

PUMPKIN JACK SKULL

And Other Stories of Terror

by

Jacob M. Drake

SMASHWORDS EDITION

* * * * *

PUBLISHED BY:

Jacob M. Drake on Smashwords

PUMPKIN JACK SKULL

And Other Stories of Terror

Copyright © 2010 by Jacob M. Drake

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Smashwords Edition License Notes

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

* * * * *

FORWARD

The various stories contained within this book were written over the past couple of years. The title story concept, that of *Pumpkin Jack Skull*, was something I came up with around Halloween of 2008 and decided to write just to see where it took me; after all, stories have a way of writing themselves, going where they want to go, not where the author thinks he wants them to. I wrote the first story and was pleased with what I came up with in the form of *Jack-O-Lantern*. Then later I realized I had another story to go along with this one inside of me and along came *Pumpkin*. Still later I realized that there was one final story in this vein that was needed in order to tie it all together and *Jack Skull* was born as the main protagonist who started this entire tale of jack-o-lanterns that went in search of worthy prey. I hope that when you get to Jack Skull you don't assign his lack of social skills and his aptitude for dismembering people to this author. I have never so much as removed the wings of a fly - living or dead. Jack Skull is in another realm all of his own. He is not me. He really isn't. Ok?

The other stories were a assortment of ideas I had along the way and had to put down in words in order to get to sleep at night. Of course the trauma inflicted upon Benjy in *New Beginning* wasn't of my doing, either. That story insisted on being written that way. Seriously. I had no intention of inflicting such horror upon a small child as that, especially where it came to dealing with his own mother. Sheesh. There's an entire book in each of these stories once I get around to writing them as such, and the *Pumpkin Jack Skull* trilogy just has to be made into a movie one day. Anyone know of a movie producer looking for his next great horror film? Hmmm?

I hope everyone who reads these stories enjoys them as much as I had writing them. Please feel free to contact me at any time by e-mailing this author at: eternal.naturist@gmail.com. Although I am busy with writing more stories every day as the plots and characters appear within my over-active imagination, I do attempt to read all e-mail I receive in a timely manner.

Thanks to my wonderful and beautiful wife Nancy, who puts up with me as I write my stories and agonize over how to make each one the best I am able, and listens to me verbalize the plots and details of my stories even though she has absolutely no interest in them at all. Isn't that what spouses are for?

I would like to thank Mark Coker for providing his work on how to get finished stories published to Smashwords. Without his insightful assistance I never would have been able to place the many stories I have written the past few years onto the internet where they could be read by all those who have taken to reading e-books. Thanks, Mark.

Thanks also to Sean Harper, a good friend who suggested I try out Picasa 3 as a means of designing and formatting the covers for my books. Without Sean's insightful suggestion I might still be tearing my hair out trying to figure out how to make my covers correctly so they would work at Smashwords.

Lastly, I want to thank those people who read my stories and gave me insight to what might need to be changed to make the stories better. You know who you are.

* * * * *

Stories in this collection:

JACK-O-LANTERN

When teenage Will Duncan is placed on restriction by his parents and forced to remain home on Halloween while they go to a costume party he discovers there is more than trick-or-treaters who come to his door.

BECOMING DRACA

Nic Draca has always been an average boy with an exotic name, all the way into his early twenties. Then he wakes up lying in a puddle behind a bar and discovers a tattoo across his face he never had before. How the tattoo got there and what the meaning of it is begins Nic on a new life that shows him the real meaning of being a Draca.

POWER EVOLUTION

If you had the opportunity to become imbued with powers beyond the scope of mortal man, wouldn't you take that opportunity? What then if you realized there was no one compatible to you who you could share your life with? Robby Burns discovers his greatest gift has become his biggest curse, and possibly for that of all mankind as well.

PUMPKIN

Paul Walker takes his small son Danny out searching for the right pumpkin to be carved into a Halloween jack-o-lantern. He never expected to unleash an incarnation of evil that would end his world - and begin a terror that would encompass the entire world.

WITCH SPAWN

Seven year-old Benjy lives in daily fear - of his mother, whom he believes must be a witch. One day he realizes he simply can't take the constant beating any longer. That's when he discovers that the supernatural power inherent within his mother is his to control as well.

TO KILL THE JABBERWOCKY

Detectives Bud Lorimer and James Credo are assigned to a murder case that leads them into the cyber-world of online role playing games. The question they have to ask themselves, however, is how can what happens in a RPG possibly affect the outcome of life and death in the real world?

JACK SKULL - ***** WARNING ***** *The following story contains scenes of highly graphic torture and mutilation. Not recommended for the squeamish.*

Jack "Skull" Schuyler has spent his adult life as an enforcer for the local crime syndicate. He gets all the jobs no one else has the stomach for - except him. Then the day arrives when the syndicate he works for decides their enforcer is a liability and Jack Skull finds himself under the death sentence he has placed so many others under.

* * * * *

PUMPKIN JACK SKULL And Other Stories of Terror

* * * * *

JACK-O-LANTERN © 2008 Jacob M. Drake

"Can you believe it's Halloween and there's nothing on TV?" Will Duncan clicked the power button on the remote. The TV blinked to black. He threw the remote across the room, where it barely missed landing on the sofa. The small television control bounced off the edge of the cushion, landing on the carpet.

Will knew if his dad ever saw him doing that he'd be grounded for at least a week. Tonight he didn't care. Tonight was his night to have fun, but his parents had restricted him to staying inside the house. All because he'd been caught cheating on a Science test.

A Science test! Who doesn't cheat on Science tests? It's one of those subjects that almost nobody knows enough about. Not that anybody wants to know about Science, Will reasoned in his mind. It was a worthless subject to him.

But because he'd been caught, he was now sitting at home, handing out candy to those snott-nosed-little-shits that kept coming around, ringing the damned doorbell and shouting, "Trick-or-treat!"

And where were his parents? They were out at a Halloween party at a friend's house. That's where. They were enjoying themselves like little kids while he was stuck here at home! It wasn't fair! They were the parents. He was the kid! Not a little kid, either. A thirteen year-old in middle school. The perfect age for Halloween, 'cause it was the number that scared everyone with their superstitious beliefs.

Thirteen. The perfect number for this holiday he should be out enjoying to the fullest. Instead he was handing out candy to bratty little kids.

Who gave a shit about those stupid kids and their ratty-assed costumes? Will should be out with his own friends, trolling the neighborhoods. Snatching candy from those same little kids who thought it was such a fun thing to be out ringing people's doorbells, expecting to receive candy.

Nobody thought to actually trick any of those shitty little bastards when they came to the door of a house.

Wasn't that what this night was all about? Trick or treat? It was one or the other, right? Not just always a treat.

Will had decided to do the opposite. From now on, whenever someone came to his door, he would make sure they got the first part of their stupid saying.

Turning off all the lights in the house, Will had put on the rubber mask he'd bought for using tonight when he was supposed to be out with his friends. They were all going to wear monster masks that fit over their entire heads, so nobody recognized them and called the cops for the way they stole candy from kids a lot smaller and younger than they were.

When he heard kids coming up his walkway to the small porch in front of his house, he'd open the door just enough so it wasn't actually closed, his hand resting on the doorknob. Then, just as those rotten little bastards reached for the doorbell, he'd fling open the door, jump in front of the opening, and raise his arms, screaming and growling like the monster he really was deep inside.

It had worked great the couple of times he'd done it. The kids on his porch had screamed and fallen all over themselves and each other, pissing their pants and trying to get away from this howling creature that they just knew was trying to eat them.

A couple of parents standing back on the sidewalk, watching to make sure their kids were all right, had gotten angry and yelled at him. One, a really irate mother, had stormed up the walkway and almost barreled through his door before he'd thought to slam it in her face and lock it.

That bitch! Who did she think she was? This was his house. She was the one who made the decision to take her "li'l angel" out door-to-door, begging for candy, not him.

The whole thing had pissed Will off enough that as the woman finally stopped beating on his door with her fists, screaming obscenities through the closed door, he had flung back the door and thrown a handful of small, hard candy at her, striking her in the back of the head with it. Then he'd slammed the door once more just as she was turning back toward him. The look on her face that time! Boy, was she ever pissed. He thought sure she was going to call the cops on him, but so far nothing had happened. Guess he'd lucked out on that.

That was awhile ago. There hadn't been any trick-or-treaters since then. Will had gotten bored and had decided to watch television. Only there wasn't anything on, except old re-runs of stupid shows that were supposed to be comedies, but weren't. They never made him laugh. They were just stupid.

Now he heard something on his porch. Like someone was doing something out there.

He sat up straight in his dad's recliner, peering intently at the closed door. What was going on out there? It didn't sound like little kids. They were always so noisy he heard them out on the main sidewalk before they even turned up to come toward his house. This was different. More like a scratching, scuffling sound. Like someone rearranging things on the porch.

Immediately he thought about the Halloween decorations his mother always put out every year. She had a lot of fun decorating the front porch, making it look like witches and ogres lived in this house, instead of normal people.

God! How Will hated being normal. Maybe his parents were normal, but he sure as hell wasn't. That was why he always got into so much trouble at school. Because he was special. Above normal. He was one of the leaders in his grade. He was one of those who told the other kids what to do, and if they didn't like it they'd get a punch in the snoot or the belly. Some times, if they were certain kids he really didn't like, he'd slug 'em in the crotch. Punch 'em right in the Old Johnson. It

was lots of fun watching those kids fold over in half, puking on their shoes when he slugged 'em in the crotch.

That's why he was a leader in school. Kids feared him. He himself wasn't afraid of anybody.

Not hearing the scratching, shuffling sound any longer, Will finally overcame the fear that had frozen him so that he couldn't get up from the recliner. Slowly he moved toward the door, picking up his baseball bat his dad liked to keep by the front door, "Just-in-case", his dad liked to say. Just in case someone tried to break in during the night.

Yeah, right, he scoffed at his dad's reasoning. What good would it do to have a bat right next to the front door if someone had already broken in and was inside the house?

What a lame-brain his dad was.

Holding the bat now in his right hand, resting on his shoulder in case he had to swing it fast, Will carefully took hold of the doorknob in his left hand. His fingers felt sweaty, slippery, as he tried to turn the knob and failed.

He released the knob and wiped his sweaty hand on the left leg of his jeans, then tried once more, this time being more successful at turning the knob.

Slowly he inched the door open, peering through the small crack to see who or what might still be out there.

All he saw was the glow of a jack-o-lantern's face staring back at him from the "Enter At Your Own Risk" welcome mat his mother always put out for Halloween.

Where had this jack-o-lantern come from? It wasn't there earlier. He hadn't even carved any pumpkins this year. It was a stupid ritual his dad kept trying to get him to continue, but he wouldn't have anything to do with.

Like most everything else about Halloween, at least the portion of the holiday that pertained to little kids, it was just plain stupid. Who in their right mind would want to spend hours carving out a pumpkin, cleaning all those slimy seeds and guts out, and then taking so much time at carving some stupid scary face into the front of the orange-colored gourd that really wasn't scary at all?

He had to admit, though, as this particular face stared up at him from where it sat on his porch, that it was a really good carving job. Whoever had carved this jack-o-lantern deserved a prize for the best and scariest carving he'd ever seen.

The bat still resting on his shoulder, Will stepped out further onto the porch. He went to the edge of the step, leaning out far enough so he could see past the edges of the house. Was anyone hiding out there somewhere? He didn't see anyone.

So why had they left this jack-o-lantern here? After all the time it had taken to carve out such a large pumpkin, and this one was large with a capital L. Bigger than any he had ever carved when he was a little kid. Why just leave such a magnificent piece of Halloween artwork on someone's porch?

Looking all about the front lawn and down to the sidewalk in front of the house, Will couldn't see any signs of anyone lurking about. He turned back around and stared at the back of the jack-o-lantern.

The face glowed eerily up at him.

How the hell? How did the jack-o-lantern get turned around so it was staring at him? It had been facing the house when he stepped out here. Now it was staring directly at him again.

He stepped back involuntarily, forgetting he was already standing on the edge of the step. His feet slipped. Flailing his arms as he fell backward, Will was unable to stop himself from falling.

The bat in his right hand didn't make it any easier. In fact, the bat had thrown him off balance. Made it even more difficult to try and regain his balance while he was falling.

The back of Will's head struck the concrete slab that was part of the walkway up from the driveway. He felt the impact before he ever heard the "crack!" of his skull striking cement.

Shit! That really hurt! Trying not to cry, Will rolled about on the walkway, both hands holding hard to his head, as if his brains were about to spill out through a crack in the back of his head all over the sidewalk.

Tears welled up in his eyes from the excruciating pain, but he refused to cry out loud. He was too old for that. No one was going to call him a cry-baby, no matter how bad this hurt.

Sitting up with his knees almost to his chest, Will pulled his hands away from his head and looked at them through tear-filled eyes. Blood covered his hands. His blood. He reached back with his right hand and felt the knot that was already forming on the back of his skull.

Damn that hurt. He touched it once more, even though doing so caused pain to shoot through his head, just because it felt so terrible and odd.

He tried to stand, but felt a little dizzy, so he turned over onto his knees in order to stand. The position made him think of his grandfather, a couple of years ago when his grandparents had been visiting for Christmas. The old man had tripped and fallen and couldn't get up on his own. He'd had to turn onto his knees, and even then Will had needed to help him to his feet. Will gritted his teeth in anger and frustration.

He was not like his grandfather. He was thirteen and in the prime of his life. Strong. Muscular. Tough. Fearless.

Pushing himself up from the walkway, Will stood to his feet. He still felt a little wobbly, but at least he wasn't falling back over.

He turned back toward the house and sure enough, there was the face of the jack-o-lantern, staring straight at him. Although now the expression carved into the hard pumpkin shell seemed as though the damned thing were laughing at him, not grimacing evilly the way it had been when he first saw it.

He stepped up onto the porch and walked around the carved pumpkin. He stood at the back of it, looking at the smooth, uncarved surface.

The face had been toward him when he'd first opened the door and looked outside at it. Then, when he had stepped to the edge of the porch and turned back around, it was staring at him again. Only that couldn't be possible. He hadn't turned it around. And no one else had been on the porch.

Maybe someone had slipped onto the porch when he was peering out over the front lawn, turning the jack-o-lantern so it faced him. That had to be the answer, even though in his subconscious mind he knew it couldn't be possible for anyone, no matter how skinny they were, to squeeze past him and the corner of the house next to the porch.

It was the only answer that made any sense at all to his dizzy brain. It had to be the right answer.

Will walked all the way around the gourd, examining the smooth, round shape of this large pumpkin. He studied the face carved into the front and once more was surprised that it had scary features carved into it, not mocking, laughing features the way it had appeared when he'd fallen.

It didn't matter. It was just a trick of his imagination after hitting his head so hard. Without thinking, he touched the knot at the back of his head once more. Ouch! It hurt even worse now that it had grown larger.

He looked once more at his hands, seeing the smeared blood from his wound covering them. Shaking his head at his own clumsiness and stupidity, Will stooped to pick up the jack-o-lantern. Even though he didn't know who had put this here or why, he had decided it was his now. Maybe he no longer wanted to carve such things at his age, but that didn't mean he couldn't appreciate a face that was as scary as this – and so well-carved that it really did look pretty frightening.

His bloodied hands made grabbing hold of the smooth, orange skin difficult at first. His hands slipped off the pumpkin flesh and he'd had to wipe his hands on his jeans in order to clean them enough so he could get a hold on the thing.

He found that as big as this pumpkin was, it wasn't easy to pick up. He wrapped both his arms, not just his hands, around the gourd, straining with his back muscles as he leaned backward, picking the gourd up with his entire body.

Damn, it was heavier than he'd expected, too. He stumbled toward the door with his heavy burden held securely in his arms. At least the damn door hadn't closed when he'd stepped out onto the porch. That would have been a real pain-in-the-ass, since his dad had insisted on building this house with a front door that locked immediately when it closed.

The pumpkin was so big, however, that Will had found it difficult to squeeze through the door with it held in his arms. It had been a tight squeeze, but he'd finally gotten through, stumbling and almost falling over once more as he pushed through into the house. Using one foot, he gave the back of the door a shove. It slammed closed with a loud bang. He smiled at how mad his dad would have been to hear him slamming the door that way.

"Don't slam the damn door," his dad had always yelled at him. Like it wasted electricity – another thing he was always bitching about – to slam the damn door.

Wobbling over to the dining room table, his mother's pride and joy, her prized possession, since it was an antique table, not just a normal table, like all his friends' mothers had in their dining rooms, what with all its fancy scroll-work and intricately carved designs along the edges of the top surface and down along the legs. He deliberately set the pumpkin down hard.

Whump! The heaviness of the jack-o-lantern shook the table. Will shoved the gourd back from the edge of the table, not wanting it to fall off and shatter on the floor. Though he had to admit, it might be a nasty surprise for his parents to come home from their party and find shattered pumpkin shell all over their expensive, plush carpet.

He turned the shell around so the face was looking at him. Once more he noticed it had seemed to change appearance, though he knew it couldn't really have altered the way it seemed. Now it almost seemed as though it was leering at him. Like it held some private secret in its seedless, hollow shell that only it knew about. One that Will wouldn't like if he learned what it was.

"You have got to get ahold of yourself, Willie-boy" Will murmured to himself with the nickname only he could use without getting upset, stepping back and getting a better look at the face. He noticed that the sides of the jack-o-lantern were covered in smeared blood. His blood. He glanced at his hands and saw there was still some dried blood on his skin where it hadn't wiped clean on his jeans.

He grinned. The addition of the blood, regardless of whose blood it was, made the whole event seem more eerie, more like a scary movie, a horror story.

Turning away from his "captured" prize, Will walked over to the wall and flicked off the light. He turned back and stared transfixed at the glowing, malevolent face that stared back at him

in this darkness. Good thing he'd had the rest of the lights off already. It made the whole scenario perfectly creepy.

He grinned more broadly and nodded with pleasure. This was perfect. A perfect scene for a horror movie. The kind he enjoyed, but his parents always said he shouldn't watch. They forbade him from going to the movies whenever it was a scary movie. He went anyway, just not with their permission.

Wouldn't they be freaked to come home and find this sitting on the table.

Will stared at the glowing eyes for long minutes before he finally realized the glow wasn't flickering the way it did when there was a candle burning inside the jack-o-lantern. If it wasn't a candle, what was it?

Will leaned over and peered into the cut-out mouth of the jack-o-lantern, but for some reason the glow prevented him from seeing what was actually causing the glow. He moved about, looking from every angle possible as he stood in front of this caricaturized orange gourd, but he was unable to see past the glow.

Even more curious now than when he had first noticed the glow wasn't flickering, he walked toward the table and reached forward, taking hold of the cut-off and dried up vine that served as the handle for the lid that was on every jack-o-lantern he'd ever seen. He tugged on it, but it was stuck tight, almost as though it had been fastened closed so no one could open it.

That was ridiculous. Why would anyone make a jack-o-lantern that couldn't be opened?

He pulled once more, but it still wouldn't open. Maybe he needed something to give him leverage.

Going into the kitchen, Will looked around until his eyes fastened on the paring knife his mother had used for cutting up the potatoes they'd had for dinner. That might work. And if there was anything inside the gourd that was holding it closed, though Will had no idea what that might be, the knife would be able to cut through it, as well.

Back in the dining room, Will once more took hold of the vine handle, but this time only for support as he placed the tip of the small knife at the edge of the lid where it had already been sliced through. He tried pushing the blade between the lid and the body, but found it was solid. That was even crazier. Why would anyone go through all this trouble of carving such a perfect jack-o-lantern, only to seal it so it wouldn't open?

Replacing his left hand so it was flat on top of the pumpkin's lid, he changed his point-of-leverage, pushing harder on the knife, trying to shove it into where the gap should be for forming a lid on this thing.

The knife suddenly plunged deeply within the shell, moving faster and easier than he'd expected. The sudden movement had caught him off-guard, however, causing him to slice into the webbing of flesh between his left hand's thumb and forefinger.

"Shit!" he screamed even louder than he had before, releasing the knife and grabbing hold of his cut hand. Will danced about in the dining room for several minutes, alternately holding onto and then sucking on the cut in his hand, waiting for the pain to subside before going any further.

As the pain settled down enough for him to think rationally once more, he glared at the offending gourd that had been the cause of all his trouble and pain tonight. The paring knife stuck out from the edge of the lid where he'd left it - as though taunting him.

Anger flooded inside of him from having been hurt twice already since this jack-o-lantern had appeared on his doorstep. The teenager rushed up to the table, grabbed hold of the vine handle

with his still bleeding hand, his other hand holding the pumpkin onto the table. He yanked upward with an explosive pull.

The lid still didn't come free, so Will tugged harder, putting all his strength into the effort. The lid finally popped off, coming free in his hand so that he staggered backward, his head striking the wall behind him. Once more he cracked his head. Once more he swore at the unexpected impact that brought about so much pain.

"Damn it!" He felt the back of his head with his right hand, his left hand now holding the lid that had suddenly come free from the offending pumpkin. When he once more pulled his right hand away from the back of his head and looked at it, he saw even more blood on it. Turning, he could see there was a spattering of blood at the impact point where he'd struck the wall. His mother really wasn't going to be happy about that. Neither would his father. Most likely he'd get grounded for at least another week for that blood ruining his parents' perfect wall in their perfect house.

Now he was really angry. Looking at the freed lid held in his hand from the pumpkin, Will flung it across the room, watching it hit the wall on the far side of the dining room.

Regardless of the mess the pumpkin lid must have made where it splattered on the wall, Will stepped up to the jack-o-lantern that sat lidless on the table. He bent over and peered inside; wanting more than ever to see what it was that was producing the light inside this glowing shell of holiday evil. After all he had gone through, it was the least he could do, finding out the secret behind this candleless illumination.

Something was definitely inside the jack-o-lantern, but Will wasn't able to tell exactly what it was. It seemed round. No, that was wrong. Oblong. That was it. Whatever it was, it was oblong in shape.

And white. Luminescently white. Whatever this was inside here, it was the source of the glowing light that lit up the inside of this jack-o-lantern.

His hands rested on the wide rim of the opening as he peered within, still trying to figure out this minor mystery. Blood from the cut on his left hand dripped inside the opening at the same time that blood from his right hand, from the injury on the back of his head, dripped inside. Both drops of blood fell onto the oblong, white object inside, resting on the bottom of the carved out pumpkin shell.

The object turned. Just like that, without him touching it, it turned, rotated upwards so that the front of it that had been facing toward the features of this jack-o-lantern now looked straight up at his peering eyes.

The gleaming, glowing, dead eye sockets of a human skull stared up into his yet living eyes.

The two rows of full, white teeth grinned up at him, as though with full knowledge of what was going on and what was about to happen within this otherwise quiet house.

The eeriness of the evil face that stared back at him caused Will once more to step back from the pumpkin. Only this time he found the muscles of his legs and feet unable to move - as though they were no longer controlled by his brain.

Will tried to remove his hands from the edge of the rim opening, but found his hand and arm muscles equally as out-of-his-control as were those of his lower extremities.

"What they fu..?" he started to say, but quickly found his jaw muscles tightening up on him, cutting off his words as his teeth clamped together tightly, preventing him from speaking.

Beads of sweat instantly formed on his forehead. He could feel the presence of something evil prying open his mind, squeezing itself inside his brain, infiltrating every nook-and-cranny of his psyche, his soul.

The dark, hollow sockets of the skull staring up at him glowed with a luminescence that seemed all too wicked, delightfully wicked, as though they understood exactly what was happening to this youth who no longer had control over his own body.

As Will's eyes involuntarily stared back into the depths of the lifeless sockets, he could feel the energy of this thing burning into his brain – straight through his eyes.

A searing, sizzling sound faintly came to his ears, causing Will to realize his eyes actually were burning. Whatever energy this was emanating upward from the skull within this jack-o-lantern, it was searing his eyeballs from the inside-out. Had this youth been able to look at himself from the outside, he would have noticed the once clear surface of his eyeballs begin to bubble, as though being cooked in a pan, fried in grease, like eggs being cooked for breakfast.

The bubbling of the membrane surrounding his eyes sizzled loudly until both eyes popped, sending tiny splattered pieces of them all about the room.

Yet even with his eye sockets no longer holding the small, oval orbs that had been there since birth, even with the excruciating pain which had accompanied the explosion of his eyeballs, Will found himself unable to scream, though he wanted so terribly to do so.

The glowing face of the skull burned brighter than ever before, enticing this eyeless Will, beckoning him forward, inward toward the skull that invited him to join with it, enter into this hollowed-out shell, become one with the essence of the unlife that permeated the skull.

Will no longer had any willpower with which to resist. The last vestige of his will had dissolved even as his eyeballs sizzled and exploded.

His hands moved forward now, inside the small space of the opening at the top of this gourd that had once lain so silently in a field, waiting for someone to come along and cut it free from the vine which tethered it to that one spot on the ground.

As Will's hands moved into the hollow shell, filled solely with the unliving skull that beckoned him inward, the digits that once were fingers began to dissolve, as though touched by a corrosive chemical that disintegrated the very flesh it touched. Blood flowed freely now, Will's blood, as the flesh that once held this life-fluid in check now disappeared, opening the veins in this body so that the red fluid coursing within cascaded now freely, pouring within the pumpkin shell, covering the once white skull with this sticky, red liquid.

The teeth of the skull separated, opening wide in order to receive the offering of blood this youth was making, as an initiate into a dark, sacred ritual of demonic lore offering up his blood, his very life, to the small, overpowering, all-controlling demon that was as a god in this instance.

Even as the freely flowing blood was received inside the open maw of the skull, the liquid seemed to vanish, as though swallowed within a non-existent throat, feeding a non-existent body that could not be seen.

The human flesh of what was once Will Duncan continued dissolving at an ever-increasing rate, first his arms moving inward through the opening that, although wider than most openings in a jack-o-lantern, shouldn't have been wide enough for a boy his size to fit through. Next the very head of Will Duncan himself and then his hunched over shoulders, pushing through the cut-out opening that should have been too small, but somehow inexplicably wasn't.

Every tiny bit, every ounce of flesh, of this once living, human youth, squeezed itself inward, being accepted as the offering it was by this hungry, devouring, all-consuming god of All Hallows Eve, this monster that existed in the darkness but once a year for the sole purpose of stealing the life from some unsuspecting human.

Second-by-second the body, the legs, the feet of what was once, yet no longer could be recognized, as Will Duncan, found itself consumed within the hollowed out shell of this pumpkin-turned-jack-o-lantern.

Minutes after the process began, it was completed. All that remained of the teenage boy who once lived in this house was a small stain of blood, a red spot, on the carpet beneath his mother's prized antique table.

The malevolently glowing features of the jack-o-lantern turned and stared out from the table toward the front door. The complete and desolate darkness of the house made it seem all the more eerie.

A few hours later the front door opened, a man and woman entered from the darkness of the outside porch. The man was dressed to make himself look like a pirate and the woman was dressed as a fairy. Neither was a very good costume, but for people with little-to-no imagination they were the best that could be conjured up on such short notice.

"Damn that kid!" Walter Duncan the pirate-wanna-be groused, fighting to pull his key from the lock. "I told him to keep the front light on so we could see when we got home."

"He's probably watching TV in the dark, Walter," Shirley Duncan the almost-fairy spoke more calmly, trying in vain to still the anger that always grew so quickly within her husband over any slight from their teenage son.

"If he is," Walter Duncan peered through the darkness of the living room, "he's watching it in his own room."

His eyes were caught by the glowing face staring out from the dining room table.

"What the hell? I thought Will was finished with carving jack-o-lanterns?"

"That's what he said, dear," Shirley Duncan answered her husband, noticing the same eerie light he did. "Oh, I hope he didn't damage the finish on my antique table."

"Now who's more concerned?" Walter chuckled, closing the front door behind them as his wife flicked on a light and crossed over to the dining room in order to inspect her table. She ran her hands along the smooth surface, ensuring herself that nothing about this table had been harmed. Her husband turned down the hall and walked briskly toward their son's room.

Opening the bedroom door, Walter flicked on the light. The illumination revealed no one present. He scanned the small room thoroughly, ensuring himself that his son wasn't hiding anywhere in preparation for jumping out in an attempt to scare him.

"Will in the kitchen?" Walter called out to his wife, even as he himself walked through the open doorway to the room used most by everyone in this family.

"I don't think so," Shirley answered, still in the dining room. Walter had entered the kitchen and could see for himself their son wasn't anywhere around.

"Damn it," his face grew darker, more angry now. "He went out with his friends, even though we told him he couldn't go anywhere."

"You told him he couldn't go anywhere, dear," Shirley Duncan corrected her husband quietly, not wanting to make him angrier than he already was.

"He's in seriously big trouble when he gets home tonight," Walter thundered, entering the dining room. His wife was just repositioning the jack-o-lantern, satisfied that the large pumpkin hadn't marred her table in any way.

Walter stopped beside her and glanced toward the gourd with the light glowing out of its wicked-looking face.

“Will’s never carved anything that intricate before,” he mused, studying the handiwork more carefully, as though it were a fine piece of artwork he’d just discovered in a studio.

“What’s that inside it?” He bent low, trying to peer past the carved face in the front to the inside.

“I’m sure I don’t know, dear,” Shirley had already turned away from the table’s new holiday centerpiece. She wasn’t all that interested in jack-o-lanterns.

“Let’s take a look,” Walter Duncan lifted the lid from the top of the jack-o-lantern and bent to peer inside.

* * * * *

BECOMING DRACA

© 2008 Jacob M. Drake

The throbbing in his head continued on and he knew it had no intention of stopping any time soon. With an effort that seemed as though it was commanding every ounce of energy he had within him, he forced his eyes to flutter open.

Dirty water flowed past his right eyelid and crashed against the milky white orb within the socket. Blinking would require too much effort and he knew he didn’t have enough strength left within him for even that minor muscular movement. Instead he chose to lie with his face in the murky puddle and allow his open eye to bathe in the water that slowly grew deeper as the rain continued falling from the dark clouds in the midnight sky.

Eventually he could feel the water rising to cover his right nostril. It was then he decided he would have to force himself to utilize the energy needed for lifting himself from this puddle. Remaining as he was meant he would eventually drown in this small amount of dirty water amidst this dank, stinking alley.

Nic Draca almost screamed from the exertion required to raise himself up to a sitting position. His head seemed to loll back-and-forth from one side to the other as he steadied himself in this upright position. He wanted to lift a hand to his head; to stop it from bobbing side-to-side. But that, too, required more effort than he had energy within him just now.

For the next few hours – or so it seemed to him – Nic Draca sat staring unblinkingly down in the pooling water of the puddle he yet sat within. The nearly half moon rose to a position high above him illuminating the water, causing it to reflect his image back up to his eyes, allowing him to see how dreadfully terrible he looked at this moment.

Then his hand finally did move upward toward his head. Only it moved not to steady the throbbing he yet experienced, but to allow his fingers to gently touch the freshly tattooed design that covered the left portion of his face. A design he had never seen upon his face until this moment.

Tracing the tattoo with his fingers, Nic sighed soundlessly. He had never desired a tattoo. Had never seriously considered getting even a small one on his shoulder the way so many others did, where it would not be noticed when wearing the normal amount of clothing in this society.

Yet now he not only did have a tattoo, but sported one so large, so predominantly obvious across nearly one half of his face, that he could never go unnoticed again.

As brightly as the moon was shining, it wasn't enough illumination in this dark corner of this night-time world. As reflective as the puddle was it wasn't enough to allow him enough clarity for discerning exactly what was inscribed within his flesh. For that he would need better lighting and a real mirror.

Nic positioned his hand over the tattooed portion of his face and realized it wasn't nearly large enough to conceal the entire tattoo. It really was going to be difficult to hide this marking from those who would shake their heads at his utter foolishness, even though he must have been far more drunk than he'd ever been before and not in his rightful mind when he had gotten the tattoo. Otherwise, he reflected within himself, he would have remembered having something this large done. He didn't even recall the pain such a large piece of artwork such as this should have engendered. Oddly enough, he noticed he didn't feel any pain even now.

Sitting here was getting him nowhere, though. Nic finally forced himself to stand to his feet, though that major effort itself caused every fiber of every muscle that comprised his body to scream even more at him. It would be much easier to lie back down in the alley and allow the rain to end his troubles right here. Right now.

But Nic Draca had always been a survivor, even if he had also always been what he considered a loser. He'd always thought that someone sporting a name as cool as Nicolae Draca would certainly have been just as cool himself. After all, his first name Nicolae was of Romanian origin and draca was the Romanian word for dragon. How cool was a name that translated as dragon?

And yet he had never lived up to such a name as he owned. Most often he felt as though the name owned him. He had merely been an ineffectual tool for such a moniker and had failed miserably at trying to live up to such a heritage. Maybe his failure was due to the fact that he had no idea what his Romanian heritage was. It obviously had been passed down from his father's side of the family, of which as far as his mother knew, had ceased to exist before his father had journeyed to America. Yet his father had died when Nic had been no more than three years old. Certainly the elder Draca must have believed he'd have plenty of time to relate such a unique heritage as he'd bestowed upon his first and only son as they grew in their years together. Yet fate had intervened and erased the man's slate so that his time had run out far too early.

