

# BOB WACZOWSKI, NECROMANCER

A DEATH-COMEDY NOVEL BY  
GEORGE DALPHIN



# Bob Waczowski, Necromancer

being the story of a regular guy  
who learns how to animate and command the dead

a death-comedy novel by

George Dalphin

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Dedicated to Joe and Stephanie Foster, who provided my wife and me a delightful  
honeymoon on Amsterdam Island.

This is a work of fiction written between the years 2009 and 2011 of the Gregorian  
Calendar, at the Metropolitan and Bramhall in Portland, Maine, the United States of  
America, on Early-Anthropecene Earth, making use of a version of the English language  
in use at the time.

Free first-few-chapters edition.

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Cover art assembled by George Dalphin from centuries-old imagery.

# **INTRODUCTION:**

## **Muncie, Indiana**

On Amsterdam Island, Bob Waczowski is building a new world, both literally in the form of his planned skeleton-built and –run vacation resort, and figuratively as the reluctant figurehead of what has been called ‘the world’s newest, most confusing, and yet also most convincing religion’.

Your world is still recovering from those cold spring days when Bob turned your preconceptions inside out. No world culture has been unaffected by his emergence. All twenty-first century cosmology and theology is in reaction to what he has done. Even great swaths of what your species previously understood to be hard science have been put into question. There is no possibility that pre-Bob futurists could ever have foreseen the rise of such groups as Holy Iblis, the Death Miners, or Thanatism itself. But this is now your world: one where the Greek island of Skyropoula is cursed with cold, asynchronously-seasoned Antarctic water and weather so that Bob’s island home can have a pleasant climate; where symbol madness, brought on by obsessive attempts to find Bob’s magic invocations among the possible thinkable abstract thoughts, has crippled over one thousand people across the world already; where every living human shared the sensory experience of a certain minute and a half. The Age of Bob has begun.

Though it is relegated to the will of a single man, something that for lack of better terminology can only be called magic actually exists in your world again, and apparently always did. Your people have seen through the thin skin of your universe into the adjacent dimensions peopled by strange, extradimensional beings like myself, and you have television footage of them. But perhaps most significantly, you now live in a society that has at least some idea about what actually happens after your bodily death – most importantly that something, at least, does happen.

Everyone on Earth has a unique and spiritually harrowing story of one type or another from their own experience of those dark few days, whether you were huddled with your family waiting for some kind of confident voice to return to the terrified and hyperbolic television, taking advantage of the atmosphere of terminality by engaging in your dying wishes of sensuality and frivolity, getting mixed up with any of the myriad suicide cults that suddenly bubbled up out of a lack of context on what was actually happening, or whatever your unique corner of the Bob days looked like. But the one story nobody really has heard yet, outside of the gross conjecture of urban legends congealed around video snippets and mob memory, is the actual experience of those at the heart of the events – Bob himself and his girlfriend Anna.

For an event that has fundamentally changed every society on this planet, no two versions told have been the same. All within the nucleus of Bob's crew have been entrenched with him on their island stronghold since their exile there, with no Internet or phone connection, only the Muncie portal through which quite literally to pass notes. From the perspective of the screen-watching world at large, Bob and his friends and throng of cadaverous minions marched through the Muncie vortex after the Treaty of Cleveland and have not been heard from since.

Few have any idea just what sort of person Bob really is, beyond his rambling, confused attempts at communication from the days in question. You all have heard the official information about who he seems to have been before he discovered Niock's Tome – a mild-mannered, even-tempered, intermittently-employed college dropout with a small but tight friend group; an only child who got excellent grades until high school; boyfriend; Internet comment poster; organ and occasional blood donor – but the everyman that describes just doesn't seem to jibe with the over-the-top corpse wrangler in the blood-spattered bathrobe everyone knows from shaky video on their monitors and TVs.

I, Xxivna, am what you will probably know as a demon, an emigrant from another dimension who traveled here to write this novel after inadvertently consuming what turned out to be the brain of a Mr. Fred James, an independent reporter from Bob's hometown of Muncie, Indiana, who was briefly passing through my dimension on his way home from Amsterdam Island. His last thoughts indicate that he would have been the first to return from that place for some time.

Similar to Bob, Fred was in the right place at the right time during the days of the events I am about to relate, the latter half of which he participated in directly and the rest of which were related to him in a variety of versions by Bob, Tony, Anna and the rest of the Amsterdam Island crew, an average of which I have tried to compile to translate from my own memory of the taste of his brain into some kind of contiguous narrative the best I could. I have tried to invent a minimum of information, and insomuch may have left a few occlusions in the story. Notably, information that takes place in other dimensions cannot exist in this one, which is why I had to travel here to write this, feeling a duty after inadvertently eating an extra-dimensional tourist's brain.

My story cannot be as impartial as Fred's views were. He had not known Bob before these events, and in order specifically to retain impartiality Fred kept himself distinctly separated from Bob's intimacy, or at least coolly unresponsive to gestures of inclusion, while on Amsterdam Island, difficult as that often was. They are a gregarious bunch. But after discerning the information I had eaten, I personally came to have a lot of respect for Bob, and I am certain that in the voice of my narrative that will inevitably resonate.

Bob's discovery of what has become known as the Tome is the most important thing that has happened to the present iteration of homo sapiens in its known history (though apparently not necessarily in its unknown history). With every revelation about the actual hidden nature of your universe and souls, Bob reveals both your amazing, new, particularly difficult-to-predict future and the distant, previously darkened past, in which

Atlantean necromancers like him struggled for the psychic favor of a near-omniscient slave-mutant named Ixikles, whose cobwebby matrix now responds to Bob's commands alone.

Or, at least, so it was explained to Fred James. And Bob spent many late nights with him on the island, trying to articulate just how any of this made sense. For Fred, it never quite succeeded in doing so.

But it is, nevertheless, quite clearly real, and soon enough the Amsterdam Island resort should be open for visitors to see for themselves. Having had a while to recover from its initial shock at his debut, and having avoided much contact with demons like myself in the time since, the world has had a chance to become less afraid and more intrigued by Bob Waczowski. His proposed skeleton-run resort island will undoubtedly attract its intended awe-struck tourism, at least for a while. Those with the courage and stomach will be able to make their own judgments.

In the meantime, hopefully a clear concept of the events from Bob's perspective will help you all to be understanding and patient with this most important of your fellow men, upon whose personal equilibrium the balance of your world and potentially your souls now rests. It is with the hope of aiding such peace of mind, though a tourist's lack of real investment in the result, that I give you the truest possible account of the rise of Bob Waczowski.

# Chapter 1

It was a gray spring day, the air cold after a warm spell that had melted away all but the last remnants of the winter's snow, merely a cardboard cutout of the sun behind the clouds. Bob had just walked across muddy Hope Park and through the cigarette-speckled puddles of bumtown, past vagrants in slick, glistening windbreakers, to get to his girlfriend Anna's apartment, but indoors now seemed no more welcoming.

"Bob Waczowski, you asshole," plain, pale, thin-boned Anna said with the door open only wide enough for him to see half of her. She glared down her apartment building's front stoop at Bob. "What do you want?"

Bob winced, but shook it off. "Baby," he started, "Anna, what's wrong? What did I do? I'm sorry. I just..."

"You just," Anna interrupted, "all you ever do is just!"

"I just..." he said again, shrugging, trying to make his most non-confrontational expression.

"You just," she mimicked again. "You have no idea, do you? You just come here to shower and don't give a second thought to how much of my body wash you might be using, or if your tiny little slivery beard hairs might be clogging my tub and even injuring me..."

"Oh shit, am I what's clogging that?" he asked.

"Bob, one of your beard hairs impaled my big toe yesterday like a splinter! When are you going to get your own shower fixed?"

"It's Tony's name on the lease," Bob shrugged, moving up a step to indicate his desire to get in out of the weather, but Anna closed the door an inch, signaling her willingness to retreat indoors, so he stepped back again. "Baby, I'm sorry. Can I just come in for a minute? I wasn't going to use your shower. I just wanted to tell you something."

"What's in your backpack, then?" Anna asked, pointing at it. "If it's shower stuff, then you're a liar."

Bob sighed and looked at his feet for a moment, because in fact it was a change of clothes in his backpack, but he quickly looked back up at Anna to avoid appearing guilty.

Bob said slowly and sweetly, “So, if you’re not going to let me in, can I at least tell you what I came here to tell you?” as he thought about what to make that be.

Anna stared hard at him for a while, then folded her arms and stepped out into the weather.

“First, show me what’s in your backpack,” she said with mock nonchalance.

Bob just stood there for a few moments in the rain, perfectly still, looking back at Anna. He let a droplet of water fall off the end of his nose as he considered what to do.

“I just want to make sure you didn’t just lie to me,” Anna reiterated. “I don’t deserve to be with a liar.”

“Oh, baby, don’t make it all epic like that; it’s not...”

“It is, Bob,” Anna shouted. “I’ve had enough of being lied to. Give me that backpack; I’m gonna see what’s inside it.” She reached for Bob’s shoulder strap.

“Anna, alright, see,” Bob said with frustration, pulling the bag unzipped so fast that the underwear and socks on the top inside bounced up out guiltily, “it’s my clothes. I lied to you. Are you happy?”

“Why would you lying to me make me happy? Is that what you think I want – to be dating a liar? To marry a liar?”

“Marry a liar? That comes out of left field...”

“That’s what this is about, Bob,” Anna said, stepping fully out into the rain and shutting the door behind herself. “It’s about ultimate conclusions, and yours is... I don’t know where you’re headed, but...”

Her long, black hair began to become speckled with the tiny droplets of rain that seemed to hang in the air, making her appear particularly beautiful to Bob, like a morning spider web in the grass, and it made it difficult for him to pay attention to what she was saying. Something about marriage, how she wasn’t going to live forever and deserved someone who took her seriously.

“I do take you seriously, Anna,” Bob pleaded, looking back into her eyes and trying to wish the moment away. All he wanted was to get into her warm bed and snuggle into her hair. He stepped toward her and she let him take her fingertips in his hand. Bob looked down at Anna’s fingertips and said, “I do want to marry you, I told you that. I just want to be more, you know, secure or whatever.”

“We’re never secure,” Anna said softly. “And I’ll certainly never feel secure if I can’t trust you to just be honest with me.”

Bob sighed in frustration, looking away for a moment at the crappy little two-swing playground half a block down the street.

“And Bob, don’t take your frustration out on me with your sighs and your gestures. I have enough of my own shit in here to not have to deal with your stuff, okay?”

“I’m sorry I sighed,” Bob sighed. “Look, Anna, I’m not trying to dump shit on you or hold you down or mislead you or anything like that. I just wanted to come over and snuggle in bed with you and then maybe take a shower afterwards...”

“Because your shower doesn’t work because you can’t convince Tony to talk to the crazy landlady to fix it.”

Bob shrugged a yeah.

“Bob,” Anna sighed, choking up a bit, “I need you to be capable. I need you to not be dependent on me. It’s not just the shower. It’s dinner last night. It’s gas when you’re broke.”

“We drive around in my car. You don’t have a license. At least I get us around.”

Bob glanced over at the small parking lot beside Anna’s building, where his little, tan VW Rabbit had been parked, nearly empty of gas, for almost two weeks now.

“Yeah, it’s your car and you should be able to pay for your own gas. You know? But no, you can’t afford to fill it up, so it stays over here doing nobody any good. And I’m not going to fill it up again for you. Sorry, Bob. I’m not asking for much. But you are a man-child.”

“I’m a what?”

“A fucking man-child, okay? It’s a term. You can’t take care of yourself, and I know that I deserve better than that. Okay? Bob, I’m thirty-three...”

“I’m thirty-one,” Bob interjected, “so?”

“Exactly! You ought to be an independent man. I don’t have time to waste with you anymore.” Anna sputtered out a single sob and then said, “Can you respect that decision? Can you let me be the girl with the boyfriend who cares enough about to her to fucking... I need you to want to be something! I need you to want to be something good. Can you fathom that? Or can you only just do things? Do you only know how to...” and then she started sobbing hard enough that the words had to stop.

“Oh,” Bob grimaced, holding out his arms toward her awkwardly, unsure whether he ought to try to touch her or not. “Anna, baby, I love you so much. I don’t want you to feel like you’re with someone who isn’t good enough for you. I...” Bob’s heart felt like shit.

“I wasn’t expecting this, baby. You sideswipe a guy with this. Fuck. What do you ..? Fuck! Baby...”

“Bob, it’s over, okay?” Anna said at last. “I need...” She looked into his eyes, narrowed her own and began to weep again, slowly putting her palm to her mouth. Then she hurriedly stepped back inside the door to her apartment complex and shut it.

“Anna,” Bob pleaded, stepping up at last toward the door and grabbing the handle, shaking it to no avail. “What is this?” He stood there for several seconds, then said again, “What is this? Are you there?” He put his hands and ear against the door and listened to see if she was just on the other side, waiting. He heard nothing, but said anyway, “Anna, are you there? Can you hear me? Or did you just go upstairs?” Still he heard nothing, and finally stepped down away from the door, to the edge of Ferguson Avenue.

