

The Skeleticon

by Jędrzej Damaszk

A solitary grin suffices to make a work worth writing

To all of you, those who feel heartbroken. May this story mirror your future.

To all of you, those who feel lonely. Whenever you seek a companion, you may have one in me.

To all of you, those who feel rejected. Such shall only be the darkness which shrouds human minds.

To all of you, those who feel helpless. May a flicker of hope lighten all your paths.

To all of you, those who feel insecure. Doubts vouch for a true wisdom.

To all of you, those who feel disturbed. At times, more real is the world we escape to.

To all of you, my dearest friends, I devote this excerpt of history. May you find a bit of yourselves
within.

Confidentially, read between the lines. It happened for real. Hush now! It shall be our secret, agree?

The dawn. His lips tasted of morning dew. They always did. I'd already come out of the cavern where we'd stayed the night. I knew not why we happened to sleep in such a moist and cold place yet relevant it was not. Only him did I care about. My Beloved. My Ben. My kiss definitely surprised him for his emerald eyes quickly widened, his cheeks went rosy and even his dark brown hair got blowzy. Apparently, I interrupted his staring at some wicked object which stole his attention from me. Now, I had it back but still... curious I was either.

- Why on Earth haven't you woken me up? You're more keen on watching this... egg hatching?
- It must have fallen down from the apex – the green-eyed pointed up to the top of a mountain – anyway, splendid morning to you, too, Jaden – I knew he was serious. He called me 'Jaden.'
- Leave it be. Any worth it has not. Or perhaps... - I decided to relieve the tension with a joke – it isn't too late to make it scrambled? - the very same moment the shell broke – Oh my! It has a beak!
- Let us not waste a second! It's gonna die without his mom – my sensitive lover uttered.
- Fine! Thou know I'll climb this pinnacle should you only wish it. Well, I even use heinous words since you do – a complaint this was not. Some kind of teasing? Indeed. We took the path up.
- Say it not, Jay – Ben's countenance visibly regained its usual placidity. Serenity of conifers surrounded us – you just speak winsome to me. Hope we manage to return this poor little thing!
- Worry not – these words I repeated myriad times – this rock is steep yet the nest I see as well.
- Sure you do? - we'd been ascending that mount for an hour by far – I only see crevices. In a crevice, no mountain bird would ever live – I grasped the chestnut-haired boy's shoulder.
- There look up! - my index showed him the way. Only fibers of straw or blades of hay (or whatever else birds created their nests with) did we spot so far yet as we ascended a bit higher, it revealed its entire majesty. Yet, however huge the nest was, it contained no eggs.
- We have the only child! - shouted Ben with a muffled voice. Out of the blue came a different sound. The wings' flutter, of powerful ones. In an instance we saw it. Screeching as an emissary of hell, the colossal golden-feathered eagle-like creature flew down from the very top. Frightened by that view, we retreated a bit. I wished to go away yet Ben insisted. I knew he wouldn't give it up so... I took a step forward. The plumaged one had landed a few blinks earlier. I was approaching slowly, sluggish as a snail. The beast appeared to behold me closely and let me prove the integrity of my intentions. The chickling had halted its birth yet its heart was still beating with vigorous quintessence of life. Its mother must have heard it and that's probably why she didn't peck me to death. In the end, I put the egg back and almost simultaneously it hatched. Within a second!
- Cease! Cease your deeds now, villains! - we heard a holler all of a sudden. The bird went upset, yet moved not. Having no time to celebrate our victory, Ben and I turned around to see an elderly running and almost stumbling upon his long white beard which was longer than his height – you've desecrated the hallowed lair of the last Kori! - his face reddened with an infantile tantrum.

- Ridicule us not, old man! - I answered instantly. Ben's mouth was ajar – should you address the deliverance we've just given by the name of blasphemy, then who by the goodness art thou?!

- Ye... are not here to purloin the offspring? - his mossy robe hung down from his lanky arms.

- Then thou art a shrewd person. We've rescued this egg for it'd fallen out of this nest. We're not vile should it need repetition – the man's visage became mild – you haven't introduced yourself yet.

- Oh... oh... I beg your pardon, messieurs. I was only looking for sparkbird's scion. It had apprised me it went missing, and therefore, I've mistaken thee with these despicable bounty hunters. I truly apologize from the depth of my heart – the discombobulated expressions on our faces made him continue his talk – thou seest, Kori, the sparkbird, is the last of its kind. It hasn't had descendants for centuries – seeing his abrupt tranquility, Kori flew closer to me and put its beak under my hand.

