

FORGET ABOUT ONCE UPON A TIME...

DEATH'S APPRENTICE

A GRIMM CITY NOVEL



K. W. JETER
AND **GARETH JEFFERSON JONES**



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For Jacob and Wilhelm

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)
[Copyright Notice](#)
[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)

[Selected List of Tales and Essays of the Brothers Grimm That Provided Inspiration for
this Novel](#)

[Also by K. W. Jeter](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Copyright](#)

1.

The music was jacked up so hard and loud, every note felt like a punch to the head.

Nathaniel shouldered his way through the club's fevered crowd. The black T-shirt under his jacket turned darker, soaking up the mingled sweat of too many bodies packed too close together.

From up on the club's stage, the bass line set the air vibrating like a chrome hammer, cutting through the old-school *schrantz* pumped out by a pair of sequenced TR-909s. The DJ, a near-comatose gearhead slumped behind the equipment rack, paid minimal attention to the Serato cues scrolling by on his beat-up laptop. At 180 BMP, the raw-throated vocal samples sounded like a Thai slasher flick with all the silences and dialogue spliced out. The crowd loved it, writhing wide-eyed into each other with wild abandon.

As Nathaniel watched, he felt the distance between himself and the dancers expand. He knew that they belonged here; he didn't. They were enjoying themselves, in their own frenetic, addled way; he was on the job. He felt hollow and cold inside, envying those who knew so little about death and darkness.

One of the dancers, in a spangly silver outfit that barely covered her hips, threw him a flirty look. *She likes you*, Nathaniel told himself—the spark that sizzled between her eyes and his seemed to tell him as much. But maybe it meant nothing at all. He didn't know.

“Beat it, punk.” To Nathaniel's relief, the girl's obvious boyfriend showed up next to her. Tank top showing off 'roid-enhanced muscles, a forehead that could be spanned by the width of two fingers.

Nathaniel didn't feel like messing around with the guy. Or the girl, or anybody else. He had work to do. He closed his eyes and drew the club's smoke-laden air deep inside himself. He didn't let it out. Instead, a little room opened at the center of his skull, a space he had been in before, and that he had come to dread. But that was part of the job as well. Dark things were in there, and he let them slip out, silent and fatal.

Outside himself, he could hear the music slowing, the beats per minute dropping into the double digits, the treble dopplering down into the bottom octaves, the rumbling bass fading into unheard infrasonic. The crowd's screams and laughter morphed into the dying groan of some immense, wounded beast.

Then there was silence. For which he was grateful. He let the breath out of his aching lungs, and opened his eyes.

Nothing moved. Nothing would, until he let go.

The light had shifted down into the slow red end of the visible spectrum. Across the club, the dancers were frozen in the murky haze, like an ink-wash illustration in some ancient travel guide through the more disturbing circles of Hell. He glanced back over

his shoulder and saw the girl, now with wild outflung hands, teeth clenched in the raging sway of the silenced beat and whatever crystalline substance still glittered at the rim of her nostrils. Her hair swung across her face and to one side like a raven's wing. Nathaniel could have walked back over and kissed her, and it wouldn't have been anything more to her than a hallucinated spark inside her brain's overamped circuits. He had done that kind of thing before, when he had first started out on this job and halting Time had been a new thing for him. But he'd stopped when the realization had sunk in that whatever he did, the ones he held in the grip of his power would always have something he could never have. There wasn't a stolen kiss hot enough to thaw the ice that had formed around his heart.

He walked farther across the locked-down tomb that had been the club's dance floor, before he'd willed it otherwise. He looked up at the ceiling's high-domed skylight. Frozen rivulets of rain streaked the glass panes; the storm clouds hung low enough to be edged by the glow of neon from the streets outside. A bright, jagged tangle of lightning cracked the night sky, caught before it could flash back into the dark.

He looked back down and stared at the crowd for another moment. He knew he should be getting on with the job, the reason he had come to the club. But the work he had done already tonight—this was the last one, the last name on the list he carried inside his head—had left him more than tired. Envy and disgust soured his guts.

One thing to stop Time. Another to waste it. Nathaniel headed for the back of the club, brushing past the frenzied, motionless bodies. He knew without glancing over his shoulder—he'd seen it before—that he'd left something behind. His shadow was still there, caught where the reddened light had still been in wave motion, before he'd stopped that as well.

He kept walking, shadowless now.