Bob zipped his backpack up and hoisted it back over his shoulder. Slowly, wondering what he could have done differently with Anna, he began walking back down the street toward bumtown, on the other side of which was his neighborhood in the university ghetto at the edge of Ball State.

A couple of eight-year-old boys he recognized from Anna’s neighborhood stood where a fence stopped at the street, by the edge of the two-swing playground. As Bob approached them, one of them called out, “Hey buddy, you got any cigarettes?”

“Does it look like I have or smoke cigarettes?” Bob called back, continuing to walk past.

The kid shrugged.

“Etiquette recommendation then, squirt,” Bob said, looking coolly forward as he passed the two kids. “Don’t ask for cigarettes from someone unless you see them smoking. I don’t smoke. And anyway you’re eight.”

“More like eighteen,” the kid retorted.

Bob didn’t turn his head, continuing his steady retreat past them, but replied sarcastically, “Forgive me. I guess I’m old enough that everyone under twenty-five just looks like a fetus to me.”

As he kept walking, his eyes set on the gathering of people down by the soup kitchen a few blocks ahead, Bob wondered just how angry Anna really was, but only had a few seconds to think about it before he heard the mysteriously fast footsteps racing up behind him. Two little hands followed by a surprising amount of inertia hit Bob in the lower back and threw him to the pavement hands first. He felt the dirt of the road scrape threads of skin off his palms when they met the ground. He instinctively curled up and attended to a tiny rock that was stuck in one hand, then spun around onto his back to address the fleeing young boy who was intermittently shooting laughing glances back over his shoulder at supine Bob.

Some people in line at the door to the soup kitchen pointed Bob out to each other, smiling.

Bob decided not to say anything to the little punks. He just got himself awkwardly to his feet without using his injured hands, picked his backpack up again and brushed some wet street dirt off it with his knuckles, the whole time glowering the evil eye back at the two laughing boys. Finally, after standing there for a minute staring at the boys, who simply stared back saying “What?” repeatedly, Bob turned back around and continued walking.

He trudged back past the morning drunks who had heckled him on the way over, and they heckled him again, but Bob did his best to ignore the taunts, considering instead what he could have done differently back there with Anna. He wondered if it could really be over this time, and the possibility made him very sad. Bob loved Anna, simultaneously due to and despite her weird, inscrutable qualities. She was the only girl he had ever felt really comfortable with.

To avoid the increasing drizzle, Bob did not take the shortcut across the abandoned lot where the old Walbog’s used to be, but rather veered a bit out of his way into a wooded area of the big complex of green areas and church buildings that comprised St. Mary’s. The branches of the trees, though still leafless, were enough to guard him somewhat from the soft rain.

Bob wondered if Tony would be up yet. He wondered what he should make for breakfast when he got home, and foresaw Tony asking him to make enough for both of them, wondered if he ought to if that happened. Bob was getting sick of making Tony breakfast.

Interrupting his thoughts, a squirrel up in a nearby tree shouted at Bob, and he looked up at it with a calm sigh. Bob enjoyed squirrels.

But just then, the earth gave out under Bob’s feet. His butt hit the ground behind him before he even knew what was happening, and then he bounced forward, falling into the chasm that had opened up in the ground beneath him. Bob hit the ground once again hands first, but this time he was able to catch himself and avoided getting hurt too badly, though he did scrape both hands again and tore a huge gash in one leg of his jeans that he wouldn’t notice until later.

Once the shock of the fall ebbed out of his brain, he found that he was surrounded by large blocks of earth and darkness. A shaft of light little wider than Bob himself shined from above into the chamber that he had fallen into. When he looked up, he saw the hole that he had fallen through, just big enough for his body to fall through.

“Whoa,” he said aloud, amazed that there was a small subterranean cavern here in the middle of Muncie, Indiana.

As his eyes adjusted, the light from his entry hole ended up lighting the chamber sufficiently to see, revealing it to be about twenty feet long by ten feet wide, and about

seven feet high. Rubble covered much of the center of the room, where Bob had fallen. The wall about six feet in front of him appeared to be some kind of carved stone altar surrounded by a bunch of tiny, flickering candles.

Bob looked up at the hole above him and wondered if he would be able to climb out.

Then he looked back down at the stone altar ahead, suddenly realizing that its presence was extremely peculiar. He forgot about his stinging hands and that the dust in the air was causing him a mild coughing fit, and crawled forward on his hands and knees to the altar. As he got closer, he made out a huge, dark book sealed with some kind of reddish strap, sitting at an angle at the back of the altar, circled by tiny candles.

“What the fuck?” Bob gasped. His heart raced in the darkness. “How have these candles been burning?” he wondered aloud as he stood, picking clumps of damp earth off his jeans. The chamber’s ceiling was high enough for him to stand up straight, but close enough to make him hunch over a little for personal head space.

He stood still for a while, inspecting the altar, the book and the candles. The altar seemed to have been carved right out of the side of the huge stone that made up much of that wall. The other walls were mostly pebbles and tough earth. The altar was about three feet high and ornately carved with a crazy, pictorial script that Bob had never seen before. The candles, each contained in an ornate little iron cage, were barely lit, their flames mere pussywillows of yellow, but they were hot. Bob passed his hand over them to feel their warmth.

“Un-fucking-real,” he murmured, shaking his head.

Upon closer inspection, the book seemed to be made of thick, dark leather with a dusty red ribbon made of satiny material holding it sealed shut. The pages swelled with moisture, making the book appear obese. Bob chuckled at it.

He reached out and touched the satin ribbon to feel its texture.

The moment his fingers touched it, the ribbon glowed bright red and a dizzying low sound exploded out from it. All the candles reared up, their flames shining blood red. The ribbon rose from the book and swirled to a spinning circle in the air above it, and then in the center of the spinning ribbon a pinkish ghostly face appeared.

The face in the swirling ribbon stared at Bob with wide black eyes.

Bob blinked, hardly believing what he saw. He said slowly, “You’re a crazy ribbon guy.”

“I am Hormel, guardian of this ancient tome!” the face declared, widening its black eyes.

Bob laughed, “Hormel? Like Hormel dinners?”

“Like Hormel the Great,” Hormel retorted. “I was created to guard this book for all time.”

“Why’s that?” Bob asked. “Is it good? What’s it about?”

“It is a Great Tome of Atlantean Necromancy, the last existent, and your blood sacrifice has shown you to be a willing novice of its secrets. I will take you through the ritual of comprehension, and then the book will be yours, evil one.”

“Wait, sorry, what?” Bob asked, confused.

Hormel just stared at Bob, then asked quietly, “Do you want me to repeat myself?”

Bob nervously over-gestured with his hands, saying, “Yes, repeat yourself. I definitely misheard all of that.”

“I, Hormel, familiar to Niock, have been left to secure this tome of secret Atlantean necromantic knowledge until such a time as the Egyptian threat has utterly passed and the safety of...”

“Yeah yeah, whatever and such,” Bob interrupted, waving his hand in front of Hormel. “What blood sacrifice?”

“I sensed blood,” Hormel shrugged facially. “You didn’t blood-sacrifice?”

Bob shrugged back, cocking his head to the side to inspect the weird face. “Does it look like I have any idea what you’re talking about at all? You’re the one living in a book in a cave.”

“I live in a book in a room in deep space,” Hormel corrected. He looked around at their surroundings and coughed a ghostly cough, then looked up at the blue circle of sky above them and asked Bob, “What sphere is that? Is that Earth?”

“Actually everything but the blue is the Earth,” Bob retorted, feeling particularly clever. “That is... space. Sky. The air between here and nothing. Whatever makes it blue. I dunno.”

“I don’t understand. We aren’t in deep space?” Hormel asked.

“No,” Bob laughed. “No, you’re underground in Muncie.”

“Well, nevertheless,” Hormel said, “you got here and you made the blood sacrifice. You have shown yourself both capable and willing, to my standards.”

“So just me touching your book with my bloody hands has made it so that you’re now my familiar and... what, the book is mine?”

“The key,” Hormel replied, “it is the key that is yours. Material objects can have only fleeting possession. And I’m definitely not yours. I was freed by the great Niock in a previous age.”

“Righteous,” Bob nodded, still hardly believing his eyes but going along with it nevertheless. “So let’s see this key I won.”

“It’s an ability to understand,” Hormel explained. “It’s a decryption. It allows only you to comprehend the symbols herein.”

“Oh I see,” Bob replied. “Okay. Sweet. So do you have to give it to me, or did I, like, get it automatically by doing the blood sacrifice or whatever?”

The ribbon around Hormel began to pulsate that glowing red light again and Niock’s familiar rose up through the air to a position right in front of Bob’s face.

Bob automatically recoiled a bit from the ghostly face, saying, “Whoa, man, no personal space in deep space I guess?” But he gradually brought his face back to where it had been, glancing intermittently away out of awkwardness. “So what, now, are you giving me the key now?” he asked as Hormel continued to flash and stare blankly into Bob’s eyes.

“There,” Hormel said after a few moments, “you can now comprehend this Tome. Use it well, evil one.”

And then Hormel’s face vanished. The ribbon stopped glowing and snaked softly down through the air to the dirt floor.

Bob looked around, not feeling like he knew any new ancient Atlantean language. He frowned interrogatively at the huge book for a while, then slowly approached it and very carefully peeled the hard, leathery cover back from the pages.

The first page was an introduction, written in a bizarre, unfamiliar script, yet magically somehow apprehensible to Bob. He read: “This is the ultimate compendium comprising the totality of ancient esoteric knowledge on the topic of the abstruse art of Necromancy. Herein can be found the means to raise and control the dead, prolong and control the living, and to wield the energies of evil in the world for the purposes of attack, defense and transformation.”

Bob read the glyph that meant transformation and instantly felt like a new man. The whole world was a new type of place.

“Transformation,” he said to himself, looking up from the book into his own mind. He saw Anna there looking back at him, her thin arms folded, and in his imagination he could read her thoughts as she wished that he were a different man. “I am a different man,” he said to the Anna in his imagination.

A huge smile took over his face. So I'm to be a necromancer, Bob thought to himself. He kept trying to doubt the reality of this moment, but upon picking up the ribbon that had surrounded the face of Hormel and finding it hot to the touch, he had to laugh because he couldn't deny that he had actually just seen all that happen.

A confidence in his own identity-as-Bob bloomed there in the dark cave. In a very literal way, for the first time in his life, Bob really believed in himself. And at that he shut the Tome. He heaved it up onto his shoulders and carried it under the skylight, heaved the huge book up out of the hole and then very slowly and shakily pulled himself up after it into the light of the world.

The clouds had parted around the sun, mottling the ground with pools of light within a network of tree limb shadows and giving the air a refreshing warmth. The squirrel that had chirped at him before now sat quietly on its branch, watching. Bob brushed dirty snow and mud off of himself and picked the big book up off the ground with a grunt.

"This is how I'm going to get back Anna," he said to himself with an ecstatic, incredulous laugh, raising one eyebrow and imagining fantastic scenes of himself riding a big skeletal horse with armies of ghost warriors trailing behind him. "With the abstruse art of necromancy. Whatever the fuck that means."

## Chapter 2

Bob burst through the front door of his house back-first, the big Tome held underneath his jacket as much as possible to guard it from the moisture in the morning air.

“Tony,” he shouted, “you up?”

He waddled over videogame cartridges and controllers and plopped the book onto Tony’s leather couch, where it bounced softly before coming to rest.

Tony peeked his head out of the bathroom door down the hall, shirtless and wet, a toothbrush in his mouth.

“What up, man,” he mumbled. “I thought you’d gone over to Anna’s.”

“I did,” Bob explained as he dropped his backpack beside the front door. “But dude, you’ve got to check out this book I found on the way back. Is the shower working?”

Tony shook his head no. “Sponge bath. Became necessary.” He eyed the Tome from the bathroom doorway. “You get that at the Wizard’s Keep?”

“No, I found it in an underground chamber.”

Tony furrowed his brow for a moment, then asked, “Is that a new bookstore?”

“No, man,” Bob explained, “I’m talking about a real underground chamber that I fell into, in the woods over by Anna’s. You know that little square of trees by bumtown? Part of St. Mary’s, I think.”

“The one where Spencer broke his arm in that tree?”

“Exactly,” Bob nodded. “Come here. Put some pants on and come check this out. For real, dude.”

“I don’t need any pants to look at a big, stupid book,” Tony joked as he ambled toward Bob and the book with his toothbrush still in his mouth and a towel around his waist. As he got closer to the book he became somewhat more impressed, and knelt down beside the couch to inspect it. “Did you seriously find this in an underground chamber? Is this, like, some kind of old Indian book or something? It’s crazy. Look at this thing. I may actually need some pants for this.”

“The Native Americans didn’t have books, as far as I know. Actually, it’s an ancient Atlantean tome of necromantic magic.”