- A... a pity it is! How smooth its plumes are! Ben, have a touch! Their tenderness resembles the one of your complexion – the green-eyed blushed (as always when he heard my compliments) and obeyed. The dignity in the bird's eyes combined with respect it felt toward us were truly an unforgettable experience. I wished I could spend the rest of that day there, with my beloved. Then... unexpected and equally unwanted came another figure. I sensed a grain of shadiness in its posture, however, it addressed only the old man. He was gasping like he had just finished a marathon.

- Master! Master Sage! - I figured he was a messenger – the kingdom despairs! The scouts have just reported that some witch is about to defile the sacred ashes of the Void one! She was descried when she was following the route that could only lead to the sepulchers of the Holy! The darkness encircled her personage and she kept whispering she would summon the Skeleticon!

- Mercy may save us! Doomed we are! - cried the man, known now as the Sage. I knew not what that piece of information truly meant yet both Ben and I were aware of its severity. The Sage's face went pale though mattered it not. Instead, I was curious why that messenger's appearance seemed ominous to my mind. Ben's sight investigated him as well, yet gone he was before we drew any conclusion. Suddenly, I felt a scorching pain in my wrist. I looked at it and distinguished a scar or a mark there. Was it here before? Why did I not remember it? Anyway, the mark was similar to two black vessels, one of which was tiny, the second of comparably enormous size. Some liquid flowed from the first into the larger one yet how could such a thought come into my mind? I knew not.

- Jay... - Ben pulled my hand, omitting my hand inspection – under no circumstances may we ignore it. Thou knowest that, right? I deem we know this witch. She cannot conquer the kingdom!

- Be as you wish, the Loved one – honestly, I distinguished a few discrepancies during our journey as well as some blank pages in my remembrance.

- I do not wish any peril to come across. Yet, the exigency of our freedom this is. I do fear, Jay.

- Fear not, then, my Beloved. My sword shall be thy guard – in fact, I detested fighting. But still, my blade and the green-eyed youth's dagger had already had us achieve multiple victories.

The noon. Down the mount we went to the foothill. So sultry was the ambiance of our perambulation that hoodies on me and Ben were no-longer. Hadn't the Sage been accompanying us, we would have made laugh of him, however, the presence of such a praiseworthy individual had us feel some sort of respect and... fear, maybe, of having revolted him. The Sage himself was wearing his inadequately warm vesture which had undoubtedly been making him sweat for hours. Never wasting an opportunity, I inquired about the supposedly ancient beast.

- Your Venerability – I uttered this wicked word fairly quickly but hey! It surely was a wicked one – may you elucidate what on Earth this 'Skeleticon' is?

- Merely a legend, my child – he responded. Obvious it was that the answer was not satisfying – until it comes true, anyway. Since I was no younger than you two, I've hoped the stories would confirm the impossibility of its execution. Yet for too long this witch has been harassing our magnificent kingdom so that it has ceased flourishing. For seven years in a row our crops have been withering even before getting close to become ripe. Lo! Plants don't even germinate very often. And this is merely a tip of this horrifying iceberg. Our most revered priests have kept the secret of the Skeleticon and its summoning yet apparently this harridan's found a way to procure it.

- Awful though it sounds... - Ben interrupted – we do have prospects of defeating her, right?

- Such knowledge does not lie by my side, son. Never has this abominable rite, which she intends to perform, been studied in our chapel. Comprised in the Illicit Texts Register, this disgusting ritual's instruction should have remained concealed forever.

- Right – I added – none of you have ever considered getting rid of it! Stupid fools you are! Why do we even have him in our party, Ben? - I winked at my Jewel who giggled. The Sage frowned.

- Go where you wish, I have not invited you – interestingly, he did not look offended.

- I'm just teasing you. What's more... we just follow in the same direction. Sorry to have made you upset or... to have tried to do so. You're not upset... Well – I inhaled three times to contrive any helpful question – do you know anything of use? What is this Skeleticon? You haven't given a clue!

- I know not much. We were not allowed to investigate it. However, should you trust the gossip, it's alleged to devour the world when it arises. Some housewives claim it will come into existence thanks to human infirmities which make up its driving force. Never should such a thing be evoked but its origin as well as its supposed creator have not ever been determined. The witch wishes to commit a sacrilege on our divine patron's remnants. She must have gotten to know somehow that they are our holy relic. The Void one's sigil is imprinted on every noble warrior's plate in our kingdom. I do quail that this day might be the last one, boys.

We remained silent afterward. Shambling a little, we were going a bit slower and indubitably needed a break. The nearby trickle resembled a paradisaal spring of potency as we'd already gone thirsty as hell. The aura of that clearing, where a rest we had, was imbued with garish colors

highlighting the vibrancy of all the surrounding area. Its liveliness notwithstanding, it still seemed to have sinister shades hidden beneath the layers of brightness.