* * *

Should've waited, Nathaniel told himself, *until I got where I needed to be*. That was one of the main problems with stopping Time: if people were in the way before, when they were still moving, they were ten times as much of an obstruction after they'd been frozen in place.

Especially someplace like the back of a nightclub, where people went to do the things they didn't want to be seen doing in public. He squeezed past the inert, inconvenient bodies in the tightly packed corridor behind the stage. Some of them were caught against the walls in full-on, stand-up sexual passion, hands and faces all over each other's sweating bodies; they probably wouldn't have noticed him pushing his way past, even if all the world's clocks had still been ticking.

There were others, more furtive and hyperaware of their surroundings, their paranoid, over-the-shoulder scans of the darkened space stapled to their visages by Nathaniel's power. Beneath the dangling lightbulbs and the asbestos-wrapped ductwork, they stood trapped in tight knots, their hands caught passing folded wads of money and receiving little foil-wrapped bundles in exchange.

He managed to get past the various deals going down, both sex- and chemical-driven, all the way to the toilets at the rear of the building. He shoved open the men's room door and stepped inside.

More bodies were frozen in place. Some of them were caught hunched over the white porcelain sinks, vomiting up the hard kick of whatever they had purchased in the corridor outside. Others splashed cold water straight from the taps into their smoke-reddened eyes.

Nathaniel stood in the center of the tiled space, searching for someone. Someone in particular.

“You’ve done well.” A soft, emotionless voice spoke behind him. “Your powers are developing ... immensely.”

He looked behind himself. And saw Death.

“Thanks,” said Nathaniel. “I’ve been getting a lot of practice lately.”

“Indeed.” Death’s pallid face remained expressionless.

“Maybe ... a little too much, actually.”

Death slowly nodded. “Ten years you’ve worked for me. Without complaint.” Death lowered his head to peer into his apprentice’s eyes. “You’ve become nearly as proficient in these arts as me. I confess I find it surprising that you speak of weariness now. Now, when you’re so close to being that for which I purchased you.”

This kind of talk drew a layer of discomfort on top of the fatigue Nathaniel already suffered. Death had treated him kindly enough for the last ten years. Better than Nathaniel’s own father would have. He had no complaints. But even so, whenever he came along on what he called Death’s reaping rounds, a tension grew inside him. He had come to dread each encounter with those whose names Death gave him.

“Come on.” Nathaniel looked away from his master. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Very well.” Death’s reply was as flat and uninflected as always. “This way.”

Death led him down the row of stalls at the back of the men’s room, then pointed to one of the thin metal doors. With the flat of his own hand, Nathaniel shoved it open.

A young guy knelt beside the toilet, but wasn’t hurling up his guts. Instead, he had a pocket mirror set out on the seat’s lid, with three lines of glistening white powder reflected on the shiny glass. From the pocket of his suit jacket protruded a ripped-open envelope, which had held the six-figure quarterly bonus from the hedge fund company where he was a junior stockbroker. Sweat pasted the guy’s hair to his forehead as he looked up with an angry scowl on his narrow face, a twenty-dollar bill rolled into a tube in one hand. “What the hell do you want?”

“You already know.” Death spoke in a whisper. “It’s time.”

Red-rimmed eyes snapping wide, the stockbroker scrambled to his feet. He looked up higher, as if finally noticing the silence, the pounding techno shut down with the other processes of Time. Panicking, he tried to shove his way out of the stall, but Nathaniel caught him with one hand against his thin shoulder. But the stockbroker got far enough to see out into the men’s room; the sight of the figures frozen statuelike at the sinks and urinals visibly horrified him. He backed away, trembling hands upraised.

Nathaniel stepped forward. “There’s no way to fight this. So, for your own good, try to relax. It won’t hurt, I promise.”

“But ... It can’t be happening. I’m still so young.”

“Age has nothing to do with it.”

He heard the soft, agonized moan that escaped the stockbroker’s lips. He felt sorry for the man. Just as he’d felt sorry for all of them. But there was a job to be done. He went on, despite the man’s mounting fear.

“It’s all right.” Nathaniel laid a hand back on the stockbroker’s shoulder. “There’s nothing to be afraid of...” He slowly nodded, trying to reassure the man. “Just take it easy. Death isn’t the end. Not completely.”

The man turned away, unwilling to listen to the hard, simple truth. But Nathaniel knew that he understood, at least a little bit, what was about to take place.