Tony looked up at Bob incredulously.

Bob laughed excitedly, “I just had a ridiculous conversation with this ghost-faced demon guy who lived inside a ribbon, and who gave me alone the key to understand these... these symbols.” He proudly pressed down on the book with one finger.

Well aware that Tony was not quite believing him, Bob knelt down beside him and looked him in the eyes, trying to underline his seriousness.

“Now, dude, listen to me for a second, because this is gonna sound totally insane, but it’s true. I was walking back from Anna’s building and in that one little wooded area over by St. Mary’s I actually fell through the earth into some crazy underground chamber. There was this big-ass stone altar, and this book was on it.”

Tony just shook his head, hesitantly grinning.

“This is the day,” Bob laughed. “This is the day that we become something serious and real. Like, okay, anyway, sorry – I should continue. So, I touched the book, and that demon guy who called himself Hormel popped out of the book and claimed that he was some old Atlantean necromancer’s familiar, who had been left with the book to give the key to whoever came across it and, and I guess there was some need for blood sacrifice or something, but I seem to have avoided that prerequisite by just touching it with scraped up hands.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony asked with frustration.

“I’m trying to explain to you what just happened to me,” Bob shouted with matching frustration. He held his bloodied palms up to show Tony.

“You scraped your hands. You need some Neosporin, B.”

“Look, man, this could be the beginning of something really big. I mean, these crazy things actually just happened to me. I got the magical key to be able to read this book.” He flipped open the cover, revealing the weird script inside and shouted, “See, this stuff makes sense to me!”

“Great,” Tony sighed, “so what’s it about?”

“It’s about secret magical power,” Bob said, gripping Tony by the damp shoulders and shaking him. “Don’t you get it?”

“No,” Tony shouted, standing out of Bob’s grip, “don’t you get that I don’t? God! I’m not as smart as you, Bob. I’m not a reader, and I don’t play book-games.”

Tony walked over to the kitchen and began pouring himself a bowl of Lucky Charms.

“Tony, this really isn’t a game. I’m not LARPing right now or anything. Look, I’ll be as simple as I can.” Bob enunciated clearly, stepping over toward the kitchen and sitting down at one of the chairs around their little table. “That book pretty much basically has spells in it that will show me how to, like, raise the dead and stuff like that, for real. Or at least, so it claims. And at this point I’m more than a little bit believing it, because I just had a conversation with a ghostly face inside a spinning ribbon, and now I understand those symbols!”

Tony looked at Bob unimpressed. He poured milk on his cereal and then ambled back out into the living room, plopped himself down on the couch right next to the book and gave it the same unimpressed look he had just given Bob.

“Bullshit,” he said. “That’s made of foam or something.”

Bob knelt next to the book, looking up at Tony with a condescending expression like he was about to read to a baby, then began carefully flipping from page to page, revealing to Tony ever more old, thick, damp pages full of shimmering alien script and demonic diagrams.

“Whoa, what?” Tony coughed when he saw one particularly cool looking demon diagram that could easily have been artwork for one of his favorite hardcore albums. He spewed a few marshmallow bits out of his mouth and some milk down his chin, then carefully placed his bowl on a table beside the couch and wiped his chin. Tony turned bodily on the couch to hover over the book, a huge grin now commanding his face. “Where did you find this again?”

“In a magical underground chamber, dude, that I fell into randomly,” Bob said, trying to give his words the drama that he felt Tony seemed now to be understanding. “And the key, the mental key to understanding these, these words or whatever, this script, was given to me by this real-life ghost-faced guy, like a floating ghostly face.”

“What,” Tony scoffed.

Bob nodded. “Serious.”

Tony and Bob just stared at each other for a few moments.

The phone rang. Tony looked over at it, on the table next to his cereal bowl, and looked back at Bob when the caller ID came up.

“It’s Anna, man. Do you want it?”

“Yeah, hand it to me,” Bob said, and received the phone from Tony. “Hello?”

“Hey, is Bob back yet?” Anna asked nonchalantly.

“This is Bob, baby,” Bob said quietly, turning away from Tony. “How are you doing?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I meant what I said about needing you to grow up before we can keep pursuing a relationship with each other. I wanted to make sure you understood what I mean, that I’m not coming from nowhere with this.”

“I understand,” Bob said.

“I’m sorry I made you walk home in the rain,” she said sweetly, and Bob fell a little bit more in love with her.

“It was worth it, Anna,” Bob replied with a grin. “Honestly, something happened to me on the way back from your place that has completely changed my outlook. I feel like I know what you meant, and I feel like I might know what I want to do.”

“Are you thinking about bartending school again?”

“No, baby, nothing so small,” Bob replied with a chuckle.

“What’s that sinister laugh, there? This isn’t a joke, Bob. You need to be serious. It needs to be something you can really do, something in your range, you know? And you can build from there.”

“I know, I know.”

“Well, we’ll see, okay?” Anna said softly. “I have to work this afternoon, but maybe tomorrow morning you could come over, and you can use my shower...”

“Thank you, baby,” Bob interjected.

“See – would you just not interrupt me all the time?” Anna snapped, suddenly angry again. “You always have something to add in the middle of my sentences when I’m clearly at a comma, not a period, with my tone and manner, you know?”

“I do; I’m sorry,” Bob said quickly. “I want nothing more than to listen to you as long as you want to talk about whatever.”

“Don’t patronize me. Look, tomorrow we can talk. I need a day to not think about you.”

“Jeez,” Bob said.

“So sleep well tonight. Don’t think I won’t miss you in bed.”

“That’s nice of you to say,” Bob said.

“Does she know about this book?” Tony asked loudly from the couch. Bob put his hand over the phone and shook his head no.

“Hi Tony! Okay, so I’ll call you tomorrow,” Anna said.

“Okay, good day and good night and all that; I love you,” Bob said quickly, then hung up and turned to Tony. “I need to read this thing. Tony – you call Spencer and Travis and tell them that tonight, we are going to go raise some fucking dead.”

Tony laughed loudly and clapped once, then began looking around for the phone.

“Here it is,” Bob said, and handed him the cordless phone.

Bob took off his shoes, flipped the book back to its first page and began his attempt to read through Tony’s loud, invasively animated phone conversations with Spencer and Travis.



The little fenced-in graveyard down the road had no more than fifty or so gravestones. It was rather old, with no graves more recent than the Sixties and some from the nineteenth century. Tony said it was a family graveyard from when the area had been nothing but farmland, and that the family didn’t exist anymore. Bob chose it because it was separated from the street by a long driveway and surrounded by trees that kept most of the light out. And it was only a short walk from the house.

The air had gotten bitterly cold after the sun went down and a gibbous moon had risen after it. The dark grass was wet from the day’s precipitation. On arriving, Bob caught the shining eyes of a raccoon just before it dashed into the woods, startling Spencer with its rustling.

Spencer was now wringing his hands and scrunching up his whole face in anticipation of the evening’s macabre events. Travis just stood stoically smoking a cigarette, trying to

seem above it all. Tony asked him, uncharacteristically (being hardly even a social smoker of anything but marijuana), “Hey man, can I get one of those?”

“Nah, this was my last one,” Travis replied, opening the pack with one finger and showing Tony its emptiness. “See; I’m not lying to you, either. Sorry, man. You wanna share this one?”

Tony shook his head and put his hands in his pockets, holding his arms tight against himself in the midnight chill.

Bob was knelt in front of a tombstone, against which he had propped the big Tome, from which he had been reading silently for some time.

“You almost ready, there, Bob?” Tony asked him.

“Yeah seriously,” Spencer hissed through clenched teeth. “This is the fucking creepiest event I have ever been invited to. And that fucking book has almost actually got me believing you already, so... I don’t even know if I want this to succeed or not. Pretty sure not, to be honest. Not to jinx you.”

“I gotta see it,” Travis exhaled. He pulled a big pair of aviator shades out of his pocket and put them on. “Do this thing already. What’s the holdup?”

“I’m just memorizing,” Bob murmured, trying not to lose his place.

As the book explained in a wordy introduction, its magic worked through inner-monologue vocalization, but the magic words, even though only occurring in the spell-caster’s mind, had to be precise. Bob had flipped ahead to this section on the animation of the dead, and so had no idea how similar the spells might be, and didn’t want to accidentally cast some other spell by misthinking.

Once he felt sufficiently confident that he had memorized the utterances, he moved the book to the side and stepped off the grave he had been crouching on.

“Alright now, guys,” Bob said to his friends, “you need to really give me serious quiet now for a couple of minutes. I have to recite some magic words in my mind, and they have to be precise...”

Tony snickered, but Spencer slapped his arm and he regained his serious face. Tony gestured a tiny apology and for Bob to continue.

“You ready to see me raise a fucking zombie or what?” Bob asked Tony directly.

Tony nodded. “Do it, dude.”

“Raise that bitch,” Travis muttered under his cigarette.

“Actually,” Bob corrected, reading from the gravestone in the moonlight, “this fellow will have been a man, a Mr. Arch Stanton. Now be quiet, and allow me to necromance.”

Bob folded his hands and held them up to his mouth, furrowing his brow and focusing hard on creating a quiet space in his mind where he could carefully pronounce the words.

With epic hope and optimism, he began thinking the magic words, eagerly picturing a future army of skeletons that he might one day raise.

Halfway through Bob’s inner pronunciation, Travis whispered, “Bob looks so serious,” and it caused Bob to pause. He struggled furiously not to mentally utter another thought-word until he had reached his place. He sighed slowly through his nose and regained a clear mind, found his place and finished the thought. As soon as he had finished and listened to a single moment of thought-silence, Bob opened his eyes, turned to Travis and shoved him hard on both shoulders.

“I’m sorry, dude. I forgot in that little second about total silence. Did I fuck you up?”

“Maybe, dickwipe,” Bob whined with concern, looking at the grave and not yet seeing a skeleton. “Do you see a goddamn skeleton here, standing next to us, willing to do our bidding?”

Then Tony shouted, “Oh fuck me!” and jumped back away from the grave behind him, colliding with Travis and knocking his cigarette out of his hand.

“Whoa, careful there, Clumsy,” Travis said impatiently, holding Tony up as he caught his balance.

“Dude, what is that? Is that Arch Stanton!?” Tony shrieked, pointing at the grave he had jumped away from, where a little white worm-sized something was wiggling back and forth, then stood up on its end and was suddenly joined by three more as Tony, Bob and Spencer all simultaneously realized that it was a grimy skeleton hand clawing its way out of the ground.

But it was coming out of the wrong grave. Bob looked around with a combination of concern and utter glee as he heard an insect-like scraping and soft, earthquakish rumbling coming from all directions.

Suddenly the whole graveyard was stirring; old skeletons ragged with patches of skin and still-clinging remnants of garments were beginning to slowly make their ways back up into the air of the world, the moonlight gleaming on the sections of white bone that showed from beneath clumps of earth and revenant flesh remnants. A faint red glow seemed to shine from each skeleton’s skull.

Travis, who somehow had not yet noticed or allowed himself to realize what was happening, bent down to pick up the cigarette he had dropped just as the skeleton fingers

it had fallen near randomly caught it in their grip and pulled it under the earth. The next moment, the skeleton's ghastly face, illuminated from within by two tiny red flames just behind the eye sockets, emerged from the ground and looked at Travis with a hellish, high-pitched hiss. Travis fainted instantly, falling onto his face and doing an inadvertent forward roll over his shoulder. Many more such hellish skeleton groans began to fill the tiny graveyard as more and more skeletons emerged from the dirt of their graves and began to gather around the four men.

Spencer screamed twice, high and hard, and then ran in the only direction in which no skeletons were yet standing, jumping over three that were still emerging and screaming once more each time. Once past those three skeletons, he was gone into the darkness of the trees within seconds.

"These skeletons are under your control, right Bob?" Tony asked, backing toward his friend.

Bob backed up against Tony's back, but then took hold of the confidence his successful spell has seeded within him and stood up straight, moved away from Tony and said, "No, yes, right. I should have command over them. And I can give command over them to others, too. You want command over them, too, Tony?"

"Yes," Tony nodded quickly. "I think that would make me feel better right now. This is awesome, right? Not terrible?"

"Right," Bob assured him, "awesome. It's excellent. It's the fucking most excellent thing ever! Holy shit, Tony! We just raised like a hundred fucking skeletons!"

"You did."

"Look around us! Who knew so many people were buried here – how did that work?"

"Yeah, seriously. What, was one of these a mass grave?" Tony asked and laughed awkwardly to himself.

"I just remembered that we might want to be quiet," Bob whispered, realizing that he had just been shouting, and that they were not far enough from houses for that. "Umm..."

All around them, ragged skeletal figures clambered to their feet and gathered in a stoic mob around the two young men.

The brief terror over what others might think about what he'd just done was surprisingly easy for Bob to shrug away.

"Alright," he said. "Bob Wacszowski, necromancer. Giving command of the skeletons to Tony."

He closed his eyes and thought the magical syllables that he had read in the book for exactly this purpose, then thought about Tony as the recipient of the spell and opened his eyes.