- Come here, indigent children. Thou needst a refreshment. Come, and have a sip! - the elderly spurred us delicately – the water that gushes from the highest mountains invigorates unsurpassably! The very moment he sipped a mouthful, he shivered and fell into a fit. The Sage's legs turned to jelly which ultimately made him topple. To him we ran as quick as two flashes yet he only murmured. He must have overlooked the dead fish floating in the trickle with their bellies directed upward. Luckily, his condition was not terminal yet despite us not being medics, we were aware his companionship was no-longer. Ben insisted on succoring him yet the Sage insisted harder:

- No! Ye shall reach the sepulchers of the Holy before it is too late! Mind me not, I will recover. This is not the first poison I have drunk, only the most unexpected one – these sentences took roughly three minutes to be uttered – Godspeed to thee! Do not look back!

A quarter later the trickle left the horizon and the dense wood we entered. Squirrels were squeaking, the peckers were tapping wood, the unidentifiable critters were emitting alike sounds and at length we were alone. I shunned most society with one exquisite exception of the boy whose emerald eyes glistened among pines and spruces. A moment of intimacy we had just been given and... Oh no! It was instantly annihilated! Some human shape swished not farther than half a mile away. Yet even in disguise, I would always recognize the owner of these flexible movements. I commenced to run and Ben along with me. We would have made a race, as we frequently did, hadn't a sudden pain forced my layover. The mark on my wrist hurt as if it was incinerated. It altered. I was sure it did. One of the vessels shrank while the other one enlarged, reminding me of a recollection that some fluid was traversing from one to another through a little artery which merged them into some apparatus.

- Lo, Jay! There his hideout is! - Ben exclaimed and I followed just these few steps.

- Be coy no-longer! - I inspired the individual who had apparently hidden in the foliage of a bush. It was a thorny one and I wished no harm to this person as I (we, actually) knew him well. And there he came out! Antes Niffleheim, our mentor and coach who had educated us of the chivalrous and gallant art of dueling. Not only had he taught us how to survive plenty of perplexities but he also saved my life the very first time we met. Sometimes I wondered why he had done such a favor to me but he always concealed his intentions. I never pondered this matter thoroughly for Ben was an apple of my eye and I thought mostly about him yet I admired Antes' multifarious virtues. His pitch-black hair and steel-gray irises emerged from the spiky shrub yet intact his skin remained.

- Ain't this old geezer with you? He wanted to curse me! - this was not a proper welcome.

- He's sick. What are you doing here? Been spying on us? - I had predilection for annoying people.

- Listen up, Jadinsky – he used to spook me out but guess what: it was no-longer! - I thought you might wish to visit some graves. You play heroes. I play looters – now he was talking to the point.

The day. By and by, we stepped in some countryside and spotted very quaint cottages. As our thirst grew devilish, we started seeking any inn we could get some rest in. Pretty soon did the ‘Aegis Tavern’ outstretch its entrance before us and almost equally soon we found ourselves in its inner. The indigenous patrons were scarce and only few of them were drinking some liquors at the wooden circle tables. Ben and I ordered two flasks of water, uncontaminated this time, and six more for the rest of our journey. Antes picked some booze which was glowing and... I really wished not to ask about it. Then we made our exit and roamed about near some stalls, one of whose owner was selling fruit and vegetables to a dark-haired woman whom I recognized immediately.

- Mother! - hailed I and ran closer – what a surprise! Thought you were at... at... - I forgot where. She threw a glance at me yet her eyes expressed no gaiety nor merriment but pure lividity. Or perhaps they were expressionless. Never before had her face looked like this.

- Abomination! - hollered she, all of a sudden, tossing her overfilled shopping bag at me. I was staggering for a while yet eventually my feet regained balance. A moment later... she slapped my cheek. Was it indeed my mother? I savvied not what spirit could have possessed her for it certainly did – I’ve been reiterating thousands of times, Jaden, but you were always a degenerate! Thy disobedience shall one day be punished – she approached one building’s wall and ripped off a poster, which stated ‘Wanted – Dead or Alive’ though the last two words were crossed out. The individual drawn on its surface was no one else but... my Beloved!

- What the hell does it mean, mom? This cannot be! He’s innocent! He’s...

- Accused of witchcraft and attracting adversities, by the verdict of the Six priests.

- Nonsense you speak! One of the reverends has approved of him. We rescued a bird in danger of extinction! It was electrifying the atmosphere and was sagacious past all belief!

- Not before me shall you account for yourselves. Woe to thee, my former flesh and blood.

I looked at Ben whose shock exceeded mine. Taking a few steps back, he bumped into a guy whom the green-eyed apologized though in vain. A stranger fell unconscious covered with bursting blisters. I scurried toward him but he touched other people who had crowded around us like they were willing to share the wicked fate with their neighbors.

