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CryptoZoo

J. Donnelly

I

Cryptid: (from the Greek "κρύπτω" (*krypto*) meaning "hide") is a creature or plant whose existence has been suggested but is unrecognized by scientific consensus and often regarded as highly unlikely. In other words, we're creatures you think don't exist. But we do. Seriously.

It was always easy to find the Hutch this time of year. I just needed to follow the hum of the generator, the one sound out of place in these sleepy backwoods of the southern Cascades. I personally don't care much to go this far north in the autumn since the chilling air nips at my pelt worse than mosquitoes. But it would have broken Aristotle's heart if I skimped out on one of our monthly socials, and how could I do that? Every other sensible, or rather senseless, critter was slipping into hibernation while I dreamed of the warmer desert I had left south of the border. As I padded up to the familiarly decrepit ranger station, I could hear the muffled conversation of the television.¹ Of course Aristotle would be the first here—he always was—and of course he wouldn't be hibernating during the Steelers vs. Ravens playoffs.

I hopped up the rickety porch steps and pawed at the door, adding new nicks over the claw marks I had been leaving there for years like lost milk teeth. The whole station shook under the heavy footsteps inside like a pleasant earthquake. The door swung open and I was greeted with six hundred pounds of fur, feet, and hugs. The sasquatch hunkered his eight-foot-tall frame through the door.

"Hello Cleo! Good to see you!" he boomed. He scooped me up, expertly avoiding my prickly back spines, and squeezed a healthy dose of love into me. I snuggled my snout into the crook of his arm, breathing in the woodsy scent of his cinnamon-colored fur.

"It's good to see you too, Papa," I giggled.

Okay, he's not *really* my Papa. Even cryptid biology isn't weird enough that a sasquatch could spawn a chupacabra.² He's my foster Papa. He took care of me before my eyes and ears were open, and up until the day I could catch my own goat. Even as a pup I understood that the resemblance in species was lacking, but it never really bothered me since he treated me like one of his own kith and kin.

What does rub piss in my nose about my appearance is what people *think* I look like. Allow me to take a moment to give an *accurate* description of what a real chupacabra is. I do not look like some bug-eyed bat-gargoyle with spots and scales; if I ever meet the jackass who came up with that rendering I am going to bite him in the nuts.³ In fact, we chupacabras just look like coyotes without fur. We're ugly—there, I said it! We're nothing more than dog-like creatures with hollow canines, grey-to-brown hairless skin, and double-jointed hind legs.

¹Hence the generator.

²Nature says no.

³I'm serious! It's embarrassing!

And of course, being a chupacabra of the female persuasion, I have a lovely set of dorsal spines. No glowing hypno-alien eyes; my eyes are brown-yellow like pueblo brick, and no wings. And yes, to answer the obvious question, we do drink animal blood as our main source of nutrition, and goats do tend to be our prey of choice. Billy-goat is my personal favorite. Oh, and we're actually marsupials, so I do have a pouch to carry hypothetical pups in.

It was actually the marsupial-ness of chupacabras that resulted in my being raised by Aristotle rather than a chupacabra mama.⁴ My biological mama had a run in with an eighteen-wheeler on a lonely stretch of road outside Bisbee, Arizona. Aristotle had been on one of his epic, interstate strolls when he found that I was the only pup who hadn't succumbed to her death-milk. Cryptids always look out for each other, so he buried my almost-family where no humans could ever find them and took me back to the Hutch. He brought me home as his own. Till I was weaned Papa, would walk to the nearest dairy farm pasture to get some donations from complacent cows and bottle feed me.

The Hutch is what Papa affectionately named this old abandoned ranger outpost he had commandeered as his home, the little cottage he had raised me in and where he kept all his trinkets. As a sasquatch he put his big feet to good use wandering up and down and east and west over the continent, and he liked to pick up souvenirs. Some were natural treasures, like slivers of whale ivory he sifted from the frosted shores of British Columbia or a gleaming apple of amber he found in a tree in Guatemala, and a 32-point mutant deer skull he found in Pennsylvania. Most were a mishmash of junk careless humans had left around that he decided to pick up like a kleptomaniac, though, including the crackling bunny-eared TV set that was temperamentally monochromatic. It only got five clear channels—seven on sunny days—but a year back he found a DVD player and after some jerry-rigging we could finally watch all the DVDs he'd been hoarding like river rocks. That was another thing he loved to collect too; rocks. Big rocks, small rocks, shiny gemite and sandy slate. It's a sasquatch thing I guess, but the things covered every surface that tolerated their company. Only the books outnumbered them.