Death slipped past Nathaniel and reached out to the man in the stall. His hand, with no nails at the ends of the fingers, might have been something fashioned from translucent candle wax. As Nathaniel watched, he could feel the metal panels trembling around them, echoing the man’s pulse. The vibration hammered at his own spine, too, as the man’s heartbeat raced faster and louder. The figure underneath Death’s pale hands writhed in fear, his hands pressing at his own chest in an attempt to stop the glow that had started to rise within it. The light of the man’s soul burst through Death’s outspread fingers, hard and searing enough to blind. Nathaniel twisted away, shielding his eyes. Burned on his retinas was the blurred image of the stockbroker’s rib cage, and the fiery ball pressed against it.

He turned farther, so that Death would not witness the agony that was mirrored in his own face, too, as the soul rose up. That dark suffering never ended; it returned with every soul that he saw gathered. All Nathaniel could do was hide his agony within himself, so that his master did not see.

Behind him, he could hear the body jolting against the side of the stall. And a smaller, sharper noise, as one by one the pins, which had held the divine and unsullied essence prisoner inside the corrupted flesh, snapped. The last one broke apart, and Nathaniel could sense the light slowly gathering itself into the air.

The soul floated free for a moment, caught between Death’s waxen hands. Then, with a whispered incantation, Death lifted it further into the air and released it from the mortal world forever—sending it away to the distant realm of Purgatory, where its sins would be judged and its eternal fate pronounced.

The brilliance faded; soon enough, the pain Nathaniel had endured would diminish as well. He turned around again and saw the lifeless, blank-eyed corpse slumped between the toilet and the side of the stall. He tried to slow his own racing pulse, taking one deep breath after another. This part of the job was over.

Something had gone wrong. The pain filling his chest—it didn’t pass, as it always had before. It sharpened, as though his heart were seized in a steel-taloned fist, tighter and tighter. A new fear, dark and unrecognizable, coiled around his spine.

Dizzied by his own unfamiliar panic, he gripped the stall’s door to keep from falling. He could hear Death’s musing words.

“Why are they always surprised?” Death sounded almost puzzled, even though it was the same question he had asked so many times before. “By something they know will come. From the moment they are born—they know.”

Nathaniel tried to answer. But couldn’t. The knifelike pain—blazing as it was sharp—had stabbed him when he had felt the fiery ball rising from the man’s chest. Now it grew as large as the world, annihilating every thought. He screamed in agony, and the floor swung toward his face.

“Nathaniel...”

As consciousness faded, he was dimly aware of Death standing above him.

“What has happened to you?”

Through the bathroom's one small window, he could see the frozen lightning, caught as it streaked across the night sky. Somewhere, out beyond the rain and the stars, the gears of Time started up again. But not inside Nathaniel. In there, it was just blackness and silence ...

Then nothing.

2.

Blake's worn-out boots hit the ground exactly as the lightning flash divided the night into jagged halves. Rain-soaked cracks and gouges in the ancient leather mirrored the white electricity above. The rumbling sky was the only sound; the broken soles seemed to make no impact at all on the cargo depot's sodden concrete.

Anyone watching might have thought he was just another ragged beggar—the city was full of them. But beggars—real ones—moved slow, one leaden shuffle after another. And this one moved fast. Glimpsed, then gone before the darkness filled up the crack that the lightning had rent through the night sky.

The wooden train carriage was empty and silent now, as though nothing more than a ghost had departed from it. A few damp splinters, brushed free by Blake's hands, drifted onto the oily gravel at the platform's edge; the freight door might have opened on its own accord as the train had slowed, so quick had been the man's touch upon it. His matted dreadlocks had trailed behind his head as he darted to the ground. Up ahead, the diesel locomotive gasped out its final sulphurous exhaust, winding to a stop.

The rain barely touched his face, deep mahogany beneath the dirt and grease smudged on it. Crouching on one knee where he had landed, he quickly scanned the freight platform, then sprang to his feet.

Yard Bulls, the private cops hired to keep drifters off the railway's rolling stock, glared at Blake as he slipped past the stenciled crates crowding the platform. The Bulls' eyes tightened as water trickled from the drooping brims of their hats onto the upturned collars of their rain-heavy coats—but they didn't pull their shotguns out from beneath and yell at him to stop. Any other time, the man's appearance—his long, matted hair, his grime-blackened hands, and the crudely stitched-up tears in his fraying overcoat—would have given the Bulls perfect license to splay him out, their boot heels pinning his wrists to the concrete. But the way the Rottweilers cringed and tugged at the leash chains grasped in the Bull's black-gloved hands, paws scrabbling at the wet concrete to put as much distance as possible between themselves and this spectral intruder—that gave their masters enough sullen wisdom to let the man disappear from view. These days, there were plenty of other, slower vagrants to bully. There would at least be a chance of catching ones like that.