- See? A friend of thine is the Devil himself! Many a warning I have given to thee yet now thou shalt face the music – mother uttered her last words and took off. I saw her not afterward.

The humans were still falling down in convulsions, their bodies in blains. Soon they were no-longer. None of them were standing as if some viral infection influenced their organisms and propagated imminently due to its contagiousness. Ben was trembling and burst into tears. Antes was contemplating the whole scene with blatancy. Typical. My instant reflex caused me to hearten my poor Dear one yet the very moment...

A hiss or rattling came into our ears and we stood stunned by it. Not so long ago the sun was in the vertex of the sky, now the thick overcast made the azure sphere leaden. The heavy raindrops commenced smiting us unbearably. It was not the worst, though. The clatter we heard became so strident that none of us could mistake it with any regular sound. The sound was like a stick hitting a stick yet its abnormality was hiding behind the portentous reverberation.

And there she was. The harbinger of pestilence. In a tattered gown she was sliding, the pale-skinned apparition of a woman with a veil concealing her visage. Her arms were thin as rakes yet closer inspection proved them to be nothing but her forearm bones, the residues of her previous life. Her soles were barely skimming the ground or they weren't touching it at all. So petrified were we that this revenant managed to diminish the distance between us. Only Antes was not frozen.

- The witch's minion it is or other squalid being! Bare your blade, Jaden!

Having spoken so, Antes rushed into the monster and attempted to sell it a kick. To no avail. Just before he had a chance, the apparition had cried with a deafening voice, unveiling its true countenance. It was lifeless and consisted of only a skull. Empty eye sockets peered out at me or Ben whom I shielded with my body. I conceived not how the being could have beaten my mentor so effortlessly for he was not a wanted person. He was able to move faster than any individual whom I knew yet there he was, lying on the damp grass. Clattering with its bones, the ghost was still approaching yet I still figured not what I needed to do. Suddenly the thing started to generate its lures, looking exactly the same as the original being, which encircled me and Ben. All of them moved increasingly quicker, striving for striking us. They succeeded a few times yet apparently only the real version could harm us. I realized then that I would probably have but one prospect of parrying its blow. I closed my lids, aware of Ben's presence behind my back. I stood in a straddle position, holding my sword, squeezing its helve, fixing myself to counterattack. Inhuman was the rain, gruesome were the sounds of the spirits yet my goal I knew. I had to defend the Beloved.

And then I struck! The edge of my blade and a horrifyingly scrawny bone were sticking to each other when my eyes hinted to me I needed to sight. It was not defeated yet, however, hopeless we were not. I put the whole potency my muscles possessed in order to repel this enemy. This was one of such moments when I was grateful to myself that I practiced my weapon and intuition so much. Hadn't I, I would have probably fallen at once. Nevertheless, my tremendous effort notwithstanding, my knees began to bend. The apparition was no doubt mightier and my chances grew thinner. The very second I was about to fall, the unexpected happened.

A flare of light, dazzling my vision, came into existence. It was one of these scarce times when my weird power was manifesting itself. Rarely did it occur but so thankful to it I was that I managed to muster the last bits of my strength. And then it was done. The sphere of light consumed the whole area, repulsing the revenant to where it came from and destroying the clouds. Safe at last we were.

The dusk. An absolute and dreary image of a shambles I viewed with my eyes. Covered with a thick layer of ash mingled with humidity, the whole area resembled an ancient battlefield. Not a single sound was audible. I glanced at Ben who was standing astounded yet subtle though he was, he always impressed me with his faculty of adjusting to upcoming events. The mark on my hand ached again and I scrutinized it. Then I started to wish I had heeded it more carefully earlier. Now it could only be a blind guess that its shape reformulated itself as if I had a living organism attached to my skin. I sighted... a semblance (for I surely misinterpreted it) of a three-headed creature. Hadn't it consisted of two pieces before? My perception and cognizance of many a matter blurred as if a heavy chain with a cast-iron padlock embraced their fragments. Only shards of thinking were my domain at that moment. The three heads... perhaps even this simile was an erroneous conjecture.

- Ain't anyone gonna help me? - my brief torpor was interrupted by Antes' awakening.

- Art thou unharmed? - I recked my comrade even though he regarded himself as too valiant to be cared for. I reached out to him and he grasped my hand which burned a little as he touched my hideous mark. I couldn't help shuddering – worry not. Thou art a bit colder than I was prepared for.

- What actually... happened? - he inquired and hearkened to my and Ben's synopsis.