Ever since I was big enough to move out and live in my own territory, Papa didn't run the TV that much anymore, only when we met up for our monthly visits. He was a reader by heart, having been reading longer than the TV had been invented. He never told me exactly how he learned to read the human words my eyes could not puzzle out, but boy did he love to read! He would read to me for hours, reciting ballads and fantasies and dramas from the books he had dog-eared hundreds of times. He even chose my name from a play he was reading at the time he had found me—*Anthony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare. I never really liked Shakespeare, though. Too dusty and too British. I preferred flipping through the magazines—*Vogue*, *Seventeen*, *Playboy*, *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*—he had stacked around the Hutch like mesas, marveling and laughing at the strange things and places humans visited.

So, between Papa's library and hours of daytime PBS, one could say that I am a decently-rounded chupacabra, which is more than I could say about my wildly raised

⁴Like the common opossum, a female chupacabra carries her babies around in her pouch where they feed on her milk. A cute little image, right? But, should the mother opossum (or in this case, chupacabra) perish unexpectedly, nature has a humane contingency to deal with the babies orphaned in her pouch; upon her death her milk turns poisonous so her little kits will die peacefully in their sleep rather than be eaten alive by maggots and scavengers that go after the mother's body. Thanks for the thoughtfulness, mama.

brethren. The big sasquatch liked to change his name every couple of decades or so, harvesting names out of the books he read as he fancied, but as long as I had been alive to know him he had gone by Aristotle. Sometimes I wondered how the original Cleopatra, who carved her niche in history with her infamous beauty, would have felt about having little old me, a scraggly chupacabra, named in her honor, or some dead poet a very old sasquatch.

Once he set me back down I wandered inside. I curled up in my usual seat, a tie-dyed bean bag as flat as a pancake that still smelled like the sixties. The announcer on the football game droned over the whines and whistles of the crowd. Aristotle lumbered into the gargantuan recliner he had claimed from an overturned RV, the plaid sagging contently as he propped up his feet, which were bigger than my face.

“How are you doing, Papa? You sound tired.”

“I’m fine, I’ve just been having trouble sleeping is all,” he smiled. I noticed how weary his eyes looked and how his smile was abnormally lackluster. I wondered if he had stayed up late reading again.

“So JD isn’t here yet?” I asked.

“Nah, hasn’t shown up—” Papa was interrupted by a loud thump on the roof. He grinned, his whole chest rumbling with a laugh. “Ah, speak of the devil!” That was another thing Papa collected too—puns.

My ears swiveled, following the footsteps as they clicked across the roof above our heads. The skylight swung open and JD dropped down like a literal bat out of hell, his leathery wings fluttering for balance as his talons touched down on the one spare scrap of floor Aristotle left empty just for his entrances. I tensed up instinctually at his sudden appearance. Even though I practically grew up with JD (since he visited Aristotle as often I did, and long before I was even born) he still, admittedly, scared me.

So what is scary enough to put a cryptid like me, who gets nourishment from sucking animal blood in a way Dracula would approve, on edge? The answer: JD. Let me put it this way; the Jersey Devil looks like a photoshop that would give Guillermo del Toro nightmares.⁵ A horse-face with a mouth full of fangs decidedly not meant for munching grass, a slender neck stretching from the muscular body of a kangaroo, including the clawed, dexterous forepaws, gangly hind legs ending in wickedly curved sickle claws⁶, and a tail as thick as an anaconda’s, JD was a conglomeration of the worst the animal kingdom has to offer. A shaggy black mane that matched his sleek fur, a curled set of elk-ish horns crowned over his crimson eyes—predatory eyes as sharp as his claws—and pair of oversized, bat-fingered wings polished off his demonic image.

“Hey JD,” Papa greeted as he rocked out of his chair. “Safe flying I hope?”

“Yes. I hit a cold front over Kansas, though, so my apologies for the delay,” JD said.