“How’s that? Try to command them.”

“Everybody raise your hand,” Tony said to the legion of skeletons that was gathering around them.

The skeletons each raised one hand, most right, some left.

“Dude,” Tony said to Bob, “we got us some skeletons.”

“We sure do,” Bob affirmed with a smile. He closed his eyes again and thought the symbols to give control of the skeletons to Anna as well, thinking that she would find it sweet that he had thought of her.

“Hey Bob!” Tony shouted, grinning suddenly. “This means that Atlantis was real!” He shrugged. “Right?”

## Chapter 3

Tony gave the last skeleton through the door down to the basement of their house a kick in the back of the pelvic bone and laughed as he slammed the door behind it.

“Man,” he said with amazement, “a hundred and twenty-one skeletons. I can’t believe they all fit down there.”

“I feel like they must be just packed in there, like, bone-to-bone, grinding against each other,” Bob said with a slightly concerned smirk. “That is not a big basement. I gotta get you your twenty next week when I get my check, but man, you were right. They all fit.”

“I can pack anything into any space,” Tony bragged.

“There were a few children among ‘em,” Bob noted with a grimace.

“Kids die, dude,” Tony said unsympathetically, “get over it.”

“Yeah, I just feel like if anyone is going to get up in my shit about this stuff being evil or whatever, it’s those kid skeletons that are gonna be the easiest things to point to.”

“Whoa,” Tony said as if he hadn’t even thought about the world’s reaction to all of this until now. “Yeah. I am not gonna be able to tell my mom about this. Never. You can’t tell her, okay?”

“I won’t tell your mom you were involved,” Bob assured him.

“Are you gonna tell Anna about it?”

Bob laughed and said, “Yeah dude. This is – look, this is, like, something I can finally really do and feel good about. I mean... I gotta tell her. I’m excited; it’s a new me, a new potential!”

“Cool!” Tony laughed encouragingly, slapping Bob on the arm. “You think she’ll dig it, then? She’s all goth, right?”

“She just wears black, that’s all,” Bob said. “I don’t think she’ll like it at first. But I think, given time, she might be able to get into it. I guess we’ll see.”

“Yeah man, good luck with that. I’m sort of glad I don’t have a girlfriend right now, because I just feel like there’s no way I’d be able to get laid... in this situation... for a while... for some reason.”

Tony and Bob stared at each other for a moment, then Bob looked down and rubbed his chin and Tony realized that what he had just said might have been discouraging.

“You know – corpses and shit? That’s not sexy, right? But I’m sure you will. You can rock this. I’m not getting laid right now, anyway. You do sometimes. Right? So you will continue to, as normal, one’s gotta assume.”

Bob grimaced at Tony, whose face slowly stretched to match Bob’s until Tony shook it away and said, “Bob, when you make that face it makes me make that face.”

“I gotta call Anna,” Bob said, bounding toward the phone in the other room.

“Remember to tell her about the skeletons,” Tony called after him.

Anna answered the phone sleepily. “Bob?”

“Hey baby,” Bob said quietly and sweetly, “I’m sorry to have woken you. I know it’s a crazy time right now.”

“What time is it?”

“I think it’s about two-thirty. Baby, something amazing has happened. I gotta tell you about it.”

“Something amazing happened in the middle of the night? Are you high? Or is this about your bed being lumpy again? God, Bob, you need to fix your own problems!”

“No, baby, it started on the way back from your place. I, um...” Bob suddenly couldn’t figure out a good way to begin explaining without sounding ridiculous. “I can’t tell you about this without showing it to you. I found this book underground, and I’m gonna use it to start doing something with my life. It’s everything you wanted me to do!”

“What is it, a self-help book?”

“Exactly!” Bob laughed.

“That’s great, Bob. Show it to me tomorrow.”

“No, baby, it’s really like a life-shattering kind of thing that I need to come over and show you right now. Can I please come over?”

“This is about your bed, isn’t it?” Anna snapped grumpily. “There isn’t even any self-help book or anything like that, is there, Bob? This is just about you not wanting to sleep in your lumpy-ass bed and being, for whatever reason, completely incapable of getting a new mattress or fixing it or anything – isn’t it, Bob?”

With a burst of confidence, because it was essentially true, Bob said, “I got a new mattress, and it is extremely comfortable. I really do have something important to show you!”

Anna seemed taken aback for a moment; Bob could hear it in her breathing. Then she said, “Well I’m impressed. Where did you get this new mattress?”

To avoid telling the truth – that he had found his new mattress in an alley a few blocks away – Bob said, “You are evading my immediate issue. Can I come over and show you this thing or what?”

“Well you’re the one with the nice new mattress. How about I come over there and stay with you for a change? You can show me your new book in your new bed.”

“And we would shower where in the morning?” Bob asked, getting irritated.

“For Christ’s sake, Bob,” was all Anna could say to that.

“Look, I’m coming over,” Bob said, trying to sound authoritative. “You’ll see how real I’m being right now!”

Too excited to waste anymore time, Bob hung up, grabbed the Tome and ran out the door into the night.

With the big book held tightly to his chest in both arms, he hoofed across his streetlight-lit college ghetto neighborhood, cutting through the Saint Mary’s wooded area.

As he passed at some distance one of the churches in the complex, looking around himself nervously as he jogged, Bob caught sight of a man in robes standing near the doors of the distant church. He was surprised to see a priest out in the middle of the night. When Bob noticed him, he barely heard the priest shout, “You, my son, what is that you carry?” It made Bob’s heart race and his muscles run faster.

He was panting, sprinting, by the time he was crossing bumtown.

“What the hell is that?” Anna asked about the huge book in Bob’s arms as she held the front door of her apartment building open for him. “What was worth running the whole way here? Are you alright?”

“This is the book,” Bob explained with a gasp.

He carried the Tome up the narrow stairs to Anna's apartment, shooing her cat, Admiral Zheng He, inside with his feet. Anna followed him in, locking the door behind herself and picking up the Admiral in her arms.

"It's big," she said, scratching the Admiral's neck and eyeing the Tome in Bob's arms.

Bob set the Tome down on the hardwood floor of Anna's living room and then turned to Anna with a big, romantic grin. He took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. To his delight, she came out giggling.

"The Admiral Zheng He here is wiggling," she explained.

"And you got all twitterpated from kissing me, you gotta admit," Bob smiled.

The Admiral yowled softly and pushed off Anna's chest to jump down to the floor. Anna squealed and held her right breast.

"You scratched me, you prick!" she scolded.

She looked up at Bob just as he came in for another kiss.

"I love you," Bob said, holding Anna close and enjoying her scent. "I want you to know that I will never leave you if you keep on wanting to be with me. You were with me before I got big."

"Got big? What is this, a book on penis enlargement?"

"Fuck off. You have no idea how much you shouldn't really be making fun of me right now. You'll see."

"Alright, alright," Anna conceded, laughing and patting Bob's shoulder. "What's the deal here, now?" She fell back over the arm of the couch and then scooted around to lie on her side with her head propped up on one hand. "Give me the spiel."

Bob stood over the book for a moment, thinking how to begin, disarmed by how much it seemed like Anna was expecting some kind of self-help philosophy. He just looked down at her lovely eyes and frail, reclining figure and couldn't help but smile. He could never really think in the presence of her loveliness. He decided just to tell it straight.

"This book has taught me how to raise the dead."

Anna lowered her chin a bit, but kept her eyes on Bob, waiting for more.

"I found it randomly, buried under the earth in some crazy secret chamber, and a magical ghost-faced guy who lived in a ribbon somehow made it so I can read the magic runes or whatever in here."

At this point, he decided to open the book, to provide what evidence the unfamiliar scripts within might give. Anna leaned forward a little to look at the pages closer, furrowing her brow.

“And last night, using some of the spells described in this book which I guess only I can read now, I...” Bob trailed off, unable to say it.

Anna looked up at him expectantly. “You did what?” she asked.

“You believe me so far?” Bob asked, surprised.

“You did what, Bob?”

“I raised about a hundred and twenty skeletons from a graveyard a few blocks down the street from the house.”

Anna stared at him, her face all scrunched up in a way that Bob couldn't quite read.

“There's crazy stuff in here, other than just raising and commanding skeletons, too,” he said, pointing at the book quickly and then going back to ringing his fingers together in front of himself. “Lich-type immortality stuff and everything. What I was thinking is that we could maybe just...”

“Enough, please. Stop it.”

“What?”

“What is this?”

“This is me explaining this crazy but real thing that has happened to me, that I can do now – I can raise skeletons, Anna, and command them to do my will! I'm not fucking with you; this is the truth, now!”

“So this isn't something with a true punch line about how you slept with some slut you met at Waffle House or anything? This is just bullshit for bullshit's sake, not some cushioning opening?”

“A cushioning opening?”

“You know what I mean! Some goofiness to pad the way for some confession.”

“No, baby, I promise you, I promise on my mother, I am telling you the truth! I raised a whole bunch of skeletons! They're in our basement! Tony's watching them. I mean, I understand why you'd be hesitant to believe me, obviously, but I assure you...”

“Right,” Anna laughed, as if Bob had just proven he was lying. “You left your skeleton army for Tony to watch after.”

Her tone made Bob momentarily question that decision of his, but he had to shake the concern out of his mind. “I gave him command over them, too, so they do whatever he tells them. I’m pretty sure this stuff is relatively fool-proof.” Although saying so made him suddenly wonder why he should assume that, but he shook that thought away too.

“Bob,” Anna said, standing up and moving in close, grabbing onto the buttons of his shirt, “there is no way you have a hundred and twenty skeletons in your basement.”

“I was surprised they fit, myself,” Bob admitted.

Anna shook her head and took Bob’s sleeve lovingly in one of her hands. He was surprised when she laughed warmly.

“Bob,” she said, looking up into his eyes, “you’re very cute, as always, but this is exactly the problem. You’re so... cute,” and at that she swooped slowly in close to Bob and began to hug her body against his, looking up and down his face, “and funny, and sweet, but you don’t... you know, you’re not going anywhere.” She sighed to herself and pounded her fists softly on his chest as she pulled herself away from him. She looked up into his eyes and said, “Maybe you really should try to find some kind of, I don’t know, philosophy or... god forbid, religion...” She cringed. “But something to give you some direction, or...”

Bob took a deep breath, genuinely put off at this point that he was not being taken seriously, and pulled himself away from Anna. With as serious an expression as he could make, he stepped over next to the opened Tome and pointed fiercely down at it.

“I command the dead,” he proclaimed in what felt afterwards like it may have been too epic a voice. “That would be the title of the B-movie about me, if there were one. But it wouldn’t be in the horror section. It would be a documentary. Now that I think about it, there is no question in my mind that someday a documentary will be made about me, and what I’ve just done and am about to do. Because this is real, baby!” He kept his eyes on Anna’s, to assure her he was being serious. “Come and see my skeletons if you really don’t believe me still!”

“If you say so, Bob,” Anna nodded, frozen by Bob’s seriousness, her eyes wide. “Let’s go to your basement, then.”

“I’m sorry for using the weirding voice, there,” Bob apologized.

“Take me to your skeletons,” Anna replied.



Anna awoke abruptly in Bob's bed with a fright. Sitting beside her, petting her hair, Bob whispered, "It's okay, baby, it's okay. They're under my control."

"You really have a basement full of living skeletons," Anna whispered.

"I do," Bob laughed, despite trying to be serious. "It's true. But I wouldn't call them living skeletons. For me, in order to be controlling them the way I do I've got to imagine them as something like robots, automatons with no will that I'm subjugating or anything. Because otherwise I'm some sort of creepy soul-slavemaster or whatever, and I'm not cool with that. But the book does seem to imply that the way I see it is more or less..."

"Shut up, Bob," Anna whispered. "Tend to me. I just fucking passed out."

"You fainted," Bob corrected.

"How long was I out?"

"Maybe ten minutes."

"That's practically a coma! How dare you try to minimize my coma; come on!"

"That's fair. Tony was just about to call an ambulance. But not really." Bob smiled meekly, unsure how much to joke. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Get in with me?" she asked sweetly, giving Bob her cute eyes. He grinned, delighted, and climbed under the covers beside her so that their shoulders were touching. They lay there together, both gazing up at Bob's drop-tile ceiling.

"Your ceiling is kind of gross," Anna said after a few quiet seconds.

"It always seems to me like it's about to fall on me," Bob said.

“How upsetting,” Anna said quietly. “I never noticed how treacherous it really is. You should get Tony to get that looked at.”

“Add it to the list,” Bob scoffed.

“So what if stories about magic and stuff like that were real stories about some crazy sort of mental stuff or something that people were really able to do in the past, and that got lost or something?” Anna mused.

“I wondered about that myself,” Bob admitted. “Seems like it must be something like that. Because Hormel, the guy in the ribbon, said that it was ancient Atlantean magic.”

“Antlandean? So it’s, like, ant magic? Is that why it was underground?”

