" the sign read.

The two made their way inside the 90s themed diner, and stopped at an empty booth. Onyx scooted into his seat, gleefully grabbing a menu off the table. Alden nearly collapsed into the booth, setting his duffel bag on the floor. He picked up a menu with one hand, scanned it for

a few seconds before placing it down, then picking it up again. A waiter in a bright yellow shirt walked over.

“What can I get you kids?” he asked. Onyx slammed his menu down, eyes glittering like a 5 year old on Christmas morning.

“2 jumbo daddy burgers, one extra-large strawberry milkshake, and 3 large fries! And you?”

Alden stared blankly. “That was just for you?”

Onyx nodded.

Alden simply shook his head. “I’ll have medium fries with the 3 tenders meal, and a medium strawberry milkshake.” The waiter nodded and walked off. There was an awkward silence between the two young teens at the table.

“So, where do you want to start?” Onyx finally asked.

Alden opened his mouth once, twice, before taking a deep breath in and letting out a sigh.

“First thing’s first, what are you?” Alden asked.

Onyx chuckled. “Well that’s a loaded question. Okay so....you know that thing chasing you? That was an Oni, a really primitive Oni. At least it smelt like one.....”

“But what does that have to do with.....oh.”

Onyx gave a grim smile, revealing the curved tusks for a moment, before they shrank back.

“You’re also an Oni.” Alden muttered.

“Yeah....But I’m not like the one chasing you. I’m way nicer, and cuter too.” Onyx waggled his eyebrow while giving a dorky grin.

Alden repressed the urge to facepalm out of embarrassment and annoyance.

“Right. So, that thing that’s chasing me is an Oni. But you are also an Oni. So.....why aren’t you guys working together to have me for dinner?”

Onyx shook his head. “Oni and other magical creatures tend to do their own things. We don’t ‘work together.’ More often than not, we’re fighting for territory and-”

“Hang on, ‘Magical Creatures?’ So, there are more things like you out there?!”

Onyx nodded. “Oh yeah, there’s lots of us out there. There’s werewolves, vampires, mummies somewhere, demons, and wizards, heck I even heard of jewelry that give you powers and -”

Two waiters balanced Onyx’s order between them, before placing down the buffet in front of the salivating Oni. They then placed Alden’s single plate of fries and tenders, along with a glass containing his milkshake, in front of the teen. “Enjoy,” they said, before returning back into the kitchen, barely hiding the concern on their face.

Onyx rubbed his hands together and dove into his food like a starved tiger. After gulping down a burger the size of his head, he began grabbing fistfulls of fries and stuffing them into his face. Alden meanwhile was staring into his milkshake as if he was wondering if it would spontaneously break into song. Onyx raised an eyebrow.

“You going to be okay?” he asked.

Alden shook his head.

“How....how do people or the police not know about this? Th-this should be all over the news and there should be governmental departments and-and.”

Onyx shrugged. “Dunno. People just....don’t. I don’t know if they ignore it, or if they don’t care but they just say ‘it’s fake’ or something and go on with their day.”

Alden was silent for a moment. “Huh.” He finally said. He looked down at his meal, and picked up a fry. “They probably think it’s easier that way.” He mumbled before biting into it.

The fry was way too greasy, but he found he couldn’t care at the moment. After taking a sip of the milkshake, Alden let out a sigh. It was far too delicious. He had to remember this place.

He returned his attention to Onyx. “So basically, there’s like this secret magical part of the world that everyone is ignoring. And for some reason, I’m on that Oni’s shit list, and you are what? Just there?”

“No. This town’s my territory, and I’m protecting it. At least, that’s the basics of it.”

“And what’s the rest?”

Onyx grew quiet for a moment. “It’s not relevant right now. But you’re on the money about that Oni. It’s marked you for death for some reason. Which doesn’t make sense. You didn’t see it before, right?”

“No. That was my first encounter with the black beast of death, unfortunately. What does ‘mark for death’ mean?” Alden asked.

Onyx was silent again, gulping down the fries in his mouth.

“The Oni will chase after you until it kills you. My....presence is the only thing keeping the beast away at the moment. If I leave, it will find you and kill you.”

Alden took in a shaky breath.

“So what can I do to get rid of it or stop it?”

“Well, there’s a few ways, but the best option would be for you to get as far away from here as you can until it loses your scent. It might work, but by the looks of it,”

Onyx stared out the window, and Alden followed his gaze. From the alleyway on the other side of the street, Alden could make out two familiar yellow orbs filled with murderous intent.

“You probably won’t get that far.”

Alden shivered.

“And the other option?” Alden asked.

Onyx clicked his tongue looking back at the beast, then Alden, before sighing.

“I can deal with the Oni. But.....You’ll have to bait it out, and stay close, otherwise it might run away again.”