He forced himself to turn from the dreariness of the alley and toward the street. With each movement he realized more and more how drained he was. He needed nourishment. Food. Something to quiet this gnawing hunger within him that was growing stronger by each passing second, threatening to consume him by its own ferocity.

Music drifted to his ears and he knew there was yet at least one functioning bar still open and operating nearby. Perhaps there he would be able to find something to eat that would quiet this growling hunger that was growing more voracious with each passing minute.

Stumbling along the sidewalk, he followed the music as it grew louder. Halfway down the block he turned left and stumbled through the open doorway of the bar. Lights flashed. Music – loud and fast-paced – blared against his ears. He flinched from the volume, not because he didn't like loud rock music, but because he was already in such pain – evidently from a hangover from a drinking binge he couldn't as yet recall – that the throbbing, pulsating beat of the music struck hard at him as though it were a jackhammer pounding at the concrete it was assigned to demolish.

Nic began to push his way past those who crowded around the entrance at the stools lining the long bar. Suddenly the smell of food found its way to his nostrils and he stopped, turning his head in the direction of the smell. He peered past those who lined the bar, straining his neck muscles to see what type of food was pulling him that direction.

Nothing was evident. Not nachos, nor burritos, nor any of the pseudo-Americanized Mexican food he dearly loved. Not even the obligatory bowls of small dried pretzels or popcorn so many bars offered their clientele in order to keep them ordering drinks to wash the snack food down with.

He moved closer to the bar and noticed the only thing anyone in front of him had were their drinks. But that wasn't what was assaulting his nostrils. Whatever it was, it was almost intoxicating in its aroma.

He moved in closer until he was nearly pressed up against the nearest person seated on a stool – a stout, burly man in his mid-thirties. The man could feel this intruder's presence and looked back over his shoulder at the one who was invading his personal space.

"You got a problem?" the man half turned toward Nic, the expression on his face plainly evident he wasn't one to suffer fools easily.

"I," Nic's voice cracked from the parched dryness he felt. He licked his lips and swallowed. No easy task since he found he didn't have even enough saliva for swallowing.

"Sorry. Just looking for something to eat." Nic found his eyes scouring the man in front of him. He sniffed several times and was appalled at what he was experiencing. The smell of this man seemed to be what was calling out to him. How? Why? He'd never had any sexual inclinations toward men. Girls – voluptuous and overflowing their bras with firm, rounded breasts that were always fun to squeeze and play with while having sex, as well as the nipples so firm and hard that were enjoyable for nibbling and sucking on – these were what he'd always been attracted to.

And yet here he was, pushed up alongside a highly unattractive, at least as far as he was concerned, paunchy, balding man with a very intense five o'clock shadow. A man who stank not only of the stale beer that he'd recently burped up past his throat, but of the sweat that yet lingered all over the flesh of his body from the work he'd performed this previous day. Someone like him should really learn to wear more clothing to cover up such an offensive body odor. Everything about him should have repulsed Nic. So why was he attracted to this man?

"Well maybe you better move to an empty spot further down, ya feather-faced faggot!" the man growled, not liking the way this oddly tattooed intruder was moving closer to him. As if to emphasize his words, the man pressed the flat of one hand against Nic's chest and shoved him roughly away from his face.

Nic stumbled backward, his body clumsily falling against the coat rack standing against the wall just inside the door. The clattering and motion of Nic's flailing arms as he tried vainly to stop his movement caused those seated closest to chuckle. Each one turned enough on their own stools so they wouldn't miss anything else that might transpire between the man at the bar and this obvious clown who was finding it difficult to extract himself from the coats that wrapped themselves about his arms and body.

With great effort Nic finally pulled free of the coats and once more stood to his feet. The hunger within him now pulled even more fiercely, his stomach growling with a ferocity that surprised even Nic.

He noticed the glare from the man who had pushed him and felt as though he should retaliate for the assault against him. A feral ferocity seethed deep within him, desiring to rip into this brutal opponent. But he knew he was too weak to get himself embroiled in a fight with someone who looked as though he could easily handle the likes of Nic. And he had never been a fighter. Not in school and not in the working world since leaving school not that many years hence.

That had been a great part of why he'd always felt himself such a loser. Someone with a name like Nicolae Draca should have been one hell of a fighter. He should have known every form

of martial arts there was in existence, yet Nic didn't know even one form of these Asian fighting techniques. He should have been a veritable champion at swordplay, yet he cut himself too often just trying to butter his bread.

And yet now, with his stomach churning and grumbling with such ferocity within him he thought perhaps just this once he might be able to take someone in a fight and kick his ass.

Nic turned from those gathered about the bar watching him and made his way further into the crowded room. Each person he passed exuded a scent that to him smelled as the most desirable aroma from the most delectable of foods. Male and female alike – it mattered not to him. They all had the same scent. The same delicious aroma wafting from their bodies and drifting across the slight currents of air to where they ended up deep inside his nostrils. His mind began to whirl from the greatly confusing thoughts that now filled his head. Thoughts of his teeth sinking themselves into the flesh of any one of these surrounding him.

The visions caused his mind to be horribly repulsed, which in turn caused his stomach to wretch, but as the sound emitted from his throat he found the urge to feed off human flesh redoubling itself.

He cast his eyes about. Certainly he would be attacked by everyone else around him if he gave in to his desires and bit someone, tore a huge chunk from someone's throat, the way he was wanting to. He would never make his way out of this bar alive.

Pushing himself further into the crowd he soon found himself staring at a man who was screaming at the woman he was with, though the loud music playing from the jukebox helped to buffer the loud berating this woman received so everyone else could go on about their own business. They were seated off to one side within a small booth. The woman had her head bent down almost to the table where her hands clutched her beer bottle as though it was the only thing keeping her alive at this moment. Her hands were white not only at the knuckles, but all along the thin, bony appendages that should have been a lightly tanned shade of brown the way the rest of her body was. The only real color on this woman were the bruises that were displayed in several prominent places across her face and arms. They were all purple and blue and yellow, with the oldest of them tingeing on a sickly brown.

The man berating the woman was unkempt and rough. Far worse than the man who had accosted Nic near the door. The difference between that one and this, Nic realized as he continued studying this man, was that this one was far more drunk than the previous man. So much, in fact, that he was slurring his words as he spat them – quite literally – into the face of the cowering woman he was with.

Wondering what he was going to do, what he could do, with the scenario before him, Nic was surprised when the man suddenly lurched out of the booth and moved towards him.

Nic moved slightly back, feeling as though once more he was about to be struck by a stranger. The man shoved past him, however, not caring that he'd been so physical with a stranger he knew nothing about in a crowded room as this one, and moved unsteadily through the crowd to a door in a wall. The single word MEN was etched into a small plaque affixed to the door.

For the briefest of seconds Nic stood indecisive. Then his feet went into motion as though of their own volition and he entered the men's restroom on the heels of the abusive drunkard.

The man was standing at a trough urinal, relieving his bladder of the many pitchers of beer he had consumed. Nic moved up next to him at the trough. He glanced quickly about and found no one else was currently around.

His face turned toward the man standing next to him. His nostrils flared from the desirable sweatiness of the other. Just as the man was about to turn toward this stranger, having noticed how

close he was standing at an otherwise empty urinal, Nic's mouth opened. His lips pulled back in a snarl, revealing two rather sharp canines that had not been in his mouth before this night. Before another second could elapse, Nic's lips pressed against the man's throat even as his teeth sank deeply into the throat's flesh.

In more fear than he'd ever experienced in his brutal life before, this man who wasn't at all used to being the victim began to struggle, but Nic wrapped his arms around his prey with a growing and renewed energy that strengthened itself as each second allowed the man's blood to flow down Nic's throat and into his ravenously empty stomach.

Sucking in great mouthfuls of blood, Nic continued drinking until he knew there was nothing more to drink.

Releasing his grip on the man, he found the lifeless shell that had only moments before been soft, living flesh, sliding to the floor. Sudden horror at what he had done filled Nic's mind. He knew at any moment someone might walk in through the door and find this uncharacteristic, at least for this quiet city bar, tableau out of a horror novel. He would then spend the rest of his life in prison – or inside a mental institution. Either one was more than his tumultuous mind could fathom at the moment.

Grabbing hold of the body once more, he dragged his victim inside a toilet stall and seated him on the stool. He closed the door, though it couldn't be locked from the outside, and quickly exited the restroom. Even if someone found the man, he would initially appear passed out. By the time anyone realized he was dead, Nic would be far enough away that no one would know where to find him, let alone connect him to this man's death.

Nic went to the first of the two grimy, dirty, porcelain sinks set into the wall across from the urinals. It was obvious from the appearance of each one that they had not been cleaned in many months - if ever. As with most low-class dives like this bar, there were no mirrors above the sinks. Such accessories would have long since been broken by the drunken clientele, anyway. Nic turned on the faucet and bent over the bowl of the sink, catching the weakly running water in his cupped hands. He splashed as much of it onto his face as he was able, rubbing all around his mouth especially, just in case he had gotten some of his victim's blood on him while drinking it from the man's throat. Nic scrubbed longer and harder than was necessary, but his frightened and horrified mind was attempting to scrub away the fact of the atrocious murder he had committed as well.

Pushing through the crowd he made his escape back out onto the street unnoticed. Even those at the bar he had encountered earlier were now far too caught up in their own selves to pay him any attention as he left.

Out in the crisp night air, cool, yet dank from the recent rains, he moved down the sidewalk until he was far enough away from the bar that the noise faded to the same dull din as when he had first noticed it in the alley.

Nic stopped and tilted his head back, his eyes closed. He tried to inhale a deep breath of air to clear his head and help him in understanding what was happening to him. However, he found himself unable to draw air into his lungs.

Panic set in. Why was he unable to breathe? Was it a side effect from having gorged himself on human blood? How long before he died of suffocation?

But the panic quickly subsided as he realized that even now his lungs were once more beginning to function as they always had. He closed his eyes and relaxed as his lungs repeatedly drew in deep breaths of the cold, crisp night air.

It was then Nic realized that until this moment he had not been breathing the entire time since waking up with his face in the mud puddle. Which was why his nostril, having been so immersed as it was in the dirty water, hadn't caused him to inhale the water into his lungs. He had been too preoccupied with first his splitting headache, then the appearance of this mysterious tattoo on his face, and then the ravenous hunger that had built up within him, causing him to seek out a helpless, innocent victim among so many others.

No. Helpless – at least toward him – the man may have been, but innocent? Never. Not if the agitated nerves of the woman he had been with were any indication. Not with the existence of so many bruises she'd acquired over a period, most likely, of not-so-many days. He was anything but innocent. She would have been the first to testify to that fact. Only women like her never testified against the man – either her husband or boyfriend – who abused them and beat them so horribly. What Nic had done was a service not only to this weak-willed woman who was unable to defend herself, but for all of humanity. Cretins like that asshole didn't even deserve to breathe the same air that was being breathed within the lungs of the rest of this world's population.

Calming his mind with his growing sense of rationalization he blinked his eyes and looked about him. Now that he was feeling stronger – apparently the blood he drank seemed to be agreeing with him – he began noticing that everything surrounding him was brighter. Crisper. Clearer to his sight than ever he had known it to be before now.

He could feel the strength of his being coursing through his body. He held up his hands in front of him and looked down at his arms. They seemed to be growing leaner, stronger. More muscular. With each passing second. Not that he was suddenly sporting Arnold Schwarzenegger-style muscles, but they were definitely more delineated and defined than he'd had before this night.

How could drinking someone's blood cause him to grow so much stronger? It made no sense. And hadn't everything he'd learned in high school biology classes told him that the human stomach was unable to digest human blood within it?

The sounds of distant sirens from a police cruiser growing louder as it neared his location pulled him from his reverie. He glanced back over his shoulder at the bar that was now far behind him. Someone must have finally found the body and called the police.

Nic moved quickly down the street and disappeared between two buildings into a dark alley. The ease and speed with which he moved displayed more fully the strength and energy that coursed through his flesh.

Towards the end of the alley he spotted a fire escape. He moved quickly toward it. The ladder was too far above him to reach easily. He tensed his leg muscles and leapt, though he knew it was too high to reach. Still, he knew he had to attempt his escape before the police began searching the surrounding streets and alleys for anyone who might have murdered that man.

His leap surprised him as his hands closed around the lowest rung of the ladder. It pulled downward as his weight settled on it, but before it stopped its movement he was already in motion, scaling the ladder and then the fire escape itself until he was safely at the top of the building.

Pulling himself easily over the parapet, he crouched on the rooftop. Would anyone be able to see him up here?

He turned slowly, scanning in every direction.

Only a few buildings surrounding this one were high enough to allow anyone inside them to see him if they decided to look out their windows. At this hour everyone should be asleep. But with the sirens drawing closer at least some of those inhabiting these apartments at this early hour of the morning would waken and peer out, trying to see what could be bringing the cops into their sleepy

neighborhood at such a time as this. Someone might yet spot him out here and call him in to the cops as a suspicious person of interest.

Nic moved stealthily, still in his crouching position, running to the edge of the building. Without stopping to think of what he was about to do, one foot settled in on the edge of the roof, the other pushed off, sending him hurtling toward the next building over. His feet touched down harder than he would have liked, but the noise he made was still minimal enough that it would go unnoticed for the moment. He paused momentarily in stunned amazement at the feat he'd accomplished. How could he possibly have done something like that? The distance between these two buildings was what? Seven, eight feet? That was farther than he'd ever leaped in school when forced to participate in the standing broad jump during PE classes.

Still marveling over this outstanding ability he'd never had, let alone used before, Nic ran to the edge of this building and looked out toward the next one. No good. This building was at the end of the block. The next building over was a good sixty feet away. Even someone accomplished at physical activities as track stars – which he most certainly was not – could never make such an impossible distance. He ran along the edge of the building and searched until he found a fire escape leading down into another alley along the backside. From there he made his way quickly and efficiently further away from this part of town until he was safely out of harm's way.

Nic dropped from a fire escape and paused in the latest alley he found himself within. He held his hands up in front of his face and studied them as though they suddenly intrigued him to no end.

How could he be doing the things he found himself doing tonight? How could he, someone who had never been overly athletic, someone who had failed at every sport he'd ever attempted throughout his childhood and teenage years, someone who had opted for a dreary, almost lethargic lifestyle due to his lack of energy, possibly be scaling buildings and scampering across rooftops the way he had tonight? He wasn't a superhero in a comic book. No irradiated insect had bitten him. No laboratory explosion had enveloped him within a shrouded mist or cloud of particles that could cause such a reaction within his sub-par body. No alien had appeared to him and altered his physiology to the extent that he would now be able to perform superhuman feats of strength.

Or had one? Certainly he couldn't recall the events that led to his waking up face down in that alley tonight. Most definitely he had no memories that explained why he now sported this large, feathery-seeming tattoo across the greater part of his face's right side.

One hand slowly drew itself to his face. His fingers traced the lightly-scarred outlines of the tattoo on his flesh.

Did his athletic abilities have something to do with his tattoo? Was there more to this fresh facial scar than he could possibly conceive? Had an extra-terrestrial shanghaied him and altered his body chemistry so he was able to do all that he'd found himself doing tonight? Had this alleged ET given him this tattoo as a sign of the abilities he now possessed? Or was the tattoo itself somehow the provider of these physical gifts?

But how could a mere tattoo, a thing of ink, possibly endow a person with unique abilities he did not previously have?

Then he recalled the fact that he had attacked a man and sunk his teeth – no, fangs – into the man's throat. He opened his mouth and felt his canines with his fingers. They definitely were longer and sharper than he'd ever known them to be. And the fact that he'd used these fangs to open a man's throat in order to suck the man dry of his blood bespoke of only one possible explanation – Vampire.

Was that it? Had a vampire attacked him and changed him into the same type of creature of the night? Was he now a dweller of darkness? A drinker of human blood? Certainly everything about this night seemed to point in that direction. But how? Weren't vampires as fictional as extra-terrestrials? How could either explanation be the right one?

All the wondering in the world wouldn't provide him the answers he sought. Nic Draca dropped his hand from his face and resumed walking; leaving the alley and turning the corner that placed him back on a dark, nearly deserted street.

He wasn't too far from his own street now. Perhaps if he went home and slept he would wake with a new perspective on this strangest of all nights. Maybe he would even discover this night to have been a dream. A hallucination. Though why his mind would invent something this bizarre was beyond him. Maybe someone had given him drugs without his knowledge. That could explain why he was imagining such whacked-out and weird hallucinations - if hallucinations they were. At least that explanation was preferable to the possibility of this all being reality.

He walked a few more blocks without seeing anyone else. But less than two more blocks from his apartment he came across a small group of people standing around on the sidewalk directly in his path.

Nic paused, wondering if he should cross the street and go around them. He knew this type. They were punks. Young men of their teens or possibly early twenties who had no other purpose in life than to harass and abuse others less fortunate than they themselves were.

The crowd parted slightly as the youths milled about and Nic was able to see another figure between them on the sidewalk at their feet. One of the local transients who lived on the streets of this city. Nic had seen this one before, an old man who meant no harm to anyone. Someone who sat on a street corner with his cardboard sign and lived off the loose change and offerings of those who passed by. Unlike so many who used such tactics these days to bilk a living off the mindless masses going about their daily routines, this transient really needed the spare change he was handed on a daily basis. Nic had seen this man for too long and, overcome by curiosity late one evening, had even followed the man home as he folded up his sign and departed his usual corner where he made his living. The man had entered an alley not far from here and took up a position behind a smelly dumpster that wasn't in use during the night hours. He was truly homeless in every sense and meaning of the word.

Only now the old man had blood covering his face from where these punks had obviously been hitting and kicking him.

Nic drew involuntarily nearer and one of the thugs turned his direction, spotting him looking at what they were doing.

"You got an interest in this, bitch?" The punk turned fully his way, as did the others whose backs had been to Nic. Some of them held broken beer bottles, others knives. All of them glared at this interloper as though he was merely another portion of fresh meat prime for the kill.

"I'm not involved in this," Nic tried to protest, moving toward the street, hoping he could yet circumvent these who were now beginning to gravitate his way.

"Yeah, I think you are involved," another of the group moved out from the rest. Obviously their leader, if such a pack of mindless punks could be said to have a leader.

This one held a wicked-looking knife in his hand. It already had blood dripping from it. The blood of the transient.

Nic involuntarily glanced toward the old man on the sidewalk. His eyes barely moved. He might yet live if he was able to get to a hospital in time.

The punk with the knife walked up to Nic fearlessly, his weapon and those at his back falsely filling him with bravado, blocking Nic's view of the transient.

"Nice tat you got," the punk lifted his knife toward Nic's face, aiming it at the side where the tattoo was. "Maybe I should add my own carving to it. Make it a little more personal, y'know?" The knife moved closer toward Nic's face.

Without thinking, Nic's left hand raised itself, seizing hold of the punk's wrist and twisting it sharply outward, away from him and to the punk's right side. A loud snap sounded throughout the otherwise still night. A shocked expression appeared on the punk leader's face. The knife dropped with a clatter to the concrete at his feet.

The youth who had seemed so menacing a moment before screamed horribly, like a little girl, his other hand moved to hold onto the one which had previously held the knife. The thug's knees buckled as he slumped down and struck the sidewalk.

"Eddie?" another of the youths moved forward, concern on his face. He looked at his fallen leader, then at the one who had wounded the toughest of their gang. "What the fuck you do to Eddie?" The youth pulled a gun from inside his leather jacket as he moved a few more steps in Nic's direction.

"We don't need to do this," Nic held out a hand, a feeble attempt to ward off further conflict.

"Yeah, we do," yet another of the punks moved closer, his switchblade flicking open as he joined the one with the gun, drawing his strength from the fact of not having to enter into this fray alone. The rest of the gang closed in, surrounding this intruder, blocking his escape from all sides.

"Shit!" Nic whispered more to himself than those surrounding him. He shook his head slightly side-to-side.

"That's right," the gun-toting thug pressed the muzzle of his weapon against Nic's cheek. "You fucked up, mother-fucker." His thumb knocked back the hammer of the revolver, turning the cylinder and placing a round in position.

"Give him a third nostril," another punk snickered, his fearlessness strengthened by being part of a pack mentality.

Nic's hands were held open, palms forward, chest-high as the metal of the weapon pressed deeper into his flesh. The sweatiness of the one standing so close caused his nostrils to flare as they had back at the bar.

Food. He smelled food. And he was still hungry.

His eyes came up and flashed brightly as he held the eyes of his current antagonist. For a brief moment the punk sneered, assuming he had the superior position in this scenario. Then the punk noticed the lack of fear in his victim's eyes and he trembled. His gun hand faltered, the barrel losing contact with Nic's cheek.

Nic realized he easily could have closed a hand around the revolver and torn it from the youth's grip. Instead he lashed out to the sides and grabbed hold of the shirts of the nearest two gang members. He yanked them inward even as he himself moved a step back, allowing the heads of these two to smash together with a dull, but loud crunch. Their colliding bodies striking the gun between them, causing the hand it was within to release its hold. The weapon clattered noisily to the ground. Nic released his hold on these two and they slunk to the ground at his feet, joining the discarded weapon.

The others surrounding him faltered at that point, unsure of themselves as the superiority they had assumed suddenly waned from them.

Nic grabbed hold of the one who had wielded the gun and brought the youth's forehead into contact with his own forehead. Hard. The youth slumped backwards as Nic released him, stumbling back, but not yet falling as had the others.

"Get out of here!" Nic's words were quietly spoken, but the strength they held was enough to scatter the remaining youths. They ran from this spot, glancing back as they fled, happy to get away with their flesh in tact.

Watching them flee, Nic noticed none had stopped to help their former leader, who yet cowered, holding his injured hand with the broken wrist in the grip of his other hand, before this no-longer-victim who squatted down before him.

"Looks like they forgot you, Eddie" Nic whispered so quietly that his prey could barely hear his voice. Nic reached down and took hold of the now whimpering gang leader by his leather jacket and lifted him up from where he was trying desperately to merge himself within the concrete of the sidewalk beneath his back. He smelled the stink of fear exuding from this courageless punk even as he bent over the bare flesh of his throat.

Oddly enough, Nic Draca noticed how he seemed to be gleaning thoughts, memories, scenes from this victim held before him, as though the mind of this human prey was opened somehow to his own mind for viewing. He quickly flashed through the scenes, as though watching a movie or play on fast-forward, seeing the boy he once had been, the rough, sordid life-style the boy had been born into and brought up within. He watched as the boy grew older, made the wrong choices and began joining in with the wrong crowds until he was swept up within the same world as the rest of those born into his neighborhood.

Nic's conscience bothered him only briefly as he reviewed these scenes, and then sniffed the scent of fear and sweat that co-mingled, emanating from this punk. His fangs sank suddenly, deeply, within the soft flesh that yielded up the hot, slightly salty red fluid Nic's stomach craved so hungrily.

When he finished, he dropped the now lifeless husk unceremoniously to the ground. This one wouldn't deserve his respect and consideration even if he were yet alive. Why bother with such niceties over someone who didn't deserve them and certainly couldn't appreciate them now? Turning to the side he contemplated the others who lay unconscious near him. Should he drain their life as well? It was a difficult decision, but finally he stood to his feet without gorging himself further and walked toward the bleeding transient who yet trembled in fear that he might be further beaten.

"Don't worry, Pops," Nic whispered in the old man's ear. "I'm not one of them. I won't hurt you. I was raised to respect the lives of others. Even if I was born into the same neighborhoods as these," he glanced back at those lying inert or dead behind him.

Lifting the decrepit old man up into his arms, his new-found strength yet surprising him, Nic clutched the man to his chest and jogged around the corner, heading down the street. He knew a fire station was only a couple of blocks down. They had medics there who could hopefully patch this guy up and keep him from bleeding to death.

Entering the open door of the station, Nic saw no one present. He shouted out as loud as he was able in order to get someone's attention. "Hey! Anyone working here? I got an old man who's been hurt!"

Within moments a man dressed in the uniform of the Seattle Fire Department exited through a door, a woman similarly dressed right behind him. They both scanned the situation before them, noticing the odd coupling of this apparent transient being born aloft by a youth in well-worn jeans and a short-sleeved striped shirt. The youth would appear as normal as any other "usual white

bread" youth, except for his bizarre and out-of-place facial tattoo. Nic hoped they wouldn't notice his face in this all-too-present emergency.

"What happened?" the male medic accepted the transient from Nic's arms and set him gently down on the concrete floor of the fire station. The female medic had retrieved her aide kit and began checking the old man's vital signs.

"He was attacked by a street gang and – left for dead, I guess." Nic stammered over his words, unsure as to how much truth he should reveal.

"You guess?" the female medic glanced up from her patient.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I came along as they were running away. I don't know what they wanted, just that they had cut this guy up pretty bad. Is he going to live?"

"Don't know, yet," the female medic drew her attention back to her patient. "We'll need to get him to the hospital."

Other members of this station were present now, though none of them joined in to assist. They were all firemen, not medics as were the other two. They knew their counterparts were better equipped to handle the situation than were they.

As the two medics made certain the transient wasn't going to bleed to death on the way to the hospital, another man stepped up to Nic with some forms in his hand.

"You want to fill me in on your friend's information?"

Nic stared at the man uncomprehending for a moment, before finally understanding what was being asked of him.

"He's not a friend. I don't know anything about him. I just found him on the sidewalk. That's all."

He started to edge away toward the opened door of the station, his part in this rescue attempt more than fulfilled.

"Hold on, kid," the other fireman reached out a hand and grabbed Nic by the arm. "I still need information from you, and the cops are going to want to question you about what happened."

Nic could feel the larger, older man's strength, which normally would have been enough to prevent him from pulling away and leaving. But that was before he had gained these added abilities he found within himself this night.

"Sorry," he yanked his arm out of the other's grasp, startling the fireman, "I've told you everything I know. I can't be of any more help to you or the cops."

"Hey!" the fireman yelled out, lunging for the retreating youth even as Nic bolted toward the sidewalk just outside the station. The fireman wasn't as quick as Nic was now and missed the arm he'd been reaching for. Nic, on the other hand, hit the sidewalk with his feet moving and spun on his toes, turning toward the right and speeding down the street before any of the crew from this station could start off after him.

Heading into the nearest alley he once more made his way to the top of the buildings and once more used this rooftop highway for his escape route.

The door to the apartment opened just as the first rays of the morning Sun filtered in past the half-drawn shade at the window. Nic Draca reached over and peered out his closed window to the street below. It was nearly deserted and no one appeared as though they were following him or even looking his way. He pulled the shade the rest of the way down, then turned and walked past his kitchenette to the bathroom that was set into the apartment just before his small bedroom.

Flicking on the light he stood before the mirror and placed his face close so he could finally study the tattoo that he knew must be the cause of all that had happened to him recently.

Nothing looked out at him from within the depths of the mirror. Nothing other than the grimy, soiled clothing he wore.

For the briefest of moments he stood transfixed by the lack of reflection he cast. “What the fuck?” His eyes squinted. Then widened in horror even as he backed away from the mirror, striking the wall opposite the sink almost instantly, since this bathroom, like the rest of this apartment he rented, was too small to allow any more movement than that.

The towel rack pressed into the small of his back. He moved away from it, looking down at his hands as though to reassure himself that he did still exist, that the lack of reflection wasn’t due to his having ceased to be living in this life.

His hands and arms were yet attached to the rest of his body; the soiled clothes that had shown in the mirror yet covered them. He moved back in front of the mirror, hoping the results would be different this time. They weren’t. Nothing stared back at him other than his soiled clothing. Or to be more accurate, he stared at nothing in the mirror other than his clothing. His face, hair and bare arms beneath the short-sleeved shirt failed to register within the silver-backed mirror that set in the wall above his bathroom sink.

His hands went to the buttons of his shirt and ripped them open. No fingers showed in the mirror as the shirt ripped mysteriously open, as though by its own power. No flesh revealed itself to the silvery mirror, though the material of the clothing hung limply back at him.

Stumbling in fear from the bathroom, Nic moved into the short hallway, then back out into the kitchenette/living room combo. He cast his eyes about for anything that might hold a reflective surface. They fell upon the toaster that was crammed in between his drip coffee maker and the stove. Grabbing hold of it he held it up in front of his face. A distorted image stared back at him from the dull, thin metallic side.

Why should this toaster reflect his appearance when the mirror hadn’t? He turned his head sideways and examined the tattoo as best he could.

An imitation feathery pattern displayed itself across his face from just above his left eye to a point almost touching the jaw-line of his face. He counted the feathers and found there were seven of various sizes that comprised the tattoo. The ones at the top above his eye and closest to his nose were the smallest, while those running all the way across his cheek and down toward his left jaw line were the largest. They curved downward with the quills connecting together on his forehead. The tips of each feather were black with gray shading in various places on each feather.

“How the..?” He still couldn’t understand how this tattoo had come to be on his face or why it should be there, since he had no recollection at all of getting it placed there. And then there were the changes to him he was still unable to explain. He couldn’t fathom any manner in which this design made in ink could possibly have caused such oddly pleasing – and horrifying – changes within his being.

He sighed heavily, staring at the distorted image of himself within the toaster he yet held. Shaking his head he then nodded in understanding. There was no other explanation for what was happening to him. As impossible as it seemed, as horrifying as it seemed, Nic Draca knew there was only one explanation that fit the facts as he knew them at this point.

Ignoring the tattoo on his face he spread his lips back and examined the now longer canines on each side of his upper teeth. They were not only longer, but much sharper than he had ever seen them before.

“Vampire,” the solitary word barely hissed from between his lips. It was the only word in his vocabulary that fit what he had seen – and done – this night. He stared at the sharp canines once

more in the side of the toaster, then slammed the appliance down on the counter and backed quickly away as though it might suddenly bite him.

He couldn't be a vampire. Such creatures didn't exist. Not in reality they didn't. They were mythological. Fairy tales. Vampires were the things of legends. Of horror movies and stories. Fantasies to scare those who enjoyed being scared. Nothing more and certainly not real.

His hands went up to his mouth. He felt the fangs that yet stuck out there.

"Vampire. I'm a vampire," he whispered to himself.

He then glanced over to the subdued light that filtered through the drawn shade on the window and realized the morning Sun was just beginning to rise up in the eastern sky. Without thinking he moved to it and pulled down, allowing the shade to be drawn upward as he released his hold on it.

The bright light that bathed him caused Nic Draca to scuttle back in pain. He looked down at the vapor of what appeared to be steam – or perhaps smoke – wafting up from his smoldering flesh. He quickly moved as far away from the sunlight pouring in past the open shade as he was able, then darted down the short hall to his bedroom.

Fortunately he always kept not only the shade, but the drapes, closed in his bedroom. That way the morning Sun wouldn't wake him on days he didn't work.

Work. How was he supposed to work when he couldn't go out into the Sun? Granted he worked inside, but he still had to venture out into the Sun in order to get to-and-from his job. What was he supposed to do to earn a living now?

The absurdity of his thoughts came to him. He began laughing and shaking his head. Here he had somehow become part of those he'd always termed undead and believed to be mere gothic fantasy, and he was concerned with as simple a thing as working. Could there be anything more ludicrous than that?

Dropping to his bed he lay on his back staring at the ceiling, thinking back through all the events of the past night, hoping to catch a glimpse of anything that might explain what had happened to him. Nothing seemed likely to shed any light on his current situation.

The unintended pun caused him to chuckle once more. Light would never again be able to shed itself upon him. Not sunlight, at least. And he did enjoy sunning himself whenever he was able, mostly on the roof of this very apartment building, but sometimes on the beach near one of the many rivers or inlets that permeated this area of the Great Northwest each summer, getting what little tan he could before the dreary, relatively sunless winters settled in up here in this region of the country.

He scanned his arms once more, but this time in order to study the medium-dark tan he yet had from this past summer. Would it fade in time as he continued to remain out of the Sun? Or would it forever be exactly as it was at this moment?

He'd always heard it explained in vampire stories that once a person was turned into a vampire he remained exactly as he was at the time of his turning.

Is that how it would be for him? Would his skin always be exactly as tan as it was at this moment? If so, at least he wouldn't have a deathly pale skin that revealed himself to everyone who met him as one of the undead. Or would his flesh yet pale in time, becoming like the vampires of some stories he knew, chalk-white, china-doll complexions that told everyone around they were decidedly not part of the living in this world?

Once more his fingers flew to his face as he traced the feathery pattern across his cheek. This tattoo would forever be evident on his face. He was doomed to spend all of eternity with this unexpected and unwanted design showing itself to the entire world.

That was not at all conducive to living a life of anonymity the way he thought of vampires as living.

Living. Life. Those were words he would have to excise from his vocabulary. At least as they applied to himself. He was no longer alive. He had no life. Merely an existence.

Sitting up on the side of his bed he rubbed his hands across his face. What cruel twist of fate would not only make him into a vampire, but cause him to be marked with a tattoo so obvious as to make him highly noticeable to everyone around?

Was that the point of his tattoo? Had it been placed there in order to mark him as what he now was? If so, by whom? The one who had so cruelly changed him into what he was now or someone else, someone who had come along afterward and clearly understood what foul thing of the underworld he had recently become?