- We shall proceed – uttered Ben at the end of our conversation, interwoven by frequent inhalations and exhalations resulting from our fatigue and dismay we had just experienced – not until we defeat the witch, may we afford some rest. Do you see that plain? I'd spotted a map before we entered the inn. It is no-longer, I'm afraid, however, I recollect that the sepulchers are positioned on the plateau, a few kilometers ahead. Should we linger here, other places will anon be bedeviled like this one!

Immediately we moved and found ourselves on the spacious ground bestrewn with sundry herbs, shrubs and trees whose foliage here and there blended into archways, nonetheless, certain tremendous portions of land were barren and parched by infernal influence of the sun. The soil cracked in many places and threatened to widen with a view to uncovering an endless chasm which was a proper chastisement for unaware adventurers if anyone happened to fall into it.

- Hungry, Jay? - the tone of Antes' voice hit my ears. Ben staggered though he was behind and I shouldn't have known that. Were my senses so honed due to constant exposure to him?

- Yeah, famished, to be honest. Are we in the possession of any viands?

- Nope, but a fruit up there presages a fruitful hunt! - exclaimed he and by dint of his superhuman speed he gathered the gift of nature and passed it to me. Flummoxed I was, seeing its morbid xanthic hue which had me feel a little grain of abhorrence. Unluckily, no other source of nourishment was on the horizon, thus I could only subject myself to my fate.

- Ben, wouldst thou lend me thy dagger? - at my lover I peeked though he did not reciprocate the sighting for a while. Maybe he contemplated the blossoming inflorescence of some weeds nearby.

- For certain, dear – the timbre of his voice evoked a dab of suspicion in my mind. Having clutched the handle of his knife, I tried to have his eyes meet mine. Alas... inefficaciously.

I turned my vision toward the fruit. Now it seemed to glisten and release a wicked glimmer which could warn against consuming it, I was afraid. Yet it was not the time to vacillate so I performed an assertive cut. I dropped it! Ben, Antes and I (apparently) jumped backward for it hissed perilously. Its sprinkling juice covered the surrounding grass and made it wither at once.

- Our repast is no-go. Damn it! - Antes expressed his frustration or any other form of crossness. All of a sudden, ravenous I was not. The inexorably setting sun rebuked our dilatoriness.

Neigh! Neigh! Neigh! Wicked sounds originated from everywhere. Many a surprise we'd already encountered yet our (mis)fortune wasn't satiated yet. Ben suggested the direction in which we should advance and he was right. We scraped through the leafage of some very dense and thorny bushes to reach a clearing. An enthralling picture materialized in front of our very eyes. Three formidable (due to their horrific magnitude) horses occupied this terrain as if they were denizens of this glade and apparently we were now to be determined as allies or foes. All of them looked like some victims of a torturer who tormented these poor animals with whip or other vile weapons. Their fur was shiny yet their healed wounds had left saddening scars which had no prospect of being erased. A little closer I came. I commence beholding them. The first one was jet black and the highest of all three. Only this one had shoes which resembled hefty irons able to crush rocks beneath their weight. This horse seemed to sight poorly, his eyes milky white. It was taking greedy sips from the slimy branch and breathing at the reeds which yellowed burdened only by scent of the decay. The second creature, of a faded, almost completely bleached color made me wonder whether its body contained a drop of blood. It was moving, indeed, however, so pallid was it that I had an irresistible notion that I was just facing the embodiment of death. Furthermore, it was entangled in particularly vicious vines which handicapped miserable being's motion. A step forward I took and spotted that this one could not see at all. It was eyeless! Instead, it had two big imprints in the shape of a crescent which curved and elongated into an outline of the letter "U." I wished to help the poor thing but firstly I had a look at the last horse which appeared to be in much better condition. It was sorrel and the least excruciated for I distinguished but a solitary streak from a scourge. Not only was it springing freely and grazing wherever it wished to but it also had ample vigor to defy immense weights fastened to its tibiae. Seeing its glory, I went into raptures which highly likely ensued from its particular hue. Just an infinitesimally darker shade of its brownness and it would be the perfect match with Ben's hair. Stunned though I remained for a while, I approached the pale horse.

- Hu... - I heard an unsettling sound within my head – human... We are the Stallions of Destiny. Thou must choose wisely for we transfer only in accordance with our names. Pick foolishly and pick thy doom! - this riddle was simple. Half an hour later we were at the feet of the plateau.

The eve. Ben and Antes were pretty silent during the ride but I didn't need to wonder why. My stallion, called Reverie, had been whispering only the words of courage which heartened my soul. I would definitely prefer that Reverie transported Ben yet these horses must have been some spirits which couldn't probably be tricked into changing their minds. Antes even said:

- I heard legends of princes turned into animals for their atrocity. But people were also saying that disenchanting them should make them boundlessly obey their liberator.