“No, not Antlandean, like some kind of ant civilization,” Bob laughed. “Atlantean, as in Atlantis.”

“Oh,” Anna laughed. “I’ve never heard that adjectivized before. I don’t know why I thought it could be ant magic. That’s so silly.”

“Seriously,” Bob agreed. “Although honestly, any magic being around seems to imply the possibility of all kinds of shit. Maybe there is ant magic. I mean, Atlantis isn’t too much less outlandish than Antlandia. We’re not dissing your magic, if you’re listening, ant magicians.”

“So they can do whatever you tell them to do?”

“What, the skeletons? Seems like. You too. I gave you and Tony and Spencer and Travis all control over them.”

“Oh god! Why did you do that?” Anna punched Bob in the side and glared over at him. “That’s terrible! I want no necromantic powers, do you understand, Bob Waczowski?”

“Okay, okay,” Bob agreed, surprised by her reaction. “I thought it would make you feel better about having the skeletons around if you had control over them.”

“Not at all! It creeps me out! As soon as you can, you take away my control over them if that really is stuff you can do.”

“Will do. Jeez.”

“You should really take away everyone’s control except your own,” she said to the ceiling.

“I don’t know about that. It seems wise to me to spread the power.”

“You’re already headed on the path toward losing this power.”

Bob assessed Anna’s seriousness, and then responded with his own seriousness, “I think you underestimate the power of friendship. I trust Tony, and Spencer, and Travis even though he’s on cocaine these days, and I trust you. But most of all I need you guys to trust me. Because I’m the one with the necromantic powers.”

“About that.”

“It’s not necessarily evil. Withhold your judgment; at least give me that, until you understand how it works.”

“So how does it work?”

“I basically just evoke certain thought-syllables with particular inflections and in certain sequences, and that seems to access some sort of etheric cheat-code-type matrix of some kind, which is to say magic.”

“And this makes sense to you somehow, because Hormel the ribbon guy gave you the power to understand that gibberish?”

“Well,” Bob replied with a chuckle, “that gibberish was me trying to explain what I’m able to understand from the text in that Tome thanks to Hormel’s magic key.”

“Is it a key you can hold, and lose?” Anna asked Bob with a nudge.

“No, no, he only used the word key. There’s no physical key for me to lose. It’s just the ability to read that script, and I assume I just can do that from now on.”

“So it was, like, some brain wave thing he must have done, or something, to you, for you to have the appropriate brain pattern to understand ancient Antlandean, or something.”

“Or something,” Bob basically agreed.

“And it’s not evil?”

“Well, it seems like it isn’t necessarily evil. It’s like carpenter’s tools, you know? You don’t have to use them for carpentry. You can use a saw to, like, hang a picture or something.”

“So, hammer a nail, which is basically carpentry? No, Bob. These are evil powers. What good are you going to do with a hundred and fifty skeleton slaves?”

“Relative good. Good for us. And they’re not slaves! Seriously, don’t say that. What does anyone do but what’s good for themselves and those they care about and/or empathize

with, so long as it doesn't disrupt other people's quests for their own goodness, right? Isn't that pretty much the Constitution?"

Anna laughed, and Bob laughed with her and took the light moment to start to caress her thigh under the sheets.

"Not yet, necromancer man," Anna protested quickly, shooing away his hand with her own. "I'm not through getting okay with this. I have more to ask you."

"Go ahead."

"Just what is your plan, exactly, for these powers?"

"Okay, so here's my best realistic thought so far. These skeletons can do whatever we command them. They're soulless automatons, and so they're basically like an army of robot workers, more or less. I was thinking maybe we could contract them out for construction work and that sort of thing. And the great thing is that with the five of us each able to command them, we could go to five different job sites each day. And I could potentially raise lots more skeletons, so each of us could be commanding a work force of, you know, who knows, maybe like thousands of skeleton workers."

"Bob, I don't want to be a foreman of skeleton labor! God, who am I? What am I trying to do? If – and I mean if – that is what you end up doing, I do not want to be part of it."

"Okay, well, nevertheless, even if it's just me and those three guys, you know, we could potentially make a good living with these skeleton workers. And we'd just have to sort of mentally command them. When really I think about it, I could start to replace every dangerous or mindless job from humans in fragile little bodies to my skeletons, who are basically just like robots. We could... shit, we could start to build a totally new type of economy..."

"I foresee workplace accidents with everyone but you, and maybe even with you. You think Tony and Spencer and Travis could really manage to keep track of a thousand working skeletons? Didn't you just say Travis was on coke? When did that happen?"

"Yeah, it's that new dodgy lawyer friend of his, Calvin Broadus. Travis said there were two hookers at their last party. So apparently shit is sketchy-wild in Travisland these days."

Bob thought about his plan for a few quiet moments and came to the conclusion that Anna probably had a good point.

"Well, maybe smaller crews is the answer then."

"Anyway, Bob, hello," Anna suddenly laughed, "who is going to be okay with you doing this? Who's gonna hire a skeleton cr– a crew of skeletons? It's the least marketable

service. No one wants a bunch of animated skeletons from the graveyard dripping with corpse flesh and rotted old clothes working on their deck.”

“It’s better than my first idea, the skeleton circus.”

“Oh god.”

“No, but seriously, I’ve thought it out. We could clean them up. I was thinking about that. I think Tony and I should take them all out into the back and fill a kiddie pool with bleach or something, send ‘em in one by one and have them scrub themselves white.”

“That is definitely job one, agreed,” Anna replied. “I can fucking smell them from here. That’s the dead. Oh god, realizing that is so revolting. Those are dead bodies.”

Anna held her hand up over her nose and wretched softly a couple of times into her sweater sleeve.

Bob was silent for a moment, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

“So you’re okay with this, then?” he finally asked her.

“You’re going to need me with this,” she said, moving only her eyes to look at him. “This is obviously a little dodgy.”

“Our basement is full of undead; it’s a fair comment,” Bob replied as he moved in close and kissed her cheek.

Anna smiled slightly.

“I’m also scared, though. This really seems to be your thing. Hormel gave you the key. This’ll go where you take it, essentially.”

“I love you. I’m so glad you’re with me.”

“No immortality, though. Promise me. No mad pursuit of undead power or turning yourself into a lich or any shit like that.”

“But...”

She made herself look very serious, so Bob quickly backed down, but rather than agree vocally he merely nodded and steeled his expression, and felt lucky that that seemed to suffice for her.

Needless to say, Bob had already dog-eared the Tome’s passages on immortality. Thinking about them, he was unable to sleep all through that long first night as a necromancer. He slipped out of bed with Anna a few minutes after she fell asleep,

collected the Tome and snuggled up with it in Tony's old recliner with the massive eruption of cushioning in the middle.

## Chapter 4

Bob ended up reading all night long, half the time diligently memorizing spell utterances and the other half leafing forward to the really scary parts and trying to make sense of the metaphysics.

He didn't realize it was morning until he was startled by Anna shouting from the bedroom, "Bob! I knew it! You're fucked! You better come see this!" He was still sitting on the recliner in the living room, poring over a section in the Tome about turning an animated skeleton into a spiritual duplicate of oneself. It took a moment for him to return to reality.

Bob left the Tome on the recliner and ambled to his bedroom, where he found Anna with his laptop open on the bed, and some website up with a video loading.

"They found the graveyard all disturbed," she said quickly, and then covered her mouth in terror and squeaked through her fingers, "What'll they do to you? I'm not waiting for you if you go to prison."

Bob sat down on the bed next to Anna and tried to calm her by reaching in her direction and grimacing.

"What's going on now?" he asked in his soothing voice. "What did you see online? They found the graveyard?"

Anna pointed to the laptop, so Bob turned it to himself and said, "Let me see here," as he hit replay on the news video.

"It was already loaded," Anna snapped.

"Whatever. It's reloading."

Bob noted as the video began that the website was CNN.com, but a square in the lower left corner of the video indicated the footage was from a local Muncie TV station. It opened on an announcer standing in front of the graveyard.

"A grim picture Wednesday morning here in 'America's hometown' Muncie, Indiana, where citizens awoke to find this small, local cemetery completely disturbed... every grave torn up... every body... stolen." Close up images of the stirred graves, all filmed at dutch angles. "One local even swears he saw an army of skeletons with glowing red eyes marching through the night. But as to what really happened here... authorities say they're

stumped!” Then it cut to the briefest of press conferences with the Muncie police chief – a skeptical man with a small mustache and cynical eyes who seemed to be giving one of the reporters off-camera the evil eye as he said: “We suspect... jokesters. Jokesters of a serious nature.”

“Jokesters of a serious nature,” Bob laughed, and looked to Anna for confirmation. “That’s a funny thing to say.”

“It’s alright.”

“Local teens have apparently decided that this is the first indication of what popular culture will hereafter know as the Zombocalypse,” the announcer continued with a light-hearted tone.

“No they didn’t,” Bob scoffed.

Some shots of local teens laying out their plans of survival in the event of zombie apocalypse got paused by Bob. He shut the laptop.

“They think it’s the Zombocalypse! They’re totally off the mark. There’s nothing to be concerned about. We did nothing illegal is the main thing! Even if they did find out the skeletons came with us, it’s not like we unearthed them! They unearthed themselves! They came with of us of their own automatic volition, whether that is under my magical control or not.”

“Oh god, Bob, but you’re not a lawyer! You can’t be sure! Get Tony. Get Tony, get Tony, he’ll know!”

She shook her fingers at Bob, and he could see that she was genuinely scared enough that her eyelashes were wet, so there was nothing he could do but what she said, even though it irritated him like nothing else. Tony had been to jail for pot once, and Anna acted like it meant he knew the law.

Bob knocked loudly on Tony’s door.

“Enter, dude,” Tony said from within.

Not particularly to Bob’s surprise, when he opened the door he found Tony was watching a porno. He wasn’t masturbating to it, though; just had it on while he was clipping his toenails.

“What’s this?” Bob asked with a laugh.

“Dude, this one is Angela’s Asses. Apparently there’s this new porn genre that’s just been born – the tear-jerker. This one’s about...”

“Don’t summarize it; turn it off, man. Anna’s over. I don’t get how you watch porn other than in five minute snippets specifically for masturbation purposes. You just watch it like a film.”

Bob grabbed the remote from beside Tony and turned off the TV beside the bed.

“That one had real story, Bob,” Tony explained.

“Yeah, like Ghost Soda really is a lost Rolling Stones album.”

“I’m telling you, I saw it at Goodwill.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter anymore. We need to talk. I just saw some video online that could be very bad for us.”

“Oh you saw it already?” Tony laughed proudly. “What did you think, man? Seven thousand views already. That’s gotta be a record.”

“The news video, about the graveyard?” Bob asked, confused.

Tony’s grin turned into a confused frown, and he asked, “Oh no, sorry, what news video?”

“The graveyard. Down the street. They found it all unearthed and the bodies missing. It’s on CNN for god’s sake! It’s real news that people are paying attention to. We need to be very careful, and maybe begin to plan how best to reveal this to the public.”

Tony just stared at Bob, his mind seeming to be elsewhere.

“You’ve got your fake listening face on, Tony.”

“I’m thinking about something else.” Tony transparently brainstormed for a minute, then said, “Breasts. Some actress’s breasts.”

“Some actress,” Bob scoffed, tossing at Tony a small, cow-shaped pillow that was within reach. “You’d know whose. What is it? You’re acting guilty-stupid. What was that about twenty thousand hits?” Tony didn’t reply, but his facial responses to Bob’s questions gradually helped Bob put it together. “What did you post online? Oh my god, you didn’t post a video, did you? Of the skeletons? You didn’t, did you? Tony, is that what got whatever-thousand hits, since you posted it last night or whenever, your video of my skeletons?”

Tony shrugged with his face, giving himself away.

“Oh my god, show it to me,” Bob whined, stomping back off to his own bedroom, where the Internet was available.

“What is it now?” Anna asked with a nervous full-body wiggle as Bob reopened his laptop and brought a browser back up.

“Where is it, Tony? YouTube?” Bob yelled out the door.

“Yeah,” Tony said apologetically as he sauntered sadly into Bob’s room. “Hi, Anna. I didn’t even think about asking you, and I should have. They’re basically your skeletons.”

“What’s it under, Tony, people, entertainment, animation? Tell me you posted it under animation!”

“Just type in ‘skeleton closet,’” Tony said sheepishly.

Bob typed the words in, and the first link to come up was a still frame of their basement door cracked open with the title, Skeletons in Your Closet? Bob noted that, at the very least, Tony had posted it under their shared alias account, Nightman900, and not his own or Bob’s real one. Nightman900 was supposedly attached entirely to untraceable accounts, according to Spencer, but what had before been mere mild doubt about that on Bob’s part instantly now became serious concern.

“Spencer is a liar. Nightman900 is not secure,” Bob said, just to finally have said it.

“Nightman900 is secure; Spencer promised!” Tony cried as if simultaneously betrayed and framed in that moment.