“About time, it’s a tad too dry in here!” I chittered. “You didn’t forget the booze, did you? We’re about enter the third quarter!”

“Of course not,” JD scoffed, rolling his eyes at me as he shuffled with the satchels that saddled his back. “I brought the usual. Aristotle, if you would?”

“Certainly.” The sasquatch obliged by taking the satchels from JD and bringing them to the kitchenette. Being the only one of our trio with opposable thumbs did make him the

⁵And I still get nightmares from that eye-hand-guy from *Pan’s Labyrinth*, so it’s like a never-ending chain of bad dreams!

⁶They were like a frick’n velociraptor’s and could swivel like switch-blades and everything!

most suitable bartender. JD keenly watched Papa's tiredly lumbering gait for a moment before he strutted over and settled down on the regal Persian rug by the TV, as slick as a greased panther. He certainly has the pompous attitude to match.

"Don't forget *your* contribution, Cleo," JD turned to me. With his forepaws he pulled a cup capped with a latex drum out of the satchel he had kept and slid it over to me with a flick of his tail.

"Aaaaah, why? Why the heck do I have to give you some of my venom every time you bring the booze? What do you even do with it?" I whined. Ever since I was old enough that Aristotle decided to include me in on their drinking sessions, every time JD supplied the alcohol he always demanded a "payment" from me in the form of a cup of my chupacabra's venom. He never bothered Papa for payment—only me! I don't even know where he gets the damn cups.

"That is my business, and my business alone, little Cleo," JD said curtly. JD liked his secrecy, even about where and how he acquired his sweet, sweet booze, and he didn't entertain questions well. I don't know how long he's been such an arrogant jerk, but if JD feels like he's above you then he'll look down on you like a gnat. So naturally, he treats me like a flea.

"Aristotle!" I called. I tried not to call him Papa in front of JD anymore so the devilish cryptid couldn't use it as an excuse to further treat me like a pup.

"Listen to JD, Cleo. He set the condition the first time you joined us, and you agreed," Papa said knowingly as he shook up my White Russian. Figures he would side with JD. They never mentioned how on earth the sasquatch and Jersey Devil immortids⁷ became associates and drinking buddies, but they were at least genuinely nice to each other. For whatever reasons Papa kept JD's secrets, and for whatever reasons JD treated me like an annoying little sister.

"I was young, I was naïve!" I retorted. "You let the *devil* take advantage of me!"

⁷Oh, yeah, *that's* an important detail. Sometimes I forget that the two drinking buddies I have been getting sloshed with for all my natural life will be drinking long after my bones are dust in the ground since they're immortids, which sounds like "immortal" because that's exactly what they are.

I'm a little hazy on all of the details since Papa and JD don't usually bring it up in conversation, so please bear with me. You see, this goes back a long, long time ago, so far back that humans have forgotten the gist and half-imagine what few details they do remember. Just about every species of living thing you know—and all the ones you don't, but more on that in a moment—has, or has had, an "original pair" so to speak. One male, one female, and they are both called the immortids of their kind.

Anyway, these immortids have been around since, well, there was any business to be around for. Papa used to tell me as a pup that before the way things were now, before the world became the land of man, most of the creatures big and small were formed out of the primeval clay from the Source of All Waters. Everyone lived together in the pre-industrial world—including man—as happily harmonious as a Technicolor Disney VHS. Papa always said that humans faintly remembered this, but they called it different names in different places: The Dream Time, Paradise, The Garden of Eden, Waters of Chaos, The Primordial Soup, Shangri-La, and so on and so forth. Most of the wildlife in the world was spawned during this peaceful dawn of time, though Papa says to this day new immortids will sometimes randomly pop out of the clay expectantly. Life likes to go on, you know?

Nothing natural can kill an immortid; they're immune to disease, injury, and old age like they've been vaccinated for it. JD always likes to brag how he was once shot through with a cannon ball back when these were colonies rather than states and he just shook off a gaping hole in his chest like a charlie-horse. Immortids sometimes get some other awesome powers, too, like teleporting, hypnosis, prophecy, invisibility, and glamour-generation.

“Cleo,” Papa said sternly as he popped the cork off the wine bottle.