He stood to his feet and began to pace the small room. Someone had deliberately marked him with this design. He couldn't recall getting it voluntarily, so it had to have been placed there by someone else for whatever reason. And if he – as a vampire – was to forever appear exactly as he did at the moment of being made into a creature of the undead, wouldn't that necessarily mean that the tattoo had been carved into his flesh before he'd been changed? Sure. That made perfect sense. Otherwise his face would already be erasing the ink design that had been mysteriously placed there, wouldn't it? So how had the one who tattooed him known he was about to become a vampire?

Again - could that person have been the one who made him into a vampire? If so – why? What possible reason could his – sire – he recalled the term from every book he'd ever read or horror movie he'd ever watched on the subject – have for marking him this way before turning him into what he now was? Wasn't a sire supposed to nurture a newly-turned vampire? Wasn't a sire responsible for ensuring a fledgling vampire's survival as one of the undead in the world of the living? Wasn't there supposed to be some form of vampiric government that ruled everything having to do with vampires and enforced such rules as sires nourishing their newly-turned fledglings?

Whether it was the process of thinking so hard on what had happened to him or the fact of it becoming daylight, Nic found he was suddenly exhausted. His eyelids fluttered several times just before closing completely. He had just enough time to return to his bed before collapsing into unconsciousness.

When he awoke it was dark outside. The blinds and drapes were yet closed, yet somehow he instinctively knew it was now evening and the Sun had lowered itself down beyond the western horizon now somewhere passed Japan, which was as nearly due-west from his location as any country could be. For awhile he lay where he was on his bed, unwilling to move. There was too much at stake here to leave this apartment just yet.

Once more he played over the events of the previous night in his mind, recalling vividly all the memories since waking in that puddle in the alley. The singular word vampire, along with an image of himself with his lips bared back, revealing his fangs and sinking them into the throats of his victims, continuously playing itself through his mind as an endless-loop reel from a horror movie.

Did he have any right to leave this apartment and venture out in search of new prey? Wasn't it more than merely illegal? Wasn't it intolerably immoral for him to choose his own continued

existence as a beast from the pits of Hell at the price of the lives of those he would need to feed off? How could he make such a decision? Wouldn't it be better to simply go up onto the roof of this building and wait until morning so the rising Sun could bathe him in its radiance? Wouldn't he then be incinerated? Burned completely to a crisp, leaving only a small heap of ash residue behind as evidence that he had ever existed at all?

Yeah, that seemed the proper choice for him to make, even if he himself wasn't the one at fault for the condition he now found himself stuck in.

Sitting up on the edge of his bed, Nic looked around his room. There was very little here to speak out concerning his life. No accomplishments. No awards or trophies. No pictures from sports teams. Not even his high school diploma, which he'd left with his mother when he'd moved out on his own a few short years back. What good would it do him?

Shaking his head in lamentation of such a life void of accomplishments, he stood and began to strip off the soiled clothing he'd been wearing since the previous night when he'd woken in the puddle. If he was going to make the supreme sacrifice and end his sorry existence, the least he could do was to shower and put on clean clothes.

He snorted in derision of himself. How ludicrous to care how he was dressed when the Sun came up and caused him to burst into flames.

Stepping out of his jeans and dropping his briefs to the floor, Nic walked the few feet from his bedroom door to the bathroom door in the short hallway. Pushing aside the pebbled yellow glass doors he reached within the stall and turned on the hot water, then added some cold to temper the heat. He grinned once more. Would pure hot water scald him in this form? Would ice-cold water freeze him? Once more shaking his head he stepped within the stall and drew the glass door closed. Regardless of his ability to resist extremes in heat and cold in this state, he decided to stick to habits he'd formed throughout his life and take a hot shower, scrubbing the filth from his flesh.

Afterwards, drying himself, he walked naked into his living room and opened the window. Leaning on the window frame he poked his head outside and stared up-and-down the nearly empty street. The night was cold, but at least it didn't appear as though it was going to be raining tonight as it had last night. In fact, the weather seemed to be changing so that the night might be showing a little frostiness. At least it wasn't snow. As much as he'd enjoyed snow as a child, he no longer cared for the white, fluffy substance, merely because it made traveling to work and everywhere else he liked to go so much more difficult.

Pulling his head back in he lowered the window and shut the curtains. Why, he wasn't at all sure, since he was planning on ending his existence in the morning.

Starting to move back toward his bedroom to select the appropriate clothes for his last night on Earth, Nic stopped and smiled at himself. He then threw back his head and released a loud, roar of laughter. Why not head up to the roof just as he was now? Why bother with clothing? The freezing weather wasn't going to affect him, and any clothing he wore would merely burn as quickly as his own flesh, right? Or would the clothes be left behind as a reminder of how empty his short life had been?

Opening the door to his apartment he glanced both ways along the hall. No one present at the moment, but what if someone walked out of their apartment or came up the stairs just as he was heading for the door that led to the roof? He didn't want anyone calling the cops and causing him to end up in jail. That would ruin his plans for the morning greeting of the Sun and jail wasn't the place where he wanted to spend his last night on this Earth.

Closing his door he headed back to his window. It was dark enough outside and he was on the top floor of his building, so that anyone chancing by on the street below wasn't likely to look up

and see him climbing from the window to the ledge of the roof above him. It would take what? A whole fifteen seconds to traverse the short distance?

Placing one foot up on the ledge Nic pushed himself forward and upward, turning as he moved so that he faced the brick wall of the building that had been old before even his grandparents had been born. His fingers reached out as he shoved upward, catching hold of the parapet that lined the roof. Pulling his naked body quickly over the edge, Nic stood straight up, leaning forward and looking down upon the few cars and pedestrians that yet traveled along on their way to their homes. If they only knew a stark-naked vampire loomed above them. He grinned sardonically, enjoying his mild attempt at humor.

Nic strode slowly along the rooftop, glancing back-and-forth as though to reassure himself he was indeed alone. Who else would be up here this time of year? Perhaps in the summer when it was hot, sure, but in this cold? No, this was his domain alone this night. No one else was insane enough to be out here.

"You're going to freeze to death that way," a decidedly feminine voice stabbed through the icy darkness, causing Nic to stop dead in his tracks, one foot held immobile above the rough composition material of the roof. He glanced quickly about and noticed a girl, a very pretty brunette, as far as he could tell in this darkness, perhaps eighteen to twenty or so years old, standing on the other side of one of the many ducts that exited out onto the roof – some from the air-conditioning, others from the furnace. She was slightly bent over something in front of her. Without moving further, Nic craned his neck to see what she was doing.

"This is one of the best times of winter to look at the stars," she offered of her own volition, seeming to ignore his condition of nakedness and leaning forward once more to place an eye against the eye-piece of the telescope she was using.

Nic slowly moved her direction, more acutely aware of his nudity now than he was before she had spoken to him. He wasn't certain how she might react if he moved too quickly. Would she see it as an act of aggression? Would she call out for a cop?

Almost as though she was capable of reading his thoughts, the girl turned his direction once more, smiling as she seemed to be studying the entirety of his naked body.

"Wow, you really have some nice, lean muscles, don't you?" She turned back toward her stargazing as though meeting naked men up here was so matter-of-fact as to matter not at all.

"Uh, yeah I - I guess so," was all he found to say. Maybe he should go back down to his apartment and get something on?

"I like the way your nipples stand out erect in the cold night air, but not other parts of your anatomy," she offered once more, casting yet another brief glance his way. "Looks like you've had practice at keeping yourself under control, huh?"

Was this a come-on? Was she attracted to him, or at least the absurdity of seeing him naked in such an uncommon and unexpected place at such an uncommon time of the year?

"Excuse me," he barely murmured, heading back the way he'd come. "I'll be right back." Without another thought he was over the parapet and swinging himself back inside his open window, his bare feet leading the way as his entire body glided effortlessly through the opening. His feet touched lightly down upon his worn, ratty, threadbare carpet and he raced to his bedroom and pulled out a dark blue turtleneck sweater his mother had given him a couple of years ago for his birthday. He'd never worn it, not caring much for anything laying against his throat, but it was perfect, since it wasn't too worn, the way most of his clothes were. He then slipped on a pair of worn jeans without bothering to put a pair of briefs on beforehand. He did slip on a pair of socks

before jamming his feet into his favorite worn out shoes. He couldn't stand wearing shoes without socks, vampire or not.

Satisfied in how he was dressed, he went back to the roof in the same manner as before, figuring it made no difference now what this girl thought. She'd already seen him at his worst – or best – depending upon her own view of seeing him naked.

Hearing the sound of feet landing on the sparsely scattered gravel of the roof, the girl turned to see this darkly-clad figure moving toward her.

"Are you the same guy who was just 'strutting his stuff in the buff' out in the open a moment ago?" She smiled, making Nic feel more at ease. "Yeah, I can tell by the really nicely tattooed feathers on your face. There can't be two guys lurking 'round the rooftops here in Seattle with that design.

"I don't know why you bothered getting dressed. If the cold wasn't bothering you, your naked flesh wasn't bothering me. Well, ok, maybe a little, but not that way."

Ignoring her remarks, Nic walked up beside her, making certain not to make any moves that might indicate an aggressive behavior. "So you like stargazing?"

"No, I'm just trying to see if I can get the light from the moon to travel down this tube into a jar so I can seal it off and keep it for a later date when there isn't any moon out," she quipped rapidly, adding, "Here's your sign!" in a slight southern drawl that sounded all-too familiar to him.

Nic grinned and shook his head slightly. "Guess I deserve that one, huh? Sorry. Guess the discovery that I wasn't alone when I expected to be unnerved me. I was looking for an ice-breaker, I guess."

"An ice-breaker?" she stood erect and grinned widely. Nic noticed how nicely rounded her breasts were beneath the tan sweater she wore, pushed together with a bra that had to be a "push-up" bra, unless her breasts really were so nice and firm that they pushed up that way, enticing all the men who saw them. He liked the effect. "After what I just saw you needed something to break the ice? How much more broken can it get than you strutting around naked up here in the open?"

"Ok. Touché," he stuck a hand out in greeting. "I'm Nic, and you're?"

"Getting more of an eye-full than I expected to get up here tonight." She stuck her hand in Nic's and pumped vigorously a few times. "Alexis. Or just Alex. My little brother, who's a pain-in-the-ass, calls me Al. Don't even think it." The glinting glare from her eyes told him she was serious.

"Not Lexis?" he ventured a query.

"I tried that in high school. Some smart ass jock on the football team decided it would be funny to comment on how 'nice it would be to "drive a Lexis all night long"'. After I got back from a week's suspension no one called me that any longer."

"Ok. Got the picture. Alex it is."

"Funny you chose that derivation. Does it mean you're more into guys than gals?" She smiled with her lips pursed together, causing dimples to appear at the corners of her lips.

"No, I just...", Nic was flustered now. Was she thinking he was gay? He didn't want that.

"Just jerking your chain, Nic. Don't get too serious on me. Not after showing off all your gorgeously fashioned hardware in full frontal, view."

He lowered his head, thinking he must be blushing, and then wondered if he could blush any longer. Did vampires blush? "Sorry. I'll try not to be too serious. Glad you liked the impromptu show. Wasn't intentional. Is this outfit all right?"

"It's fine. Liked the other one better," Alexis stated flatly, bending back to her telescope. Nic couldn't help but notice her well-rounded ass as she pushed it out further than he was certain she actually needed in that position. "Know anything about astronomy?"

"Just that I don't believe the stars can determine a person's life," he answered flatly.

Alexis stood straight and raised a cocked eyebrow his way, shaking her head.

"That's astrology, not astronomy, and I don't either."

"You don't either what?"

"I don't believe in astrology, either. Astronomy I believe in wholeheartedly. Looking at the stars out there in the vastness of space fascinates me." She seemed to scour the length of his body with her eyes before placing them against the telescope's lens once more. "Almost as much as the heavenly body I witnessed behind me the first time you came up here tonight."

"Ok, that's at least the third come-on I've heard from you tonight. Are those intentional, or are you just prone to sticking your foot in your mouth the same way I am?"

"Oh, it's not my foot I wanted to stick in my mouth when I looked back and saw your hanging-dangly-thingy swinging around all free and clear a little bit back." Alexis stood up straight and moved closer to Nic. He thought for a moment he could feel his heartbeat quicken, then couldn't recall if he even had a heartbeat any longer. Had he felt it beating since he'd woken up in that alley last night? He tried concentrating on it, but her closeness, her proximity at this moment, her perfume – no – he inhaled deeply, his eyes closing in concentration – she wasn't wearing any perfume – ok, her scent was intoxicating.

Alexis placed a hand upon his chest and leaned closer. Now he could feel his heartbeat, and it definitely was beating faster with her this up-close and personal.

The thought of his heartbeat caused him to recall why it was he had come up to the roof in the first place. He had intended on ending his life – existence – come morning. Now here he was with a young, very hot and sexy, brunette coming on to him the way no other girl had ever thought of all his life.

Was this just one more example of how fickle and unrelenting fate could be, to take away his life and humanity and at the same time bring a possible love interest into it? How more screwed up could anything get?

"So, just what were you doing prancing around up here without a stitch of clothing on in the middle of autumn? Don't you know that's the best way to get frostbite? Or maybe you think you're immune to freezing temperatures?" Once more her eyebrow was arched in a quizzical manner. He noticed for the first time that she had the most intensely green eyes he'd ever seen. Maybe it was just how he was seeing them with his enhanced vision, but they almost seemed to be sparkling, glimmering, as though there was a hidden power beneath her eyes that caused them to sparkle as no other eyes possibly could.

"Um, yeah, well, I am kind of resistant to cold weather," Nic finally managed to mutter through lips he was trying to keep closed as much as possible, now that she was directly facing him close enough that if he wasn't careful she might notice his lengthened canines.

"And are you also a card-carrying member of The Naturist Society?" she quipped cheerfully, closing the gap between them.

"A what?" Nic was even more confused now.

"A card-carrying member of The Naturist Society. It's one of the national memberships held by people in America who are practicing naturists or nudists. You've never heard of it?"

"Uh, no, I can't say that I have. Are you one?"

“Yup. All my life. Well, my parents were members since before I was born, and then I became one when I turned eighteen, which was five years ago, just in case you were wondering if I was legal or not. Been one ever since and enjoy the hell out of it, since all the nudist clubs across America always have lots more male members than female. That means wherever I travel there’s always a club willing to allow me free access on a limited basis, knowing that the presence of a nubile, young, female as beautiful as I am will undoubtedly attract others.

“It works quite well, and I never have to buy my own dinner or drinks.”

Nic knitted his brows together as he thought this over. “Wow, not stuck on yourself at all, are you? Sounds to me like you’re quite avaricious, at least where men’s attentions are concerned.”

“Get off it,” she almost seemed irritated now. “Men of all ages love throwing money around on pretty girls, as long as they think there’s a good chance of getting sex out of it. Right? Why shouldn’t an enterprising young woman like me take advantage of such willingness from those same men to gamble their riches on a chance to get me into bed?”

“Hey, l-look, Alexis,” Nic found himself stuttering in a way he’d never done before, “Maybe we should start over. I wasn’t trying to offend you. All I meant was that you seem to know what you want and how to go about getting it. Guess I just didn’t say it the way I intended.”

Her shoulders relaxed and facial features smoothed out. “I guess. Sorry. Anytime I have a man come on to me and not give him what he thinks he deserves, I always find myself defending my decision not to have sex with him. After all, having sex isn’t necessarily a given just because a man buys dinner and drinks. I mean, it’s like playing the lottery or sitting down at a table or slot machine in Vegas, right? ‘You pays your money, you takes your chances,’ as my dad always said.”

“Um, no, I guess not.”

“Huh, meaning you think so, too.” She snorted, folding her arms over her breasts and turning back to peer into the eyepiece of the telescope, ignoring the man next to her.

“Wait-a-minute,” he exclaimed. “All I did was come up here to be alone – to try and resolve some personal issues. How come I ended up being the ‘bad guy’ to someone I just met? And for your information, no, I don’t think sex is a given where dinner and drinks are concerned, but remember how you’re the one who came on to me when we first met. More than once.”

Alexis remained poised over her scope a moment or two longer before once more straightening up to face him.

“Ok, I guess you’re right. I did come on to you. I liked the way you looked – especially sans clothing – and the way you seemed to be braving the Northwest climate. I thought it was – hot – if not an outright turn-on.”

“You mean, you got turned on seeing me ‘strutting my stuff’, as you termed it.” Nic was the one grinning now.

“Well, yeah. I got an unexpected hot flash from seeing you in-the-buff, as naturists tend to call being nude.”

“Which means in layman’s terms, you got horny?” Nic grinned so broadly now he forgot to hide his teeth. They flashed forth in the moonlight so that Alexis couldn’t help but notice.

“Wow. You’ve got great fangs,” she quipped, moving in to examine them more closely. Nic immediately clamped his lips tightly together and took an involuntary step back from her.

“Oh.” Alexis stopped short. “I guess my impulsiveness got the better of me again. Sorry. I hadn’t thought about you maybe being sensitive about your teeth. Guess you probably got teased about them a lot when you were a kid, huh? Your parents never heard of Orthodontics?”

He shrugged his shoulders, not sure how to broach a subject like this. He hadn’t considered talking about it to anyone and was caught more than a little off-guard.

His reticence caused Alexis to become more contrite over her overbearing forwardness. "Sorry, Nic. I'm not teasing you or making fun of you. I just thought it was kind of cool that you had, um, well, fangs, y'know? Not too many people do, right? Certainly not as pronounced as yours are. I like them. They kind of give me goose bumps and turn me on all at the same time."

"No, I guess there aren't too many people who have teeth like mine," he sighed slightly, trying to keep his lips mostly together.

"Don't be self-conscious around me about it, please?" Alexis found herself almost begging. "We were starting to get along so well and then I opened my mouth and inserted my foot, just like you implied earlier." A sly grin spread across her face and she glanced down toward his groin. "But as I said then, I wouldn't mind inserting something else inside my mouth. Anytime you'd like, too, Nic. Got a hot date planned tonight?"

The absurdity of what was happening got the better of him. He forgot himself in her presence and found himself grinning once more, no longer caring that his fangs showed.

"That's so much better." Alexis moved up to him and placed her hands lightly around his waist, pulling him against herself. He was surprised to find she was almost as tall as he was, her eyes staring straight into his mouth without her having to tilt her head either up or down.

"Mmmm, nice pearly-white's you got there, Nic. You won't believe the fantasies they're giving me right now. Fantasies I wouldn't mind playing out with you, either." Without hesitation, Alexis pressed her lips against his, forcing her tongue between his teeth in search of his own.

Nic relaxed the tension inside him and responded to her advances, his own tongue rolling around inside his mouth, as though wrestling with hers, then inside of hers, intimately exploring this new person so willingly turning him on and being turned on by him.

He moved his face away from hers, placing tender, hot kisses against her throat, feeling the pulsation of her blood as it pumped its way from her heart to her brain. He heard her groan in response, her body pressing ever-more tightly against his, one of her legs pressing its knee up and into his groin, gently massaging his already erect manhood.

A growing hunger deep inside him sprang forth, causing him to suddenly pull back, fearful that he might respond by biting her throat and drinking her blood.

She looked wide-eyed at him; curious as to why he had cut off the obviously mutual attraction they were each responding to. "Did I do something else wrong?"

"Uh, no, it's not you, Alex," he glanced nervously around, searching for the best way to exit from this potentially volatile situation. "I, uh, just have somewhere I need to be."

He broke their embrace and moved quickly back. "Please don't take this the wrong way, ok? I really like you and – want to finish what we started. Now just isn't the time for it. Ok?"

"You live here in this building, right?" He began edging away from her, their hands barely touching by their fingertips now. "Maybe you can come by my apartment in say, an hour?"

Without another word he darted for the edge of the roof on the other side of the building, and dove off headfirst toward the dark alley below. By the time Alexis ran to where she could peer over into the darkness, he had vanished completely from sight.

Falling headlong into the alley, having leaped from the rooftop like an idiot who was seriously intent on suicide, which he now realized pleasantly that he was no longer intent upon, Nic grabbed hold of the bottom rung of the fire-escape just before he would have plunged past it. His hands gripped it tightly, causing the rusted-iron ladder to squeak as his added weight applied downward pressure to it. Before the ladder could begin to break free from the position it had lain inert within for so many years of non-use, he had swung himself forward, feet-first, swinging out

toward the street. He landed on his toes, his knees bent, then immediately sprang forward, sprinting down the now vacant sidewalk and away from the searching eyes of Alexis, who was just now peering over the rooftop.

He ran several blocks before deciding it was safe enough to once more take to the rooftops as his personal and private highway. He hadn't wanted to leap from one roof to the next in full sight of this strange new girl he was quickly falling head-over-heels for. Maybe his appearing for the first time ever in front of her totally naked hadn't caused her any alarm. Perhaps his facial tattoo hadn't bothered her any. Certainly she hadn't been repulsed by his long, sharp canines, but maybe, just maybe, if she'd witnessed him leaping impossibly along the rooftops at breakneck speed, the way he was doing now, it just might have freaked her out enough to change her mind about getting sexually involved with him.

He could definitely feel his heart beating faster and faster within his chest, the pulsing of his blood a constant throb within his eardrums. It wasn't the exertion of his muscles causing this rapid rate of heartbeat, he knew – it was the thought of having sex with such a vitally attractive and sexually energized, beautiful girl like Alexis. He wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anyone else in his entire life.

More even than he'd wanted Victoria Lynn Woodington, the pretty little brunette he'd first met his first day of first grade. He'd had an instant crush on her and it hadn't been any easier finding she lived directly upstairs from him in the same apartment building. Good thing she had become friends with his sister or he might never have had an opportunity to get her into his apartment. Sure, he'd only been six years old, but he'd become instantly infatuated with this budding ballerina with the already nicely-muscled thighs and calves from her dance classes. He'd hated it when her parents had moved away, forcing her to go along with them and breaking his then seven-year old heart.

But Alexis – now there was a daunting beauty as rare as rare could possibly be. And with absolutely no inhibitions whatsoever as far as he could tell. She had come on to him, not the other way around. How many times had that happened in his short-lived life span? Zero.

A sharp sound of a gun pierced his hearing. He came up short, just as he was about to leap across yet another alleyway beneath him. He faltered, realizing he hadn't been concentrating on locating a prey for tonight, his mind too caught up in the sexual foreplay he'd been so impulsively involved in.

Catching himself as he fell into the dank, smelly alley, Nic turned his fall into a somersault and landed just as he had earlier when he first ran from Alexis. He paused for a brief moment, all his heightened vampiric senses on full alert status. No second gunshot sounded to his hearing, but he could hear people shouting now, someone crying – a woman - as though in fear of her life – or perhaps that of someone with her – who might be the one shot.

He sprang forward, heading that direction, his senses now on full, his mind having pushed all thought of Alexis down deep for the moment. He was intent on his prey – his need to fulfill his hunger – and this might possibly be what he needed.

Rounding the corner along the street he pulled up short, being as he was confronted with a scenario of two men and a woman. One man was on the ground. The woman was on her knees, sobbing, holding onto the man on the ground. Both were black, African-Americans, he reminded himself absently. The other man was maybe white, maybe Hispanic – he couldn't tell from this angle behind him, yet. He was the one holding the smoking gun, although the smoke had long since cleared the barrel. Still, the acrid scent of gunpowder lingered in the air. Nic inhaled deeply and caught the acrid scent pungently stinging his nostrils.

“Give me those fuckin’ drugs, bitch!” the man with the gun was screaming loudly. Nic didn’t need enhanced hearing to pick his words up. Anyone awake on this entire block could hear him plainly. Nic hoped there weren’t too many people awake and paying attention. He needed privacy for what he was about to do.

Poising himself on his toes, Nic ran swiftly up behind the attacker of these other two. He had heard the shouted words. He knew none of them were completely innocent in all of this. The people being attacked were either drug pushers or users – at least they were in possession of drugs. The other one – their attacker – wanted what they had. No, there were no innocents in this scenario, just the decision in Nic’s mind to take out the most antagonistically protagonist in the scene.

The look on the woman’s face must have alerted Nic’s victim that someone was behind him. He began to move – to turn around – his gun leading the way as he turned toward Nic, who was just now reaching out for the collar of the man’s black jean jacket. The man never completed his turn. The outstretched hand grabbed firmly ahold of the collar and swung the man down to the sidewalk. The woman screamed as much when Nic’s other hand slammed into his victim’s face as she had when this man had shot the man she was holding onto. Maybe she just liked screaming.

The punch in the face caused the attacker-turned-victim to release his hold on his weapon. The gun clattered quickly to the concrete, but Nic had the man lifted up in both arms and was springing away from the scene before the weapon could settle down upon the ground. He had moved forward, past the two who’d been attacked, putting himself and his prey on the backside of the others. Nic didn’t want this woman getting any better look at him than she already had.

Darting quickly within the nearest alley he slammed his victim against the nearest wall. The impact jarred the man’s teeth and caused blood to spatter from the back of his head as a minor abrasion resulted from the impact.

“This just isn’t your lucky night, is it?” Nic huskily breathed the words even as he sunk his teeth within the man’s flesh. His victim had no time to cry out in fear or alarm. His blood flowing from his body and into this stranger’s mouth was too sudden and astonishing an event to allow his brain the time to do anything that might consciously assist in his escape.

It didn’t take long for Nic to drain the man’s body of all the necessary fluid that kept him alive. Within less than a minute the body had become a shell, where once a living being had resided. Now it was less than a corpse.

Nic released his hold on the body, allowing it to slump to the filthy garbage-strewn alley. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, though there was no need to wipe it. He had not spilled any blood or caused any viable mess that necessitated his wiping his mouth. The action was merely a reflex from when he’d been human.

A sound from the street behind him caught Nic’s attention. Without looking back to see if anyone was heading his way, he chose instead to leap upwards, catching hold of the nearest window ledge with the toes of his shoes, grabbing hold of the crevices between a couple of bricks as well, propelling himself further upward where he landed upon the roof of the building. Without another thought, he quickly headed off in the direction of the apartment building he lived in. Where Alexis lived. Where hopefully she was awaiting his return.

Only a few minutes passed before he leaped down from the rooftop of the building next to his, angling his descent so that he landed perched on his own window ledge. He’d left the window fully open, so it was easy enough to pull himself in before anyone outside – not that he’d noticed anyone this time of morning - could see him making such an amazing leap.

“You have a way of making the most astonishing entrances, don’t you?” Alexis spoke casually, softly, from his living room. Startled, Nic cast his eyes abruptly toward the sound of her

voice. The lights had been on when he'd left earlier. They were off now. He hadn't noticed the difference. He knew he had to be more careful from now on – if he was going to continue on in this bizarre new existence.

"How'd you get in here?" He reached over and turned on the nearest lamp, one of only two in this small room. The girl who'd been a stranger not an hour before was sitting in his only recliner, a glass of wine held in her right hand. He noted it was red wine and she was slowly, gently, sloshing the liquid within the goblet, causing it to swirl almost hypnotically.

He also noted that he didn't have any wine in the apartment. She must have brought it from her own place.

"Care for some?" Alexis sweetly offered the crystal goblet out toward her host. "Or is this the wrong type of red liquid for you? Already had your fill tonight?"

What was she saying to him? Did she know what he was? But how could she? They'd only just met. Sure, he had fangs that she'd commented on, but she'd seemed to think he'd always had them – even as a child. Why would she now assume differently?

"Not too many people who have canines like yours can pull off the amazing stunt you did when you 'flew' from the rooftop above, Nic." She stood from the chair and sauntered over to him, the wineglass still held poised in her hand. "Not that I didn't already know all about you."

"What?" His mind was reeling now. In a fog. How could she possibly know about him? This change had just happened. He hadn't even had time to truly come to terms with what he was. "How?" the word was barely out past his lips before other words entered his mind. Words not of his own choosing.

Not every mortal is as mundane as most. Some of us are quite literally adept at the most amazing feats ourselves.

Nic blinked his eyes several times as he stood mutely staring at this beautiful young girl he'd thought a mere innocent bystander when he'd met her. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Innocent bystander, Nic?" Alexis laughed so sweetly, so beautifully he found himself being drawn to her, enticed by her allure, her appeal – more than merely sexual.

"You are going to explain all this to me, aren't you?" Nic's words barely left his mouth before Alexis pressed her lips against his own, preventing any further discussion.

Later, the solitary word penetrated his mind even as he felt her hands entwine his neck, pulling him more firmly against her firm body. Absently – somewhere far back within the recesses of his subconsciousness – he wondered what had happened to the wineglass. She hadn't stopped to set it anywhere before placing both hands around his neck. So where was it?

You really are quite the enigma, Nicolae Draca. Stop thinking and start ravishing me. The way you know you want to.

Nic picked Alexis up in his arms and carried her down the short hall to his bedroom, laying her carefully on top of his bed as though he feared she might break if he dropped her. She smiled at his exaggerated care.

Without another thought – conscious or otherwise – Nic's hands began undressing this most beautiful girl he'd ever known, his lips now caressing her throat – and eventually her bare breasts – without once fearing he might take a bite out of her flesh. What they were engaged in together was far more appealing to him even than gorging himself on human blood. And the stamina he found he had while having sex was amazing. Never before had he ever been able to last this long before coming. It was almost like he was the star of a porno movie and he found he was enjoying it immensely.

When they finished the two newly-acquainted lovers lay side-by-side until Alexis decided to snuggle, wrapping her legs and arms across Nic's body, her ample breasts pressed firmly against his chest.

He felt himself grow hard once more. Alexis felt it as well, his organ standing straight up and pressing against the inner thigh of the leg that was across his groin.

"Oh, you really are insatiable, aren't you?" she laughed, nuzzling his throat with her own lips and taking a small bite.

That set something off inside of Nic's head, inside of the primal beast he had recently become. More than the sexual stirring he found down in his pubic region he felt another hunger growing deep inside of him. A hunger that would turn ugly if he didn't do something about it.

Alexis rolled her body over on top of his and slipped his still erect organ between her thighs, firmly seating it inside of her flesh. She then nuzzled his throat once more, kissing, licking, biting his throat and stirring the deeper passion that lay within him.

Nic's head pushed deeper into his pillow even as his body arched upward at his midriff as the vixen atop him thrust her hips more and more forcefully, their pubic regions meeting together harder and harder. His heart began beating with a ferocity, a truly insatiable hunger he had never experienced before, as though it wanted to leap right out of his chest.

Suddenly he grabbed hold of Alexis' hair and pulled her back from him. He stared momentarily into her large, round, frightened eyes. For a moment she looked exactly like the proverbial "deer in the headlights" he had always heard about, though never seen himself.

"Nic? What are you doing?" she barely whispered, sensing the desire that was burning within him, the primordial lust of what he now was becoming more than he could hold back.

"Nic, I..." She didn't get the chance to say anything more. Nic pulled her down to him even as he lifted his head toward her. His fangs sank deep within her throat. His lips felt the pulsing of her blood as it throbbed through her carotid artery. He began sucking and that same blood began filling his mouth, pouring down his own throat until it was gushing faster than any liquid he had ever drunk before.

Alexis' body thrashed as she attempted feebly to break free from his grasp, but his arms wrapped about her body, holding her tight against his own flesh, his engorged and enflamed male organ yet thrusting within her own flesh until he climaxed, his seed spewing inside of this body that had been so willing until a moment ago. Soon she stopped fighting against him and lay still. As still as death.

Once his thirst was sated Nic pulled Alexis away from his mouth. Only a small drop of blood remained on her skin where the two round piercings were to show any sign of the brutality with which he had ended her life. A life which he had viewed in excruciatingly raw detail as her very life's blood flowed from her into him.

His tongue snaked forward and licked that drop of blood away, leaving her throat now pristine in its pale white beauty.

Death. How spectacular it could be.

For the briefest of moments he mourned the fact that her life had been lost after giving herself to him so willingly. But then, she had known what he was and had chosen to give herself to him of her own volition. Could she blame him for giving in to the lust of his flesh after all she had already given him this night?

Nic chuckled softly as the thumb of his right hand caressed the still flesh of her throat before him.

Maybe spending the rest of his life as a vampire wasn't going to be so bad after all.

* * * * *

POWER EVOLUTION

© 2010 Jacob M. Drake

Above the city of Chicago a lone figure broods. He stands high above Willis Tower, the tallest building in the city and once the tallest building in the world.

As he looks down upon this city that he has called home for too many years to even be feasible, this being, male in appearance, though he long ago gave up his humanity in order to have his greatest wish fulfilled, his muscular body, gleamingly golden in hue, giving him the appearance as a statue of a Greek god, slowly descends to the top of Willis Tower, his feet barely coming to rest on the ledge of the parapet which overlooks Wacker Drive many stories below.

He continues looking down, his memory moving backward in time to the day he first gained the powers which now imbue his being, not simply his body, but his mind and essence of being - his soul, as well. It seemed such a harmless thing when twenty-two year old Robby Burns had been beaten by two thugs who roamed the streets of Chicago, looking for those who would be unprepared for the sudden attack through which these thugs would rob their victims. Indeed, he had been unaware that he'd been followed, until two rough hands grabbed him from behind, threw him down the flight of stairs which led to a subway tunnel which had been closed in order to affect extensive repairs.