Bob played the video, which consisted of a slow move toward their basement door, and then the slow opening of it to reveal the shadowy mass of hellish-red-eye-lit skeletons all squirming against each other, and after a couple of seconds of panning around that, it froze at the end.

“Alright,” Bob sighed. “That wasn’t so bad. They could be puppets, right, if you’re suspending your disbelief?”

“Or the opposite,” Tony said. “If you’re disbelieving to begin with, because you’re never in a million years expecting real animated undead skeletons.”

“Right,” Bob agreed. Then he laughed and said, “You know, it would have been funny if you had posted it under animation.” He looked back and forth between Tony and Anna, neither of whom seemed to be getting it. “You know, because they’re... animated. I reanimated them.”

Anna just nodded.

Tony got up from the bed, having clearly stopped listening before Bob had finished. “Anyway, who wants breakfast?”

Bob frowned and looked up at Tony to see if he was kidding. “What, are you asking me to make breakfast?”

“No, Bob, in fact I already had some skeletons do it for us,” Tony replied with a nod and a little clap, quite proud of himself, and left the bedroom. “You two,” Tony was overheard to say from the kitchen, “the master and mistress will take their meals in bed.”

“I’m not his mistress!” Anna shouted.

Two rot-ragged skeletons walked into the bedroom each carrying an encyclopedia with a bowl of cereal balanced on it, which they carefully handed off to Bob and Anna, who were working purely on autopilot through their shock. Anna even ate a few spoonfuls of cereal with smiles to the backs of the skeletons until they had left the room, before spitting the cereal back out into the bowl with a gasp like she’d been underwater. Bob accidentally let his bowl of cereal slip off his encyclopedia and spill into his lap and the blanket.

“Aw shit,” he cursed, “I just wasn’t paying attention. I would have eaten that. Fuck. Tony, we don’t have any kind of trays?”

Bob noticed Anna’s distinct silence and turned to find her frozen, staring at the bowl balanced precariously on the encyclopedia she was holding. The milk and marshmallow charms inside shook slightly, but the little meaty dollop of wet, brownish matter stuck to the rim of the bowl that her eyes were fixed on stayed perfectly still.

“Aw, now what is that?” Bob groaned when he saw it. “Is that you not totally cleaning our dishes, Tony, or is that corpse flesh? We need to clean these motherfuckers off.”

Bob took the bowl and the encyclopedia away from Anna and carried them in separate hands back out to the kitchen, where Tony was watching a skeleton cook an egg on a skillet.

“I doubt it’s corpse flesh,” Tony said matter-of-factly. “It’s probably just graveyard mud or whatever. Earth is worm shit, you know.”

“Dude. Tony,” Bob sighed as he put the bowl in the sink and the encyclopedia on the counter, “was this your idea specifically? To use the encyclopedias as trays? Or was that the skeletons’ improvising? Honestly.”

“It was my idea,” Tony admitted. “I recommended that. I don’t know. I thought they were wider and less heavy than they are.”

“And this guy,” Bob slightly laughed, indicating the skeleton cook with a thumb over his shoulder, “did you just tell him, ‘Make me an omelet?’”

“That’s exactly what I said, in fact,” Tony laughed. “I said, ‘You – make some omelets with cheese.’ But he couldn’t find any cheese, I guess. Seriously, though, Bob, this necromancer thing is the greatest! It’s like having slaves!”

Bob eyed Tony with a little shocked laugh, then simply said, “Yeah, we’re out of cheese,” watching the skeleton flip the omelet on the skillet. “So this guy just knows how to cook. I wonder how that works.”

“Maybe it’s, like, because he used to know how to cook when he was alive,” Tony guessed as he and Bob both scrutinized the cooking skeleton. “I mean, look at the way his arm holds the spatula. He’s got a cook’s ease to him.”

Bob shook his head.

“The skeletons have no remnants of the soul that used to occupy their bodies. And don’t ever call them slaves again. They’re automatons.”

“How do you know, soulmaster?”

“I read the book,” Bob said with a mild glare, “how do you think I’d know? I’m the necromancer who raised that skeleton and who gave you command over it. Remember?”

Tony and Bob looked at each other for a moment, Tony with a look of mild irritation and Bob with one of uncharacteristic confidence.

“You’re not gonna turn into a dick because of this, are you?” Tony asked.

Bob sighed with frustration.

“Hey man, you know me. I’m Bob. I’m still just Bob. I mean, I’m a necromancer now, but I’m still Bob. It’s like I got a new career. I’m not gonna change into some evil overlord or anything, if that’s what you mean.”

“Better not,” Tony said, looking up and down Bob with a momentary seriousness. “I’d stop you, dude. I’d be that kind of friend.”

“Don’t worry, man. You know me. Just give me the benefit of the doubt before you start your crusade to stop me. Come on. Give me more credit than that. God. A guy can’t move up in the world without getting his intentions doubted? I just want a little credit.”

“You right, you right,” Tony agreed, and lightly punched Bob’s shoulder. “You the necroman.”

They both laughed.

“We should get drunk, dude, to celebrate,” Tony suggested.

Bob scoffed. “What time is it? It’s morning.”

Anna walked out of Bob’s bedroom clutching her purse tightly to her stomach and already wearing her jacket and sunglasses. She walked up to Bob and Tony and demanded, “Tony, make me a mimosa,” then sat down at the bar between the kitchen and living room. “And don’t let that dead fellow near it. I don’t like the cut of his jib.”

Tony nodded and went wordlessly to work making her mimosa.

Anna put her sunglasses up on her head and nodded to the skeleton cook. “Bob, look at this guy’s skull. There’s a big hole in the back - there, on top. You think he was shot in the head? That’s so macabre.”

“What? That people get shot in the head?”

Bob sauntered over to where Anna was sitting and stood next to her with his hands in his pockets. Behind him, the two skeletons that had brought in the cereal stood with their arms at their sides, swaying slightly and ever-so-quietly hissing their constant hellish exhale. Anna eyed the two skeletons and then looked at Bob, putting her sunglasses back on.

“I have to go back home and get dressed for work,” she said. “This doesn’t end the world, right? Days keep on going; we still have to make money and stuff. Are you guys going to clean off these skeletons today, or what? They still fucking smell like death.”

Bob nodded.

“That’s the plan. I was thinking a few gallons of bleach and a kiddie pool in the backyard. No one can see over the fence. It’s perfect.”

Anna exhaled slowly, with a clear look of concern on her face.

“And what about eventually, when you have to tell people what you’ve done, what you can do?”

Bob shrugged and said, “I’ll figure that out.”

Anna looked quickly over her shoulder at Tony, who was contentedly watching the skeleton cook. Then she stood up and discretely pulled Bob by the shirt over to the front door. There, she got close enough to whisper, and with a blank face instead of the cinematic sultriness he would have hoped for, she said, “You’re a necromancer now. There are skeletons in your house. I need you to know... that I understand that... I can’t really know what’s happening to you right now. And that I basically... don’t really know you anymore. Inside, I’m actually freaking out. I’m only able to remain together like this right now because I’m... because it’s like I’m in public, not at home. And so my strong version has to be out, and my weak, freak-out, wanting-to-hold-you side doesn’t know

where the fuck is safe anymore. So what I'm saying is that I am not comfortable right now. With you, or with this. I don't know you. I don't know who you're becoming. But I do... find it unbelievably... hot... for some reason..."

Bob interrupted her stillness by embracing her in his best attempt at a passionate kiss. By the time they came out of it, Anna was smiling, but she quickly stopped once Bob noticed it.

"Just wait," Bob assured her. "I'll make you proud yet."

"Okay," she continued. "I have to be at work in twenty minutes. So I have to go now, but... the next thing I want to do is get naked with you." After a beat of eye contact, she added with a cute little shiver, "If I can get over the terror."

"I'm just Bob, baby," Bob assured her, and gave her another couple of kisses. "You do know me. I'll see you tonight."

Anna smiled, then turned to look back at Tony and the skeletons only to find all four of them waving.

"Have you turned my control over the skeletons off yet?" Anna asked Bob.

"No, not yet, sorry. I forgot. I was up all night studying."

"Studying, really?" Anna asked in a high voice of surprise, gripping onto Bob's shirt for a moment endearingly. "I'm impressed."

"I'm gonna do this one right," Bob said with a smile.

"You two, you idle skeletons - clean this place up while I'm gone," Anna said whimsically, then laughed and turned around to see what reaction her command had received.

She squealed with delight when the two idle skeletons both began picking up dirty dishes from the bar area near where they had been standing. One quickly accumulated a tall pile of plates and took it over to the sink.

"Amazing," Bob said, shaking his head. "They take such vague commands. And they can hold all those plates carefully in their spindly little bone-hands. How does that skeleton know what 'clean up' means? I've got to do more studying."

"Tell me you'll keep this low-key until we can discuss it, Bob, okay?" Anna asked him sweetly. "Be careful?"

"I will," he agreed. "We'll discuss this together."

It struck Bob while gazing into Anna's lovely brown eyes that he and she were definitely not broken up anymore. She really did love him, and wanted to be with him even as a necromancer, even seemed finally impressed with him because of it. Bob glowed with pride, and determined himself in that moment really to do his best, to be the best necromancer he could be.

Anna kissed him and then left the house with a smile on her face. As soon as the door was shut, Bob had to let loose a yelp of joy and a downward elbow pump that even he felt afterward had been more than a little cliché, and had not appropriately expressed his very real delight.

## Chapter 5

The backyard of the house that Bob and Tony rented was very small, but was surrounded by a high wooden fence on the three sides that weren't the house, and the basement opened up into it from a couple of big, metal storm doors, making it relatively perfect for their plan.

"This is so awesome," Bob remarked, standing in the back breezeway of their little house with the door held open, looking out upon the scene that he and Tony had just set up in the grass – a little clear-plastic inflatable pool with dinosaurs printed on it, surrounded by a circle of bottles of bleach, with a small pile of steel wool nearby. The horizontal sunset light gave everything strong orange shadows.

"You really don't think we should wait until night?" Tony asked Bob nervously, holding his puffy red and white coat tight and shivering as he stood out by the little pool.

"No, man," Bob replied, sniffing the air with confidence. "It's dinner time. Conditions are perfect. Everyone's in with their families doing their dinnertime thing. And then, as we continue, it'll turn into night. But if we did it in the middle of the night, that's when the crazies come out and who knows who might see us. No. Conditions are perfect right now. Let's open those storm doors. Grab that side."

Tony and Bob heaved together to lift the storm doors open, revealing the mass of skeletons below. A few skeletons who had been cramped back into the little stairs under the storm doors finally were able to stand up once the doors were fully opened. They looked around calmly as the setting sunlight fell upon them.

"Alright, you two," Tony commanded to the two who had recently taken off his suits and now stood just inside the back breezeway, awaiting instructions, "start filling that pool with that bleach."

"Don't forget to keep whispering, okay Tony?" Bob asked, noting that he could hear the distant clinking and chattering of a family at dinner through an open window nearby somewhere.

"Right," Tony acknowledged, pointing to the bleach as the two skeletons passed him on their way to the kiddie pool. "I'll keep it quiet. How full you think we should get this thing?"

"Fill it up," Bob shrugged. "Use 'em all. I don't know. How many skeletons have we got again?"

“A hundred and twenty or so. I forget exactly. Look at them. They’re just standing there, looking around.”

“Yeah, it’s weird,” Bob agreed, watching the nearest skeletons who stood on the little steps down into the basement. “I don’t know if I like working with skeletons. They lack a whole lot of expression without faces and all.”

“Well you just started. Always time to rethink your career path.”

Bob just sniffed a little laugh. “Yeah right.”

“So is this, like, it, basically, or what, then?” Tony asked after a few moments of shared silence while the skeletons unloaded gallon after gallon of bleach into the little plastic pool.

“What do you mean?”

“Raising skeletons. Controlling skeletons. I mean, it’s a lot, but... what else is in that book?”

Bob grinned.

“I’ve been hoping someone would be interested. It’s crazy, really. I mean, this stuff I’m learning about is... you know, it’s life and death.”

“Tell me about it, then,” Tony prodded. “Where are these skeletons’ old souls if not here, being controlled by us? Are they, like, in the Underworld or what?”

“Well,” Bob admitted, “I don’t know where they are. But they’re not here. I know that. The book talks about souls, but it doesn’t talk about Heaven or anything like that. I mean, you know, like you say actually, it talks about an Underworld. It’s ancient Atlantean magic. We hadn’t, like, come up with Heaven back then yet. It was all Hell – the Underworld. And so, that’s where souls go, according to the book.”

“So you’re using outdated software, is what you’re saying?” Tony asked, comically acting quite shocked. “You need to get some new, modern necromancy that’s Heaven-compatible.”

Bob laughed. “That’s funny. But honestly, it makes me wonder, since this shit clearly works.” He gestured to the two skeletons that had half-filled the little plastic pool with bleach and were presently emptying the last two bottles. “So, I mean, what does that imply, you know? I guess just that science doesn’t know everything.”