Farther in from the tracks, the iron overhang cast the platform into nocturnal shadows, their edges rendered hard by the halogens crudely mounted above, power cables looped from one arching girder to the next. The raw, wooden flanks of unclaimed freight containers had been pried open by those desperate enough to risk sneaking past the station's guards. The cheap splendor of Asian toys, spilling from the broken crates, had been imbedded into the concrete like a slurried mosaic of bright-colored plastic, the tiny fragments still sharp enough to draw blood from incautious

fingertips. As the beggar moved catlike past the decaying freight, his momentary step raised no dust from the shards.

Another crackle of lightning broke across the night; Blake's narrow shadow leapt across the crates. He halted and looked behind himself, the grimy dreadlocks tracing across his shoulders.

A shift in wind blew the rain beneath the overhang and closer to his face. He could feel soot-blackened rivulets crawling beneath the rag knotted at his throat. The muscles of his chest and spine, tightened from days of hard jostling as he had slumped in the corner of an empty freight car, now began to ease. This place looked like hell—which he had known it would—but he was still oddly relieved to have reached it at last.

Wanted to come here ... A frown tugged at Blake's mouth, the rain collecting in one downturned corner. *Why?* That was what puzzled him. Why would anybody want to drag their sorry ass to this dump? Even somebody who had been born here, the way he had—nobody ever got homesick for this. A guy would need to be a glutton for punishment to have managed to claw his way out, and then make his way back here again.

A fragment of the answer came into his consciousness, the dark ebbing from a corner of his memory, as though the freight platform's searing halogen beams had managed to penetrate his skull. He had come back here to kill somebody—that much he could remember. Which was enough for now. The knowledge comforted him. Now all he had to do was find someplace to sleep off the weariness of his long traveling, and the rest would come to him in the morning. It always did.

Shouts and yelling broke into his thoughts. From somewhere farther down the platform, where there weren't any lights, just the shadows of crates and boxes that had been plundered and abandoned so long ago that they slouched together like damp straw huts in a moonless forest. The shouts weren't the fun kind but instead shrieked with panic.

He swiveled around to look. For a moment, it seemed to him as though the storm itself had come onto the platform, its wind rolling across the concrete. A torrent of fluttering rags surged between the freight containers, heading toward him. It took another second for him to see the fear-contorted faces, and realize that the cries came from their mouths.

"They're cleaning us out!" The rags were men, or what had been men, but were now just the homeless creatures who found what shelter they could in the station's unlit tunnels and corners. "Tons of 'em!" The nearest, his running gimped by an improvised crutch under his skinny bare arm, locked a panicked stare into Blake's eyes. "Run! Go!"

A tide of other homeless men crashed over the emaciated figure; their rag-swaddled feet trampled over his back. Blake let them sweep by, then looked down to see what they had left behind. The cripple, facedown, was still breathing, red leaking from his mouth and bubbling with each panting gasp. Blake reached down and pulled the broken figure to his feet. The wet sounds from the homeless man's mouth were no longer words; he clawed himself away from Blake's chest, and flopped birdlike after the rest of the ragged pack.

Blake peered into the darkness from which the homeless had burst into view. The

platform was quiet again, but he knew they were still around, probably cowering under the freight carriages and peeking out at him, to see what he would do. Which was to turn and step into that dark, just to see what had spooked them all so bad.

It was still a mystery, even when he stood in the middle of the homeless men's abandoned encampment. Water leaked through the soot and grime of the tunnel's low roof, pattering like soft finger touches on the cobbled-together shelters, the cardboard boxes with nests of rags inside, the sleeping bags so begrimed with filth and the sweat of bad dreams that they shone in the trace of light like cocoons of black silk. Food rubbish, plastic bags, and little Styrofoam boxes scavenged out of the city's alley Dumpsters drifted to his ankles as he stepped through the crowded space. A cooking fire smoldered in the center of the boxes, a mold-spotted potato skewed on a length of rebar propped above it.

Blake heard more shouts coming from farther down the tunnel. These running steps were hard-soled, though, and the shouts rang with the fierce pleasure that came with clenched fists and truncheons snapping bones.

"There's one! Get the filthy bastard!"