Although his body had been severely beaten he wouldn't have begrudged the thugs their ill-gotten gain, except for the fact that they then dumped his broken body down an old manhole that fed into the massive sewer system beneath the city.

The young man he'd been back then felt certain he was soon going to die in that dank, dark, rat-infested pit running with waste sewage, except that somehow he had brushed up against an artifact which had been the home of an *Ifrit Djinn*, what in other languages would be called a *genie*, freeing the supernatural creature contractually bound by whoever was responsible for awakening it from its curse-induced slumber to grant the greatest desires of that person's heart, up to four wishes, but no more.

His mind awash with the blood which was then seeping through his gray matter, infecting his thinking after such a brutal beating, followed by being dropped no less than seventy feet before striking the sludge-encrusted bottom of that sewer, thought the mystical creature to be nothing short of an hallucination brought about as he neared death's door, so he made his first wish, which was that his body and mind both would be completely healed in such a manner that not only would make them whole once more, but that would make them both thereafter completely invulnerable to any and all forms of illness, disease, viral, bacteriological, psychic, physical harm of any kind, magical and any other normal, supernatural or any other force of nature of anything else in or ever possibly being in existence.

In short, he wished to become immortal.

The Djinn granted that wish, although the battered youth yet believed he was merely experiencing a near-death hallucination.

As his next wish the youth then asked for the power within himself to bring about any and all power of any kind, be it magical, mystical, of ethereal form, extra-terrestrial origin, that which could possibly be constructed by science, or absolutely anything at all he could ever conjure up within the immense imagination he had always been blessed with having.

In short, he wished to become a god.

Suddenly becoming imbued with such power as even he with all his imagination could never have dreamed of, this young man tested out his newfound powers amidst the stink, the sewage waste and the infestation of vermin the sewer was crawling with. He surmised that either he actually had been imbued with all that he had requested of this Djinn or he was experiencing the most realistic hallucination of which the human mind could ever conceive.

The third possibility was that he had already died and this was the afterlife to which he had been relegated to.

He chose to believe the first of the possibilities.

He then used his newly gained power to extricate himself from the sewer, clean himself up, and go in search of those who had so unceremoniously deposited him within the place where he was supposed to have met his maker.

At first he had thought revenge would be too good for such as these, but his basic instinct took control of him at one point and he spared the lives of these two who deserved no mercy from anyone. He made only one stipulation upon them before releasing them from the death that waited were he to open his mighty hands and allow these thugs to fall the several miles of distance which stood between where he held them above the city and the hard surface of the road below. That condition was that they mend their ways and never again even consider the criminal path of life. He informed them he would be constantly watching them and any deviation from righteousness on their part would bring him immediately to their doors where he would then mete out their due punishment.

In all the years since then he had only needed to remind each of them once.

That all took place in the early part of the twentieth century, during the year 1938. Since that time this being, this man-turned-god, had committed himself to serving the society into which he had been born. He used his enormous and unlimited abilities for the good of all mankind, saving the lives of many hundreds of thousands, if not millions over the span of seven decades.

The only problem with all that he had done in protecting mankind throughout those many years was that he now was thoroughly, completely alone and bored.

This was why he now hovered over the city of his birth and the place of his re-birth – he needed to make a decision as to which direction he would go now that he had, as he viewed his heroic efforts, wasted the better part of a century.

At first he had thought the world needed saving, needed someone who could assist in ways that no one else living could possibly do. With his power he had covered himself with a uniform that identified who he was in his guise of newly-christened superhero, savior to the world. With this outfit everyone soon knew immediately who it was who swooped in to rescue so many from burning buildings where no fireman could possibly reach, to interfere with unlimited numbers of crimes being committed, from simple muggings to bank robberies to murders to serial killings all the way to those terrorists who plotted to kill thousands if not hundreds of thousands with the plans they made involving nuclear weaponry.

As a superhero he had been ecstatic in being able to save lives. He had become overjoyed each and every time someone realized that because of his interaction, that person would go on to

live another day, would not miss their mortgage payments, would not be put out onto the streets for lack of finances, would breathe one more lungful of air.

All of what he accomplished granted him quite a heady exhilaration. For years he doted on the thankfulness of those he helped, until that one fateful day when he saved a child from a burning apartment building, delivering the small girl to her more than grateful parents who hugged and kissed her and thanked him over and over again for restoring their family happiness.

Somehow on that fateful day at that exact moment he realized he had no one to call family, having been orphaned himself at the age of fourteen when his mother had died from a heart attack, his father having passed on several years prior during the height of the Great Depression when he had been attacked and robbed of the few dollars he had held, that he had worked so hard to earn in order to provide for his own family.

This hero of heroes stood looking on as that family was reunited through his efforts, the emptiness and loneliness settling in upon him as he realized that his power kept him from attaining what he most certainly would have had if not for the fact that he had chosen to become imbued with such power and turned it all toward helping mankind.

He now wondered if perhaps he had made the wrong decision. That perhaps he should have asked for untold wealth, perhaps fame and fortune, not power.

For a time he put aside his uniform for certain periods each day, something he had never done in all his years of saving others, simply in order to walk about as an ordinary mortal, what he once had been, seeking out someone with whom he might be able to share his life, to build a family and become like those many he helped.

Such happiness eluded him and he began to wonder if perhaps the Djinn which had granted his wishes had somehow also cursed him.

He then realized that with all the excitement brought about throughout the years, which at this time had been more than two decades, bringing him into the early portion of the 1960s, he had not used his third and fourth wishes. The hero then called upon the Djinn who had granted his first two wishes, wondering if after so long a time the creature would even respond.

Instantly the Djinn had indeed appeared, exactly as it had that first night in the depths of that dank sewer, where apparently its home artifact yet resided.

The hero had asked the creature if he had been cursed for his magnanimous use of the gift he had been granted, though the Djinn assured him no such curse had been forthcoming. He then decided that it must be an affect somehow from an aura he projected, something which prevented others from growing close to him as they viewed him in his persona of the mightiest being on the face of the planet.

Considering his options he then requested his third wish, which was to locate someone, a woman, who would come to know him and love him not for his powers or mighty deeds, but for who he himself was deep inside. He wanted someone to see past the surface hero and view him as he truly was in spirit, forming a romance with him that would endure throughout life.

The Djinn assured him such would be placed into effect within the realm which governed the granting of such wishes and the Djinn once more vanished, leaving the hero to ponder how he was to go about locating the one woman in all the world who would fall in love with him and be able to live out her life with him, growing a family together.

He decided to once more outfit himself in casual attire as befitted a normal human of the time and go about performing natural human functions, dining in restaurants, drinking in bars, walking through parks as well as city streets, both in the daytime and at night, and even going so far as to visit the opera – just once.

The hero had assumed he would soon meet this woman and the two would quickly form the attraction by which they would fall in love, get married and start raising their own family.

Such was not the case and several more years passed during which time he divided his days between being the hero he had chosen in order for properly utilizing his power and living as a normal non-powered human doing all that such humans do.

Many times over during this period he met women who had been attracted to him, but as their relationship developed each one grew either jealous of the time he spent away from them while he performed his heroic functions or grew suspicious of him during his time away, wondering if perhaps he was cheating on them with someone else, which would certainly explain his secretiveness and many disappearances which he was loathe to explain properly.

Only once he decided to reveal himself to the woman he had been growing so fond of and who was growing fond of him, allowing her to see that he was more than the simple man she had supposed him to be. Her mind was unable to handle the sudden shock to its system, to fathom the revelation that this man she had dined with, watched movies with, kissed so lovingly and even gone to bed with on several occasions could possibly be the hero of all the Earth, the singular being whom all mankind nearly worshipped for his mighty and supernatural feats of heroism.

She had needed to be committed to an asylum and he had never seen her again, at the request of her parents, whom she had been very close to all her life.

For a time the hero forsook the normal human existence and once more took up the mantle of performing only those heroic functions with which he had been so busy the first two decades of assuming this persona. Every once in awhile, however, he endeavored to locate the woman the Djinn had promised would be his, the one who would love him solely for the person she saw within him. Never did such forays into the realm of the normal produce what he sought.

Over the remainder of his years he grew more and more embittered until he now stood upon the parapet of the building known as Willis Tower, looking down at the humanity which so heavily filled the streets and buildings, thriving under his protection.

“For some reason the Djinn failed to deliver in its promise,” his breath seethed from between his clenched teeth, his hands clenching fists and unclenching, over and over again as the inner depths of his being fumed and boiled over at the continued abstinence that had been forced upon him by fate itself.

“If humanity will not love me for who I am, then humanity will see me for what I shall become. And they will pay for their neglect of my humanity.”

His arms spread out wide, his hands splayed as they waited at a point far above his shoulders. The inner turmoil that had bothered him so deeply burned through the windows of his soul, fire flickering from the pupil in the center of each iris. As the inner spark flared from the pit of his orbs an identical force flashed forth from his palms, all of it aimed down upon the unsuspecting humanity that milled about below.

The force of power erupted from the being's body, striking at the base of several large buildings on the other side of Wacker Drive, the impact causing the concrete of each one to crumble. The towering structures which had held safely for many years buckled at the floors where no foundation existed any longer, falling forth onto the people below. Screams filled the air reaching even up to the height where the one that was no longer a hero stood, his inner self yet seething with the ire that had boiled within. Many died that moment, many more died before the day came to an end, the efforts of surgeons failing to repair what a god had willed upon those helpless and hapless individuals so unfortunate as to have been in the way when the power of a god was so unceremoniously unleashed.

One such person who stood amidst the rubble, the broken and bleeding bodies, the death and dying of the aftermath of what this god had decreed, looked up to the tops of the buildings towering overhead. Her eyes zoomed in as telescopic projections which she controlled within her optical system. Scouring the buildings in search of the reason for these buildings' destruction she finally located the gleaming flesh of the being that the world had called a hero for the past seven decades. Instead of assisting with this most horrific emergency situation, however, he stood motionless above, as though almost enjoying what he was seeing below as so many screamed and cried amidst their misery, their bodies bleeding out from the destruction she finally surmised he himself had brought about.

A puzzled look crossed this woman's face, but the wonderment within her did not prevent her from grinning just before her feet lifted from the rubble-strewn surface of the sidewalk she had been walking upon.

Soaring almost faster than the human eye could see, this female of gorgeously statuesque proportions soon stood upon the air itself, hovering directly in front of the golden god who had extricated the worship of the masses for so long. Her lips yet stretched forth in the smile which displayed the emotion of enjoyment she experienced within herself. Enjoyment at the suffering of mankind. Enjoyment of the raw irresponsibility from someone who had awed the masses for so long and received humanity's admiration.

"This is what I have been searching the world for," this dark-haired vixen nodded as she lent her own admiration to this one who stood mutely immobile while hundreds suffered at his hands. "A mate who will join with me as we together bring about the total and swift destruction of mankind."

* * * * *

PUMPKIN

© 2008 Jacob M. Drake

"Over here, Dad! This is it!" Danny Walker, all of six years old stumbled over the vines that cluttered the way through the pumpkin patch. He had whined to his dad about wanting to pick out his own pumpkin at the pumpkin patch his friend Tommy had told him about at school on Friday. Paul Walker, tired of hearing his son beg to visit the patch, instead of simply going to the local supermarket, where dozens of pumpkins of various sizes filled a large container, already cut from the vine and ready to go, finally relented.

The drive had been nearly an hour from Paul Walker's apartment, where he lived alone since he and his wife of nearly eight years had finally called it quits and gotten a divorce.

Now, Paul slogged through the mud and vines, hating the outside world this time of year. It was too cold and wet. Why did the weather always have to be so spiteful in October? Why had he given in to his son on this stupid expedition? No one had ever taken him to cut his own pumpkin from the vine. He'd always been lucky to get whatever pumpkin his parents brought home for him. Why couldn't Danny be that way?

Paul Walker stepped beside his six year-old son, a small, thin boy who resembled his mother more than his father, who was wide in the shoulders and had plenty of meat on his bones.

"This is the one I want, Dad." Danny wrapped his arms as far as he could about the girth of this large, orange gourd lying amongst so many others like it. The boy tried to pick the pumpkin up, but it was the biggest pumpkin in the patch.

"That one's too big for you, Danny," his father shook his head scornfully. "Pick another one. A smaller pumpkin you can carry."

"I want this one, Dad!" Danny's words came out in his perpetual whine. Something he'd developed only after his parents had split up, his dad moving out of their house in the suburbs and into an apartment in the city. "It's perfect."

"It's not perfect, Danny, it's just too freaking..." his words trailed off as he saw the tears starting to well-up in his son's eyes. Paul Walker scuffled his feet even as he reached into his pocket for the folded pocketknife he'd carried ever since he was eleven years old.

"All right, Danny," Paul sighed, then leaned down, careful to make sure he didn't get his pants in the mud that cradled this pumpkin and seemed to provide the only bedding for all the gourds that were tied together by the serpentine vines that attached to each one.

Paul flicked open his knife and cut the umbilical cord of the pumpkin, noticing that his blade must not be as sharp as he normally kept it. He hadn't been able to cut the vine that easily. Either he wasn't strong enough, something Paul Walker would never admit to, or the knife needed to be sharpened.

Clearing the residue of the vine and all the clutter of leaves from around this pumpkin his son had chosen, Paul refolded his knife, placing it back into his pants pocket. He then grabbed hold of the handle made by the stub of the vine he'd cut, placing his other hand on the bottom of the gourd. He pressed upward with his bottom hand while lifting with the other. The orange vegetable was much heavier than it looked.

Damn it! This meant he was going to have to kneel in the mud. He hated getting himself dirty. Even worse, the pumpkin was wide enough that he was going to have to wrap his arms around it and hug it to his chest. His nice, clean, blue jacket he'd bought only a month ago for the colder autumn weather was going to get dirty as well. That meant he was going to have to wash it, and the material used for the padding between the inner and outer shells was going to clump up, just like the last jacket he'd had to wash.

"Isn't there another pumpkin you like?" Paul Walker turned on his son, his words far more harsh than the situation called for, immediately causing tears once more in the eyes of this boy who was too small for his age.

"No, Dad," Danny whined in a small, feeble voice, "This is it. This is the one I want." With the boy's eyes as sad as they were he could have posed for one of those posters that showed a perpetually forlorn, round-eyed child with eyes the size of saucers.

Paul Walker gritted his teeth, anger for his son's whining as well as his obstinacy, just like his mother, Paul thought, his emotions seething anytime he thought of how his wife had whined and wheedled him on every subject for the past eight years. It was one of the biggest deciding factors in his leaving his wife. He hated her whining. Now he had to listen to that same whining in the voice of his son.

Sometimes he wondered why he hadn't insisted on his wife having an abortion?

His teeth clamped tightly closed, the large, beefy man knelt in the mud, feeling the thick, viscous ground material ooze about his bent leg. Would the stain ever come out of these tan slacks?

He then wrapped his arms about the pumpkin, pulling the gourd tightly against his chest, and then heaved with all his strength, lifting the pumpkin upward from the ground.

“Aaargh!” The word shot gutturally from Paul’s throat. Something twinged in his lower back and he stumbled, the heavy burden shooting pain down his spine and through the lower portion of his back. Paul clenched his teeth tighter. He was not about to show any pain in front of his son, even though the spasm he felt at the base of his spine was killing him.

Just drop the damn thing, he thought to himself. But he held on, stumbling through the vines until he finally found solid footing in the mud. Placing each foot carefully, Paul Walker carried his heavy burden for what seemed like an hour, but in reality was only a few minutes. Finally reaching the counter where the old man who manned the register waited, his eyes smiling nearly as much as the tightly stretched lips spreading across his face.

“Well, now. Looks like you got yourself the king of all the pumpkins,” the old man bent his head, talking to the small boy clambering closely beside his father, who couldn’t release the gourd fast enough. The vegetable thumped heavily onto the counter. The wood that comprised the obviously homemade fixture that held the ancient-appearing cash register shook, threatening to fall apart. The movement of his counter only made the old man chuckle and grin wider.

“We usually charge by the pound,” he laughed. “I doubt you could pay the bill if I charged that way on this one.”

Paul Walker didn’t like the slight the old man was paying him. Was he trying to say Paul looked like he didn’t make enough money? That was another of the subjects his whiny wife always harped about. “Why don’t you get a better job, Paul? I can’t pay all the bills on what you make, Paul. How am I going to buy the food we need on your salary, Paul?”

“I’ve got enough money for this thing,” Paul growled, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet, pulling it out and starting already to count the bills he’d need for this purchase.

The old man just continued grinning. Did he ever show any other emotion?

“Take it easy, son. I was just stating that we have a set price for anything this heavy. We don’t want anyone to have to take out a loan in order to buy a proper pumpkin for carving a jack-o-lantern out of.”

“Just ring it up!” Paul snapped angrily, opening his wallet and withdrawing the bills stuffed inside it, waiting to see what the tab would be.

The register dinged as the drawer slid open. “That’ll be eight dollars,” the old man was still smiling. Paul handed over the money, making sure it was the correct amount. He didn’t want to wait around for change.

“There’s hot apple cider and hot cocoa inside the store,” the old man hooked a thumb over one shoulder, indicating the ramshackle lean-to where other items of a holiday interest were sold. Danny looked up at his dad, yearning in his face displayed there over the thought of having something hot to drink on such a cold day.

“I’ll make you hot chocolate when we get home,” Paul growled more fiercely than he intended. His son’s face fell, showing a frown. Paul didn’t care. He wasn’t spending any more money in a place where they make you carry something as large as this pumpkin after having to wade through mud to find it.

“You can use one of the carts we’ve got,” the old man gestured over to where several metal carts sat, low to the ground, the kind used at certain home improvement centers for hauling lumber and other do-it-yourself supplies. “The big tires are perfect for this muddy terrain.”

Feeling as though the old man were making a fool out of him for not using the cart in the first place caused Paul's pride to flare up. "It's not that far to our car," he grunted, hoisting the heavy gourd once more between the wide grasp of his arms.

Managing to once more get the solidly built gourd angled against his body and stabilized so he wouldn't drop it, Paul Walker stumbled his way into the parking lot, a dirt field covered over in pea-gravel in order to keep the cars parked there from sinking into the soft mud.

"Open the trunk for me," Paul ordered Danny. "My keys are in my right, front pocket."

Danny reached his tiny hand into his father's pants pocket, fumbling around for the keys, finally locating them at the bottom of the pocket. Paul thought the boy was deliberately taking his time, enjoying the fact that his father was killing his back by continuing to hold this stupid pumpkin for so long.

"Which one is it, Dad?" Danny asked, sorting through the various keys.

Paul grew irritated. Damn it, couldn't the boy pay attention? Hadn't he watched his dad drive for six years? He should know which key was which.

"It's the rounded key. Right next to the square one." Paul knew he was shouting, but he no longer cared.

Danny fumbled with the keys, tried to insert the point of the key into the slot on the back of the car's trunk lid. The keys slipped from his fingers, fell onto the ground. Paul grew more irritated when he heard the sound of metal striking gravel.

"Sorry, Dad," Danny whined softly, knowing his dad was displeased with his clumsiness. "They've got mud on them, Dad." Danny held the keys up for his dad to see. Sure enough, the keys had landed on a section where other car tires had pushed the gravel down into the mud, allowing the dark brown, squishy material to ooze up around the tiny rocks.

"Wipe them on your jacket sleeve!" Paul gritted his teeth, trying hard to keep his anger down and failing miserably.

It seemed like eternity before Danny finally got the key into the lock and turned it. Paul heard the pop of the lid opening. He used his elbow to nudge the lid all the way up, and then lowered his burden as carefully as he could before finally releasing it. The car wobbled from the weight, but the pumpkin remained where it was. It was too heavy to roll around. And there wasn't enough room in the trunk for something this big to move anywhere, anyway.

Paul feared the lid might not close and he'd have to cut off the vine handle. He knew that would cause his whiny son to start crying about how he'd ruined his pumpkin and the boy would want to get a different one that had a handle on it.

Paul knew the type. His son was just like his mother. He'd hated those kinds of kids growing up. He didn't like it any better in his own son. In fact, he liked it far less. Why couldn't this boy be more like him? Tough. Determined. Strong.

The lid closed just barely, leaving no room as the inside of the lid scraped against the handle of the pumpkin. At least it finally clicked closed as he gave an extra push downward.

"Get in the car," Paul ordered his son through gritted teeth. The boy obeyed without a word. He seemed happier now that his prized possession was safely in the trunk. Danny opened the passenger side door and clambered up onto the seat. He closed his door, then grabbed his seatbelt and strapped himself in.

Paul entered from the driver's side, closing his door and immediately inserting the key into the ignition. He twisted the key. The engine roared to life as he gunned the gas the way he had since he first learned to drive as a teenager.

"Your seatbelt, Dad," Danny whined.

"I don't need to wear a seatbelt," Paul answered, not happy that his son was doing the same thing his wife had done all the years they'd been married.

"But you'll get a ticket," Danny persisted, pointing out the obvious.

"Cops only give tickets if they pull you over for something else and see you aren't wearing a seatbelt. They can't pull you over if you haven't done anything else wrong."

The pleading in his son's eyes continued as the boy stared at his dad. Paul finally relented, reaching over his left shoulder and grabbing hold of the strap that he hadn't worn since he'd left his wife so many months ago. He clicked it in place and glared at his son.

"That better? You satisfied?" The words had more of an edge than the incident called for, but Paul Walker didn't like being told what to do in his own car. Certainly not by a six year-old boy. Even if he was his son.

Paul placed the car in reverse, backed out of the tight spot left by the other cars that had parked too close to him, then pulled out of the gravel lot onto the paved road. A short while later he pulled into the parking lot of the apartment building where he lived and pulled into the spot reserved for his car alone.

More struggle ensued as Paul wrangled the pumpkin from the trunk of his car and up the flight of stairs to his apartment. He'd had the foresight to open his apartment door first, positioning Danny just inside, to make certain no one came in and stole anything while he was in the parking lot. The boy stood against the door, holding it open as though he were a doorstop. His hands pressed flat behind him against the door.

Paul managed to get the pumpkin into the apartment. He heard Danny close the door after he entered. At least he was doing something right without being told. He then lowered the gourd onto the small, cheap table he'd purchased at a yard sale. It wasn't much, but it was all that was necessary for a bachelor like himself. The table came with only two chairs, the others having long ago broken and been thrown out. Again, it suited him just fine.

The flimsy table wobbled under the weight of the burden that rested upon it. Paul feared the table legs might collapse, but mercifully, they held up.

Paul stepped back from the table, looking at the overly large pumpkin sitting there. A small smile of satisfaction crossed his lips. He had to admit, it was a damn good-looking pumpkin. He would've loved having one like this when he was a kid. Guess he hadn't had parents who cared enough to go through all that trouble for him the way he had for his son.

"Can we cut it open now?" Danny pleaded, his hands folded together, wringing them as though he was worried he wouldn't get to carve this thing, now that it was here.

"We need newspaper, first," Paul answered, thinking about when he was a boy and had carved his own jack-o-lanterns. "Go in the kitchen. There's a paper bag next to the fridge. It's full of old papers."

The boy hurried into the kitchen. Just as he'd been told, there were the newspapers. He wondered how many they'd need, and then finally settled on dragging the entire stack, paper bag and all, from the kitchen to the small living room/dining room combination in this small apartment.

"We don't need all of them," Paul growled, shaking his head at the sight of this small boy dragging such a large bag of papers along. Still, he had to grin at the sight it brought to mind. It was kind of comical. The papers were much heavier than his son was.

Good. Teach the boy some adversity. Like what he himself had gone through today lugging this damn pumpkin around. God, why couldn't this boy have chosen a smaller one?

Selecting half-a-dozen folded sheets of newspaper, Paul spread them out on the opposite end of the table from where the pumpkin sat. He arranged them so there would be enough space

covered on the table, and then tilted the gourd, rolling it along the tabletop so it could sit centered, more-or-less, on the layered papers. He sure as hell wasn't going to try picking this damn thing up again to move it. His back still hurt from the twinge he'd gotten lifting it off the ground.

"Can I cut it now?" Danny moved one of the chairs around so it was in front of the pumpkin. He climbed up in the chair, standing on his feet, leaning over the table and pumpkin. He was too short to sit and carve, but too tall to stand on his feet. Kneeling wouldn't make it any better. He was still too short to kneel and carve.

"Hold on, Sport," Paul tussled his son's hair the way his dad had done to him when he was little, even though he had always hated him doing that. "First we need the right knife for the job."

Paul entered the kitchen, opening drawers, trying to decide if he even had a knife that would be right for carving a pumpkin. He recalled from when he was a kid that serrated knives worked best. Did he have any that were serrated?

There. His set of steak knives. They might be just a bit too long for this purpose, but they were the only knives he had with serrated edges.

Carrying one knife, he reentered the dining room and walked up beside his son, who fidgeted terribly, anxious to start cutting into his pumpkin, like there was a prize waiting inside.

Maybe there was, Paul thought, a small smile spreading across his lips. To a little kid, carving a jack-o-lantern was a big thrill. He had always enjoyed this time of year. The emotion accompanying the old memories flooded back into Paul as he stood with the steak knife poised above the pumpkin's top.

"Don't I get to cut it, Dad?" There was that whine again. Paul gritted his teeth, which were set on edge by the sharp, tinny whine of the boy's voice. He handed the knife over, holding onto his son's hand, steadying it as it neared the area around the pumpkin's top.

"Hold it steady," Paul admonished his son. "You have to angle it just right, like this," he took hold of Danny's hand and directed it so the blade was at an angle, the tip just barely piercing the skin of the gourd.

Danny's exuberance got the better of him as he rapidly moved his hand and arm, far too fast to do the proper job of this type. He rapidly sliced through the thick flesh at an awkward angle, not in a round shape the way a proper jack-o-lantern lid should be shaped.

"Ok, now that's why I told you to be careful," Paul roughly took the knife out of his son's hand and lay it in on the newspaper. "How about we draw a circle for you to follow, ok?"

Paul went to the kitchen once more, looking for a black marker, but not finding one. He'd have to buy one for just such occasions, but for now a pen would have to do. He took one out of his assorted knickknacks drawer, which he figured everyone in the world had, and went back to the dining room.

Paul drew a rough circle around the top that would allow enough space for them to reach inside and pull the pumpkin guts and seeds out. He then set the pen down and picked up the knife.

"Nooo," Danny whined, seeing his father about to cut the pumpkin. "I get to cut it. It's my pumpkin." The boy seemed to forget that his dad had carried the damn thing through the mud and cold. He'd suffered the pain of the weight of this monster pumpkin. He was the one who paid for it. But in his mind, his little kid's mind, it was his possession.

Paul sighed, handing the knife over. "Just make sure you cut along the line, ok? If you don't, the lid won't fit right when you place it back onto the pumpkin later."

Eagerness drawing him on, Danny leaned over the large gourd and jabbed the knife point inward. He then seesawed back-and-forth with the serrated blade, like using a tiny saw, cutting

along the line his dad had drawn. Paul had to hold on to the gourd and steady it, keep it from moving around as his son pulled back on the knife each time he cut.

The cut wasn't perfect. It didn't always follow the line exactly, but it was close.

"Ok," Paul took the knife from his son and took hold of the vine handle. "Now we cut the guts away that are connected to the lid." To demonstrate what he meant, he pulled the lid up from the body of the pumpkin. Attached to the underside was a mass of light orange strings that extended all the way into the large, round pumpkin body. Seeds clung to the strings.

"See what I mean?" Paul tilted the lid so the strings and seeds were clearly visible, even to a six year-old.

"Can I cut it?" Danny's face beamed with anxious pleasure. Paul couldn't help but smile at the exuberance of the young.

"Sure, Sport. Go ahead."

Once more the boy picked up the knife, this time more carefully applying the edge to the underside of the lid. He deftly cut the strings away, setting the lid his dad held free.

"Ok," Paul set the lid aside, then went back into the kitchen and returned with a large salad bowl and a large spoon. "Now we scoop out all the guts and seeds."

"We use the spoon for that?" Danny's eagerness caused him to run all his words together so they sounded like one long nonsense word.

"First, you have to get your hands dirty," Paul grinned.

Danny waited while his dad rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, baring his arms so the shirt wouldn't get messy. Then he watched while his dad demonstrated pulling the guts out.

"You're not gonna do it all, are you, Dad?" The hurt look on Danny's face irritated Paul once more. When would this boy ever stop with all that whining and let him show him how this was done?

"No, Danny," Paul only used his son's name when he was getting pissed. He used it now and Danny understood why. "I'm just showing you how it's done, ok?" The edge to his voice was obvious. It was hard again and Danny knew he'd done something wrong, only he couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Paul scooped out a double handful of pumpkin guts, setting it all inside the bowl, cleaning the guts off his hands by wiping each finger one at a time with his opposite hand.

"Go ahead," Paul nodded toward the opening in the top of the golden orange gourd. "You get to do the rest."

He was glad his son enjoyed himself at what he was doing, since he didn't like getting his own hands dirty with all that slimy crap. Still, the memories of how it had felt when he was little flooded back into his mind. It had been fun each year getting to scoop out his pumpkins in preparation for carving. Maybe he should go easier on his son. After all, he was only six and just learning how to do all of this.

"Dad?" Danny's voice was uncertain, his young brow furrowed and wrinkled in a way Paul had never seen it before.

"What's wrong?" Paul joked in his own way. "You don't like the sliminess of the guts?" He laughed lightly as he leaned over to look inside the pumpkin the way Danny was doing.

"Do all pumpkins have lumps like that?" Danny pointed the index finger of one hand inside the opening.

Paul peered inside, noticing right away there was a large lump in the bottom of the pumpkin's shell, as though the gourd had formed around something or had just made a large lump in its bottom.

“Huh. That’s weird,” Paul intoned quietly. “Never seen anything like it.”

He placed his hands aside the outer shell and tipped the pumpkin, revealing the bottom. Sure enough, there was a pinched area in the center, making it look almost like a sphincter, a person’s anus in the center of their butt. Could something have been on the ground when the gourd was forming? Did that something get swallowed up by the soft tissue of the pumpkin as it grew, wrapping itself around whatever it was?

Paul set the pumpkin back onto its bottom, once more peering inside the cavity still filled with guts and seeds.

Whatever was encased within the shell couldn’t be dangerous. After all, even if it had been something that had once been alive, which he knew it couldn’t have been, since anything living would have moved on long before the slow-growing gourd could have formed about whatever it might have been, it had long ago become encased within the forming shell. It would have been deprived of oxygen as the shell had formed a cocoon around it, trapping it inside and closing up at the bottom. There wasn’t enough space between the sphincter-like wrinkles on its bottom to allow air to leak through even the tiniest amount.

“Is it ok to carve, Dad?” Paul looked over at his son’s face. The yearning eagerness still there, but tempered by fear of the unknown. Paul didn’t blame him. For all his fearlessness and bravado, he couldn’t help wondering just what had gotten trapped inside the shell.

“Yeah. I’m sure it’s ok. Just let me finish scooping the guts out, ok?” Paul reached inside the gourd to remove what remained of the gooey strands. Danny was more than all right with his dad finishing this chore. He didn’t feel right about the lump in his pumpkin. He hoped it wouldn’t ruin the shell. He so wanted to carve out the best jack-o-lantern ever.

A few minutes later Paul had the guts removed and had scraped most of what remained free of the inside shell. It wasn’t perfect, but that final touch could wait until he’d cut the lump away, exposing whatever it was that was inside it.

He picked up the steak knife, but looked closely at it, then decided it wasn’t right for this job. He put it down and wiped off his hands before reaching into his pants pocket for his trusted jackknife. This was the perfect blade for cutting open such a thing as whatever it was that existed inside this pumpkin’s butt.

Blade in hand, Paul pierced the soft inner flesh of the shell at the top of the lump, his heart beating rapidly in fear of what he might find beneath the surface of this shell. Cutting deeply, the blade struck something solid. It was only about an inch into the flesh, indicating that was as thick as this inside flesh was.

Carefully Paul cut downward from the top center of the lump, and then turned the gourd so he could slice another incision of equal length along the other side. He had to admit, this was one large lump. As big as a bowling ball, perhaps. Maybe that’s what was inside this thing. A bowling ball. It would certainly explain why the gourd had been so heavy.

The silly thought of finding such an item inside the pumpkin put Paul at ease. At least a little. Seeing inside his mind a black, hard plastic ball, or whatever material bowling balls were made out of, like those he’d used over the years the few times he’d gone bowling with friends, made this task easier.

He cut two more incisions so there were four equal cuts from the top of the lump to its bottom, on four sides. He then poked down into the center of the lump with his knife, and pulled back on the soft flesh. An entire triangular lump of soft, yellowish-white flesh came lose in his hand.

But then his heart began beating rapidly once more.

A skull. A human skull was inside his son's pumpkin.

It can't be a skull, Paul told himself inside his mind. How would a skull get inside a pumpkin? How would a person's body get in the field where the pumpkin patch was?

It didn't make any sense. But there it was, the left-side portion of a human skull, complete with eye socket, nasal cavity and two rows of teeth clamped together in a death-grin, along with the left jawbone. All of it was right there staring back at him from the exposed portion of this gourd.