Alden remained silent, his face blank. He sipped the milkshake, and bit into another greasy fry. He stared into it for a minute before finishing it. He took in another shaking breath before looking back at Onyx.

“Running away is not really an option, is it?” Alden asked.

There was a long pause before Onyx gave a slow nod.

Alden sighed, taking in the truth.

“You are absolutely sure you can kill that thing?”

Onyx nodded again. Alden eyes steeled as he clenched both of his fists.

“I’ll be the bait,” Alden said.

“Are you sure?”

Alden shook his head, but the confidence in his eyes remained. “No. A few hours ago, monsters were just fiction in movies and shitty romance novels. But now, all that shit is real, and one of them wants me dead. I can’t be sure of anything right now. But I don’t want to die, and I

won't let that..... monster kill me. If you say you can kill it, I want you to kill it. And if I have to put myself at risk....fine."

Alden fell back into his seat, feeling the full weight of his decision. Onyx slid Alden's milkshake to him.

"You're gonna want to finish your food. You're gonna need the energy for what comes next."

Alden nodded.

Onyx continued to devour his food, while Alden slowly got through his burger. After swallowing what might be his last meal, an obvious question came to the still terrified teen.

"So what's the plan exactly? Is there a ritual you're gonna do, call in a wizard friend or something?" he asked.

Onyx gulped down the last of his food, before wiping away the grease with his sleeve. "We're gonna lure him back to the field where I found you. You'll leave the diner first, and I'll be just far enough behind you that the beast doesn't notice me. Then once you get there, I'll beat it up and kill it!" he finished, with a smile.

Alden nodded. "Probably the least insane thing I heard all night."

After Onyx called the waiter and paid with a massive wad of bucks, the waiter nodded and curtly made his way off. The two boys rose, and Alden took a step before Onyx grabbed his wrist. "Are you still sure about this?" Onyx asked.

"No. But I don't need to be sure. I need this to end." Alden replied. Onyx said nothing and let go.

Alden walked through the diner door, staring directly at the beast, before walking down the street. He could feel the beast follow. Onyx came out next. With a brief grunt, he shifted into

his Oni form, and leaped onto a lamppost, staring down at Alden from his perch. Alden kept walking, even as he felt the air around him chill. The beast came closer, and closer, its breath growing louder and louder every second. He shivered as it growled in his ear. But he just kept walking forward. He just needed to get a little farther from the diner, from the people.

The footsteps behind him became faster, and Alden quickened his pace. The beast let out a barking laugh as it kept pace. Alden broke into a run, the park so close. But the beast was charging behind him. Alden dared to look back as he hit the grass, and saw Onyx was only a few feet away, perched on a fence.

“NOW!”

With a roar, Onyx leaped onto the Oni, grabbing its horns. The Oni roared in defiance, thrashing like a wild bull. Onyx growled, holding onto the beast’s horns with all his might. He yanked its horn’s to the right, sending it writhing to the dirt, and throwing Onyx off in the process.

The beast glared at the violet-haired oni before realizing his prey was still there. With a cruel grin, it charged at Alden. Alden had barely managed to make it halfway across the field, but the Oni would be there in a few seconds. The beast leaped into the air, before Onyx leaped into its path, slamming into its stomach.

The two went tumbling into the grass, rolling back on their feet, and growled at the other. Alden clutched the strap of his duffel bag as he watched, before an insane idea came to him. As Onyx and the Oni lunged at each other, Alden pulled out a shiny metal bat from the bag. He threw the bag to the ground and turned back to the two creatures, biting and scratching each other.

The larger Oni tried to use its size to overpower its smaller opponent, but Onyx was too fast, ducking under its swipes, and gave the beast a few of his own. Leaping back, Onyx lowered himself to all fours and charged at the beast like a raging bull. The beast mimicked the motion, and the two crashed into each other, the beast's horns locked with its smaller opponent's own.

Onyx snarled as the beast began pushing him back, before the beast jerked up his horns, sending Onyx up into the air, and kicked him with its hind legs. Onyx was sent flying into a lamp post, leaving a large indent in the metal. A dazed Onyx looked on in horror as the beast charged towards Alden.

“ALDEN!” Onyx roared.

Alden took in a deep breath, tightening his grip on the bat. Just like practice.

Five.

The beast snarled, its tongue lolled out of its maw.

Four.

Alden lowered his stance, and held the bat as if he was waiting for the pitch.

Three.

The beast roared, and leaped into the air.

Two.

Onyx leaped from the lamppost and began running after the beast on all fours.

One.

Alden glared at the beast's yellow orbs, filled with hate.

Zero.

And he swung with all his might.

The bat connected with the beast's skull with a sickening crunch. The Oni was sent crashing to the ground beside Alden, writhing in pain.

Onyx ran up and grabbed Alden by the shoulders, and scanned his body.

"You okay? Nothing broken?"