- Thou surely mistook the fairy tales, lad – uttered Ben, pointedly.

That was their only conversation since Nightmare and Daydreamer murmured their venom into my companions' ears. I was really glad when they could get off them when Reverie announced that we reached the terminus of our joint journey. Neither plaguy horses nor colossal interval could now refrain us from approaching the sepulchers of the Holy. There only were a number of steps we were bound to climb in order to achieve the moon gate and notice the barely legible inscription "Beware, those who own fiendish hearts. No absolution awaits you here."

- How soothing. Never have I visited so welcoming a place – mouthed I and scratched an itching spot on my... hand. The reddened mark was dark no-longer. It was unwilling to rouse the pain above my knuckles yet instead it enkindled a sense of formication. Two symmetrical whirls made up its present shape. Thorougher inspection led me to the conclusion that it was identical to images from the book I and Ben were obliged to read. The title of that work was... "Odyssey" or ish. I better remembered the passages concerning Scylla and Charybdis, two gargantuan sea monsters which, with a single firm bash of their tentacles, produced ferocious vortices. These hazardous maelstroms were now coating the surface of my skin and appeared to manifest zeal to split up since the connection between them was dwindling with every second.

- Shall we? - Ben coyly disrupted my transient stupor. Gathering the last shreds of our wills, we encroached the grand area of an enormous cemetery. This image took my breath away though I couldn't sink into another oblivion, thus we went on walking. The fathomless garden of stony flowers resembled a different country we had just invaded. Every grave and every tombstone were voiceless and deaf inhabitants of the land of sorrow. Howbeit, out of the blue a hunch I underwent that this place concealed an enigma, and far from truth I was not. Lifeless though the whole vicinity was, it evinced certain characteristics of the ante-mortem state. Marble pillars were thumping rumbling sounds as if they were conveying the misshapen growl coming from underneath the ground. The obliterated epitaphs were nictitating and shedding golden light as though they were spying on us. Our each step made the soil sizzle and crackle and worried I was that I was inadvertently hurting it. So fearsome were these sounds that I made my steps as long as it was possible. My juvenile homies were following my footsteps and remained silent until after we

attained another milestone which was the second moon-shaped passage. Then came the unanticipated. A backstab which no one should ever be able to handle.

- Sorry, Jay. If only I could choose. But my nature is unalterable – I heard Antes' words while I was turning back to him. I descried him detaching Ben's dagger from his belt and in rapid leaps of his super fast motion he disappeared in the tunnel behind the gate.

- The serpent of all vipers! - cried Ben – I've been telling thee so many a time! I wish thou had just once hearkened to me – his eyes vibrant and lachrymose so much – what... are we gonna do now?

- Ben... Quit brooding, my Beloved. We'll... – the very second a crunch I heard. It was of repugnant origin, in fact it was coming from a double source. The earth couldn't endure anymore and commenced spitting up the bones of those who had once been buried in their sepulchers. Alas, these redoubtable enemies had been equipped with full panoplies comprising sturdy plate armors, intimidating falchions or sabers and crumpled bucklers, all of which were rusty. For another time in my life I detested human superstition according to which this equipment was supposed to succor them in the afterlife. A load of codswallop!

All we could do was nothing but flee. The dead warriors were coming closer and closer in very sluggish movements yet they seemed to heed only Ben as though he magnetically attracted them. We squeezed through the moon gate and moved backward with the aim of observing the undead constantly. We avoided quick escape for who knew whether even worse surprises awaited in deeper parts of the cemetery. At a moment, a wicked skeleton rushed toward Ben in an unexpected increase of velocity. My blade, thank our stars, was swifter and ripped its exposed spine apart. I considered dealing with all of them yet however slow the freaks were, they were also innumerable and possibly consisted of the overall decomposed population of the sepulchers. Chances were obviously low.

A few moments later one particular monument disclosed its incredible sublimity. We both knew what it was even without reading the huge engraving "Here lies the Void one. Praise his heroism!" Anon it seemed to us that the magnificent tombstone repelled the vicious corpses since they were encircling us as if they couldn't cross some invisible barrier. I looked at the black sky. I knew the moon could shine only with the light reflected from the sun but it was the moon, not the sun, that gave me an instant flicker of hope.

- We are safe here, let us get closer to the stone – I spoke but Ben was terrified and froze at one moment – Prithee, the Dearest, rest a while there and we shall figure this out – he complied.

The green-eyed boy touched the cold stone with his back and a horror played a split second later. Out of nowhere came Antes with Ben's dagger in left hand. He plunged the blade between my lover's third and fourth rib and then it was over. I knew I lost everything. I ran to Ben as soon as my strength allowed me to. Antes was gone. My life was gone. All was pointless from now on.