Should he call the cops? Was that the right thing to do in this situation? Obviously someone had been murdered. How else could the existence of a human skull be explained? Someone had been murdered and their body tossed into the pumpkin patch without anyone knowing about it. That was it. The gourd had formed around the skull after the flesh had rotted away, the thickening flesh of the pumpkin snapping the skull free from the vertebrae that formed the neck bones.

Yeah. That had to be the answer. It was the only one that made any sense at all.

"Dad?" Danny's small, feeble voice warbled up at his side. Slowly, very slowly, Paul turned his head, forcing his attention away from the macabre sight to that of his son, his pleading, worried expression looking up at him.

"I-it's ok, Danny," Paul's voice was softer than his son had ever heard it before. That meant that whatever it was, it certainly was not ok.

"What is it?" Danny asked, his hands wringing together in front of him. The boy's anxiety level had increased tremendously, seeing the frightened look on his dad's face. His dad was never scared. It must be something awful to scare him.

"It," Paul started to say, but stopped short. How did he explain this to his son? How did a dad go about telling a six year-old there was a human skull embedded within the flesh of his pumpkin?

A wry smile crept across Paul's face. It was almost Halloween, right? This was going to be a jack-o-lantern, right? Then the skull in here was perfect for this particular holiday.

"It's just, um, something special for your Halloween jack-o-lantern, sport." Paul grinned, then reached inside and pulled the rest of the soft flesh away, placing it atop the gooey guts sitting inside the bowl on the table.

Carefully he reached inside and placed his hands around the skull, now fully revealed as exactly what it was. Something similar to an electrical shock resonated from the skull, up and into the fingers of Paul's hands, streaking up his bare arms and along his nervous system into his brain.

"Aaargh!" he bowed his head upward toward the ceiling even as his back arched. He dropped his hold on the skull, but the electrical shock had numbed his hands and arms. He felt as though the entire upper portion of his body had been injected with Novocain or something similar to make it numb.

"Dad!" Danny shouted, fear coursing through his own body as he watched his dad stand with his body arched in such an odd fashion. "What's wrong? Are you ok?"

Danny didn't know what to do. He didn't know if he should do anything. He was scared. More scared than ever before in his young life.

Slowly Paul felt the numbness recede. Minutes after the shock had coursed through him, he returned to normal, although there was a faint residual tingling that ran along from his hands to his shoulders.

"I'm ok," Paul stated too quietly. "Just give me a moment."

Danny, strengthened and relieved by his dad's reassurance, climbed up onto the chair and leaned over, peering inside the hollowed interior of the pumpkin. He no longer thought of it as his pumpkin. The fear he felt removed the personal touch from his thoughts.

What he saw inside the large gourd both excited and scared him.

A skull. How did a skull get inside this pumpkin?

“Get away from that!” Paul spoke too harshly, scaring his son once more even as he grabbed hold of one of Danny’s arms and yanked him back from the pumpkin, almost knocking him off the flimsy chair.

Danny remained standing on the chair, pressing himself against the weak, feeble back of it. He looked up at his dad, noticing the fear on his face, the beads of sweat that had formed on his dad’s skin. Now he was really worried.

“Sorry,” Paul touched his son’s arm more tenderly this time. “I didn’t mean to grab you so hard.”

“It’s ok, Dad,” Danny spoke quietly, fearfully. “I understand.”

Did he? Paul thought. Did the boy understand what had happened, or was he merely feeding off the fear exuding from him? Paul couldn’t be sure.

Looking inside the opening in the top of the pumpkin once more, Paul couldn’t be certain, but it appeared as though the skull was tilted back, looking up at him. Had it moved on its own, or had it just been tilted by his having grabbed hold of it, then released it the way he had?

That was a crazy thought. How could a dead thing like this move on its own? Paul mentally kicked himself, then laughed out loud at the bizarre thought he’d had.

The electrical shock was probably just a pinched nerve from having injured his back when he’d lifted the pumpkin in the field earlier. That was it.

Once more he reached inside the gourd, taking hold of the bare skull that seemed to gleam with a radiance he hadn’t noticed before.

“Dad?” Danny’s voice showed concern once more. “Where’s that light coming from?”

Paul’s face looked askance at his son. What had he said? Had the boy seen the light as well? How could that be, unless there really was light shining out from the skull.

But how..?

The thought died in Paul’s mind even as a burning fire coursed this time up through his fingers that were clenched tightly around the skull’s sides. A fire he couldn’t bear, but which shot through his nerves even stronger than the electrical shock had earlier.

His muscles tightened this time, instead of releasing as they had before. He found he couldn’t relax his grip on the skull. In fact, it seemed as though his grip tightened. Like a death-grip, one he couldn’t break free from. And the fire – the fire burned with a terrible ferocity all throughout his body.

His face tilted up toward the ceiling, as though he wanted to scream, but nothing came out. No sound emitted from his throat. Not a scream. Not a wailing. Not even a sigh, though he knew he definitely wanted to scream.

His eyes clenched tight even as his jaws clamped shut in a rictus grin that bared his teeth with his lips pulled back as tight as they could possibly get. The pain was unbearable, but he couldn’t release the hold his hands held on the skull.

“Dad?” Danny’s plea was louder, but there was nothing Paul could do to assuage the fear in his son’s voice. There was a lot more fear in Paul’s own brain. Fear he could likewise do nothing about. Fear he wanted so terribly to still.

Then the fire intensified.

As if acid had been poured onto his flesh, new pain coursed up his arms and into the brainstem located at the base of his own skull. Still he found himself unable to scream. Still he

found himself unable to move, to release this matrix of such horribly agonizing pain that resided within his clenched hands.

On the floor beside his dad, Danny's eyes grew wide in fear greater than anything a child his age should ever have to experience. His flesh turned ashen-white. Sweat beaded up onto his skin as cold as ice cubes from the freezer, and then trickled down along his deathly pale flesh.

The reason for this newly transfixed fear was obvious. The fire that burned within his father was real. The boy watched transfixed, though horrified, as the flesh of his dad's arms burned away like ash, from inside the shell of the pumpkin where he was unable to see, all the way up the bare arms, then beneath the folded layers of his dad's shirt, all the way up to the shoulders connecting the arms to the rest of the body, the flesh burned away to ash in seconds.

Bone crumbled as cold ash as well, as though it had been incinerated by the hottest furnace during cremation, though falling cold to the touch onto the table, then the floor, where the entire body of what was once, only recently, Paul David Walker, estranged husband and father, turned to ash, flesh mingling with clothing as a soft, cold pile of light-gray-white ash.

Danny remained transfixed by this awful fear-inspiring sight for long minutes, his mouth hanging open wide. Then the fingers of his right hand found their way to his mouth where he clamped his lips around the five clumped digits and began sucking in a manner he had not done since he was a baby sucking on the pacifier his parents had given him to keep him quiet and satisfied at night so they could sleep.

Only this sucking did nothing to pacify him. It did nothing to satisfy him. He sucked out of fear, out of nervousness, out of anxiety and the realization that his father, as selfishly bad a father as Paul Walker had been, was dead, having been transformed into a pile of ash even as his son watched in horror.

For long hours the boy stood staring at the sight where his father had once stood. He remained completely motionless, other than the sucking of his fingers by his mouth.

His bladder had long since grown full and released itself, his urine involuntarily running down his legs and onto the floor at his feet.

The daylight waned and gave way to darkness before the sound of knocking came at the door to this apartment. No one answered the door, so the knocking came once more, harder this time, more insistent.

Still no one answered, the only person able to do so standing mutely transfixed by the horror he'd witnessed earlier.

Finally, the door of the apartment opened. Someone stepped inside into the darkness.

"Paul?" a woman's voice spoke sharply in concern within the darkness. "Paul? Danny?" Danny recognized the sound of his mother's voice, but was unable to stop sucking on his fingers long enough to answer her, to tell her he was standing in the darkness not thirty feet from where she stood at the open door.

A light flicked on behind the boy. His mother's eyes adjusted from the darkness to the dim light of the globe that hung over the meager living room furniture, only slightly illuminating the area where the boy stood.

"Danny?" his mother had spotted him and called out his name. He still didn't answer, so she moved quickly over and stood by his side. She noticed the fearful expression on her son's face, recognized the sucking of his fingers, obviously from some trauma the boy had suffered recently.

She knelt beside him, her jeans-covered knees feeling the cold wetness of the urine he had released from his bladder.

“What?” Marcia Walker felt the dampness on her knees, but right now she was more concerned over the fact that her son was ignoring her in favor of sucking on his fingers. She recognized what this was. She knew how intense trauma could instill such sucking motion within a child his age.

“Danny?” she called out softly to him. He didn’t answer her. “Danny, where’s your father? Where’s Daddy, Danny?”

Still he remained silent, sucking on his fingers, wanting nothing more than for the fear to go away and his dad to be ok. But he knew that wouldn’t happen. He’d witnessed his father’s body burning to ashes. He knew enough about life to know that people didn’t return to life after such an ordeal.

“Danny?” his mother persisted, pulling his fingers out of his mouth. His lips continued to suck, even without his fingers stuffed between them. “Danny, what happened? Where’s Daddy?”

Danny’s eyes lowered from where he’d been staring at the pumpkin seated still on the table above his head. They lowered to the small pile of ashes on the floor, on the other side of the chair he had stood on earlier in order to reach the pumpkin.

It was his fault. He knew it was. Had he not insisted on having this exact pumpkin his dad might still be alive. But maybe all the pumpkins in that patch were like this one. Maybe all the pumpkins in the world were like this one. He didn’t have enough experience at his age to know the truth. He didn’t know if this was what was supposed to happen when carving a jack-o-lantern.

He only knew he would never carve another one, no matter how long he lived, how old he got. Jack-o-lanterns were evil. He never wanted to see even a pumpkin again, let alone a jack-o-lantern. And he never wanted to enter a pumpkin patch again, either.

Marcia’s eyes followed those of her son’s as he centered on the ash on the floor. “What Danny? What are you looking at?” She couldn’t see it. She couldn’t understand what he was looking at. She didn’t know that pile of ash was his father.

Then his eyes looked upwards once more, toward the pumpkin sitting on the table. He didn’t want to look at the pumpkin, but somehow, for some unknown reason he felt compelled to do so.

His mother watched his eyes shift. She looked up and saw the pumpkin, as though for the first time, realizing what had been going on before her estranged husband had deserted their son, leaving him in this apartment all alone. Why Paul had left their son this way, alone, in the darkness, Marcia had no way of knowing. But she grew angrier the more she thought of how cruel Paul had been. How utterly unreliable and irresponsible he had proven himself to be. Leaving a six year-old child alone. In the dark. All by himself as the sun disappeared.

Unexplainably Marcia Walker straightened her legs, lifting up so she towered over the opening of the pumpkin on the table. She leaned unflinchingly over; peering inside what should have been a dark pumpkin. She’d noticed the ugly, scary features carved into the front of the shell. How could Paul have carved something so horrible, so evil for a child Danny’s age? Maybe that was what had traumatized her son. The features her ex-husband had carved into the jack-o-lantern.

Marcia Walker had no way of knowing that her ex-husband had died, being burned by a fire not of this reality, long before the features on the face of the pumpkin had burned themselves across the smooth surface of the pumpkin, etching a cruel, evil leer where most children might carve triangular eyes and a silly, square-toothed grin.

Something was inside the jack-o-lantern. Something that glowed brightly. Only there hadn’t been any light coming from this jack-o-lantern when she’d first entered the apartment. She would have noticed the light from the doorway. It had been completely dark when she’d entered.

Where was the light coming from? What could possibly be inside this jack-o-lantern her ex-husband had carved for their son that could start glowing by itself as this had?

Peering over the edge of the opening, though she wasn't certain why she should be so interested in something like this when her son obviously needed her attention, more, Marcia Walker noticed something oblong in shape and definitely white. She couldn't make out exactly what it was, so she decided to reach in and move it, see if its shape became more distinct, something she recognized more easily.

Beside his mother Danny Walker watched in fascinated horror while she reached inside the pumpkin's opening. Involuntarily, Danny's fingers returned to his mouth, where he resumed sucking. His sucking motion changed, becoming ever more rapid, only when this woman who had given birth to him suddenly turned to ash, as his father had. Danny continued his sucking, even in the encroaching darkness that resumed as the light hanging over the living room went out, leaving the light from the jack-o-lantern as the only light in this apartment where both his parents had died today.

Slowly, the glow from within the jack-o-lantern moved, as though someone was turning the face of the carved pumpkin. The leering glare that shown so evilly with its inner radiance fixed itself upon Danny now.

The lips of the boy's mouth began sucking faster and faster as he realized the purpose of this thing that had once been nothing more than a large pumpkin.

It wanted him as well.

* * * * *

WITCH SPAWN

© 2007 Jacob M. Drake

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

Benjy cringed in the corner as his mother angrily approached. She held his dad's belt loosely in her hand, swinging it gently back and forth. Benjy knew that in the next minute or so there would be nothing gentle about the way that belt moved. His mother would use it to beat him. She always did. It was her way of making believe his father was still a part of the family, though in truth he had left nearly six years earlier.

"What did you think you were doing, Benjy? Answer me!" She screamed so loud Benjy was always surprised the entire neighborhood couldn't hear what was going on within the compact house. He'd seen the way so many of the adults turned their heads when he walked by going to school or to the store. He realized then that they did know what was going on. Each of them just chose to ignore the screams that echoed from his house on a daily basis. The same way the teachers at his school ignored the bruises, the cuts, the welts, on his face and arms.

Everyone in this small town knew his mother beat him, but no one bothered to do anything about it. Even the local police, who he'd always been told were his friends – that he should trust them when he was in trouble – ignored all that went on in here. Sometimes Benjy would glance out the large picture window in the front of his house and see the patrol car slowly rolling past as his mother vented her own emotions by beating him with his father's belt.

Yeah, they knew what happened inside this house. They just didn't want to get involved.

Benjy merely bent his head low as he crouched down into the corner, the way he always did, hoping the confined space would provide at least a little protection from the sting of the leather strap as it descended down upon his frail body.

It never did. There was nothing that could protect him when his mother's fears and anger took control of her.

Not the corner.

Not the neighbors.

Not his teachers.

Not the police.

Certainly not Benjy himself. All he could do was to bury himself within the corner and make himself as small a target as he possibly could. That was his only defense.

"Look at me, you little shit!" The belt slapped against his left arm, since it was the foremost arm, covering as much of his face as he could with the small, thin appendage, and left a welt. Benjy barely even jerked anymore when the strap struck his flesh. He'd become too indentured to the pain. The belt struck again, a piece of it managing to catch hold of his left eye. This time Benjy yelped in pain as blood began to trickle from the scratch in the corner of his eye.

"Oh, did that hurt Mommy's little boy?" his mother's words came mockingly from her lips. She never had a moment anymore when her words carried any feeling or concern over what she did to him. Her face altered quickly from the pretense of concern, taking on the look of a demon from Hell. That was the only image Benjy could relate her expression to. He'd seen a picture of a demon in a book one of the other boys at school had brought in one day. Benjy recognized the expression on the drawing instantly. He'd seen it every day for the past seven years.

Every morning when he woke up.

Every afternoon when he came home from school.

Every night before he went to bed.

And anytime between those periods – whenever his mother took a notion that he needed a beating. Like right now. Saturday afternoon. He'd hoped he could sneak off to the local playground at the park. Spend some time with the other kids there. Running. Laughing. Playing on the playground equipment. Trying to see what it was like to be a normal child for once.

But only minutes after he'd arrived at the park his mother had stormed in and yanked him off the swing as hard as she could. She didn't care that his head had struck the concrete the poles of the swing-set were anchored in as she jerked him off the heavy rubber seat.

She didn't care at all that he'd left a trail of blood behind as she dragged him by his right leg all the way down the many blocks to their house.

Or that his hair had scraped almost clean from a small portion of his scalp from all the bumping on the ground as she'd drug him home.

Home. What an odd word that was to little Benjy.

Only seven years old, and already he knew only too well that a home was a place where a child should feel safe. Secure. Protected from the dangers of the world outside.

Not in the Johnson family home. Benjy wasn't safe there at all. And he knew this house could never be his home. Not as long as his mother was left free to beat and abuse him the way she did every day of his life.

"I said, look at me!" Her words screamed louder. Far more shrill than usual. Something must have happened to bring about this outburst of wrath. Benjy knew there had to be a reason for his mother's actions. But he'd never been able to figure it out.

Was it simply because he'd attempted to spend his time the way the other kids his age did on a Saturday afternoon?

Was it because she still, after six long, brutal years, couldn't forgive her husband for deserting them in the middle of the night?

Or was it something else. Something from her own tortured past when she was growing up? Certainly Benjy had heard the whispered stories at different times, when no one thought he could hear them. Like when his mother sent him to the store to buy her cigarettes and booze. Even though he was only a child, no one in the town dared to question his buying such items. They all knew he wasn't using them for himself. They all knew if they didn't sell him what he'd come for, how badly he'd be beaten when he came home empty-handed.

But he'd heard them whisper about how his mother had been this way ever since she was a child.

Maybe it was her mother's fault.

Maybe it was her father's fault.

Maybe she was just born with something unbalanced inside her brain.

No one was certain of the facts. But they all talked about her whenever they saw Benjy somewhere within the town.

Still, none of them lifted the smallest of their fingers to stop her or to remove him from her home. Almost as though they were all afraid of what she might do to them if they did.

Benjy tried to forgive the people of this town for their cowardliness and lack of action to protect him. He'd smile at every one of them whenever he walked past them. He'd hear them whisper about, "how brave he must be," to smile that way when he was being abused so badly.

They all knew what he was going through.

So why didn't they do something about it?

The belt struck yet again as Benjy withdrew even further into the corner. Sometimes he wondered that he didn't push through the inside wall to the outside. This was his favorite corner to cower in when he was being beaten. It was right next to the picture window up front. With the drapes drawn all the way back the way they always were, it left his beatings open for the whole world to witness.

It was his way of making sure no one had an excuse to not know how terrible his life was inside this house.

Still – no one acted on his behalf.

And he hated every one of them for their cowardly ways.

For several minutes after the beating stopped Benjy remained crouched within the corner. Either he was so accustomed to the beatings that he couldn't tell when they stopped, or he was afraid to move too soon. Afraid the beating might just start all over again if his mother thought for a moment that he wasn't sufficiently hurt enough.

Finally the tiny form of human flesh unfurled itself. His stick-thin legs stretched out as far as they could. His arms fell down from in front of his face. In fear Benjy glanced about, making certain his mother wasn't near enough to see his movement. Too often before she had still been within distance when he tried to relax. The resultant beatings had been far worse than the former.

Seeing no one else around, Benjy pushed himself up from the bare wood floor, being certain not to make any sounds as he moved. The slightest scrape of his worn-out sneakers against the wood might be enough to send his mother into yet one more rage. He wasn't sure how many more of these beatings he could take before it was too much and he died from the abuse.

At seven years old Benjy was extensively aware of the fact of death. Most children his age had no concept of death. Most six year-olds felt a raw immortality that caused them to take foolish risks when playing within their neighborhoods. Leaping off roofs of houses to land tumbling on the ground below. Riding their bikes pell-mell down steep hills where they flew from the jumps they'd built, flying high into the air before landing with a thud on the front wheels of their bikes' tires.

Not Benjy Johnson. He knew death was an imminent reality that could overtake him at any moment. Especially here at home.

Carefully he made his way past the window. So slowly it almost seemed he wasn't moving at all, he turned the knob on the front door and pulled it open, wary of the creaking the hinges made as he ever-so-slowly pulled the wooden barrier free from the jamb that held it, open only far enough so he could squeeze his frail body past the door jamb, making his escape, at least for the moment, from the terror that inhabited this house.

Once outside, Benjy's legs went into high gear and he ran all the way down the block. Many adults were outside at that time of day, mowing their lawns. Watering their gardens. Washing their cars. They all looked up as his tiny body streaked past. They each shook their heads in mock concern over the fresh bruises and cuts that stood out so plainly upon the exposed parts of his face and body.

Still, not a single one of them lifted a finger to do anything to relieve his pain.

And so he ran.

He ran to escape his mother.

He ran to escape the pain, hoping to leave it far behind him. Though he knew that was impossible.

He ran to escape this town and its indifferent attitude toward him and his plight.

But he was never able to run far enough. Eventually his mother would come looking for him. And each person she asked about the direction her son had gone would answer her truthfully, too fearful not to. And she would find him.

Then she would drag him home once more.

And the beating would commence.

This time he tried his best to keep running. It was further than he'd ever run before. Though every muscle in his body was protesting against the exertion he forced upon them, he continued to run. This time he was determined he would not stop until he had left the town and his mother far behind him.

Perhaps this time he would be able to run far enough that she wouldn't be able to find him.

But his legs finally gave out.

He continued moving – at a moderate pace at first. Then much slower as all energy drained from his body. Still he tried to continue. But his legs began to shake from the exertion. Finally, as always happened when he pushed himself too far, he collapsed.

The hardness of the dirt he fell onto felt soft compared to the texture of the leather belt his father had left behind when he escaped six years ago, barely a year after Benjy was born. Though the grains of dirt ground their way into the pores of his facial skin, it wasn't near enough pain to cause Benjy to cry out. Nothing could match what he'd been forced to endure these past years.

His body lay still for long minutes after he'd fallen. He could feel mud forming beneath his cheek and raised his face just enough to determine that it wasn't from tears dripping from eyes. He'd long ago stopped crying over his ordeals. No – the mud came from the trickle of blood that still leaked from the cut at the corner of his eye.

Looking long enough to satisfy him that he wasn't crying, Benjy lowered his face back into the bloodied mud and left it there for awhile. Just long enough to regain enough strength so he could push himself from the ground and start running once more.

Never before had he demanded so much from his frail, half-starved body. Even though some of the teachers at his school would pass on a few cookies, half a sandwich, or a muffin when they realized he had once more been sent off without a lunch, more-often-than-not they were afraid to provide nourishment when his mother had seen fit not to do so.

As he ran Benjy pushed a hand deep within a pocket of his ragged jeans. He found there the crumbled remains of the single cookie a girl from his class had given him the day before. She had pushed the cookie into his hand during recess, then turned quickly and ran away. As though she feared his mother would know it was she who had dared to provide him with this tiny bit of sustenance. Almost nothing at all, yet even in her desire to help out this boy she felt such fondness for, she'd been afraid to provide even that.

Benjy had refrained from eating the cookie just then, knowing a time would come when he would need its nourishment more than he had at that moment.

Right now was that moment. But the cookie had turned to nothing but crumbs in his pocket. Still, he withdrew the crumbs and sucked them between his cracked and bleeding lips. Into his mouth and down his parched throat.

Over and over his hand dipped into his pocket. Until he was certain no more crumbs existed within his jeans' recesses. Still, he pulled the inner cloth of the pocket out in order to extract every minute crumb possible of the demolished cookie.

His tongue had failed to register the fact that this had been a peanut butter cookie. His mouth had been too dry for the taste buds to determine anything of the kind. All he knew was that the crumbs from the cookie were nowhere near enough to provide him the strength he needed to keep his body moving hard enough and fast enough for him to escape this town. And to escape his mother.

Eventually he slowed once more. Only this time he managed to keep himself from falling from exhaustion. This time he merely kept moving, though it was the slowest anyone had ever walked. Of that he was certain.

As he moved along he noticed that the sun had dropped far below the top of the trees that lined the dirt road he was on. That fact surprised him. Though it had been late afternoon when he'd fled from his house, he had thought his mother would have come after him and found him by now.

His knees began to shake uncontrollably as he continued on. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to endure the pain that wracked his body. Even if he died in the attempt, Benjy had decided the earlier mistreatment was the last time he would allow himself to be beaten by his mother.

As he walked along the dirt road amidst the ever-descending sun, Benjy's eyes drifted to the sides of the road. He absent-mindedly noticed the bits of debris strewn about from past storms that had blown through this area. Bits of branches were scattered everywhere, even upon the surface of the road itself.

At one point he began to sense an unreasoning fear coming over him. A fear unlike any he had ever experienced before. He furrowed his brow in puzzlement, wondering why this was happening to him. Wasn't there enough for him to fear in reality without succumbing to the terrors of his imagination as well?

Benjy tried pushing the fears from his mind, but it was difficult. Almost as though the fears were being placed there by an outside force. Again and again the unknown terrors seeped into his

thoughts. Each time he furrowed his brow and pushed them away. Only to find them returning once more.

Trying to find a way to ignore the unreasoning fear, Benjy began to study the pieces of wood along the roadside. It seemed to work for awhile, but then his eyes fell upon a small stick only about six or seven inches long. The stick was a splinter from a larger branch and had thin pieces of itself protruding from along its length. The pieces looked to Benjy as though they could be legs of a tiny animal – the stick itself being a creature of unknown origin.

Fear of the stick coming to life and attacking him overwhelmed Benjy. He looked away from the stick as he passed it, trying hard to ignore his imagination. But his eyes jerked back toward the stick in fear.

Suddenly his fears materialized themselves as the “legs” of the stick began to twitch. The unexpected action caused Benjy to stop walking and stare at the stick. Had he imagined the movement? Had a breeze drifted along and caused the stick to wiggle, his fearful mind filling in the blanks so that it only appeared to move like legs?

Benjy started to walk backwards, keeping his eyes riveted on the stick. And then imagination became reality as the stick came to life and pushed itself up from the dirt where it had lain inert for so long.

The now mobile stick raced on spindly splinter legs right toward the backwards moving boy. His eyes grew big and his mouth fell open in a way he would not have believed possible for someone who had experienced the horrors he already had.

With an ashen-white face, Benjy whirled about and forced his weary legs to push faster and faster, trying desperately to outrace this impossibly living new creature.

Was it only his imagination after all? Was the weariness he experienced causing him to merely imagine that this stick had come to life and was chasing him?

Benjy decided not to stop running in order to find out. Even if it was only his imagination, he felt it was real enough that he couldn't even attempt to determine the truth.

Benjy glanced back as he ran. The stick was continuing to chase him. And it appeared the impossibly living creature was gaining on him.

Benjy's legs pumped harder and harder as he forced them passed their level of exhaustion. Every ounce of his muscles ached worse than he'd ever felt before. Even his lungs were threatening to give out on him. He closed his eyes – gritted his teeth – and pushed his body onward, trying in vain to outrace the stick-thing.

Then his foot encountered a rock lying in his path and Benjy went down. Hard. His arms flinging themselves forward in an attempt to absorb the force of the landing and cushion his fall.

His hands struck the hard-packed dirt of the road first – and then his chin. Benjy once more felt blood spurting from those parts of his body which were being scraped by the roughness of the ground.

Terror overwhelmed him and he flung himself over onto his back just in time to see the stick catch up to him. It pushed off with its splinter-legs and leaped impossibly high into the air. Benjy's eyes widened in horror once more as he saw as through slow motion the stick creature descending down upon him through twilight's gloom.

Frantically he reached out to the side in a vain attempt to locate something he could throw at the stick. Something that might impede its progress and allow him time to escape.

All his hand encountered was a bit of loose dirt lying in a small mound where perhaps a car's tire had pushed it as the rubber contraption came to a stop beside the road.

The muscles and tendons of his thin fingers enclosed around the dirt and scooped up as much of it as possible. The arm attached to the hand flung the tightly gripped dirt forward, the fingers opening as they reached their zenith. The bits of dirt flew out upon release and struck the quickly approaching stick.

In his frightened mind Benjy imagined the dirt encasing the stick creature. He saw the granules of earth becoming hardened, like a shell, forming around the stick and drawing inward toward it, crushing it to pieces so that it was no longer able to attack him. Instantly the loosely flung dirt reacted exactly as Benjy had seen it within his mind. In awed amazement he watched as the dirt encased the stick as a shell. In fascination he observed the shell of dirt harden, and then draw itself inward upon the stick. In muted glee his eyes grew big once more, though this time not in fear, as the stick splintered apart from the force exerted upon it by the impossible action which had just taken place.

Benjy waited a moment before moving. Making certain the stick would not rise up to attack him once more. Though it seemed certainly impossible that such a crushed and splintered thing as it now was could reform itself and renew its attack.

Still, he reminded himself, it had been impossible for the stick to come to life and attack him in the first place. Sticks didn't do such things as that. Yet this one had.

It had also been impossible that the out-flung dirt could form around the stick and crush its non-existent life from the creature. But that impossibility had happened as well.

Slowly he pushed himself from the ground and stood looking at the pieces of the thing which had only recently come to life and chased him down.

Then the fear began to form within his mind once more and Benjy began to back himself away from the strewn splinters of wood. Quickly his eyes began to dart about at other pieces of wood, as though they, too, might come to life and attack.

Then realization hit him in the forehead as though he had been struck by a rock thrown at him.

His mother.

This was why the people of the town were so afraid of her. She possessed some type of power which allowed her to attack others within their minds. To strike at the very basest of their fears. To even form new fears where none existed. Caused those fears to spring to life. As had the stick he had seen along the road.

There was something within her that was more terrifying even than the brutality with which she assaulted him every day.

As well as he could, Benjy forced himself to stop thinking about the pieces of wood. He closed his eyes and instead pictured the little girl who had given him the cookie. He formed her face before him within his mind and noticed for the first time what a pretty girl she was. He saw her as clearly as if he were standing in front of her at this very moment.

Then the image of her within his mind changed from a smiling girl to a girl reacting in terror.

Too late Benjy understood that his mother had somehow lifted the picture from his mind and was even now attacking this girl who had dared to befriend him. Though he was miles away from the girl, Benjy could now see her in her house, in what until only moments ago had been the safety of her home, screaming as her skin began to tear in tiny cracks. Then the cracks widened and tore apart the very skin that covered her face until her skin was ripped by an unseen force completely away from the muscles it had previously covered.

Blood spurted from the now exposed facial muscles as the girl fell screaming to the floor of her house. Benjy now could see her parents kneeling beside their daughter trying frantically to help her. And failing. Not understanding what was happening to their daughter or what could be done to stop it.

In horror Benjy watched the scene unfold as this girl who had merely given him a cookie closed her eyes for the last time in her so-short life – and died. Not from lack of blood, since she had bled relatively little from her wounds. Her death had come from the fear – the terror – his mother had formed within this child's mind.

For long minutes Benjy stood motionless on that now dark, lonely dirt road. Then his body began to tremble. Though not with fear this time, but with a rage that was building within him until he found he could no longer control it.

The hostility that had buried itself so deeply within him all these years now forced itself to the surface of his mind and pushed past the defenses Benjy had built around it in order to keep it safely buried within.

As a great force of nature the rage burst forth from this ten-year-old boy. The trees surrounding him, though it was now too dark for Benjy himself to see them, bent almost to the ground from the magnitude of his fury.

The rage grew even stronger the further from his body it moved. At first only a small cloud of swirling dust formed a short distance from the stone-still boy. But then it grew in size as well as ferocity and began to move quickly away from its source. By the time it was merely a mile away from Benjy, the swirling mass of dirt and wind had grown as large as any tornado in the existence of known history. By the time it found its way to the street where the house in which Benjy had, until this moment, lived out his too-miserable existence, the force of nature which was far too unnatural, had grown in mass until it was destroying every house it came across. Consuming the splintering homes within seconds of their coming into contact with this mind-created ferocity.

The number of houses destroyed would later be counted and found to be a total of forty-three. Right now none of that mattered to the gargantuan tornado that swept through the sleepy little town that had too long ignored the terror that lived at the end of this unimportant street. Nor did it matter to the little boy who caused it all, his grief overpowering him and clouding his better judgment.

As the swirling force of wind struck Benjy's now former home, his mother, still inside the wooden structure, tensed herself and concentrated with all the power she had amassed throughout the years of her life. She quickly found that the power she held within her was not nearly enough to save her from the outburst she herself had unknowingly caused to spring from within this solitary spawn from her womb.

The house flew apart instantly as the tornado struck it. Again and again the swirling wind turned and passed through the now demolished structure, being as it was, controlled by a little boy who knew he had to make doubly, triply and quadruply certain the single inhuman creature within that dwelling did not escape the onslaught he unleashed upon it.

Not once did it occur to Benjy that he had also slaughtered many others as his unleashed fury had traveled to its destination. Had he stopped to consider what he had done, he most likely would have rationalized it within his mind as a necessary part of what those same people had brought upon themselves by not helping him when he needed them most.

In his mind Benjy searched through the wreckage of his former home and finally located the broken, battered, bloodied corpse of the woman who had once been his mother. He drew mentally

near to her and examined every aspect of her being until he was satisfied she would never again be able to bring harm to him or anyone else.

Benjy closed his eyes and was knocked to the ground by the suddenness of the force he had released returning so quickly to him. He tumbled several times before stopping himself. Then he sat up, his eyes still closed, and for the first time in many years he began to cry.

Not for himself.

Certainly not for his now deceased mother or even for those many people who had lost their lives as a result of his actions.

His tears flowed this one time solely for the little girl who had sought to perform a single act of kindness to a beleaguered little boy, and had brutally lost her life as a consequence of that action.

Benjy finally cried himself to sleep that night, lying by the side of a lonely dirt road in the middle of nowhere. In the morning he would awaken, stand to his feet, and begin walking to no particular destination. Anywhere was better than where he had been for the first ten years of his life.

For now, he simply slept. And for the first time in years he actually found peace within his dreams.