Dammit, I’m a three year-old chupacabra— just getting out of my awkward “teen” years—so it wasn’t like I wasn’t mature enough to handle a cocktail now and then⁸, and it was a special treat to share with my Papa. But I couldn’t really argue with Aristotle⁹, so I begrudgingly bit down on the cup and spat a glob of spittle through the rubber. It was humiliating, like I was some dumb rattlesnake being milked. Once I filled it up I rolled the cup back to JD. “There. Happy?” I licked my tongue against my fangs, thirsty for the vodka to wash away the rubbery aftertaste of annoyance.

“Thank you, Cleo,” JD said with utmost politeness as he secured the vial, the corner of his lips perking up in a smile I wanted to snap in half.

“Here we go,” Aristotle said as he handed out the beverages, “a White Russian for Cleo, a bottle of Chateau Margaux 1995 for JD, and good old Bud for me.” We settled down and turned our attention to the game, drinking and chewing the fat. Our monthly custom, a tradition of cryptids, booze, and static-y TV. We usually rotate what we watch. I like Entertainment Tonight, AMC, and the Travel Network. JD always picked some kind of artsy, insufferable film in black and white I would always fall asleep half-way through. Now it was Aristotle’s turn, so we were in the heart of football season.

“So, Cleo, any boy chupacabras I should be meeting?” Aristotle asked after the third can had wet his whistle.

“Nope,” I sighed as I lapped down my drink, the alcohol toasting my system comfortably. “I haven’t found a male chupacabra I can hold a decent conversation with, let alone call a mate. All they think about is food and getting tail. They don’t even know who Dante or Michael Crichton or Spielberg or Madonna are!”

“On the unlikely day that Cleo finds a mate I will personally cater the reception in an Armani suit,” JD chuckled.

“No one asked you JD!”

“Children, don’t make me put you in time out,” Papa laughed.

JD sipped from his ink black wine, his forepaws normally reserved for tearing apart prey cradling the fine crystal glass with utmost delicately. His tone darkened to match the hue of his wine and fur, “Did you hear the kraken are no longer cryptids? One of their immortids was apparently photographed on a bait line by a scientist in Japan. While the Japanese do make impressive technology, I think one of the kraken immortids revealed themselves *intentionally*. Mankind have officially documented them as *Architeuthis*, the giant squid.”

“Oh, what a shame,” Papa shook his head. “I overheard one of them talking about revealing themselves at the last Immortid Council, but I never thought they’d actually go through with it. They managed to hold out for so long.” Aristotle lifted his beer can in a solemn toast, “To the kraken.”

“The kraken,” JD and I mimicked with our drinks. We drank on in silence, the news settling in like an uncomfortable miasma. I shot JD a dirty look at the back of his head for

⁸ Though normally being a blood-drinker, I honestly can’t handle booze straight-up; I found this out the hard way when I tried a can—a *can*—of Papa’s beer one of my first times drinking with them and was drunk off my tail for three days! The hangover lasted a frick’n week! Hence why I take my vodka watered down with some nice cream.

⁹I’ve tried. He can be as stony as one of his rocks when he wants to be.

breaking the news; it was depressing as hell every time a cryptid species is lost, so it was obviously not the best drinking topic.

“Guys,” Papa said after a thoughtful pause, his tone heavy as the boulder he used as an ottoman, “I was considering resigning my immortal right, too.”

The cream in my stomach turned sour. “What?” I asked, hoping my ears had misheard. But I saw JD’s ears flick up in alertness too, wings falling slack in surprise.

“Y-you are going to reveal yourself! Reveal all the sasquatches!” I stammered in disbelief. Papa closed his eyes wearily and didn’t answer my question directly.

Papa had been around since the dawn of time and I always thought he would be around for much longer! The only way an immortal can lose its eternal life is if it is *seen* by man, and because of Man’s Broken

Promise, that act consigns their entire species to become *animals*.¹⁰

Usually an immortal loses its immortal right by dumb chance, by some human being in the right place in the right time, but occasionally humans successfully seek out and drag them into view with their science and technology. Sometimes, because humans so rabidly pursue the unknown, an immortal will rescind its eternal life by willingly revealing itself just to escape the pressure, like the poor kraken apparently. It’s just the way it is. Papa would never tell me what “promise” was broken that allows mankind such control over the lives of cryptids. He always said, “There are some things you don’t need to know, little Cleo.” I know he’s my Papa and he’s supposed to shelter me from stuff like that, but I wish he would let into the loop more often.