“They think they do,” Tony scoffed with arbitrary disdain.

“I need to do a lot more real reading, and less just looking at pictures and cherry-picking the powers I’m intrigued by,” Bob said mostly to himself. “I need this to be the next Mortal Kombat: Annihilation, the novelization.” He smirked at his friend.

Tony laughed, though Bob was mocking the little-known fact that the mentioned novel was the only book Tony had ever actually read from cover to cover. “You serious?” he asked. “You’re gonna read that whole thing? It’s like War and Peace the ancient textbook!”

“Dude,” Bob said. “Look what it did for us with ease. Imagine what it could do for us with its depths.”

“With its depths?”

“You know – with the stuff deep within it. With a full understanding of the whole necromantic system. There’s shit in there about eternal life and the power to exist in multiple dimensions and – crazy shit!”

“Word,” Tony shrugged. “Think the pool’s ready.”

“Alright, y’all,” Bob said to the skeletons standing up out of the storm doors. “One by one, into that pool. I want you to scrub yourselves good and clean with that bleach, until you’re white as the day you were... grown inside your old bodies.”

One by one, beginning with the closest one, the skeletons each ambled over to the kiddie pool and stepped into it slowly, then crouched to a sitting position and began to splash and scrub themselves with the bleach like monks in a tub while the others all watched, waiting their turn. It took several minutes of scrubbing with a wire brush for each to clean themselves white and then gather with the other dripping skeletons on the far side of the small yard.

“Amazing,” Bob mused. “They take orders so well. I can’t get over it. You – what’s the meaning of life?”

The skeleton Bob had addressed as it waited its turn to bathe turned its head in Bob and Tony’s direction, but made no other motion or sound in response to Bob’s question.

“I guess they don’t have tongues,” Bob remarked.

“Well you asked him a question no one knows,” Tony said, and asked the same skeleton, “What’s two times two?”

The skeleton held up four fingers on its left hand.

“You’re right,” Tony nodded, “they’re not real thinking souls in there. It’s like if I asked the calculator on your computer the same question. Came up with the answer instantly.

No hesitation. He didn't have to think about it at all. That's not how a person answers math."

"But that shows that they can communicate," Bob whispered, intrigued. "I wonder if it would be possible to teach them sign language."

"No, dude," Tony frowned, shaking his head quickly. "Then they'll be wanting all kinds of rights and shit. You're opening Pandora's box with that..."

"Well Tony," Bob protested, "these aren't our slaves. Even if they could communicate with us, I bet you'd pretty quickly see that there is no real essence or personality in there underneath the mechanism. They're animated by my magic! They're completely under my control. It's no different than if I were animating like trash or appliances. Hey you – do whatever you want. Decide what to do for the next thirty seconds."

Bob and Tony watched as the skeleton just stood there, its skull still turned slightly to face them. Its bones did their regular standing sway.

"See," Bob laughed softly, "he's got no idea. No ideas. Just a vapid little dummy with no spirit-fingers of his own to move his strings with. No soul. See, Tony?"

"Dude, don't taunt the undead," Tony said, only half kidding.

"He's not doing anything. He doesn't... he may be able to perform complex tasks, but he has no internal thought-engine of his own."

"The thirty seconds aren't up, dude. He's biding his time. He's letting you say all this shit so that right at the end he can, like, go, 'Peace,' and walk away from you or bust some kind of move," Tony said, getting a bit too loud at the end as he threw his own forceful peace sign right in Bob's face and wiggled his knees.

A dog barked nearby. The skeleton just stood there.

"No, see, thirty seconds are up, Tony, and he did nothing; now get your fingers out of my face. Geez. And don't forget to keep whispering."

"Well, maybe if Uses All the Hot Water here would hurry up, our guy could get into the pool," Tony whispered harshly at the currently bathing skeleton. Then he turned to Bob with a squint and asked, "So if this really isn't any different than if you were animating trash or appliances, why can't you animate those things? Why just the dead?"

Bob just looked at Tony as he thought about the question, then replied honestly, "That is a fair question. I've said already – I need to read more of that book."

“How about you go do that while I take care of these guys?” Tony recommended. “I’d like to know you know what you’re doing. You know?” A look of genuine concern appeared on Tony’s face.

Bob just nodded, mimicking Tony’s genuine, serious look, then said, “Yeah, okay. Thanks, Tony,” and headed inside. “Remember to stay quiet.”

“Mouse slippers,” Tony whispered, and snapped his fingers in the direction of the bathing skeletons.



The Tome didn’t give a lot of background. It seemed to assume the reader had a grasp of ancient occult basics to at least some degree. However, even from the perspective of someone with a modern American understanding of the history of humanity and the Earth and a lay scientific viewpoint on the nature of the mind-body connection, there was much strangeness that Bob was able to glean simply from context. For instance, first of all, the many references to Atlantis as the origin of the text’s author. There was some vaguely implied rivalry with the Egyptians, who were often referred to as backward and superstitious. And the text seemed to refer to the magical matrix of possibilities that the spells accessed as having been set up by an ancient unnamed hero from a different dimension.

Most interesting to Bob, however, were the clear indications that his physical world of books and bodies and clothes coexisted constantly with a series of parallel spirit realms, where his and everyone else’s soul lived alongside a menagerie of other beings invisible to their physical eyes.

The book explained in detail how different souls enter their bodies at birth in different ways, depending on which school of thought one ascribes to; how some enter before conception, sharing the lovemaking process with their parents and joining with each gamete specifically before the moment of conception in order to affect their gender, while

most others wait until the sensory organs are ready for comfortable habitation and yet others even until after birth, avoiding the whole experience and trusting in what the brain will have automatically set up for them (this is not recommended). Death, of course, is different, as it happens through the lens of a body so confused and awed by childhood and life that it has forgotten its original nature and considers itself only to be the sum of that body's experiences, and so the soul is usually working as if with gloves on and often blinded by abject fear due to a complete lack of information on what to expect (suicide rituals followed, which Bob skipped).

Looking up and gazing around at his surroundings for a moment, Bob felt like he was high, his mind swirled so ecstatically. Because he knew that there really were skeletons standing outside the house, which must mean that all of this was true.

He read on. How the soul drives the body like a vehicle, centered in specific places along the length of the spine and up in the brain. How the whole time we are surrounded by legions of spirit beings with various duties and desires, ushering us into our DNA coil in the morning and sweeping us into a bin at night. How there really is a Grim Reaper-type character called Karab who guides human souls at death, to usher them into the Underworld for a while as if taking them to prison. Some ways to confuse him, and nonsensical information with which to blackmail him (after all, the book was clearly written with the evil reader in mind).

A long section near the end of the introduction was composed entirely of variations on thanking someone named Oab. That was followed by a short section that made almost no sense to Bob, and seemed to be some sort of ritual Atlantean propaganda about their crystal energy sources and ability to kill enemies from a distance. Certain parts seemed to imply that Egyptian souls were used as fuel for some sort of Atlantean transportation network. That made Bob feel guilty for some reason, so again he skipped ahead.

What followed was a big drawing of a man in a robe, holding a staff with a skull on the top, which was winking, believe it or not. The section was all about immortality and how using the magic in the Tome makes you age preternaturally, so you really want to make sure to be immortal first. Bob tried to pay attention, as the information seemed important, but he just couldn't believe that the skull in the picture was winking, and it kept taking his attention away from the text, so he had to go back out to the backyard and ask Tony to come in for a moment to check it out.

"Leave the skeletons?"

"You guys – keep bathing one by one like this, and gather there," Bob commanded, pointing at the skeletons, who all looked in his direction when he did. "Yeah, see, they'll be alright. They're almost done. You guys made good time."

"Yeah, thanks," Tony said as he followed Bob inside.

“Tell me something, now,” Bob said, pointing to the picture in the Tome, “is that skull really winking?”

Tony laughed. “That skull is winking. You sure this book is for real? Because yes, that guy’s skull staff is totally winking.”

“There are skeletons outside bathing in bleach, aren’t there?”

“I’m gonna go back out and make sure,” Tony said, and left Bob’s room in a hurry as if he really did suddenly think maybe he’d just been hallucinating this whole time.

Bob reread the opening passage about immortality aloud to himself. “Harnessing the powers of the cosmos is bound to sap one’s lifeforce, causing the master of magic to age sometimes as much as the equivalent of a natural year in a single utterance. Therefore before a necromancer can wield the truly significant powers of the universe, he ought to secure his permanence in this realm by means of transforming the elements of his body into an eternal lich. Blood sacrifice required.”

Bob scoffed when he read that, remarking quietly to himself, “Oh, so I gotta scrape my hands again?”



To hurry the process, Tony eventually had several skeletons sharing the pool at the same time, and still it was late evening before all the skeletons were bone-white, crammed back into the basement with the storm doors closed and Bob felt comfortable enough to agree to Tony’s request that they have a few beers, drag out the old Dreamcast and play some Crazy Taxi. After about an hour and a few beers, they agreed to begin a season of Tecmo Superbowl, even though it was already nearing midnight, and to open up a bottle of champagne in celebration of their new position as masters of life and death.

While Tony was struggling to open the bottle, a thump and shudder of bushes came from their backyard, very close, followed by some muffled giggling. Tony’s eyes widened and Bob’s heart began to race. The champagne cork popped very suddenly, startling them both again enough to make Bob drop to his hands and knees.

“What was that?” he asked in a loud whisper.

“Someone’s in our backyard,” Tony replied, going to the window.

“Don’t show yourself,” Bob whispered, rising from the floor and following behind Tony, hunched over. “Who is it?”

“It’s two guys,” Tony replied, peering out the window cautiously. “One of them fell climbing over the fence and the other one is looking down from the top of the fence. They’re whispering to each other, but loud-whispering, like we are, so I can sort of hear them.”

“Well then they can probably sort of hear us,” Bob whispered with concern.

“No, I doubt it. These walls are... sound comes better in than it goes out.”

“That makes no sense!”

“Look, just shut up.”

Bob and Tony both quietly listened as the giggling returned and there was another loud thump.

“The second guy just jumped down into our yard.”

“What are they doing?” Bob asked.

“They’re going for – oh god, they’re going to fuck with the pool.”

“Is it still full of bleach?”

“And corpse residue or whatever,” Tony snickered, “yeah.”

There was some splashing, and then a loud, sudden, “Aww!” shouted out, followed by a lot of laughing. “This is acid or something!” one of them shouted.

“It’s that fucking frat house down the street, I bet,” Tony suggested. “It’s that time of year. Getting cold. They’re getting drunk and doing stupid shit.”

“Assholes.”

The sounds of scrambling against the fence and the shaking of bushes was followed by two loud thumps and some more incoherent shouting that faded slowly further away.

“Geez,” Bob said. “That’s so gross. They have no idea.”

“Can you believe those douche bags are probably at least ten years younger than us at this point?” Tony asked Bob with a shake of his head. Then his expression focused and he asked, “Did you say something earlier about there being stuff about immortality in that book? Like, living forever, staying young or whatever?”

“I don’t know if it’s so much a staying young thing,” Bob admitted. “But yeah. Immortality. It’s kind of a lich-type thing, though, it seems like.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, from what I understand it basically means that you enslave your own body to live forever, but you still age all super-fast because you’re using magic and shit, and that stuff makes you age, I guess. So you, like, live forever in a withered old body, I guess. But who knows how accurate that is.”

“Using spells makes you age?”

Bob nodded. “I guess so. Do I look older?”

“Maybe a few minutes older. Do I? Does getting spells cast on you, or being allowed to command skeletons, age you?”

“I don’t know, dude.”

“Well I don’t want I don’t know, mister,” Tony reprimanded with a sudden scared anger. “What the hell did you think you were doing, anyway, messing with that stuff without knowing everything about what it does to you? What getting your friends messed up in it might do to them? You didn’t think about that, did you, dude? This is like one of those movies where the guy gets magic but it drives him mad or Satan shows up and owns his soul or something – like in Merlin’s Shop of Mystical Wonders.”

“Calm down, man, it’s not like that,” Bob assured him. “I don’t think it’ll really age you to command the skeletons. It’s more like I’ve used my spell to command them to follow your commands. You’re not using any magic, are you?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Then you’re not aging, don’t worry. I mean, you’re aging at a normal rate. But me, I’m aging extra a little whenever I use this magic.”

“That’s fucked up. Could it get you sick?”

“I don’t think so. But there’s this lich thing I could do to live forever.”

“Rock and roll. And how does that work?”

“Well it requires a blood sacrifice of some sort, but supposedly so did getting into the Tome itself, and just having scraped hands apparently counted for that, so...” Bob laughed off the possible graver implications, but Tony didn’t seem convinced.

“That sounds like some serious stuff,” he remarked quietly.

Bob just nodded. "I'll be careful. I'm gonna read the whole thing through before I do anything serious."

"Good, man. Good. Let's not fuck this up. Seriously."

"Agreed."

Tony handed Bob a glass of champagne. "So what else have you learned?"

"Atlantis was real," Bob said as he took a big swallow.