* * * * *

TO KILL THE JABBERWOCKY

© 2009 Jacob M. Drake

The small living room was crowded with cops. The crime scene technicians had already come and gone, clearing the scene for the police officers who were assigned to investigate the death of the apartment's occupant, found slumped over the keyboard at his laptop, setting atop his desk.

To the untrained eye the deceased appeared to have succumbed to a simple myocardial infarction, in layman's terms known as a heart attack. To the assistant medical examiner who had taken the call for this particular death, the presence in the air of an unusual and indeterminate smell that stung the medical assistant's nose when he'd first entered the room and continued stinging it while he performed his examination, indicated there might yet be something that had been introduced to the decedent's system that might have caused the death, simulating the apparent heart seizure.

It was for this reason that more officers than normally required for a simple heart attack victim had been called to the scene and were now examining every piece of evidence they could find to figure out who had been within this apartment most recently, other than the deceased, in order to determine who might be a likely suspect to center their investigation upon. After all, the first twenty-four hours after a murder were the most crucial. Even though the police weren't positive this was a murder, the victim was high-profile enough that the decision was made to get a head-start on the investigation - just in case.

It was also for that reason, of the possibility of a death other than from normal causes, that Detective Bud Lorimer had been contacted and assigned to take the lead on the case, pending the

final decision by the Chief Medical Examiner as to whether the cause truly was natural or indeed a homicide, as the assistant ME had surmised.

Entering in through the front door of the apartment, indeed, the only door that lead from the hallway into this cramped, one bedroom dive that had seen better days, only not in many long decades, Detective First Grade Lorimer, known merely as Bud or Buddy to his friends and associates, took in the chaos of the too many bodies milling about and generally getting in the way of the investigation he was supposed to be running.

Standing at six feet-two inches tall and weighing in at just over two hundred pounds (He never would tell anyone in the department exactly how much he actually weighed, but it was less than a few years ago when he had begun working out.), Detective Lorimer was a striking sight, even with his too-short hair that was cropped closely around his ears in an attempt to hide the grayness that had long since taken over the sides of his head and the slightly loose, flaccid skin that hung limply from features that had at one time supported a larger face, a certain indication that he had lost weight over his years, rather than gained. He knew he was losing the battle to keep his age from being obvious, but vanity kept him from admitting he wasn't a spry kid any longer.

The fact that he had reached and passed what he considered to be middle-age bothered Lorimer not at all. He was proud of his maturity, as he liked to call achieving the age of sixty-three, even if the young officers and detectives in the department did tend to call him "Pops", "Gramps" and "Methuselah" behind his back.

Bud Lorimer had joined the police force later in life than most of his generation, having first spent several hitches in the United States Marine Corp., developing the musculature that he had retained throughout his years, working out at least three days a week, regardless of his caseload. Being a Marine for nearly ten years had also given Lorimer an edge many lacked when becoming cops, since his stint in the service had also allowed him to develop a sense about who was bullshitting him and why it might be the case that they were trying to pull the wool over his eyes.

Another thing that had become ingrown within him, both from having been a Marine and from his long years on the job as a cop, was his distaste for bureaucratic wastefulness, such as the cluster-fuck before him now.

Lorimer opened his mouth and allowed his naturally resonant timber to fill the small and crowded room before him. He had no need to yell with this voice, merely add volume along with his stern tone.

"Anyone not immediately inspecting the crime scene, handling crucial evidence for the express purpose of locating any would-be killer or kissing my ass had best find themselves on the outside not only of this apartment, but of this building as well – ASAP!" he concluded his declaration, his hands formed into fists and centered upon the sides of his waist, his tan porkpie hat with the white band around it, what had become known among those of the department as his trademark as well as a standing joke among those of lesser talent, that Lorimer was incapable of solving any case without his hat, considering it a good luck piece, pushed jauntily back from his forehead. The thin tuft of once-brown hair sticking out from the center of the hat proved he hadn't gone bald the way so many others in the department junior to him in both rank and age had.

Within seconds the room cleared, leaving only three other detectives, one of which was taking pictures of everything within the room, the other two leaning over the back of the desk where the deceased had been slumped, the desk having been moved away from the wall in order to effect the ease with which the technicians would be able to access the various pieces of computer equipment situated upon the desk and connected to the laptop with various wires.

Lorimer, satisfied with the reduction in force as per his instructions, walked calmly over to the two bent over the desk.

"Got anything so far, Jimmy?" he asked the detective assisting the technician.

The man spoken to, Detective James "Jimmy" Credo, a slightly shorter African-American who liked to say he was "black before he was African", straightened his body and turned to face the detective who was not only his partner in the department, but one of his best friends as well. For those who, like Lorimer, had achieved or were nearing maturity, the aged detective was afforded much more respect and civility.

"Not yet, Buddy," Credo leaned over the back of the desk and lifted several wires with his left hand, displaying them for Lorimer to see clearly.

"Everything back here at least appears to be as it should be. There's nothing attached to the laptop that might have caused the vic's death. Not that I can see."

"Is it possible there could be something hidden inside one of these..." Lorimer waved a hand dismissively at the equipment scattered about the desktop, not being a well-informed computer-literate man himself, "...things, that might have given off the odor the ME reported smelling?"

"That's what Mac and I were just about to find out, Bud." Credo watched as "Mac", Steven MacDonald, removed the back to the printer and set it aside.

The computer technician removed the top to the printer as well, then poked about within; studying the inside with a small penlight flashlight until he was satisfied this piece of equipment at least didn't contain anything suspicious.

"Nope," MacDonald shook his head before moving on to the next item on the cluttered desktop.

Knowing he wasn't going to get anything out of this particular part of the investigation until MacDonald had completed checking out all the equipment, Lorimer turned his attention to the detective taking pictures while Credo himself sat down before the laptop, which had been left on and exactly the way it had been when the discovery of the decedent had been made.

"Find anything noteworthy or interesting I should know about?" Lorimer approached the photographer, a much younger female detective, one of the newer ones who were promoted to detective grade due to her excellent skills with photography.

Janet "Jan" Pruett looked up from her camera and gave a small smile to the older man as he stood next to her. She pressed several buttons on her digital camera, and then turned it so Lorimer could see the picture displayed on the back.

"Take a look," Pruett offered cheerily, not being one of those who felt Lorimer should have retired by his age.

Accepting the camera from Pruett's hands, Lorimer squinted his eyes and opened them wide several times before withdrawing his folded glasses from his shirt pocket and placing them on his nose. That didn't make the images any larger, though they were slightly clearer. Still, the pictures were too small for his old eyes to even discern what the picture was, let alone be able to study anything important that might be in the picture.

"Get me copies of everything after you finish, all right?" he smiled wryly, knowing that she knew all too well why he declined to look at any further pictures.

He wandered back to the detective who had been his partner longer than anyone else in the department, Jimmy Credo, still seated before the laptop, studying what appeared to be e-mails at an online e-mail location.

Credo glanced up as Lorimer came up beside him, and then turned his attention back to the many e-mails.

"Looks like our Mister Michael Warner was a busy man on the internet," Credo gestured briefly at the screen before placing the mouse indicator over the next e-mail down and clicking the left button on the mouse. The view on the screen changed rapidly, causing Lorimer to blink his eyes and lean forward, peering intently at the contents of the now opened mail.

"All this confounded technology is just too much for my eyes," Lorimer sighed, trying to make something out of what he was seeing.

"What? You don't have an e-mail account?" Credo laughed as he moved on to the next entry down the line. He knew his partner all too well. It was a standing joke with Credo that Lorimer was the only detective in Homicide who didn't know how to use his department-based e-mail account.

"E-mail account?" Lorimer guffawed, standing back up straight and rubbing the small of his lower back. "I'm lucky to still have a bank account and I'm not exactly sure I know how to use that right, either."

"The internet's not all that bad," Credo continued to laugh at his friend's resistance to all things computerized. "You just have to...Whoa! Wait-a-minute," Credo emphasized each word as he leaned in toward the screen, reading the information now showing forth.

"What?" Lorimer leaned back in toward the screen; his interest peaked by the other's muted excitement. "You find something interesting?"

"Maybe," Credo clicked the button on the mouse once more and the scene changed completely away from the e-mail account, now displaying a brightly-colored page filled with various icons designed to attract the attention of anyone arriving at the page. The background image was an old-fashioned British castle with banners waving from the turrets.

"What the hell just happened?" Lorimer jerked back as the page changed, the alteration too much for his strained and weary eyes.

"Nothing to get excited about, Bud, just relax." Credo moved the mouse indicator yet again, and then clicked on a button that said "Login". The screen once more altered rapidly, pausing very briefly on the next screen before altering yet again, then again and once more before finally stopping at what was obviously a pre-determined destination.

"What the hell was all that?" Lorimer stood with his hands out slightly to his sides now, his expression and demeanor plainly revealing his confusion over the various page changes that had taken place so rapidly he had been unable to keep up.

"Not a big deal, Bud," Credo continued to look through the information on the new page while Lorimer stood behind him, his countenance growing ever-more irritated by the lack of an understandable explanation.

"I'm so glad you seem to be up on all this computer mumbo-jumbo crap, Jimmy, but would you mind explaining to my addled brain just what happened there? I am supposed to be the lead detective on this case; it might just help if someone who understands these things tried explaining them to me, ya think?"

"Hold on, Bud, I'm trying to understand what I'm looking at myself." Credo glanced back and noticed the look of irritation on Lorimer's face. He shook his head and sat back against the framework of the wooden chair.

"Ok, look, Bud, what just happened was that evidently the vic who rented this place has an account with – whatever this site is. When I clicked the login button it went through a series of pages until arriving at this one. Apparently the vic has his login information saved so it logs him in

automatically to this site.” He gestured expansively with one hand toward the screen, “Which I believe is possibly where the vic was the last time he was on this site.”

Lorimer stood with his head looking from Credo to the screen, and then back again, the lack of understanding still evident.

“And that explains exactly what to me, Jimmy?”

Credo looked at his friend and shook his head as he grinned out of one side of his mouth.

“What it means is that you need to take at least one class on how to use the internet so I don't have to waste so much of my time explaining everything to you; that's what it means, Bud”

From the silent, yet stern look affixed to Lorimer's expressionless face Credo knew he had stepped over a line - one of many he had stepped over during the course of their rocky and somewhat marriage-like partnership over the years. He inhaled deeply and breathed a sigh before changing tack with his partner.

“From what I can tell so far, this site is an online gaming account.”

“Gaming, you mean like gambling?”

“No. Something different entirely. This is more of a RPG site, a role playing game where people come to be a fantasy character and get involved in fantasy adventures.”

“Fantasies? Ya mean like sex stuff? Bondage and shit like that?”

“No, Bud, no. It's...Look, you've heard of Dungeons and Dragons, right?”

“Ah, yeah. I've never played it, but I have heard about it. A long time ago.”

“Ok, this is similar to that, only it's all online and not played by sitting in a room and rolling dice and such, as far as I can tell so far anyway.”

“What is it, then?”

“That's what I was trying to determine when you interrupted me.” Credo sounded exasperated with his friend, who threw both hands up in a gesture of surrender and stepped back a pace, giving Credo room to work.

“All right, Jimmy. I'll leave ya alone to figure this out. I'm just trying to get a handle on everything that's going on here, but it's all so, so...”

“Futuristically technological?” Credo smiled.

Lorimer looked blankly at his partner and shook his head.

“Y'see? Even that I didn't understand and I know you were speaking English.”

Credo chuckled at Lorimer's lack of knowledge of all things computerized.

“Look, Buddy, why don't you pay a visit to the M.E.? I'll go through this computer stuff with Mac and then let you know what, if anything, I come up with, Ok?”

Lorimer glanced around at the detectives about him, working on a case he was in charge of. Each of the detectives was busy performing duties too far advanced for an old dinosaur like himself. Maybe it was time for him to retire, he thought wearily; though he had no idea what he would do to occupy his time if he didn't have the department to go to work at each morning.

Later that day, while seated at his desk in the Homicide office, he received a verbal message delivered by a blue-suit, as those still in uniform, but assigned to working within the confines of the department's building were known as, that the pictures taken at his possible homicide scene were all waiting online for him to study. He barked back at the person who had given him the message that he didn't want the pictures online; he wanted them in front of him, on his desk. The blue-suit had shrugged his shoulders and slunk off elsewhere, leaving Lorimer to look at the scrap of paper in his hand that gave the internet address of where the pictures could be viewed.

Everyone in the department had been given a computer back when they had become standard issue for police departments. Lorimer had put off learning to use his as long as he possibly could, giving in only when his lieutenant informed him that all reports were to be done on computer from now on and that any report handed in on paper would be summarily returned with a note to redo it on the proper computer program. Reluctantly Lorimer had learned just enough about the one-eyed monster that perched on the corner of his desk like a hulking beast, waiting for the moment it would pounce upon its unsuspecting victim, to be able to complete his reports as instructed. He steadfastly refused, however to learn anything more that would make him competent or literate in this computer age.

Resigned this time to the fact that he was not going to receive the requested photos of his crime scene, Lorimer placed his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and studied the screen, trying in vain to locate a way to access this infernal internet. Any way at all would be helpful for him.

"You have to move your mouse so that the pointer is over this icon right here," Credo stood behind Lorimer, pointing to the icon he was referring to.

"How long have you been standing back there?" Lorimer asked, turning his head just enough to see the only-slightly younger man standing behind him.

"Oh, about long enough to watch you scratch your balding head about a zillion times while trying to locate the Mozilla icon."

Credo moved around the desk to his own on the other side, and sat down in his chair, facing Lorimer now, surprised that his partner hadn't bitten on the barb about his being "balding".

"Mozi.., what?" Lorimer scrunched up his face in disgust.

"Mozilla Firefox," Credo explained. "It's the latest and best browser for accessing the internet. The Department downloaded and installed it on everyone's computer months ago. Just click on the icon and wait for the window to appear on your screen."

Seeing that Lorimer had no idea at all of what he was saying, Credo came back around next to him and opened the browser himself, and then began explaining to his friend how to go about using the internet. When he was finished, Credo went back to his seat at his own desk on the other side and facing Lorimer's and watched in amusement as Lorimer slowly moved the mouse over the first icon and activated the browser.

"You don't have to enjoy the pain of my ignorance quite so much," Lorimer peered over the frames of his glasses as he maneuvered though the front page of the site where the pictures were waiting for his scrutiny.

Credo remained silent for a few moments before speaking in a more somber tone.

"You know, if you had remained a lieutenant you wouldn't be having this problem now."

"Let's not break into that old argument," Lorimer held up one hand, palm flat, toward his friend.

Credo did likewise, only with both of his hands held up as though in surrender. "I'm just saying, Bud, that you wouldn't have to muddle through these cases if you hadn't given up being a lieutenant."

"I wasn't cut out for being a lieutenant," Lorimer nearly snapped his words as he continued trying to concentrate on the screen before him. Credo knew his argument was interfering with his partner's attempt to figure out what he was doing with the online pictures, but he was having too much fun at it to stop.

"You weren't cut out for surfing the web, either," Credo guffawed, shaking his head. "But I finally got you doing it, don't I?"

“Only ‘cause that photographer wouldn’t send me actual pictures like I requested. Sometimes people need to pay attention to what other people are telling them.”

“No,” Credo inserted his own two-cents worth, “Sometimes other people need to keep up with the advances in technology and learn how to use them the way everyone else does so life will move along more easily for all of us.”

“I’m done with this conversation,” Lorimer held a hand up in the same gesture once more. Then his expression turned peculiar as he stared at the screen.

“What the hell..?” he nearly whispered, causing Credo to once more come up out of his chair and stand next to Lorimer.

“What?” Credo chided the older man. “You click the wrong thing and lose the page? You need me to get it back for you?”

“No, I need you to stop being such a smartass and explain to me what that – message box is for?”

Credo looked to where Lorimer’s hand was pointing and was surprised to see an open message window about four inches across. In the box was a blinking cursor.

“Huh,” Credo responded, taking the mouse from Lorimer and moving it so he could click on the dialogue frame. When he did, the cursor was replaced by a string of words that spelled out a message.

Michael Warner was murdered.

“What the fu..?” Credo paused in his expletive and placed his fingers over the keyboard, typing out his own message. Lorimer moved aside, pushing his chair back with his feet while his friend assumed the center position in front of the monitor.

Who is this? Credo typed into the dialogue frame.

Wouldn’t you rather know who murdered Michael Warner? The message returned.

I want to know who you are and how you hacked into a secure police system.

The cursor remained blinking for a short while, but no further message displayed itself across the screen.

“You might have pissed off whoever was trying to talk to you,” Lorimer offered. “If it was me at the keys I would have asked who murdered Michael Warner.”

“But, you don’t understand, Buddy,” Credo sounded confused and exasperated as he continued to stare at the screen. “No one is supposed to get into the Department’s system. We have programs to protect the system and prevent hackers from gaining access. That person shouldn’t have gotten through.”

“Looks to me like he did, though, don’t ya think?”

When Credo didn’t have a comeback for that statement Lorimer maneuvered his chair back in front of the monitor. “Let me have a crack at talking to whoever that was. Maybe a more seasoned and professional detective can get better results.”

Lorimer began to slowly type out his message, asking the unknown hacker who it was who had murdered Michael Warner.

The Jabberwocky, was the only response.

“The Jabberwocky?” Lorimer scrunched his face at the answer.

“It’s a reference to Lewis Carroll’s...” Credo began to explain, but was cut off by Lorimer’s waving hand and exasperated expression.

“I know what it’s referring to, thank you. I learned how to read when I was a kid. I was just wondering what the Jabberwocky had to do with this case, is all.”

Both men were still for a few moments as they pondered the response they had gotten from the unknown person on the other end of this dialogue box. What was this all about? Why was Michael Warner killed, if indeed, he was killed by someone and it wasn't a simple matter of natural causes after all? And most importantly, if he had been murdered, who was the Jabberwocky the unknown person had referenced?

"I'm wondering..." Credo looked up, his eyes unfocused, since he was concentrating on something within his mind, not on anything physically in front of him.

"What?" Lorimer calmly asked, though inside himself he was anything but calm.

"What if the name Jabberwocky is a username, an online ID being used by someone on an internet site, maybe..."

"How about that, what did you call it?" Lorimer scratched his head, trying to recall the unfamiliar term from earlier.

"The RPG site," Credo snapped, a look of knowing entering his eyes and making them wider. "That's gotta be it. Someone else who was playing as part of whatever game Warner was involved in there. That might well be what we're looking for, an online RPG username."

Without saying anything, Lorimer turned his attention back to the dialogue frame and carefully typed in the query, *Is Jabberwocky a username for someone on a role playing site?*

The response was almost instantaneous, as though the respondent had been waiting for just this question.

Yes

Now what? "Look at this," Lorimer gestured toward the screen. Credo came around and read the query and the response, his head shaking even as he exhaled the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Jesus, Bud, how do we locate someone who exists on an internet site? How do we even attempt to make an arrest of such a person? Anyone could be the Jabberwocky, even someone all the way on the other side of the world where we don't have any jurisdiction."

"I was hoping you had the answers to those questions," Lorimer chuckled mirthlessly. "I sure as hell don't know anything about all this crap." Once more he gestured toward the monitor, intending the wave of his hand to encompass not just the monitor, but everything involved with being online, the internet, the world wide web.

"First we're going to have to figure out who this Jabberwocky is," Credo looked blank again, his eyes unfocused as he considered everything he knew about locating people on the internet.

Lorimer typed another query into the frame, hoping for as much help in the forthcoming answer as the last one.

Do you know who the Jabberwocky is?

Yes, came the response once more. Both men inhaled deeply, even as Lorimer typed his next question.

Who?

That's something that's not easily proven, came the response. You will have to meet me in the Garden of Paradise in order to receive the answer. We will discuss this and other issues. Then I will decide if you are worthy to receive the truth.

"What the fu..?" Lorimer read the words, but couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Why would this guy be so helpful, and then turn around and give us the bum's rush?"

Credo chuckled lightly. "I don't think he's doing that, exactly. I think this is his way of playing his game. He's an online gamer himself. He has a certain form he sticks to within his

games and this is it. In order to learn anything from him, we have to meet on his terms, play by his rules and conditions.”

“So how do we find this Garden of Paradise?” Lorimer looked confused.

“Ask him,” Credo pointed to the monitor.

Lorimer typed in his query.

Where is the garden of Paradise? How do we get there?

Use Warner’s computer. It is already programmed. Use his avatar for gaining access to the garden.

“Avatar?” Lorimer looked fully at his partner. “What’s an avatar? Is that some kind of bird?”

“An avatar is the online image, a representation a person chooses in order to interact with others in a RPG setting. It’s like playing a character, a role in a play, only this is a figure created and used online for role playing purposes,” Credo explained, hoping Lorimer was understanding, but not having much faith in the older man’s ability to grasp such concepts.

“Do you have Warner’s laptop?” Credo asked finally.

“Yeah, it’s right over here. Herman brought it in after you sent it over earlier,” Lorimer stood up and walked to an adjoining desk, picking up the laptop and carrying it over to his own desk.

Credo took the plug from Lorimer and hooked the laptop up to it, then plugged the other end into an outlet beneath Lorimer’s desk.

“I don’t know how much of a charge is left in the laptop’s battery. Plugging it in will ensure we don’t lose power in the middle of whatever we’re doing. That wouldn’t be helpful at all.”

He then powered the laptop up and waited for the system to boot itself. Credo then located the online site he had been at earlier at the deceased man’s apartment. He entered the site through Warner’s ID and the same transference of pages rapidly sped through until they were back to where the site had taken them earlier, the last place on this site Warner himself had been, evidently the portion of the online game where Warner had either chosen to save and quit for the time being, or where he had been when he died.

Credo studied the site, looking for anything, an icon, a trail, something that would indicate in which direction to find this Garden of Paradise they had been told about.

After several minutes of intense, quiet searching, Credo noticed a small icon off in the distance, as though it were an island being viewed from far away. He steered the avatar that had belonged to Warner so the avatar seemed to walk toward the icon. As the avatar “moved” the icon grew larger and it was obvious this must be the access point to the Garden they were looking for, since the icon was represented by a dense thicket of foliage, interspersed with large, beautiful flowers of various colors and types.

He glanced at Lorimer, seated next to him, since Credo had pulled his own chair around so both men could sit comfortably while making this search.

“What choice do we have?” Lorimer shrugged his shoulders. “Click it.”

Credo did just that, yet neither of the men was prepared for the psychedelic barrage of images that assaulted their senses as the activated icon spun them through a swirling mass of sites that moved far faster than the average human eye could even blink, let alone see clearly enough to comprehend. Finally the colors subsided and the site coalesced into something resembling a real garden, only far more beautiful and luxurious than anything either of the men had ever experienced in their lives.

"Damn, for a minute there I thought I was back in the late sixties and early seventies," Lorimer shuddered, beads of sweat having popped up upon his forehead, running trickling rivulets down his nose and onto his chin.

"You were one of those guys, huh?" Credo grinned.

"Well, not habitually, ya understand. But I did experiment a little for a short while. A very short while."

"Long enough to know what a psychedelic LSD trip was like, eh?"

Lorimer merely smiled briefly before returning his attention back to the garden they were now within.

"Now what?" Lorimer asked.

"Maybe we should ask our unknown hacker that question."

Without any further prodding, Lorimer, who was seated before his own monitor as Credo was before the laptop, typed in the query.

We are in the Garden of Paradise. What do we look for?

There was no response on the dialogue frame, but moments later they noticed movement within the garden. The avatar they were using, as well as the two detectives, turned toward the movement and watched as bushes parted, allowing a beautiful, shapely, and barely dressed woman to push through to where she stood before their avatar, which was a swashbuckling sort of swordsman, similar to what the old actor Errol Flynn had played in so many movies.

"Sure wouldn't mind meeting her in a dark bar," Lorimer offered breathlessly. "Or even in a well-lit one, for that matter."

"What do you seek?" the female avatar spoke in a voice that matched her beauty.

"How do we answer?" Lorimer looked at Credo, who studied the site briefly before typing in words on the keyboard.

In response, the avatar he controlled spoke in a rich, baritone voice, using the words Credo had typed.

"Are you the one who hacked into our computer?"

The woman stood looking at the swordsman a moment, then smiled. "Yes. I am the one who sent you that message about Michael Warner's murder."

Both of the detectives looked briefly at one another. Neither of them had considered that their hacker might be a woman.

Credo returned to typing on the keyboard.

"We are looking for answers. Who killed Michael Warner?"

Without answering, the female avatar turned back toward the bushes she had pushed through, then said over her shoulder, "Follow me and I shall show you."

"I guess we follow," Credo glanced at his partner before enabling his avatar to follow the girl before him.

"I guess we do," Lorimer sighed, noticing how provocatively the avatar's barely covered rear end swung from side-to-side as she walked ahead of them. He wondered if the image was programmed that way or if whoever was using the image made it do that deliberately, knowing that they were two horny, middle-aged males watching her. He hadn't known computer-generated avatars had progressed so thoroughly that they looked almost like real people. The woman walking ahead of their avatar was hot enough to have sex with; almost like a movie running on the laptop.

Their hostess led them to what appeared to be an oasis in the midst of the dense foliage, a large pool of water displayed as the centerpiece of the beautiful resting spot. Along the sides of the clearing were several stone benches that were placed equidistantly from one another so they

appeared to ring the pool around. Small tables, apparently, for the purposes of this game, tables made of gold, set beside each of the benches. On each table were set baskets of fruit. Goblets filled with red wine set beside each of the baskets.

The hostess avatar took her place before one of the tables, gesturing to it with one delicate, beautifully formed hand.

"Please, select the fruit you will eat and wash it down with the Ambrosia, the nectar of the gods which will clear your minds and make you able to receive the answers to what you seek."

"Is she crazy?" Lorimer sounded dumbfounded. "She thinks we're going to eat or drink anything in a place like this?"

Credo, next to Lorimer, chuckled loud, having a difficult time in keeping himself from an outright guffaw. Lorimer looked quizzically at his friend before realizing why he was laughing so hard.

"All right, so I forgot for a second that this wasn't real. I'm not used to things like this, ok? I deal with reality."

"That's all right, Buddy," Credo calmed his laughing, wiping at his eyes to dry the tears that had formed there. "I haven't had a laugh like that in a long time."

"Yeah, well I'm glad you could have a good laugh at my expense. Now, can we move on? What do we do here?"

"I guess our avatar is going to have to eat a piece of fruit and take a drink of this wine. The question is which piece of fruit does he eat and is there any difference in which glass of wine he drinks from?"

"There's a difference in what he does here?"

"Oh yeah, Bud, lots of difference. It's like Alice deciding whether to drink from the bottle that made her small enough to fit through the door when she first got to Wonderland. Everything she did there had consequences and it's the same here for us."

"Hmm," Lorimer mused aloud. "Apples, pears, oranges, bananas, what the hell is that?" he pointed at a piece of fruit sticking up above the rest of them in the bowl. "I've never seen any fruit like that before."

"Maybe that's the one we should eat, then," Credo had his avatar reach for the odd piece of fruit and bring it to his mouth so he could eat it.

"Wait a minute. You're gonna eat that fruit just because I said I'd never seen anything like it before? What kind of reasoning is that?"

"The best kind of reasoning in a place like this, Bud. Remember, nothing made sense to Alice, either. It was when everything made the least sense that it worked the way it was supposed to for her."

"Well, I haven't read that story in far too many years, not since my kids were little, so I'll take your word for it, I guess."

The swashbuckling avatar ate the odd fruit, then reached forward and selected from among the goblets of wine, bringing one of them to his lips and draining it in one draft. He set the goblet back on the table and looked at their hostess, waiting to see what was next.

"How did you decide which glass of wine to drink from?" Lorimer asked Credo, who merely shrugged.

"I didn't. I decided the wine was all the same, that it was the fruit that made the difference, but that I had to drink the wine or nothing would happen. Like deciding which key works for a specific lock puzzle. Once you locate the right key it doesn't matter which lock you insert it within. All of them will be the same and the key will fit."

“You have the craziest logic I’ve ever run across,” Lorimer once more shook his head in exasperation.”

“Why thanks, Bud. I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Hey! Something’s happening,” Lorimer perked up and watched as all around the oasis the air became thicker and it appeared as though they were seeing through clear, but thick gelatin that began undulating in-and-out, as though the gelatinous air were breathing on its own.

On the monitor their avatar swooned, staggered, as though he were drunk, then fell head-on into the pool of the oasis, his entire body falling beneath the water’s surface and disappearing within.

The scene altered so that their view was now from within the pool, as they watched their avatar sinking deeper and deeper, the light around him vanishing as he went further into the water’s murky depths.

“What do we do?” Lorimer sounded excited, sitting up straight now and looking intently at the surprising scene before him.

“I don’t think we can do anything just yet,” Credo explained. “I’ve been trying to work the controls and either we have to wait until our avatar gets through this water hazard and to whatever place it takes him or we just killed him and there’s nothing else left to us here.”

“That’s not a very good choice to have,”

“No, it’s not, but it’s all we’ve got, Bud.”

For long minutes the avatar fell slowly through the depths of the pool, and then finally turned toward the bottom. A metal grate appeared at the very bottom of the pool, though it was so dark where it was that the avatar had a difficult time seeing it clearly. When the avatar reached the grate Credo found his controls working once more. He was able to get the avatar to grasp hold of the grate and pull up on it. Pulling it out of the muddy bottom wasn’t easy, but he managed to finally break it free.

“Ok, Bud, here we go. Down the rabbit hole.”

Credo made the avatar swim downward, into the opened hole. The tunnel he was within turned completely black so he was unable to see anything, even which direction he was heading.

“Are you moving the right way?” Lorimer asked finally.

“I hope so, Bud. Can’t tell just yet, but...wait! There’s some light up ahead. Guess we were heading the right way after all.”

“Good thing. I sure couldn’t breathe that long underwater. I would’ve drowned by now if it had been me in there.”

“I think that’s what either the fruit or the wine was for,” Credo explained. “To make our avatar able to breathe underwater or at least hold his breath long enough to get to his destination.”

The avatar finally found itself being spilled out of a tube that allowed water to pour forth as from a fountain onto the ground. When he stood up the detectives found themselves at the edge of an expansive field that spread out for many miles before them. Off in the distance they could see what appeared to be a castle. Credo had the avatar start heading for the castle, making it trot at a moderate pace so it would get there faster.

Off to one side a shape appeared. The avatar stopped jogging and looked in that direction in time to see a knight, a black knight, suited in heavy armor and riding astride a gleaming black stallion that was likewise armored. The knight and his steed galloped hard, bearing down upon the lone man standing before them, the lance the knight held securely within his arm’s crook and pointed directly at the avatar.

“Jesus! That guy’s gonna run us through,” Lorimer exclaimed in surprise. “Anything you can do to stop him?”

Without verbally responding to the query, Credo manipulated the controls so that his avatar leaped to his right, hitting the ground and rolling several times, taking him away from the onrushing threat of death.

The knight’s steed galloped past the point where the swordsman had previously been even as the knight pulled up on his reigns and turned the steed about, leveling his lance for yet another round of trying to stick the unarmored man on the ground.

“This is crazy. Why would this guy want to kill us? We’ve never even been here before,” Lorimer was seriously involved in the online simulation, forgetting that it was all a RPG and there was no immediate or serious threat actually involved.

“Maybe we haven’t been here before,” Credo answered, preparing to defend against the onrushing knight once more, “But most likely Warner had been. If so,” he leaped to the left this time, figuring the knight would compensate for the maneuver he made the first time in leaping to the right. He was correct. The knight maneuvered his lance toward the left, expecting his target to do the same thing again, the fact that the target had leaped in the opposite direction threw the knight off balance. His horse stumbled as the knight tried in vain to correct his mistake.

Seeing a possible opening for attack, Credo had the avatar rush toward the knight, leaping up and onto the horse’s back, using the stirrup as a means of leverage, propelling the avatar upwards and onto the back of the horse. He grabbed hold of the knight and pulled him along with him as the momentum of leaping up onto the horse carried him, and the knight, off the horse’s back and onto the ground where they landed with a discernable thud.

“That’s better,” Credo laughed, getting his avatar to its feet, the unarmored man being much lighter and faster than the heavily armored knight. The avatar released the sword he carried in his scabbard and thrust its tip down so that it rested against the fleshy throat that was visible and accessible within the opening provided where the helmet parted away from the armor’s front piece. Their avatar stood with one foot planted on the knight’s chest, preventing him from trying to get out from beneath the avatar’s threat.

“Hold you, sir knight,” Credo made the avatar say, his sword pressed lightly against the knight’s throat. The knight held himself still, aware that if he moved, the sword would pierce his flesh from his own effort.

“Tell me,” the swordsman continued speaking, “Why have you attacked an innocent man this day? What wrong have I committed that you would attack me in such a vile manner?”

Lorimer looked askance at his partner, who smiled and shrugged jovially. “Hey, when in Rome, ya know?” Credo laughed.

The knight took a moment to answer, afraid that even in speaking he might cause the sword to pierce his throat.

“I, forgive me, milord,” the knight answered carefully. “I didst mistake thee for another. My humblest apologies, milord.”

“He’s lying,” Lorimer offered.