Alden shook his head before returning his attention to the beast. He glared and raised the bat at it.

The beast glared back, clutching its head.

"Bastard," it snarled.

Onyx's and Alden's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. The voice was deeper and distorted, but Alden recognized it.

"Lake?" he whispered.

The beast's eyes widened in shock, before his maw twisted into a toothy grin. "You finally remember me," he growled.

Alden dropped the bat and began to stumble backwards. Onyx was frozen, still staring at the beast.

"Lake....how....why?" The chill was becoming worse.

"A deal with the devil. A spirit came to me, and promised me power beyond my wildest dreams. So we became one, all to kill Mr. Perfect," Lake said.

"Mr.Perfect? Lake, what does tha-"

"EVERYTHING!" He roared.

"You've lorded over me for years with your overachieving BULLCRAP. No matter how hard I work, you always surpass me!! But now,"

Lake chuckled darkly.

“Now that doesn’t matter now, does it?”

Alden took another step back as the beast that was Lake rose to its full height and roared. It lifted one of its clawed hands and swung, only for the blow to be stopped in mid swing.

Onyx glared at Lake as he clutched his talon with one hand, his eyes burning with rage.

“Run, Alden,” he growled.

Alden took another step back.

“NOW!” he roared.

Alden began running as fast as his legs could carry him, but found himself collapsing on the fence, his legs turned to jelly. He looked back at the two....beasts, who had returned to clashing and gnashing at the other.

Onyx glanced back, and the fury in his eyes faded into something softer. He said something, but Alden couldn’t hear over the chaos. The beast roared as it reached in vain for Alden.

With a roar of his own, Onyx lifted the beast up into the air, before throwing it into a lamppost.

Suddenly, Onyx lowered himself to all fours on the ground, as he began...growing. His hair grew longer and more wild as the blue on his skin grew darker. His horns began to curve as the horrific melody of the crunching and shifting bones sang through the field. He groaned in pain before snapping his teeth together, eyes burning red.

What rose glared at his opponent and pounced. In a blink of the eye, Onyx was on top of it, holding the thrashing beast down with one hand. He glared at the beast, studying it for a moment. He took his other hand, and aimed at the beast’s chest. In one stroke, he plunged his hand into the beast.

The Oni, or Lake, screamed in pain as Onyx pulled something out. Grasped gently in his giant hand was a young teen around Alden's age, still wearing his baseball uniform. Onyx gingerly placed the boy down on the sand before glaring at his prey, now slowly fading away.

With a roar, he plunged his fangs into the beast. Alden could hear the sound of flesh tearing, bones breaking, then a crack. Silence. Onyx stepped back as the beast burst into purple flame, becoming nothing more than ash.

Alden was frozen. From fear, shock or something else, he wasn't sure. Somehow, he found the strength to take a step forward and was greeted by a pair of blood-red eyes high on adrenaline and bloodlust.

They quickly turned into horror, and the giant Onyx attempted to cover his mouth and hide the blood dripping from it.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Alden wasn't sure if he wanted to scream in fear or just laugh at the fact a giant monster had just apologized to him. Instead, Alden shrugged. "What for?"

Onyx began to shrink, yet still looked sheepish. "I lost control."

Alden looked at Lake's body. He was still breathing.

"Lake's still alive though. Does he.....?"

Onyx shook his head. "No, he's normal. Whatever deal or contract he made with that spirit is broken. Or rather, I tore it apart." Onyx tried to give a cheeky grin, but it seemed forced.

"Anyway, he won't be doing that again. Or ever really."

Alden nodded, as the sound of police sirens began blaring around them. "So now they come." He grumbles. "I guess that's your cue?"

Onyx nodded.

Alden sighed. “Tonight was crazy and insane and....” Alden trailed off trying to find a word to describe the night. Onyx opened his mouth to say something, but Alden beat him to the punch.

”Thank you.”

Onyx almost looked surprised, and chuckled bashfully.

“I’m just doing my job.”

“Right but still.....”

Onyx nodded. The sirens were glowing louder.

“Do...Do you think I’ll ever see you again?”

Onyx shrugged.

“Hopefully not but hey....maybe I might drop in to say hi?”

Alden smiled.

“That’ll be nice.” Alden gave a small awkward wave.

“See you, Onyx.”

Onyx smiled back and copied the gesture.

“See you, Alden.”

Onyx leapt off into the dark. Alden’s smile faded as he fell to his knees, exhaustion finally catching up to him. Officers quickly surrounded the two young teens, both nearly catatonic from the night's events.

It wasn’t long before Alden and the shivering remains of Lake found blankets wrapped around them as officers barraged them with questions.

Alden couldn’t find the strength to answer most of them except one.

“What happened here?” one officer asked

Alden gave a long sigh. He turned to the officer and stared into his eyes.

“I’m honestly not sure.”