"For real?"

Bob nodded.

"And Bigfoot?"

Bob frowned, but then said, "Maybe. I'd say probably at this point."

Tony grinned, very pleased. "And pirates?"

Bob smiled. "They were always real."

"Well, not like they're portrayed."

"I dunno, maybe. What do I know about the reality of pirates?"

They both laughed and took swigs of their champagne.

Tony, as a joke, swung the basement door open and shouted, "Hey, any of you old boys pirates?"

Among the skeletons in the dark, crowded basement, a single one near the bottom of the stairs turned in Tony's direction and softly hissed.

"Whoa," Tony remarked, shutting the door slowly and turning back to Bob with a bewildered look. "You see that?"

Bob nodded, smiling under an intrigued frown.

"You think that means he was a pirate?"

"I sort of doubt it. In Indiana?"

“You’re right,” Tony agreed. “He must just have been waiting to exhale. Like the chick movie?” Tony tried to pull a laugh out of Bob, but Bob wouldn’t let him. Bob always got stubborn and semantically confrontational when he got drunk.

“A reference isn’t a joke if it isn’t in any way relevant,” he berated.

“You son of a bitch,” Tony laughed, shoving Bob hard with both hands. “We’re doing shots now, or you’re gonna have to fight me.”

## Chapter 6

A polite knock at the front door that went unheard was followed by a series of loud fist pounds that stirred Tony right up out of a dream.

“Oh shit – skeletons!” he mumbled, flipping onto his back where he lay on the leather couch, inadvertently knocking over the small wooden table by his head that had two half-empty glasses of champagne on it. “Whoa,” he said as he caught his breath, looked around the room and at first saw nothing amiss. “Oh man.” He let his face fall back down onto the soft arm of the couch.

Then there were four more loud pounds on the door that startled Tony to his feet.

“Bob?” he called out deliriously, but Bob was drunkenly passed out in his bedroom, fast asleep, not hearing any of this. “Shit.”

The pounding on the door began again, and Tony quickly, though reticently, went to the door and opened it a crack.

On the doorstep was a police officer in full uniform. Tony gasped and shut the door far quicker than he had opened it, then stared in terrified silence into the empty air beside himself.

Before too many seconds had passed he opened the door again and said, “I’m sorry, officer, I just had to put my johnson back in my boxers. Good morning, sir, how are you?”

“Good afternoon, sir,” the policeman said with an opaque expression. “I’m Officer Kierny, with the Muncie Police. You Tony? You rent this place? I wonder if I could come in and ask you a few questions.”

“Um, um, um, um,” Tony stuttered, “sure. Um, sure, yeah, come in, okay.”

Tony opened the door the rest of the way and rubbed his face with his hands as Officer Kierny stepped inside.

“Sorry about the mess. My roommate and I were kind of drinking a lot last night.”

“I see,” the officer noted. “Looks like you spilled some wine on the floor there.”

“Oh shit, really?”

“Yes, right there.” Officer Kierny pointed to the two champagne glasses and small stain on the carpet by the overturned table. “You two must have had some party, huh? You celebrating?”

“Yeah,” Tony nodded with a smile of camaraderie. “I guess so. I mean, you know, not celebrating anything in particular. Just life still being pretty cool. You know.”

The officer nodded, looking around.

“So what brings you by?” Tony asked with forced nonchalance.

Officer Kierny scrutinized Tony for a moment, his eyes perfectly still, then he gave a momentary wry grin and turned away from Tony to look around the room with his hands on his belt.

“One of you get a job or something?” he asked. “Pass the bar?” He laughed to himself.

With a slight frown while the officer was looking away, Tony replied, “My roommate Bob did pass the bar, actually. How did you guess?”

“Did he really?” Officer Kierny asked, turning back around with a surprised look on his face. “No way. Well that’s great. Is he around?”

“He’s still passed out in his bedroom. Should I wake him?”

The officer frowned a no, peering around at the items on the floor. “You two play a little Tecmo Superbowl last night?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s an old school game. I see you got a Dreamcast, too.”

“Yeah. We were playing Crazy Taxi for a while.”

“I sold mine on EBay in Two-Thousand,” the officer remarked, nudging the little console on the floor with his shoe.

“That’s too bad, man; it’s still a good system. Some classic games.”

“I got a Three-Sixty now,” Officer Kierny sniffed, and started to amble toward the kitchenette. “Mind if I look in your kitchen for a moment?”

“What are you here for, sir, if I may ask?” Tony asked, following Officer Kierny closely.

“We’re asking everyone in the area about the graveyard,” the officer said, looking at the closed kitchen cabinets. “I assume you heard about the disturbance the other night?”

Tony nodded. "I saw on the Internet."

"You two get Internet here?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, we gotta look into these things. So I gotta ask you if you heard anything on Monday night, or saw anything unusual."

Tony shrugged, absent-mindedly beginning to move dirty dishes into the sink. "Not that I recall, sir. I was just here at home."

"What were you doing?"

Tony paused, biting his lip for a moment, then asked, "Do I have to answer that? I mean, what if I had just, like, been masturbating alone or something? Wouldn't that sort of have been inappropriate then, for you to have asked me? Can't I do stuff like that?"

"Is that what you were doing?"

"Well, no."

"Then why don't you just tell me what you were doing, and we can judge the appropriateness of my having asked when we get there."

Tony was frozen somehow by the sentence the policeman had just uttered, and something about the calm, unbroken way in which he had said it. He remained perfectly still for a few long seconds, slightly crouched over the sink, a pan in one hand, staring like a deer right into the officer's eyes.

"I lied," Tony finally said. "I was masturbating."

Officer Kierny frowned very slightly, furrowing his brow, then nodded and asked, "Do you know what your roommate was doing that night?"

"He was also masturbating," Tony quickly said, looking back up from the dishes, which he had just begun mindlessly to scrub (though he had not yet turned on the water).

"So you didn't hear anything," Officer Kierny said mostly to himself.

"Had the porn up pretty loud."

"This door lead outside?" Officer Kierny asked, eyeing the door to the small back breezeway that was littered with empty recyclables.

“No, that’s just where we throw all our cans and bottles. I mean, yes, it does lead out into a small area of space, just like a patch of…” Tony stumbled on his words trying to minimize the backyard enough for the cop to lose interest.

“Mind if I go out here for a moment?”

“I just woke up, Officer,” Tony said, turning away from the dishes and stepping over to the backdoor, which Officer Kierny was about to open. “I have to go brush my teeth.”

“Go ahead. I’m just gonna peek in your backyard for a second.” The policeman opened the door and stepped out into Tony and Bob’s small, square backyard. Tony reluctantly followed close behind him, making little faces he wished Bob could see.

“Poolside,” the officer dryly remarked, and chuckled softly to himself. “I see you got a couple of trees back there in the corner. Those good for climbing? Doesn’t look like it. Limbs too high up.”

As he passed it, Officer Kierny kicked the little kiddie pool, shaking the stagnant, filmy bleach inside, and something about the particles floating in it and clinging to a ring around its surface, and the manner of the bubbles that wasn’t like water seemed to catch his eye.

“We were cleaning in that, actually,” Tony said quickly, trying to deflect any questions preemptively, pointing from the backdoor. “That’s bleach.”

“Cleaning what?”

“Bones,” Tony said in the middle of a nervous swallow.

The officer stooped beside the pool and touched his finger to the surface of it. “What is this? This isn’t water, is it?”

“It’s bleach,” Tony admitted. “I told you, we were cleaning.”

“Why in a kiddie pool in your backyard?” Officer Kierny asked, standing, seeming suddenly extremely suspicious of Tony. A slight movement of his hand past his belt made Tony think he was reaching for his gun, and that started a momentarily blinding rush of adrenaline through Tony’s body. “And wait,” the officer stuttered, turning to look at Tony, “did you say cleaning bones?”

“Oh shit,” Tony choked. “Jesus.”

“What’s wrong, Tony? You look like you just shit yourself.”

“No. What? No, I just realized yesterday was my Mom’s birthday. And I forgot it ‘till now.”

“What were you two doing cleaning bones – a lot of bones – in a kiddie pool full of bleach in your backyard? Were you guys tripping?”

“No, Officer, I told you, we were drunk. Bob thought it would be easier to clean all the bones – he has this science thing he’s doing, I don’t know how it works, but it needs a lot of animal bones – legal animal bones – that are, like, bleached clean, you know, so he can study them.” Tony couldn’t keep a hesitant wince off his face despite his desire to seem nonchalant.

“He studies animal bones?”

“Yeah, he does this thing where he saws them up and studies like their interior, you know? Something about DNA or something; I don’t understand it. But I help him clean the bones sometimes, you know, because I’m his friend, and that’s what friends are for. Helping you out. He was like, ‘Would you help me with this,’ and I was like, ‘Sure.’ And so he was like...”

Officer Kierny trudged up toward and past Tony, waving a dismissive hand as he reentered the house. Tony followed close behind, heading straight for the fridge to deflect any attention away from the basement door, which was the first thing one would see when coming back in that way.

“You want some Kool-Aid, Officer?” Tony asked, grabbing the first thing he saw. “Purplesaurus Rex, I think.”

“You have coffee?” Officer Kierny asked with a hopeful rub of his chin.

“No, sorry. Just Kool-Aid. Water. We’re out of milk.”

“Neither of you two drink coffee? Even your scientist-lawyer roommate? That surprises me. You should. You’d have a lot more energy.”

Tony shrugged like maybe he’d start drinking coffee.

“Sure, then, I’ll try that Purplesaurus Rex.”

Tony grabbed a glass from the cupboard above the fridge and poured Officer Kierny a glass of purple Kool-Aid.

“Thanks, Tony.” Officer Kierny took a sip and slightly closed one eye for a moment in reaction, then put down the glass. “Not enough sugar. There’s no point in making that stuff unless you’re going to put a whole shitload of sugar in it, if you ask me.”

Tony shrugged.

Officer Kierny nodded slowly. He put his hands in his pockets.

“Not like coffee,” he said with a jarring abruptness that restarted Tony’s adrenaline for a second. “Coffee you gotta drink black.”

“I’ll remember that when we get some, which you really have convinced me we need to do,” Tony said quickly with an exaggerated nod. “Say, man – there’s this Ball State girl who walks to class around this time of day. You mind if we continue this conversation out on the front lawn? I don’t want to miss her.” He nudged the officer’s arm with his elbow.

Officer Kierny exhaled a slight laugh through his nose and nodded, then turned and seemed to be starting toward the living room, and the front door.

But Tony had only a moment of relief before the officer stopped in front of him and reached for the basement doorknob, beginning to say very casually, “This go to your basement?” But before the word basement could really form, it was replaced by a shocked squeak as Tony slapped the officer’s hand away from the knob and the two men’s eyes darted up at each other.

“You... can’t open that door.”

Tony’s eyes widened and his mouth twisted with sudden fear, but he stepped in front of the door and covered it bodily with his arms out at his sides nevertheless.

Officer Kierny sniffed a couple of laughs of disbelief before Tony’s genuineness came across fully. He frowned and tried to reach past Tony for the knob, but Tony quickly swung his hips in the way of the officer’s reach, shouting, “Why are you grabbing for my crotch! You want to get sued? Go home! You can’t make me let you look in here, right? You don’t have a search warrant!”

“You bet your ass I’m gonna go right the fuck back to the station, get one, and come back here, Tony, so if you’re just fucking around, stop now. Now open this god damned door.”

“We were just playing animal bones,” Tony stuttered.

“Playing animal bones?”

“Bob is a scientist! You can’t disturb the doctor again! Now please leave, Officer. Can’t a scientist keep his experiments secret?”

“What’s Bob doing down there, Tony? What does he need bodies for? You’ve seen Frankenstein, right? It doesn’t end well, Tony.” Officer Kierny kept a straight face for only a moment before he broke into laughter and added, “Come on, Tony. Quit fucking around and just let me peek in the basement. If you guys have a bong or something, I’m not gonna turn you in. I’m not looking for drugs, I’m looking for about a hundred missing corpses.”

Tony just stared at Officer Kierny, his back pressed against the basement door.

“Let me look.” The officer laughed again, grinning, and reached for the knob, but again Tony moved his hips in the way. “What, do you want me to grab your crotch?” he laughed.

The officer’s comment made Tony push a couple of awkward laughs through his confused whirlwind of shame at having let the situation get to this stage, but he remained unable to speak. He just shook his head and looked at the floor, his brow in a knot.

“Tony?” Officer Kierny asked again in a soft voice, and Tony looked up at him, seeing that the officer finally seemed to be taking the situation seriously. “Tell me the bones you were talking about weren’t bones from the graveyard.”

All Tony could do was shake his head, close his eyes and hang his head low.

“Better believe I will be back here directly,” the officer said as he trudged back toward the front door.

Tony moved from the basement door just enough to peek around the corner of the doorframe at Officer Kierny as he paused at the front door, across the video-game strewn living room.

“You may want to wake Bob,” the cop recommended before he left.

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