“Don’t I know it,” Credo nodded in agreement. “Criminals are the same everywhere, even in RPGs, it would seem.

“Lie not to me,” the swordsman pressed his sword’s tip more firmly. A small trickle of blood came forth from the minor wound, proving how real this game was after all. The blood trickled down the throat and beneath the thick armor on the knight’s chest.

“Why didst thou attack me?”

Again, the knight remained quiet at first, and then chose to speak, though his words were bare whispers this time, as though he feared he might be overheard.

"I, I was ordered to attack thee, sire," the knight replied. "My Lord didst command me so and I cannot but heed all commands my Lord and liege conveys upon me. To do otherwise would mean the end of my own life, sire.

"Besides," the knight gulped carefully and once more Lorimer marveled at how realistic this imagery was made to appear. "Thou didst die at my hands the last time we met on this field."

The revelation astounded both of the detectives. They looked hard at one another before returning their attention to the monitor once more.

"When was this?" the swordsman queried.

"Last night," the knight replied. "Thou didst venture forth here, into the realm of *Obsidian*. My Lord didst place upon me the charge of ending your life and it was so. I ran thou through with my lance last night. Your body lay bleeding not far from this very spot where I now lie.

"Are...you now going to revenge yourself upon me, milord?"

"No," Credo answered through the avatar.

"Why the hell not?" Lorimer asked incredulous. "I would."

"That's why I'm playing this avatar and not you, Bud," Credo nodded with a wan smile on his lips. "You're too vengeful of an old bastard."

Through the lips of the avatar he said, "I shall allow thee to live, sir knight, if thou wouldst explain one thing to me clearly – Why doest thy liege hate me so? What wrong have I committed against him?"

The knight remained silent at first, then replied, "I know not what the reason is, milord. That he does hatest thee is clear to all in this realm. What reason he has for hating thee so greatly none of us knows."

"Very well, then, remove thine helmet."

Puzzled at this command, the knight struggled in the position he was in on the ground, lying on his back, but finally managed to manhandle the helmet from his head.

His head now exposed, the swordsman used the hilt of the sword and struck the knight squarely upon his left temple. The knight responded by losing consciousness.

"Why did you do that?" Lorimer asked, perplexed.

"Two reasons," Credo explained, "First, so that he couldn't struggle to his feet and warn anyone inside the castle that we were on our way inside; second, to supply this knight with an excuse for why he didn't warn his Lord of our imminent arrival."

Lorimer shook his head. "I'll never figure you out, Jimmy. Not in a million years."

"Good. That's the way I like it."

"How long are we going to have to play this game?" Lorimer looked at the watch on his wrist, then back at his partner.

"I don't know. Until we find the answers we're looking for, I guess. Why, you got a hot date or something?"

"Don't be a smartass. My stomach's grumbling. I want dinner. It's been a long day and it looks from this," he pointed at the monitor, "Like it's going to be even longer. Don't some of these games continue on for weeks at a time?"

"Some can take months to complete," Credo laughed. "Depends on how well we perform in each round."

"Yeah, well, I perform a whole hell of a lot better on a full stomach."

He rose from his seat and picked up his suit jacket, which had been draped across the back of his chair. "You want me to pick something up for you?"

"Yeah. Make it something light. Tasty, but not too heavy on my stomach. Bev says I have to watch my cholesterol intake as well as calories."

Lorimer merely shook his head in disgust at this partner, displaying the fact that he was glad he was no longer married. He was able to eat anything and everything he wanted, even if it did cause him to die sooner. He figured there was no reason in living if a person couldn't enjoy the food that made him happiest.

After exiting the building housing the Homicide Division, Lorimer walked down the street three blocks before entering the restaurant he liked best in this neighborhood, the *Lucky Red Star Chinese Restaurant*, owned and operated by Tam Yiu Chuen, whose parents had come over to America in the sixties, then opened this restaurant several years later. Their son, Chuen, had taken over a few years back when his parents both became too infirm to operate it any longer. He did a great job in keeping the food being produced as delicious as his parents had when they first opened this restaurant.

"Good evening to you, Detective Lorimer," Chuen genuflected, then waved eagerly, coming out from behind the register to shake the detective's hand the way he did many of his long time costumers.

"Evening, Chuen," Lorimer returned graciously, knowing that this generation of Chinese immigrant continued in the same traditions he was taught as a child.

"Would you like your usual order or do you want to look at a menu for something different?"

"The usual will be good enough for me, Chuen. And add the usual for Detective Credo, too. He's working at the office and I'll be taking it back to him."

"Oh, working on an important homicide investigation, Detective?"

"It could be," Lorimer shrugged. "Right now we're not a hundred percent positive it is a homicide, but we're covering all aspects of the case just to be on the safe side."

"I know you and Detective Credo will knock this case out in record time," Chuen nodded as he pulled a waitress aside in order to pass on the orders that were to go.

"Please excuse me, Detective Lorimer," Chuen apologized profusely, as he was used to doing. "I have matters in the kitchen to take care of. Your order will be out to you very shortly." Chuen bowed low, with Lorimer copying the motion as close as he ever did, out of respect, the restaurateur disappeared into the back.

Lorimer looked about the lobby of the restaurant, decorated as most Chinese establishments were, in various ethnic displays that portrayed the Chinese lifestyle adequately, and then sat in the closest booth to the front, so as to be available and ready when his order came.

He was startled by the ringing of his cell phone. Although Lorimer normally disdained as many forms of modern technology as he was able, the addition of a Blackberry was something mandated by the Department. Since the Department was paying for the monthly usage of the PDA device Lorimer grudgingly had accepted it, though he used it strictly for its cell phone capabilities.

He withdrew the compact, though slightly bulky device from his jacket pocket and held it to his ear.

"Hello?" he spoke into the receiver after pushing the start button to connect him to the caller. No one responded from the other end.

"Hello? Who is this?" Lorimer spoke tersely into the phone now, annoyed that no one was answering him.

Thinking that perhaps he had lost the call, he pulled the device away from his ear and glanced at it, surprised and somewhat disgruntled to discover that it wasn't an incoming call that he had received, but a text message from an unknown number.

He sighed audibly and shook his head. He hated texts as much as he did having to use computers for filling out reports. He had never sent or received any texts on this device, though several people had chided him for being so old fashioned.

The texting service continued beeping at him, making him annoyed all the more. Lorimer looked intently at the face of the device, wondering just how he was supposed to retrieve the message.

He finally located the message button and pressed it, allowing the words of text to appear on and scroll across the face of his screen.

Your partner is doing fine at the Castle. I fear, however, that he will not be able to defeat the creature behind the throne without your assistance.

"What the hell..?" Lorimer muttered. What was this all about? Whoever had hacked into his computer at work now had figured out not only who he was, but how to hack into his cell phone as well. Who was this person? What did she want with Credo and Lorimer? How did she know he and Credo weren't together at the moment? Why couldn't she just call him like any normal person and talk to him on the phone, instead of sending these damned messages?

Once more looking the device over, Lorimer finally figured out how to respond to the text.

What do you want? Why did you send me this message?

He'd had to delete some of what he'd written; misspelling a few words, since he wasn't familiar with the workings of this keypad, then hit "send". The message vanished from the screen and then the words "Message sent" appeared on the screen.

Seconds later a new message was received.

Your presence is needed by your partner. If you want him to live and be successful, return to your office immediately. Your partner will die without you.

"Oh for crying out loud," he groaned, then signaled to the first employee he found, a young girl who worked as a waitress.

"I'm Detective Lorimer. I have a to-go order being prepared. Could you tell Chuen that I'll be back for it as soon as I can? Something's come up and I have to get back to the office. Tell him I'm sorry," he added as he was already heading for the exit.

Moving as quickly as he could, Lorimer made it back into the vast communal office space in Homicide in time to see Credo's face straining, as though he was experiencing a difficult time. Lorimer came up next to his partner and resumed his seat. He scanned the monitor and could see that Credo's avatar was dueling with a knight dressed in a suit of heavy armor. The swordsman seized an opening and swung his sword from the side, the blade caught up beneath the helmet where a slight opening showed as the knight before him tilted his head slightly to one side. The move caused the sword to hack the man's head clean off at the shoulders. The helmet, no longer connected to the rest of the armor, tumbled to the stone flooring and clattered about until it came to a stop against a side wall.

Lorimer looked intently at the armor, expecting to see blood spraying forth the way it should from such a serious, mortal wound. No blood gushed forth. All that resulted from the decapitation was that the armor stumbled about, then toppled heavily to the flagstone floor and lay still.

"Where's the blood?" Lorimer couldn't help but inquire.

"Guess there wasn't any," Credo shrugged. "Looks like this was just an animated suit of armor without anyone inside of it."

Lorimer was about to object that such was not possible, but then realized the type of game they were involved in and merely shook his head in resignation. Anything was possible in this format, it seemed.

"What happened with the creature from behind the throne?" Lorimer asked, watching intently as the swordsman made his way down the remainder of the wide hallway, and then stood before a large, ornate door made of solid wood, but gilded all around with heavy gold trim.

"What creature?" Credo glanced at his partner just before he had the swordsman kick the door in with one of his feet. "I haven't gotten to any throne room yet."

As the door swung open they both could see the throne setting at the far end of the room. Credo glanced at Lorimer, who glanced likewise back at Credo.

"How the hell did you know there was a throne room?"

"Lucky guess?" Lorimer shrugged.

Suddenly a gust of wind moved through the room where the two detectives were seated. Papers fluttered and blew off desks around them; even papers on their own desks fluttered. Lorimer snatched several pages as they tried to lift from his desk.

"Where did that come from?" Lorimer asked, looking about and seeing that there weren't any open windows in this large room. The windows were made so they couldn't be open. So where had the gust of wind come from?

"No idea," Credo shrugged. "Maybe an open door somewhere?" They both knew that wasn't the answer, but it was the best they had at this moment. A chill passed through both their bodies as they each silently thought perhaps that wind had been connected to the game they were playing, though they had no idea how it could have been.

Credo turned his attention back to the inspection of the throne room, moving further into the room at the same time. Suddenly, the throne toppled forward and the wall seemed to explode into the room. The swordsman ducked in order to avoid the various flying chunks of stone from the exploding wall. When the swordsman avatar straightened up, a large creature, some type of hideous monster with scales all over its humanoid form that stretched from the floor almost to the very ceiling itself, making it at least three feet taller than the swordsman, loomed up through the opening and lurched into the throne room.

"Damn thing looks like the old version of the creature from the black lagoon," Lorimer offered.

"Only uglier," Credo added with a touch of humor.

"You got that right," Lorimer agreed.

The creature moved far too quickly for something of its size and girth. Lorimer was wondering how his presence was supposed to help his partner with this thing when his Blackberry rang once more, alerting him to yet another text message.

He opened the message, finding how good he was getting at this and how easy it actually was.

Your partner must chop the throne into pieces. The power to the Jabberwocky is within the throne.

Jabberwocky? This thing Credo's swordsman was about to fight was the Jabberwocky they were looking for? Not certain how the information related to what was happening on the screen, Lorimer knew enough not to question whoever had sent the message; instead he merely passed the information on to Credo.

"Cut the throne into pieces with your sword," he offered.

"What?" Credo glanced back at his friend as though he thought the detective had lost his mind. "Why would I do that?"

"Just trust me, Jimmy. The power to this thing is in the throne. Destroy the throne and you stop the Jabberwocky."

Still not sure that his partner had all his marbles in one bag, Credo turned his attention back to the scene at hand, just as the creature lunged toward him. He skittered off to the right side, keeping the swordsman low to the ground so he could ease below the bulky monster's body and move off quickly toward the toppled throne.

The creature turned about and saw the direction in which the avatar was heading. The Jabberwocky roared its disapproval and lunged after the swordsman, who, standing before the throne now, raised his sword high above his head, holding onto the pommel with both hands.

The Jabberwocky moved faster, trying to reach the swordsman before he could damage the item that conveyed power into its body, but the beast was too slow. The swordsman's arms came down quickly, the sharp edges of the sword striking the heavy frame of the throne and sinking deeply.

Within the detectives' office the lights suddenly flickered as though they were about to go out, and then the lights did go out, leaving the office in total darkness - except for the computer on which the RPG was still playing.

"What the hell?" Credo glanced about the darkened room, wondering how it could be possible that the computer he was sitting before had power flowing into it, but nothing else within the room had any electricity. All the other computers were dark, as were the lights.

Then the emergency power came on and a soft glow of lighting played about the room. Still all the computers were dark, no emergency power being allocated to the working of the computers in this office, other than the one lone computer the game was playing out on.

"Keep your eyes on the screen!" Lorimer shouted to his partner just as the Jabberwocky moved up behind the swordsman that was their avatar.

The Jabberwocky's arms shot out toward the swordsman, as though the creature were trying to strangle the man before it.

Credo looked back at the screen just in time to prevent his avatar from being killed, though for some reason he couldn't comprehend his own throat felt slightly constricted, as though someone's hands had tightened about him, cutting off his own airflow. The inexplicable sensation passed quickly, however, and Credo once more breathed easily. He looked at the screen and noticed that under his control the swordsman ducked beneath the Jabberwocky's outstretched hands, pulling his sword free from where it was buried deep within the throne's frame.

The swordsman rolled to one side, leaped to his feet and swung his sword once more against the frame of the throne. Twice more before the Jabberwocky could react the swordsman hacked at the throne until it lay in pieces before his feet.

Behind the swordsman the Jabberwocky's body trembled. It lifted its head toward the ceiling and roared violently, as though in serious pain.

The avatar extracted the blade from the throne's frame and once more brought it down with enough force to damage the heavy throne, this time managing to completely sever the back from the seat. The two pieces tumbled away from one another, leaving the throne in even more pieces than when the avatar had first entered the throne room.

The monster spread its arms out wide, the eerie scream issuing forth from its wide open mouth piercing even through the cheap speakers feeding the sound out from the laptop and over to the ears of the detectives.

"Damn. That thing must be in some serious pain," Credo chortled, not finding it in him to lament over the agony of a monster such as this.

"Hit the throne again," Lorimer directed. "Really chop it up. Make sure you've got that thing beaten good, ok?"

"Sure thing, Bud," Credo nodded, seeing as how his partner had somehow been correct about the throne being the source of power for the monster.

The swordsman lifted his sword high and brought it down twice more, splitting each of the already existent, larger sections of the throne and cleaving them each in two. The monster fell heavily to the flagstone floor, its body writhing now, arching upwards as though in the very final throes of death. Both the detectives watched in amazement as the scaly creature's form burst into flames and disintegrated before their very eyes.

An acrid smell as of something burning flowed through the office where Homicide was located. Both Lorimer and Credo noticed the pungent odor and looked at one another oddly before turning their attention back to what had happened on the monitor.

"Well, I'll be damned," Credo nearly whispered. "I don't know how you knew, Bud, but you sure got me through what could've been a tough scrape. Thanks."

"Don't thank me, Jimmy. I got a text message from the hacker. She told me what to do and that I had to get back here or you would die."

"You mean the avatar would die," Credo corrected.

"No, the message specifically said you would die," Lorimer held out his Blackberry so Credo could thumb through the texts and see the messages for himself.

"Well, I'll be..." Credo began, pausing incredulously.

"That's the way I felt, too," Lorimer agreed.

"But how did the hacker..?" Credo's words were cut off as first the lights in the office came back on, restoring power to everything so that all the computers rebooted, and then a uniformed officer entered the room with a bag in his hands. He brought it over and set it on the desk top between the two detectives, who looked up at him in wonder.

"Some kid from the Chinese restaurant down the street brought it in a minute ago. Said to bring it to you guys and to make sure I tell you it's already paid for. Huh. Wish someone would buy dinner for me sometime."

The officer turned and exited the room, heading back to the desk downstairs.

Lorimer opened the bag and reached inside. "That Chuen sure is a great guy. Imagine him sending someone with our order and paying the tab for me."

His smile faltered as his hand encountered a sheet of paper that instructed him to open the fortune cookies first.

"First?" Credo scrunched his face wryly, pressing a button on the keyboard in order to pause the game being played. "Never heard of eating fortune cookies before the main course. Wonder why Chuen said that?"

"I don't know," Lorimer shrugged, "But since he paid the tab, guess I'll oblige him on this and open a fortune cookie."

The older detective cracked open one of the two cookies, releasing the slip of paper that was tucked up inside of it. He spread the paper between his fingers and read the message out loud.

“‘Incoming message of grave importance.’ What the hell does that mean?” Lorimer looked over at Credo, who was opening the other cookie.

“‘Much praise for work well done.’” He looked up at Lorimer, who was still looking at him. “Guess we must’ve done a great job,” Credo shrugged wide-eyed, wondering if both these messages referred to the way they had beaten the creature in the throne room, but not understanding how Chuen could have inserted such messages into these cookies, nor how Chuen would even know about what they had been doing on the laptop.

The Blackberry chimed in once more. Lorimer picked it up and opened the text to find, *You will be pleased to know that in the Realm of the Warrior, the RPG you were playing, whatever happens there happens in the real world as well. The person controlling the Throne and therefore the Jabberwocky was the one who killed Michael Warner. Now that his Throne is destroyed, he too has ceased to exist. I know this is something you cannot understand at this point, but be assured that what you achieved was to enact justice for the death of an innocent man, as well as others like him who were killed by this monster in human guise. Thank you for serving justice this day.*

Just as they finished reading the message the assistant medical examiner, who had been processing the components of the computer in order to determine if anything inside of it had caused the death of the victim, entered the office complex.

“Hey there, Detectives,” he called out as he approached their desks. “You’ll be glad to know that nothing in the computer or any of its various accessories was responsible for the decedent’s death. The M.E. has officially ruled it as death by natural causes.”

Both Lorimer and Credo looked at one another momentarily before turning their attention to the assistant M.E.

“If it was an accident, what was that smell you detected when you first entered the apartment?”

“Oh that,” he shrugged. “That turned out to be nothing more than some wiring that decided to short out, burning up and emitting a mild gas that created an unpleasant odor, but nothing harmful at all. The guy had a heart attack, that’s the official prognosis.”

The detectives looked at one another once more, knowing that the odor at the decedent's apartment that morning was the same thing they had smelled in this office a short few minutes ago as they played the RPG against the Jabberwocky. They then turned toward the laptop that still sat opened; the picture paused on the scene within the RPG site.

“Hey, what game are you guys playing?” The medical assistant moved forward to peer more closely at the screen. Credo reached out and shut the laptop, turning it off in the process. He reached down and pulled the plug from the outlet under the desk.

“That’s just a bit of research we were doing,” Lorimer responded nonchalantly. “Nothing for you to be concerned with. Tell the M.E. thanks from both of us. Nice to know we don’t have to spend any time on something that wasn’t a murder after all.”

The medical assistant looked puzzled for a moment, then quietly turned and left the office. He could tell when he wasn’t wanted.

Both detectives sat staring at one another for long minutes before finally broaching the subject.

“If Warner’s death wasn’t a homicide, what was all that about on the computer?” Lorimer finally queried.

“I don’t have any answers, Bud,” Credo sighed, reaching into the bag and extracting a box of Chinese food. “I only hope that whatever it was, no one actually got hurt by what happened on that RPG site.”

Lorimer thought about that statement for a moment before saying, “Realistically, Jimmy, how could someone be harmed by what happened on a computer gaming site? I mean, let’s be reasonable about this – people don’t die because their, um, avatar on a computer game gets killed, right?”

“Right as always Bud,” Credo answered around a mouthful of food. “Shut up and eat, will ya? I don’t want you giving me any indigestion.”

“Me neither, Jimmy. Me neither.” Lorimer extracted another box and opened it, reaching into the box with a set of wooden chopsticks. He couldn’t help but wonder if there had been any truth at all to what had happened with them today? If it had all been a hoax, how had that hacker managed to break into the Department’s computer and his Blackberry? And what about the fortune cookies?

Lorimer shook his head and opened his mouth to receive a large breaded shrimp dipped in sweet and sour sauce. Forget about anything that doesn’t immediately make sense, he told himself. That had always been his motto for living and solving cases. It would serve him now as well.

* * * * *

JACK SKULL

© 2009 Jacob M. Drake

The door to the bar swung open quickly, slamming against the cigarette machine just inside the door. The bartender looked up, a frown on his face, until he saw who it was who’d entered his establishment. His face turned white as the lean, muscular man sauntered up to the bar, his evil grin instilling fear.

“Draft Heineken, Charlie,” Jack Skull leaned against the edge of the bar, his head bobbing slowly back-and-forth, searching the dark room made darker by the haze of cigarette smoke that always hung thickly in the air.

Charlie passed the man his mug of beer, hoping whoever it was he was looking for wasn’t here. Jack lifted his mug without paying for it. He never paid. No one asked him to. They just wanted him to leave. Slowly Jack Skull drained half his beer without removing the mug from his lips. His eyes focused on the shapes in this gloom, as though able to peer through the darkest interiors.

The man’s name was Jack Schuyler, but because of the fact that he was meaner than most anyone else who’d ever walked the streets of this city, because of the fact that he worked as an enforcer, a bone crusher, a hit man, for some very unsavory people, with more power than anyone else in this city, and because of the fact that his skin was taut against his lean, muscular frame, especially tight around the features of his face, making his very head appear so much like a skull with flesh coloring added to it, everyone called him Jack Skull.

Everyone knew that if Jack Skull was looking to talk with you, he wasn’t interested in just talking. If you were lucky, and I mean really lucky, he might just break both your legs and maybe an arm. If you were high on his list or maybe he just wasn’t feeling especially cheerful that day, you might end up with half the bones in your body crushed - not broken - crushed.

If you were the top priority on Jack Skull's list, however, that meant you were dead before you even woke up that morning.

"See the opening day game?" Charlie wiped the counter just past Jack Skull. He tried making conversation with the man only because he hoped no one was going to get killed in his bar. He remembered the last time Jack Skull had come looking for someone in here – and found him. The police had closed the bar for nearly a week while they checked especially close in order to locate the forensic evidence to figure out who had committed the crime so they could put him away.

The police had never solved that murder. They never would, even though everyone had known who the killer was. He hadn't disguised himself or done his deed in secret. But no one was about to say anything that might implicate Jack Skull. No one wanted to take the chance that he might not be convicted and would then come looking for them.

Charlie couldn't afford the loss of business, but he wasn't about to say anything the lean man might take as an offense. He'd seen what Jack did to people who irritated him. He didn't want to become one of them.

Jack Skull didn't answer Charlie's question. He knew the bartender didn't want to get into a conversation with him about the opening day of baseball season or any other topic. He drank his beer in silence, then without a word, turned and walked into the back of the bar, his eyes ever-searching, checking out each table, and each booth in this seedy joint.

At a small booth near the back, he spotted someone he recognized and quickly slid in next to the man before he could recognize Jack.

The man was startled to find someone not only joining him unbidden in his booth, but on the same side of the booth he had slid into, meaning that this newcomer was pressing up close to his side. Unless this guy was a fag looking for sex, he had no reason sliding up so close to Matt Perkins this way. And Matt didn't have sex with fags. He didn't swing that way.

Matt turned with a growl towards the newcomer, his left fist raised to swing into the intruder's face. Fortunately for him, he recognized the almost perfect rictus grin spread across the skeletal face of Jack Skull. His fist poised in the air, Matt Perkins dropped it onto the top of the table before him. With his other hand he tightly clamped hold of his own beer.

"H-hey, Jack. What's up?" Matt Perkins' voice was as frightened and as unsteady as the rest of Matt Perkins. His eyes tried to remain fixed on Jack's, but he was searching for a way out of the booth, knowing there was none. Still his eyes continued to flit around the dark corner where he'd chosen to sit, drops of cold sweat beading up on his forehead and making their way down his face.

Jack Skull continued staring silently at Matt Perkins. His half-drained mug of Heineken held in his right hand, the hand furthest away from Matt.

Jack lifted the mug. Matt flinched. He knew too well what Jack Skull could do with a weapon as simple as a beer mug. Jack merely took a casual drink from the mug, and then set it back onto the tabletop.

"You seen Davey Oswald?" Jack's quiet voice filtered through the gloom, sounding very much like a creaky door that needed terribly to have its hinges oiled.

"Davey?" Matt's voice, normally deep, low, a husky baritone, came out too high. He sounded more like a girl than the heavy, thick man of brawn he actually was. "N-no, Jack. I haven't seen him. Not lately."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Jack lifted the mug to his lips once more, taking another sip of his beer, his eyes never leaving the eyes of the man beside him.

“Davey?” Matt’s voice was even squeakier now. He cleared his throat, took a gulp of his beer, glanced away from Jack Skull, then right back to look into Jack’s eyes.

It was said that Jack Skull had a special power. That he could look into your eyes and see everything about you. When Jack Skull was looking into your eyes, if you tried lying to him, he knew it. And Jack Skull didn’t like being lied to.

Matt wasn’t sure he believed the stories about Jack’s powers. He figured he was just a normal guy, like everyone else. He was just the kind of guy who instilled fear in everyone and was good at figuring out when someone was lying to him. That’s all. That’s what really made him so scary. He could kill a man without blinking, without any special powers.

“The last time I saw Davey was a coupla days ago. Down on G Street. Over by the theater.”

The streets on this side of town had numbers assigned to them. At one time, a long time ago, they had names, names that meant something to people who lived there and the people who had assigned them their names. As time moved onward and the area changed, the neighborhood becoming ever more run-down, dirty, cluttered with every kind of bum, druggie and hooker anyone could imagine, those who governed the city changed the names to letters and numbers. They decided the names had too much meaning to be assigned any longer to such a low-class section of town. The names were then assigned to newer, more affluent sections of the city. And the streets where the names used to be were re-identified; in one direction the streets held numbers. On the cross streets, they held letters. That’s all they were, letters and numbers.

Jack Skull held his stare into Matt Perkins’ eyes. He sat silently a few minutes before asking his next question.

“What was Davey Oswald doing at the theater?”

“Doing?” Matt’s voice was more nervous than before. “What was Davey doing there, Jack?” His hands fidgeted with his glass of beer. He tipped it to his lips. Realized the glass was empty. Set it back onto the table. Still his fingers continued fidgeting with the now empty glass.

“That’s what I asked,” Jack’s voice was a low growl, now. His eyes narrowed. He didn’t like having to explain himself. Matt was causing him to lose what little control of his temper he had.

Without another word, Jack Skull swung the heavy mug held in his hand. The thick glass struck squarely against Matt’s nose. The heavy bottom of the glass struck first. Blood spurted out from where the cartilage flattened, breaking with a snap. Had there not been a thick, padded back to the booth where Matt Perkins sat, his head would’ve hit the back wall of the bar behind him.

The howl that involuntarily escaped Matt’s throat alerted everyone in this bar that Jack Skull was at work. No one looked their direction. No one wanted to be involved. No one moved out of their respective seats, either, afraid that the movement might attract Jack’s attention. Cause him to come after them next, even if they weren’t on his list for the day. Moving wasn’t a wise idea at the moment.

Not liking the sound of Matt’s wail, his whimpering, Jack once more swung the mug in his hand, this time holding it sideways. The glass struck Matt’s mouth, breaking his front teeth. Jack shoved it in further. Harder. The mug became snugly fit within the stretched wide flesh of Matt’s lips. Blood oozed from both the man’s nose and his mouth. Broken teeth lay on the table before them.

Jack leaned in close, so only Matt could hear his words. He didn’t care if anyone else heard him. No one was going to say anything to anyone about what he’d said. He just preferred speaking softly. It added a dimension of fear to those he spoke to. Jack knew this. He thrived on that fear.

“When I remove the mug you’re not going to scream like a little bitch. Right? You’re going to answer my question.”

Jack didn’t wait for Matt to nod his head or indicate in any other manner that he agreed with what Jack had said. The lean, skeletal man knew Matt was going to obey his words. Fear dictated he do so.

Jack grabbed hold of the glass handle protruding from between Matt’s lips. He pulled the stuck mug from the other man’s mouth. Blood splattered everywhere. Matt grabbed hold of his mouth, holding it in his hands, blood oozing from beneath the hands clamped tightly over the closed lips. Matt rocked back-and-forth from the pain he felt shooting through his face.

One glance from Jack’s eyes told Matt to forget his pain and answer the question.

Slowly, Matt removed his trembling hands from before his lips. As he opened his lips to speak, blood poured forth. He glanced around quickly, trying to figure out what to do with this mouthful of blood. His blood. He finally lifted his empty glass to his lips, allowing the blood to pour from between his bruised and bloodied lips into the glass.

“D-Davey was waiting,” Matt Perkins tried speaking. It wasn’t easy. Blood continued seeping into his mouth and out past his broken teeth, his lips, down his chin and onto the table. Charlie wasn’t going to like the mess Matt made of the booth back here.

“He – he was waiting for a kid to enter the theater.” Matt mumbled his words. To anyone else they would have been unintelligible. Jack Skull had grown accustomed to listening to words mumbled through broken teeth and split lips. It was an occupational hazard for him. He understood every word.

“What kid?” Jack Skull still held his mug. He gripped it by the glass handle now, the rest of the mug too slippery with Matt’s blood to hold onto securely.

“I don’t know,” Matt answered meekly. With the barest movement of Jack’s mug, he pushed himself back away from his assailant, deep against the cushion behind him.

“I swear I don’t know,” Matt practically screamed, both hands held out in front of him, a feeble attempt to ward off someone as vicious as Jack Skull. “You know how Davey is. Any kid’ll do for him when he’s in the mood. He ain’t particular.”

Jack considered the words in silence for a moment. He decided the man was too frightened for his life to lie to him. Nevertheless, Jack Skull wasn’t known for leaving people without ensuring they would never testify against him.

“You got a couple of nice kids yourself, don’t you?” Jack didn’t use Matt’s name, although he knew it. He never used the names of the people he tormented. The lack of their name dehumanized them in his eyes. They weren’t people to him. That’s how he was able to be as brutal as he was. That and the fact that he just didn’t care about their feeble, meager lives.

That was all Jack Skull had to say. Standing from the booth, Jack flung the mug at Matt’s face. Matt wasn’t fast enough to stop the heavy glass from striking him in the face once more. This time however, he didn’t howl his pain. He knew better by now. He just wanted Jack Skull to leave him alone.

Without another word to anyone, Jack Skull walked out through the front door of the bar. A collective sigh went through the bar as everyone present expelled the breaths they hadn’t realized they’d been holding.

Charlie walked to the booth in the back with a bucket half full of dirty bleach water and a couple of bar rags. He tossed the rags to Matt, setting the bucket on the table.

“Here. Clean yourself up. Then clean the booth.” Charlie walked away without another word. He knew better than to get a reputation for being too nice to those brutalized by Jack Skull.

Jack's next stop was the theater on G Street. He knew it was a long shot for finding the person he was looking for, but if anyone at the theater had seen Oswald lately, they might be able to give him a better angle on where to find him.

Skull smiled grimly as he walked the few blocks to his destination. He didn't normally have to go through this much trouble to find his prey. They usually had certain hangouts they frequented most often. Skull normally only had to go to those places and he'd find whoever he was tracking.

Today was different. He smiled, because he suddenly realized this is exactly what cops went through when they were searching for a suspect to a crime that had been committed. Often that suspect was him. It struck him funny that he was acting like a cop. Usually he was the one the cops were searching for.

The theater was already open when he arrived. A couple of movies were already in progress, according to the sign on the door, but there was no one out front at the booth. Must be the girl who usually worked there was taking a break, since no new movies would be starting for awhile.

Jack Skull walked in passed the front door without a ticket. The old geezer who took the tickets and tore them in half looked up from where he was leaning over the candy counter, talking to the old lady who served out the popcorn and other refreshments. The old man didn't stop Jack Skull from entering without a ticket. Like everyone else, he knew better.

Instead, Skull walked right up to him, his face no longer held a smile.

"You seen Davey Oswald, Pops?" Skull glanced about the theater lobby. He didn't have to use his usual tricks of holding eye contact with this old man. The older people around here were all too frightened of him already, more so than anyone else. They were always afraid he might pop up as the "angel of death" to usher them out of this world they clung to so fearfully.

"Oswald?" The old man he'd called "Pops" glanced over toward the right entrance to the theaters. "Down that way."

Skull nodded his head. It was nice to have someone who feared him enough to cooperate freely. He didn't like having to lean on old people.

"Anyone with him?" Skull asked.

The way the old man shifted his feet gave Skull his answer, but the old man spoke up, anyway. "Yeah. A little girl. 'Bout eight – nine years old, maybe ten."

Skull's features took on an even grimmer scowl than normal. He didn't judge people in the crimes they committed. Hell, he'd committed worse crimes than most anyone else in this entire section of town they all called home, and a lot more than anyone else, either. Just not the type of crimes people like Davey Oswald committed. Pedophiles were right on the very top of Skull's list. He'd even dispatched a few he'd found with their victims without them being officially on his list. That's how much he hated those who preyed on children.

Oswald was different. He'd always been a slippery sort. Someone who seemed to know when others were looking for him and managed to remain hidden long enough to get away. But this particular child molester had chosen the wrong kid to punk the other day. That was the reason Jack Skull was hunting him down. Certain kids you don't touch in this neighborhood. Oswald knew that. Somehow his predator's hunger had gotten the better of him and led him down a path that now led to his death.