- How kind of thee that you finally made it. If only thou wouldst be as pleased as I am.

The full moon. This voice I recognized not. It was of no salience, though. I embraced the warm body of the one I had sworn to protect. I screamed and repeated it a few more times for I shattered into pieces. Forlornness and misery replaced my friends. Ben was... NO-LONGER. I was witnessing the last moments of his life. Our life. A solitary tear was flowing down his cheek and his breath was losing its sweet humidity when he told me, almost inaudibly:

- Thou maddest each day of my life Heaven on Earth. Should I go to hell, find me and we'll make it a paradise. More than anything in the world, I love you. Fare... - he did not finish.

His eyes closed and his soul left me stranded. I couldn't believe it nor stand up. Yet I was forced to. First drop of Ben's blood fell onto the tombstone and had it burst. The sturdy lid of the sepulcher of the Void one fractured like an egg shell. The true void was actually inside. Suddenly, from the dark and gloomy interior, there came an azure luminosity which was soaring high above the cemetery. Then, I heard this voice again. It belonged to a shady figure of a woman who was presumably the...

- Witch! - shouted I, infuriated as a rabid dog. She was a culprit who bereaved me...

- I prefer the term *the Sorceress* to any other dysphemisms, if thou wilt. Now, should thou not interrupt me once more, you will do me a grand favor, boy.

I wished to kill her or at least make her horribly suffer but something wicked evoked strengthening my focus. The luminosity began to absorb the bones of skeleton warriors who had been standing still for some time. Now I was alone and the ritual of summoning the Skeleticon was at its finale and nothing could be done. I watched it being born, helpless. It mattered not since I had already died with all my hopes. I felt my life forces abandoning my body.

- Now, I will rule the world and grant it a fresh start – the witch was holding her silver scepter which glimmered a bit in the moonlight. Her pleated dim robe looked like a shroud though her burial was adjourned due to my lack of reason. So elated did she look that I could probably pull out that big staff out of her hands. If only it mattered - All thanks to you!

- What do you mean, you virago? - I knew not how I vocalized these words for I was kneeling by my friend's body again. Antes did not show up, too. All that remained was somber desert of life.

- Thou hadst no prospect of knowing some facts. Silly sages had been hiding this secret for so long that no one would be able to prevent me from performing it. It required only three ingredients: noble souls of those who had deserved their glory, chaste blood erupting from a dying heart... Well it also had to be such a heart that loved truly. Thou knewest poor bastard's chosen one?

- What. Is. The third. Ingredient? - empty though I was, a lust for cutting her throat was unbearable.

- Thou art, my lad. Of course, thou art. Thy maleficences and vices constitute a perfect counterweight to the innocence of that... well, cadaver.

- Why am I alive, then? - I was irate as hell yet still didn't attack her. She laughed.

- Thou needst no explanation. Thou shalt seek within thy mind. Now behold the splendor of the prime being. The Skeleticon has arisen! - a lightning illuminated her face. It looked... familiar.

A dragon... a dinosaur... a thing of wicked shape finally hatched and looked at me with its obnoxious pallid blue eyes. Myriad bones composed its body and its size was of a yacht or a plane maybe. I was supposed to be its first victim. It mattered not. Yet... behind its rib cage... there was... a heart. I knew it was a heart for it was thumping and making this peculiar sound. I caught a sight of my poor Ben and if it was his life force which was driving this monstrosity, then... I had to intervene. I found within my guts the last remnants of my gallantry and the very moment...

Another lightning illuminated the sky and calling became discernible. Then I recalled I had another friend who arrived to provide rescue. It was the reinforcement I did not merit. But there she came. The sparkbird, the last Kori, fast as threads of electricity it produced. She was gliding through the sullen air and leaving it with sanguine shards of hope. So powerful was her momentum that the strike she exerted on the Skeleticon's figure had the beast topple. Then the battle began but I could only watch. At times the monster hit the bird but the Kori took advantage of the Skeleticon's unwieldy posture. All of a sudden, I felt another itching on my hand. The mark barely visible in the moonlight appeared to present the stick and a ball. Or... it was... Was it? It was... the heart and the dagger. A hint! I got close to my Beloved whose skin whitened a bit which still could only beautify his countenance. I gently pulled out his weapon to which he also fell prey to. I whispered to his ear "Wait for me just for a minute longer and we shall meet in eternity." I stood up and looked at the Skeleticon's rib cage which had been shredded by the Kori. The pulsating azure heart was revealed. I was not as good at throwing knives as Ben was but it was my final deed. So I couldn't miss. I took one strong breath and tossed the blade deep inside the creature's life drive. It squawked and the very instant later was pecked to death by the sparkbird. The witch seemed frozen. It mattered not.