“What does Daphne think of this?” JD commented to crack the silence that fell between us.

Aristotle’s female counterpart¹¹ goes by the name Daphne. I’ve never met her, since they have been taking a relationship hiatus over the past few centuries. It’s not that they don’t like each other, it’s just after living together for millennia they needed some “space”. At least, that’s what Papa always says. She likes to hang out around the Great Lakes, and they still meet up once in a while. He would actually leave me under JD’s watch in my younger days when he’d visit her, but I’ve repressed the memories.

¹⁰ You see, the immortals are like the representative of the entirety of their species. If a human caught sight of a regular cryptid, like plain mortal me, there would still be doubt and tabloids about it, even if it is the most compelling evidence in the world like a bone or a body. If an immortal is seen by human eyes, however, then some kind of cosmic power goes into effect and humankind at that moment will understand and believe that that cryptid is real. It has to be a look straight in the eyes, too, so glances are still kind of a safe zone. Aristotle always said it was part of something he called “Man’s Broken Promise,” and that once an immortal is discovered, again for some kind of supernatural reasons beyond our control, the entire species lose all consciousness and will become plain, old, animals—the immortals included.

We cryptids can reason and think and learn and communicate as sharply as any human, but all that is taken away the instant the immortals of our species are seen. This is the true difference between a cryptid and an animal; our immortals have remained unseen by humans while an animals’ have not.

¹¹ As I mentioned earlier, there is *almost* always one male and one female immortal of any cryptid species, and they are created together to, uh, “populate” the species. It really isn’t a suggestion but more of their purpose-of-existence actually, and all cryptids roaming today are distant descendants of their immortals that are still running around alongside them. Think of the concept like Noah’s ark, but without the old guy and the boat. There are some exceptions to this paired rule as there are one-of-a-kind immortals like the Mothman or the Dover Demon. For inexplicable reasons no counterpart was ever created with them. I think JD is one of these bachelor immortals since I’ve never heard him mention a she-devil back in Jersey.

“Well, that’s the thing,” Papa said, crushing the aluminum can with a pinky flex, “I paid her a visit to ask her, and she’s pregnant from our last get-together a few months back.”

“Congratulations,” JD nodded, raising his wine glass in a toast. “It has been some time since you two had an infant, isn’t it?”

“Not since the 1700’s at least,” Aristotle said.

“But, you can’t,” I said as I set down my drink. “You can’t reveal yourself Aristotle! You’re a sasquatch, one of the most illustrious, famous cryptids in the world—”

“And it is the infamy among man that burdens me, Cleo,” Papa sighed. He closed his eyes wearily, and it struck me how ancient he actually looked. How many wrinkles mapped his cheeks, his eyes, like all the countless roads and paths he had wandered down. “I am tired of being pestered by humans. When the indigenous humans were the only ones dwelling on this continent it was at least easier; they respected the land around them, respected us sasquatch—and many of the other cryptids—as their brethren in the forest. They allowed us peace. But then traders and colonists and conquistadors came, and so did their curiosity for the old native legends.

“I am tired of having my every step dogged with human cameras and eyes, even if I do enjoy their NFL, their poetry, and their beer. Half the time when we get that Animal Planet or History Channel they’re talking about the sasquatch—my children’s children’s descendants— and bicker about whether we’re real or not. I just want to be able to let go. I want some of that old peace again.”

“B-but,” I said, trying to keep the sob back in my throat. “Won’t you miss Daphne? Won’t you miss your books? TV? Drinking with JD? Won’t you miss *me*?”

“Cleo,” JD turned on me, “It is *his* decision, not yours.” My back spines bristled; this was hardly the time for him to get on his high-horse when I was about to lose Aristotle—my Papa—forever!

“Shut up! This isn’t your business either, JD!” I hissed. My fangs watered to bite his obnoxious face.