Skull walked down the dimly lit hallway that held two doors, both opening into the theater he wanted. He chose the second door, knowing most people who entered would take the first door. Oswald, being the sexual-predator that he was, would likely take the second door, putting him and his prey further away from the rest of the crowd.

He waited until the door closed and allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Only the fluidly flickering celluloid strips that showed the movie currently rolling provided any light.

Skull turned to his left, knowing that the layout of this theater was designed so there was a small section that went back passed the entryway. A recessed area he'd seen in other theaters, as well. Why these designs were so well liked, Skull didn't know. The only people who used those recessed sections were teenagers wanting to make out – and predators. Like Oswald.

With his eyes adjusted, Skull peered back toward the furthest part of that section. He could see the dimly lit face of a child, most likely a little girl, her face lit up by the light from the movie playing down front. She looked like her body was bobbing up-and-down. Skull knew why.

Walking quickly, Skull reached the back row and grabbed hold of the little girl, pulling her off the lap of the man who held her by the waist, using his hands to pump her up-and-down on his lap where his zipper was undone and his dick pushed straight up into the little girl's until now, virginal vagina.

"Hey!" Oswald was surprised by the action. He figured he was safe back here. He always had been before. This portion of the theater was like an office to him. He paid his daily "rent" and brought his "clients" in for consultations.

"Get out of here," Skull growled harshly to the little girl. "Go home."

Without answering back, though Skull could tell she was whimpering quietly from what Oswald had done to her, the girl hiked up her shorts, which had been pulled down around her ankles, and ran quickly out of the dark theater.

The flickering light displayed the fear that etched itself on Oswald's face. He'd finally recognized Jack Skull and knew the reason why this man had spoiled his afternoon fun. That recognition caused Oswald to push his body as far to the side of his seat away from the man towering over him as he could without standing up.

No words were spoken when Skull reached back and slapped Oswald's head to one side with the back of his bony knuckles. Skull then grabbed Oswald's shirt, cinching the collar too tight about his neck and yanked him over the seats in front of him, dragging the child molester out of the theater and onto the street out front. No one working in the theater said a word of protest. They all knew what Oswald was, but no one around this area wanted to get involved in anyone else's affairs. It was an understood and unwritten rule of survival.

Halfway down the block Oswald finally managed to catch a breath. He clawed at the back of Skull's hand and up his arm as far as he could reach. Blood trickled down from the scratches on Skull's arm, causing the skeletal man to stop and face the one he was towing behind him.

"You like little kids, huh punk?" Jack Skull lifted Oswald up so their faces were more-or-less even, holding the pervert up with only one hand. With his other hand he reached down to where the now flaccid penis hung barely outside of the still open zipper. It was so small at this point it was hardly noticeable.

Skull forced his hand inside the open zipper, grabbed hold of the tiny member, catching the molester's balls up with it. He then squeezed as hard as he could. A high-pitched keening emitted from Oswald's throat as his eyes bugged out, as though they might pop out of their sockets at any moment.

All those walking by on the busy sidewalk continued walking without hesitation. No one bothered to look at what was going on. No one cared.

"You're not gonna fight me anymore, are you, ya little shit?" The simple nod of Oswald's head gave the correct response. Skull continued his stroll down the block, dragging his current victim along behind him.

A dozen blocks or so later Skull turned down an alley. The alley wasn't big and there were a lot of boxes, garbage cans and other items of refuse that filled up most of the space. He made sure to drag his prisoner through as much of the really nasty filth as he could, even though it meant exerting more of his strength and energy than if he had simply drug him straight along behind him in the narrow, winding pathway.

Oswald was filthy and bleeding profusely by the time Skull reached the back door in the darkest section of this alley. He inserted a key in the door, turned it, and swung the door open. With one hand he closed the door behind him. With the other, the one holding onto his prey, he slammed Oswald's head against the concrete wall inside the doorway. Hard. Blood spattered where the molester's head struck. Oswald whimpered, but otherwise didn't protest. He knew what was coming was going to be far worse.

The door Skull had entered led down a short hallway, then straight down into a basement. His basement. His private domain. The closest thing Skull had to an office.

Only this office didn't have a desk, cushioned chair, telephone, a secretary sitting out front answering calls and taking dictation. No clients visited him here for consultations.

In this office, Skull's private quarters, were items, tools used for inflicting pain, disfigurement, torture.

Skull released his victim by throwing him as hard as he was able – and with Skull's strength, he was able to throw the smaller man pretty hard – against the concrete wall in the furthest corner of this basement.

Oswald landed with a sharp crack, his head hitting at an awkward angle. Skull noticed the way his victim landed on the floor. He hoped he hadn't inadvertently killed the little prick already. That would spoil all the fun he'd planned for himself the next couple of days.

A quiet groan issued forth from the corner. No, the perv was still alive. Skull smiled broadly, evilly. When he showed his teeth in a smile it meant the worst for whoever he was smiling at. His teeth showed now. Never more did Jack Skull's face appear more like a true skull than when he smiled this way.

He reached down and lifted Oswald by his left arm, eliciting further groans as he strapped the wrist he held within a leather strap with Velcro sewn into the underside of it fixed to a chain attached to the wall. He then lifted one of Oswald's legs, the one furthest from the arm he'd strapped up, and then bared the ankle in order to wrap the opposite Velcro strap around the lifted leg, fastening it to the wall as well.

He stepped back to admire his handiwork. Skull grinned. He enjoyed this display. No one ever escaped from him in this position. Why leave both legs on the ground where someone might gain a foothold and find a way to escape? With one leg in the air and one arm at equal height, both above the person's head, no one ever escaped.

Skull selected a knife from the implements on a table off to one side. He made sure Oswald was watching as he touched an index finger to the point of the knife. A bead of his own blood appeared on the tip of his finger.

"P-please!" the feeble pleading was little more than a whisper. "D-don't do this. I didn't harm anyone. N-not really."

Skull approached his prey, the knife held out slightly to one side and in front of him. He knew how to wield a knife in a fight. No one around this area knew better how to knife-fight than Jack Skull. He was a pro at everything he did. He held the knife in his hand as though he was ready to fillet the flesh from Oswald's body.

A pathetic whimper issued from his prisoner as he watched the approach of his impending doom.

Skull grabbed hold of Oswald's pants, up by the crotch, stabbing the point of his knife in where the fold was thickest. He deftly and quickly slit all along the length of that leg, laying open the material from hip to ankle. It fell away from the now bare leg.

Skull did the same with the other leg so that the only part of Oswald's pants still attached to his awkwardly hanging body was the portion around his waist.

Skull reached forward with his free hand and with a twist of his thumb and forefinger, unsnapped the pants. They fell completely away from his prisoner's body, leaving him naked from the waist down, since the perv wasn't wearing any underwear. Made it easier to pork kids that way, Skull guessed.

"Please?" Oswald continued with more of a squeaky whimper, more of a whininess that really irritated Skull.

"If you're gonna be a man," Skull growled from deep in his throat. "Then be a man."

He stabbed the knife forward, pricking the point into the base of Oswald's testicles. Oswald screamed like a little girl, but only a few drops of blood trickled forth from the minor cut.

"That hurt?" Jack scowled. He got close in his victim's face. "You really think *that* hurt?"

He moved back from the human wall-hanging. "Wait'll you see what I do later. Much later."

With the knife still in his hand, Skull reached forward with rapid movements, pricking little slits all over the bare flesh of Oswald's exposed lower body. When he finished, his victim looked a lot like he'd been ravaged by wild dogs, or maybe attacked by a bunch of cats. Blood oozed from every cut. Jagged streaks of red trickled down the flesh and onto the dirty, littered floor beneath him.

Oswald had ceased his whimpering and whining. He knew no one would hear and come to his rescue. There was no rescue for anyone who found their way into Skull's basement. Still, with each new prick of the knife he cried out in pain, his body shivered, searched for a way to avoid what he knew he could never escape.

"You know why this is happening to you, Chester?" Skull used the accepted name on the streets – and in prisons – for child molesters. These were the most hated and detested people in prisons. No one liked those who preyed on innocent children. Not even hardened convicts.

"Because you decided to dip your wick in the wrong little boy last week. That's why. There's some people around here you don't touch. You knew that, Chester. What happened – you get so horny you figured no one would notice if you jammed your jig into that kid's ass?"

Oswald's eyes flared wider for but a moment. He tried to remember last week. How many children had he coaxed into the theater with the promise of popcorn and a soda? How many had accepted candy from him in the local park? How many had he found gazing at toys in the store window? Toys he assured them he already had at his place. Toys he promised to give them if they would only follow him home.

Some of those were boys and some were girls. He had no idea which one Skull was talking about. Children were all the same to him. He didn't even make the distinction between boys and girls. He just enjoyed sliding his relatively small dick up inside their virginal vaginas and asses. At least he was gentle with them. He worked himself inside them with plenty of lubricant so it hurt as little as possible. Didn't that count for something?

And he'd taught both boys and girls how to give the best blow jobs in existence. That was something they would all need to know later in life, so he was actually teaching them life skills,

wasn't he? Wasn't it good to teach children something useful? Something they would be able to use over and over for the rest of their lives, something that many of them could turn into a cash flow, if they learned how to do it right?

He was teaching them business skills, as well. And when he finished with them, they really knew how to suck a cock so it popped like a pro would do. Think of all the lonely old men these boys and girls could satisfy later in life. Men who would pay top dollar for the skills he'd taught them free of charge.

Their parents really should have paid him for teaching their children such valuable skills as those.

"You don't know who I'm talking about, do you, perv?" Skull approached with the knife once more, jabbing the base of the now erect penis. Seemed old Chester here got off on the pain. It made him hard. That pissed Skull off more than anything else. Pain was torment, not for pleasure. Unless it was Skull's pleasure for how he inflicted the pain on others.

"You like this pain, Chester?" He stabbed the cock several times all over. Oswald barely whimpered any longer. He was growing used to this form of torture.

Skull walked back to his table and laid the knife down. He moved his hand slowly above the implements spread out over the wooden surface, wondering which to use next. He finally settled on a large pair of pliers that fit nicely in his hand.

He turned back around and displayed the pliers so his prisoner could inspect them. Oswald's body shivered as he realized what was coming next.

Skull walked up close to the man hanging on the wall, opening the pliers' jaws wide. He slowly closed them around the hanging testicles, watching Oswald's face as the pain from the pressure of having his balls squeezed contorted his features. This he definitely did not enjoy.

"Nnnngghh!" The unintelligible sound squeezed past Oswald's clenched teeth even as the jaws of the pliers clenched tighter around the two squishy balls within the nut-sack that held them. Skull re-positioned the pliers so that only one ball at a time came within the grip of its jaws. He applied pressure slowly, enjoying the way Oswald's face beaded up with such an ice cold sweat. His face had turned completely white. Skull hadn't seen a face this white in quite awhile. He knew he was plying his trade properly now. That was the best sign.

He didn't want his victim to pass out. Not yet. He released the pressure and Oswald displayed his appreciation by exhaling with a whoosh as his body, which had been totally tensed when the pliers squeezed his ball so tightly, fully relaxed.

Seizing the moment, Skull caught hold of the other ball in the wide jaws and squeezed hard as fast as he could. Oswald's eyes nearly popped from his head as his body lurched upward in excruciating agony.

Skull knew exactly what he was doing. He'd done this same thing many times before. Had he video-taped these tortures, many people all over the world would have paid top dollar for them. But Skull was smart enough not to do anything that would prove he was the hand behind torturing and killing these pervs. Even though the cops all had it easier with far less child molesters on the street, they would have to arrest him and try him for murder if they knew what he did down here.

Anonymity was the only way to remain outside the prison walls for Jack Skull. It had worked for more years than he could recall. It would work for a lot more years to come.

He held the single testicle tight in the pliers' grip for several minutes, almost longer than Oswald could stand. Just as the molester was about to pass out – Skull could tell because the man's eyes began fluttering, readying to close as his brain shut down – he released his grip, setting the testicle free.

Oswald once more relaxed, only this time a thousand bright pricks of light swirled around in front of his eyes – a result from nearly passing out.

“You like having your pathetic little dick licked, don’t you, Chester?” Skull laid the pliers on the table, then reached over at the end of the table and picked up a large container of some kind. Oswald recognized it as a pet carrier. Something to hold small cats or dogs.

Skull set the carrier on the table and inserted his hands into heavy leather work gloves. The really heavy kind worn by welders. He then carefully opened the carrier’s door and reached in with one hand, withdrawing the biggest rat Oswald had ever seen, even bigger than the normal-sized Chihuahua.

What was he going to do with that? Oswald’s face once more turned ashen white. He thought he knew what was about to come next, but he hoped he was wrong.

Holding the rat away from his body, secure in the gloved hand so he didn’t get bit by the sharp teeth on the rodent, Skull reached over across the table and grabbed hold of a table knife that was sticking out of an open jar of peanut butter. He scooped out a large glob of the light brown, gooey substance and carried both the peanut butter on the knife in one hand and the squirming rat in the other, right up to where Oswald hung terrified on the wall.

“N-nooo, p-please!” Oswald tried to squirm out of the way, but couldn’t move far enough to keep Skull from wiping the glob of peanut butter all over his once more pathetically flaccid little penis.

With a grin spreading all across his skeletal face, Skull pushed the rat forward, its nose sniffing wildly as it came into contact with the peanut butter-covered dick.

“Rats love peanut butter. Did you know that, Chester? That’s how they get rats to perform in movies. They smear thin layers of peanut butter all over someone’s body and the rats go ape-shit licking it off them. Makes it look like the rats, which are bred and trained in captivity for that purpose, are eating that person’s flesh.

“Now, this rat,” Skull pulled the rat, almost as big as a three-month old kitten, away from the limp dick and held it up so its nose was almost touching Oswald’s nose. “This rat was born in the sewers. It’s wild, Chester. As wild as they come. It wasn’t trained to not bite whatever the peanut butter is smeared over. So when it eats down far enough,” he returned the rat to the smeared dick as he talked, “it’s likely to bite the flesh of this li’l weenie you call a cock.”

Oswald wanted nothing more than to get away from this ravenous rodent eating peanut butter off his dick, but he knew that if he squirmed, the motion might cause the rat to bite him prematurely. Better to remain as still as possible, hoping that the rat wouldn’t bite his flesh when it cleaned the smeared food off it.

Skull watched in growing amusement as his victim’s cock grew erect once more under the ministrations of the rat’s licking tongue and nibbling teeth.

“Y’see, Chester?” he taunted with a chuckle. “I knew you liked having your cock licked. Even a rat can bring you joy, huh? You don’t need kids. Just get yourself a rat and you got something that’ll give you pleasure all you want.”

Skull began moving the rat around slightly as he talked. His jerky movements made the rodent angry. Suddenly it bit out at the peanut butter-strewn member that kept slipping out of its way, hoping to latch onto it so it could finish its eating. Its sharp incisors latched onto the swaying flesh, biting deep. Clamping tight.

“Arrrgghh!” Oswald screamed louder, more high-pitched than Skull had heard so far during their session together.

“Get it off!” he screamed, his waist jerked side-to-side. The rat bit time and again, pissed at the sudden, rapid movements.

“Better stop jerking ‘round, Chester. The rat doesn’t like that. It’s pissing him off and he’s just going to keep biting.”

Skull was right. But with this rat biting into the solid muscle of his now stiff cock, Oswald had a hard time staying still. He finally exerted all the will power he had left, which wasn’t much at this moment, and forced himself to remain motionless as much as possible.

Finally the rat stopped biting his dick and went back to licking it clean.

“See how that works, Chester?” Skull pulled the rat away and placed it back inside the carrier, closing and securing the wire door tight.

When Skull turned back to his victim he noticed the panicky way the perv breathed and how much blood was oozing from the various wounds on his dick left by the rat.

“You going to pass out, Chester?” Skull picked up a large plastic cup full of water and tossed it into Oswald’s face. “Can’t have that, now can we? Lots more fun to come, Chester. Yes sir, we can’t stop until the fun’s over, now can we?”

“You never allowed the kids you punked to stop, even when they whined and pleaded with you, did you, Chester?”

Skull slapped his victim’s face several times with the back of his left hand. Hard. Oswald’s face hit the wall behind him with each slap, adding more pain to the fun.

“Let’s see, Chester. What else did you force those kids to do?” He rubbed at his chin with one hand, as though trying hard to think. He knew all-to-well what molesters made kids do. He just wanted to prolong the torture for this perv. Make him wonder what was coming next.

“Oh, yeah,” Skull snapped his fingers together, as though a thought had just occurred to him, as though he hadn’t planned this entire scenario all the way through all along.

“You like sticking your ‘li’l Ozzie’ inside the tiny assholes of your victims, don’t you, Chester?”

Grabbing hold of Oswald’s restrained hand, Skull released the strap, but held onto the wrist tight enough to cut off the blood circulation. He then pulled Oswald’s body, by the wrist he held, quickly over to the left, slamming his victim’s face into the concrete wall – hard. Oswald whimpered once more from the pain of his nose breaking as it struck the hard surface. Skull then re-strapped the wrist to another leather binding hooked to the wall even higher up.

The present position forced Oswald’s free foot up off the floor. He no longer had any contact with which to exert leverage. Skull grabbed the dangling foot and pulled it off to the side – wide enough to force a cry out of his victim’s throat as he fastened this ankle within a similar strap as the other leg was held by. “What’re you..?” The cry died in Oswald’s mouth as Skull delivered a kidney punch to his back.

“Shut the fuck up, Chester! You don’t get to ask questions or make demands. You just get to set back and enjoy the fun of what’s about to happen next.”

His legs spread as wide away from one another as they could physically get, Oswald found his ass cheeks were spread slightly apart. This was exactly what his tormentor wanted.

Skull reached back over to his table, cluttered with too many tools and implements of torture. He grabbed hold of a long, iron bar and slowly walked up behind his victim, who, with his face plastered against the bare wall, couldn’t see what was about to happen.

“You know, I think you might just like this next part of our fun time, Chester.” Without waiting for a response, Skull placed the tip of the bar against the opening of Oswald’s anus. He then jammed it roughly up passed the spread butt-cheeks about ten inches.

Oswald howled with a long, drawn-out scream that would've brought the cops for certain, had anyone been close enough to hear. Anyone who actually cared.

Skull moved the bar around in random, jagged thrusts. "You like this, don'cha, Chester? This is ecstasy to a baby-raper like you, isn't it?"

Skull pulled the bar most of the way out, and then thrust it back inside the already bleeding anus, harder and deeper. He felt something give way inside his victim's body from his thrust, and grinned wider, shoving the bar even deeper, reaming the anal cavity in ever-widening circles.

Blood flowed freely from the opening that was intended only to release shit.

"Damn, Chester," Skull mocked his victim, "Didn't know you liked me that much. I'm touched by your display of affection."

Skull pulled the bar out of Oswald's ass in one long motion, dropping it onto the floor so the blood and shit covering it wouldn't contaminate the rest of his tools. He'd clean it after he was done.

"You play with the ass-cheeks of your victims, Chester? You like the feel of their soft, round buttocks in your hands. Maybe you kiss their ass-cheeks. Even bite 'em, huh?"

Skull picked up a large horse-grooming brush with metal tines that covered its broad head. He carried it over and without further warning, slapped Oswald's right buttock, driving the tines deep within the soft flesh.

His victim barely moved from the contact, still too overwhelmed from the ass-reaming he'd received. Blood still dripped from his anus that was torn wide from Skull's exertions.

"That didn't please you, Chester? Not hard enough, maybe?" Skull pulled the tines from where they bit into the flesh and swung again, harder this time. The tines struck the already fresh wounds from the first blow, biting deeper, stinging more than before. This time Oswald whimpered and shuddered, his ass twitching side-to-side from the torture.

"That better? Good. I like to know my efforts aren't wasted. If I'm doing something wrong, Chester, you just let me know and I'll find a better way to please you, ok?"

Skull swung the metal-tined brush again, this time raking it off to the side as it came into contact with the already bleeding flesh. Long, deep scratches opened in the soft flesh of this buttock. Blood appeared at the surface and ran down in rivulets along the upper thigh of his right leg.

"Ooo, you do like me, Chester. I'm starting to get an erection. Let's see how hard this makes me."

Turning the brush around in his hand, Skull slapped the open wounds with the flat of the back. Over-and-over he repeated his action, loud smacks meeting his ears. Oswald howled higher with each successive slap. The contact with the open wounds stung deeper each time.

"I'm truly touched by your show of affection toward me, Chester. Really, I am."

Tossing the brush down onto the iron bar on the floor, Skull picked up a plastic spray bottle. "Now, this might sting just a little," he warned barely seconds before spraying the liquid inside the bottle onto the open wounds of the ass-cheek.

Oswald's face tilted as far back away from the wall as he could manage as his mouth opened to release the loudest, coarsest scream he ever thought his throat could produce. His hips pressed themselves against the wall, twitching side-to-side in a vain effort to wipe his buttock free of the intense burning the liquid produced.

"Oh, my," Skull feigned horror, slapping one side of his face with his free hand. "Did I just spray battery acid on you? Jeez, Chester. I don't know how I could have made such a mistake. Here, let me wipe it off."

Putting the bottle down, Skull grabbed hold of a section of coarse sand paper. He slapped it against the burning wounds and pressed deeply as he “scrubbed away” the acid.

Unable to scream any louder, his throat grown hoarse and weary, Oswald merely whimpered at the rough treatment he received. He was past caring. He knew he wasn’t going to live anyway.

“Aw, I’ve hurt your feelings, haven’t I?” Skull released the left hand from its strap and whirled his victim back to his original position, slamming him even harder than before as he re-strapped his wrist where it had previously been.

A sharp crack of Oswald’s spine brought more solicitous empathy from the tormentor.

“Oh, jeez, I forgot to release your leg. Damn. That must be a painful position, huh, Chester?”

Releasing the left leg, Skull brought it back around so Oswald fully faced him. He then pulled the leg out to the other side and strapped it against the wall so his victim’s legs were spread wide, forming the letter “A”, without the cross-bar.

“Ok, now we come to what I like to call the pinnacle of our play time together. Since you like having your dick pulled on by little kids, you should really enjoy this.”

Skull picked up a small metal box and placed it over Oswald’s testicles, covering the small sack of flesh completely. He squeezed in with his hand, compressed the box so it made a sharp click, enclosing itself around the nut-sack and remaining in place even after Skull removed the hand that had placed it there.

He then held a large weight up in front of his victim’s face before attaching it to the bottom of the metal box. The result was that once Skull released his hold, the added weight pulled quickly and sharply down on the nut-sack, stretching it far beyond what even its natural elasticity would allow. Oswald gritted his teeth hard, but refused to make any more sound that would bring pleasure to this sadistic bastard.

“You like that, do you? Wait, there’s more.” Skull sounded much like a game show host who was revealing the prizes to a winning contestant.

He selected a long, thin wire, approximately three feet in length, and brought it up to Oswald’s penis. He then wrapped it tightly about the base of the limp dick, pulling tightly on both ends so the wire bit into the flesh, cutting it and producing oozing blood.

“Tight enough?” Skull mocked. “No? I can fix that.”

Skull picked up two sets of pliers and grabbed hold of each end of the wire with them. Gripping the wire ends tight, he pulled the wire much tighter around the base of the fleshly member than he ever could have with his bare hands.

The now erect dick, made hard by the engorgement of blood produced by the tightly wrapped wire, began to turn blue.

“Hmmm, that looks uncomfortable, Chester. Is it? Good. That’s the way I like it to be. A snug fit.”

He then took the ends of the long wire and attached them to the weight pulling down on the testicles. The weight pulled the ends of the wire even tighter. The wire cut so deeply into the base of the cock that it formed a guillotine effect and sliced it completely off.

Blood flowed freely.

Oswald screamed just before he passed out and died from blood-loss.

“Damn!” Skull shook his head side-to-side. “And I really wanted this one to last at least till tomorrow.”

An early model black Honda pulled off the main road and onto a dirt road. This time of year, with all the spring rain, the road had grown muddy, slippery. The tires of the Honda skidded slightly, but the driver brought the vehicle under control and headed all the way back from the road, toward the tall growth of trees that lined the back perimeter of this property.

Getting out through the driver's door, Jack Skull reached down at the base of his seat and pulled on the lever. The trunk lid popped. He walked back and opened the lid, then reached inside the shallow space and grabbed hold of the tightly wrapped body, encased in the gray plastic tarp.

Both ends of the tarp had been tied tight. No blood had seeped through to leave traces inside the trunk. Not that it mattered. This was a stolen car. Jack Skull would leave it along the side of a road somewhere far from his basement office. There would be no connection made to him.

Tossing the bundled body over one shoulder, Skull reached into the trunk, withdrew a small, sharp hatchet, then walked casually toward the trees, noting the dried up vines from the pumpkins that had grown here last fall. Pumpkins that were one of the cash crops for this farm that catered solely to holiday production. On one side of the farm were pumpkins, for Halloween and Thanksgiving. On the other side were pine trees, Douglas Firs, Blue Spruce, Nobles, anything a person might want for their yearly Christmas tree.

On each side the people tromped around in the foul weather and selected what they wanted while it was still alive. Still growing. Then they cut it themselves and packed it off to their vehicles, where they took their prizes home for the holidays.

Jack Skull wasn't here to select a tree or pumpkin. He wasn't here to take anything away. He was leaving something, adding to the minerals that would seep into the soil, add to the growth of the pumpkins on this side of the farm.

Tossing down his burden, Skull untied the ends and unrolled the tarp. The half-naked, deceased body of one Davey Oswald rolled out of its bindings, flopping loose on the cold, rain-drenched, spring-time ground. Mud splattered over the flesh, the last covering Oswald would wear before his flesh was eaten by the ravenous animals, the coyotes, raccoons, opossums, and anything else living in this area of the countryside that would gladly feast on this carcass left out here for its dining pleasure.

Raising the hatchet he carried, Skull lifted one hand of the corpse. He swung the hatchet downward, slicing off the body part at the wrist. He did the same to the other hand, tossed each one far out into the depths of the trees, then bent over and lifted the head in his free hand.

This was a trademark for Jack Skull. He always rid the bodies of his victims of their hands and heads so no one could identify them, if they happened to discover their lifeless, ravaged corpses after the wild animals finished picking them clean and strewing their bones all over the countryside. So far not one of the severed appendages had turned up as evidence against him.

Cradling the head that had once been Davey Oswald, Skull gripped the hair on top of the head tightly, giving him freedom to slice the head free of the body with one strong, effective whack of the blade he'd sharpened to perfection.

He swung his arm. The hatchet blade connected. The hand holding the head moved upward as the skull came free.

Jack Skull held the once living ornament before his eyes. He grinned. One more trophy no one else would ever see. This he shoved down into the soft mud so the small portion of vertebra attached at the base of the skull stuck into the mud. It appeared as though the body was buried in the ground, while the head was left up above the earth. Soon the animals would find this, too. They would pull it free from the ground and gnaw the flesh from the skull. Leave the round object out in

the open, most likely, where one of the animals would eventually make off with it. That's the way it always worked.

Skull stood straight, smiled as he admired his latest victim. He had no way of knowing Oswald would be his last victim.

"Hope you enjoyed yourself, Jack." Skull stiffened slightly from the voice behind him. He knew that voice. He'd heard it for many years, giving him the names of those he hunted down and tortured for the crimes they'd committed against his bosses.

Skull turned slowly and saw Tom Walsh standing with his right arm extended, a forty-five caliber automatic pointed straight at his chest. Next to him was his right-hand man, Brian Nelson. He held a gun out toward Skull as well.

Skull didn't raise his arms the way people did in movies. He hocked up a mouthful of spit and sent it into Walsh's face.

Walsh used his left hand to wipe away the slime that oozed down his cheek.

"Guess you know what's coming, huh, Jack?" Walsh kept his eyes fastened on Skull's hands. He knew better than to give the man before him any chance of finding leverage to escape with. He'd seen Skull work too often for too many years. No one was more effective, or dangerous, than Jack Skull.

"Aren't you curious as to why you're about to die, Jack?" Walsh cocked his head slightly to one side. He knew he'd want to know, so he told Skull anyway, even though he hadn't asked.

"You've been careless, Jack. Too many cops have been coming around lately. Gill doesn't like cops coming into his building. Gives the place a bad reputation.

"Seems you've grown so used to getting away with everything for so long you figured no one would ever rat you out. Well, someone finally did, Jack. More than one someone. Like at the theater today. Someone sitting in the seat a couple of rows up from Oswald saw you grab him. Guess he didn't see the kid Oswald was fucking, huh, Jack?"

"Anyway, this upstanding and concerned citizen called the cops. They came to the theater. Then they paid a visit to Gill's office. He was pissed, Jack. Real pissed.

"That's why me and Nelly are here, Jack. This mud hole you been dumping corpses into is gonna be your final resting place, too. But thanks for taking care of Oswald for us. Gill was thrilled to hear you offed the guy who punked his grandson."

Without another word, both Walsh and Nelson raised their weapons. They forgot about the hatchet in Skull's hand.

Without warning the hatchet whooshed through the air and embedded itself in the center of Walsh's chest. Nelson, caught off-guard by the counter attack he hadn't expected, glanced to his right at his boss and long-time buddy. That was all the time Skull needed to bow his head and shoulders and rush headlong so that he upended Nelson, just like a fullback in a football game keeping the other side from reaching the quarterback.

Nelson's breath rushed out of him from Skull's head plunging into his solar plexus. He landed hard on the muddy ground behind him. Skull landed on top of him.

With his large, bony fists, Skull began beating Nelson's face to a bloody pulp. Time and again the raw-boned hands slammed into the pulpy tissue of what was once a human face. Now it looked like meat that had been tenderized too much.

A shot rang through the otherwise cold, silent air. Then another. The center of Jack Skull's chest blew out all over the already bloodied face of Brian Nelson just before the body that had been the most ruthless killer known to this city fell lifeless onto his still-living victim.

Nelson lay unmoving on his back in the mud, Jack Skull's corpse on top of him. Nelson needed to catch his breath, recoup from the beating he'd taken, before trying to move.

A shadow loomed over the coupled bodies on the ground. Nelson opened his eyes to see Tom Walsh, a wadded up handkerchief held to the center of his chest, stanching the flow of blood from the wound where the hatchet had sunk into his breastbone. Skull had been too good an aim. The hatchet struck the solid bone, rather than the softer muscle. It never reached the heart or lungs, the way it had been intended. If it had, both Walsh and Nelson would be dead by now.

"Let's get out of here, Nelly," Walsh seemed woozy, weak from loss of blood. He needed to get himself to a doctor before he bled to death.

Slowly, Nelson pushed Skull's body off his own. He got up on his knees, and then managed to stand up straight. Instead of leaving the body and heading back to the car he and Walsh had arrived in, however, Nelson searched around until he found the hatchet Jack Skull had thrown at Walsh.

Hefting the weapon in his own hand, Nelson whacked several times into the back of Skull's neck. The spine cracked clean, and then split. The head rolled free from Skull's body, coming to rest face-up, the lifeless eyes staring up at Nelson.

"Just wanted to leave Jack the way he's left so many others," Nelson mumbled through lips that were too split and bloodied to speak clearly.

Taking the hatchet with him so as not to leave his fingerprints, Nelson followed Walsh to their car. They drove away. Two bodies having been dispatched into this pumpkin farm this day.

By nightfall, both bodies, Davey Oswald's and Jack Schuyler's had been picked clean of all flesh, muscle and all connecting tissues that had proven them to have once been human. Oswald's head was gripped in the wide teeth of a large carnivore. Jack Skull's head, once it had been stripped clean, was left in the pumpkin patch where the encroaching summer sun bleached it of all traces of blood and flesh, leaving its white bone to gleam in the brilliant summer sun. By late summer, when the vines had begun producing the tender flowers that would evolve into small, soft shells of immature pumpkins, Jack's skull had become engulfed by one such flower that had grown out directly above it.

As the pumpkins grew larger and formed themselves into whatever nearly round shape they would hold until carved by children into jack-o-lanterns, Jack Schuyler's skull found itself in the center of the largest pumpkin in the field. The orange vegetable had engulfed the skull, wrapped its thick flesh about the oblong bone, and formed a soft shell within the center of the gourd that feasted on the minerals of the soil where the flesh of the killer had deteriorated.

Some say Jack Skull had an eerie power dwelling within him. They would be surprised to find they had been right. This power pulsated as the life of the pumpkin joined with Jack Skull's flesh-deprived head.

Soon someone would come along and pick this pumpkin.

Then Jack Skull would be free to once more do what he had enjoyed most in life.

Jack Skull would kill again.

###

Jacob M. Drake began his reading experience at the age of six when he discovered the superheroes of comic books. Since then he built his collection into the thousands, devouring the exploits of every hero to grace those colorful pages. Most of what he writes is based upon the exploits of those heroes he himself has created and developed over the years through his overly-active and fertile imagination, though every once in awhile he comes up with a "tale of terror" of one vein or another. He has also written more than a hundred songs. Jake lives in southwest Washington State with his wife and two cats (Or is that two cats and his wife?). He has two sons of his own, Joshua and Micah and two step-children, Jerry and Joanna. He also has been blessed with two wonderful and entirely adorable grandchildren, Malachi and Cassidy, for which he thanks his son Micah for providing.