- Ben – I sat next to him – I will fulfill my promise now – I touched the tombstone with my sword and engraved the final epitaph which joined us forever in this last minute:

I've yearned for it, this dream of mine,

My bones shall rest in the tomb of thine.

- Thou always dost, my dear – I didn't expect the response to come so soon. I opened my eyes.

- Ben...? How? - he silenced me by putting his finger on my lips. The witch spoke instead.

- Thou remember thy mother's inklings, right? - she pulled off her hood. She was...

- Mother! It is thou! Thou always told me to trust only the words of wisdom and follow the path of affection. And.. and... did it work? Why... Why did it all happen?

- My child... dost thou suspect why at least? One day thou shalt be defined as *the Unifier*. But beware. Grandeur always comes hand in hand with tremendous sacrifice.

- Were you willing to know why it was senseless at times – said Ben – we lived your dream.

The afternight. Entirely discombobulated, I woke up in a cold sweat. I glanced sideways, rubbing my tingling eyes. It was our *darkroom* as I used to call it (though Ben applied way more enthralling term, *the Room of Skewance*). I presumed I would never find out what he'd meant yet I accepted his surreptitiousness which was ubiquitous within his whole personality.

The shutters were enshrouding the windows, and thereby the rest of the outer world. Only the minutest crevices filtered the backyard nightly refulgence, tenuously indicating the languid arrival of the fiery sphere of magma which was anon about to announce the cessation of the night. Not until that moment, was everything pitch black except for a figure, reclining tranquilly on the bed, who was suspected by me to emit his own aura which would always ban the infinite darkness from overcoming the world. His steady breath was having his chest lift at regular intervals. Lying there, the emerald-eyed boy would never anticipate the horror I had just been a participant of. Or would he? Had anything been for sure, it would certainly be uncertainty. It was such a... pleonastic sentence, wasn't it? Yeah... sorry. It was just... I should have recognized the whole event as a damned dream. It was illogical and full of holes! Many an inconsistency was present there. Even the language was mixed up though... I really sounded unnatural in the real world as well.

I moved away from the bed and headed toward the window which I made ajar. A stream of tepid air flowed through my hair and skimmed my cheeks but then I closed it for lest it would cause Ben to catch a cold. I squeezed my fingers into the shutter and observed the adjacent area. All of our neighbors were apparently asleep for the street was devoid of human presence. Not a footstep to be heard or spotted, obviously only my soul remained active at that time. I didn't bother to check the time. Was it essential? I got used to sleepless nights or... very early mornings.

The matter that was of salience was the meaning of my night terror. Why was it so realistic? Yet, sensible though it at times was, it resembled a string with dozens of knots. On the other hand... why? Why did it... did they address me as if they were telling fortune? Something was amiss. And my mark... My mark... I raised my hand.

And then it all blurred. I attempted to hold the photos of my dream inside my head yet it caused so much pain that I eventually let go. Something told me it shouldn't have ever happened. Suddenly I wasn't able to envision anything that had constituted my dark fantasy. If only my mind hadn't been so sleepy... I swear, I would have tried much harder to keep these memories in my brain had I only known they were... yet to come.

Alas! Now I remember none of these facts I have just recounted. But how was I able to tell this history in the first place? Well, some mysteries exist to be unraveled and some may not ever be soluble. I am glad to have concentrated enough on scribbling this excerpt of life I have no longer access to. Now I remember only writing it but this splinter of consciousness will soon fade away

and I will be left with all of this forgotten. It matters not. Come what may. I have tackled so many an obstacle that I am ready for anything. Wait. We are ready.

I go back to my green-eyed chestnut-haired lover. If only he was awake a few minutes earlier. I would have told him at least a part of the story. But no. I have taken an oath not to trouble him with trivialities (among other things, of course). I sit next to him and observe him for a while. My life is truly a fairy tale due to his presence. Calling him *a fairy* would be indubitably stupid but his ambiguous influence on my life (and his as well) along with still accumulating grains of mystic origin are surely enough to give him a different name. One day maybe, I will contrive a proper title. Come what may. It's been always the case.

I bend a little. He shivers. I have uncovered his leg. Unwittingly. I cover it back. He shivers no longer. I bend again. More carefully. I cannot wake him up. I cannot resist as well. He died in my mind but now he lives. A miracle. A miracle indeed. I was crying during the dream. I thought I wouldn't admit it. Now it matters not. He lives. I live, too, but who cares. He lives and exhales sweet air at my face. I bend just a bit further. He's been always like this. His mouth ajar. His lips taste of morning dew.