“But, I have thought it over, and you were one of my deciding factors, Cleo,” Papa interjected before I could throw some violence at JD. “I never, ever, want to hurt you, Cleo. I want you to know that, and to never forget that. I want to be around long enough to see you grow up and live your life to the fullest, to one day see your pups and grandpups. By the time this new little sasquatch is born and raised, that will have passed.

“Daphne and I have weighed the options long and hard. We decided we’re going to wait for this little one to be born and grow up before either of us reveal ourselves. You know, as a kind of last hurrah for the sasquatch race.”

I nodded in relief and understanding. Sasquatches lived really close like humans, so it takes them about twenty years to grow up. We chupacabras typically only live ten to twelve; I wouldn’t have to live a day without my Papa.

Papa beamed a smile at me, “Till then, I promise not to leave you Cleo.” He glanced up at JD, who watched Papa closely with one of his usual, unreadable expressions. “That applies to you too, Jersey.” JD only blinked slowly in response.

“Thanks, Papa,” I sniffled. Normally I wouldn’t have wanted to be so weepy, especially in front of JD, but the relief was so strong I couldn’t hold back. I guess the booze loosened my tear ducts or something. Papa reached over and stroked my ears soothingly, just like when he would rock me to sleep as a pup. JD didn’t say anything, but I could read from

his tight wings loosening and his tail curling thoughtfully that he was probably just as pleased with Papa decision.

“For now, let’s worry about more important business, like our annual Super Bowl bets,” Papa smirked. I was overjoyed to see his usual twinkle return to his eyes now. “I’m pegging the Steelers.”

“Nah, it’s the Dolphins, all the way to the ring,” I said with confidence. “What about you, JD?”

JD grinned slyly, “You know I only bet on my namesake.”

“The ‘Jersey Devils’ are a frick’n hockey team!” I snorted. “That joke’s getting old.”

The next month—we always meet up the day after the new moon—I journeyed my way back up the mountains towards the Hutch. My hunting grounds of choice were in southern Arizona and northern Sonora. South enough to soak the sun, yet north enough I could travel to the Hutch in a couple of days. A few other chupacabras and I shared the territory, taking turns at the livestock and occasionally sharing bigger kills like the long horns. By serendipity I found a tossed cooler on the side of a park trail chock full of Heineken and lemons. Moldy lemons, so just threw those out. I clamped my teeth around the handle and dragged it off with me. Papa preferred Budweiser, but I figured he would appreciate the gift anyway. I even found a nice shiny rock—some kind of quartz, I think—when I stopped at a watering hole and tossed that in too.

The sun was setting by the time I had the Hutch in sight. As the cooler rattled against my fangs I sensed something felt rather off. I looked up and was startled to see JD coiled on top of the porch awning, eyes gleaming in the twilight like deer eyes.¹² Jeez, I knew dragging the cooler with me would make me lag a little, but I didn’t think I’d get here later than JD. He had to fly across the Midwest to get here!

“Hey JD!” I called. “Help me get this inside!”

JD unfurled his wings and with a smooth leap glided down to the ground. “Cleo, we have to go now.”

“Wait, what?”

“You and I have to go, *now*,” he repeated as he approached me.

“What? Where are we going?” I asked, not at all appreciating his abruptness.

“There is an Immortid Council and you have been summoned,” he insisted

“Oh, wow. O-okay, let’s go get Aristotle and then—”

“No. Just us, Cleo,” JD snapped, a growl entering his voice as his ears flicked back and forth, attuned to the forest around us.

“But, why?” I asked. Then it occurred to me what didn’t feel right; it was too quiet. The generator wasn’t running. I couldn’t hear the static of the TV. I couldn’t hear the heavy plod of sasquatch feet. JD’s back wasn’t laden with his satchels of alcohol and stupid rubber cups.

“JD, where’s Aristotle?” I asked, every muscle in my spine tensing, “Why are we being summoned by the Immortid Council?”

¹² But being a carnivore, they were more like rabid, *man-eating* deer eyes

JD's wings shifted at his sides uneasily, eyes locked on me in the gathering darkness. At that moment they were more terrifying than I had ever seen them, because in his gaze I saw pity. Not malice, or the condescendence he usually teased me with, but actual sorrow.

"Cleo, we are being summoned as witnesses. We were the last to see him alive."