He saw another pack of men, younger, not yet broken by time and the world, running toward him. Their shaved heads shone as bright as the knobbed toes of their cherry-red bovine boots, khaki fatigues tucked inside the tight, shin-high laces. Spittle flecked their yelling mouths, and their wide-open, excited eyes glistened with the joy of anticipated carnage.

Blake didn't move, just watched impassively as the skinheads charged toward him.

"Mess him up, Charlie!"

The first one's suspenders tightened over his sleeveless T-shirt as he skidded to a stop less than a yard away, braced himself, then swung a dented baseball bat in a flat arc toward Blake's ribs.

"God-damn—" The skinhead's eyes widened farther as he gawped in amazement. The blow hadn't hit its mark, but had been stopped instead by the palm of Blake's outstretched hand. The force of the impact traveled back up the bat, hard enough to nearly throw the skinhead off his feet.

"Whuddaya screwing around for?" One of the skinhead's companions shrieked in fury. "Get him!"

Blake plucked the bat from the skinhead's white-knuckled fists as easily as pulling a twig from a shoulder-high tree. He swung the big end up and set it between the skinhead's goggling eyes. A short, fast jab sent the thug toppling backward, blood streaming down from the crushed bridge of his pug nose.

It seemed sad to Blake that these kids didn't have as much sense as the Yard Bulls, who had at least known when to leave well enough alone. If they had turned tail and run, either dragging their buddy with them or leaving him where he lay, they might have had a better evening of it.

Instead, their howls rang louder and more outraged against the bricks of the tunnel's roof. Eyes reddened, the tight pack clawed and scabbled at each other's tangling arms in their haste to throw themselves on him.

More shouts sounded, coming from another direction. He turned his head and saw another tunnel branching off from this one, filled with another churning pack, their weapons waved above their bald heads as they ran to join the party.

He brought his gaze back around in time to lay his forearm across the mouth of the first one to reach him, breaking the yellow teeth to stumps and sending the skinhead staggering back against the others, gagging on his own blood and ripped tongue. Blake's hand shot up, grabbing the nail-studded slat swinging down toward his skull. He wrenched it from another skinhead's grasp and brought it around hard across two of their faces, tearing open one's jaw before imbedding the bloodied nail into the other's neck.

That didn't slow down the rest; he hadn't thought it would. It never did. The second pack was racing toward him now. Their shouts were mingled with giddy laughter.

"We got ya now, asshole!"

True enough—they had spread out across the width of the platform as they ran, pushing and kicking aside the smaller crates, swarming houndlike over the bigger ones. Their black-nailed hands clawed toward him—

But caught nothing. Stupefied, the skinheads gaped as the beggar ran up the tunnel wall, the ragged hem of his overcoat fluttering behind him. Before they could react, he had already grabbed two by their necks, cracking their skulls against each other. As they dropped, a spinning kick, launched higher than Blake's own head, smashed bloody the faces of another pair.

The others finally reacted—but not before Blake was able to dive past their outstretched arms. He landed yards away, poised for only a split second on his fingertips and the balls of his feet, then leapt from the concrete's edge and onto the iron tracks. A solid wall of freight train loomed ahead, trapping him as the combined packs rushed close behind him—

Blake didn't slow. Instead, he dove shoulder-first toward the sharp-edged wheels, swinging his cracked leather boots above his own head with enough velocity to set him in a horizontal run across the locked carriage door. Rain fell in the skinheads' faces as they stared up at him. He bent his knees and kicked himself away from the carriage, hurtling above the shaved heads and landing in a crouch behind them.

They didn't have time enough to turn around. He grabbed the necks of the two at the rear of the pack, hard enough to hear bone crack like thick-shelled eggs. That gave him enough room to launch a roundhouse kick, dropping another pair. A steel rod swept toward his knees, missing him by inches as he sprang upward. The rod clanged on the platform as he dove forward, catching the attacker with a forearm under the chin and crushing his trachea. He dropped the gagging body in time to whip his elbow into the next one's face, a blossom of red bursting from where the nose and mouth had been.

One of the remaining skins snatched up the steel rod and drove its end toward Blake's gut. He fell backward to avoid the rod, then spun onto his side as it arced down, grazing the back of his skull before its tip sent shards flying from the concrete. He rolled back onto his spine and grabbed the rod, yanking the skinhead off his feet and catching him with a heel to the gut. Red vomit splattered Blake's ragged trouser leg, the skinhead's eyes rolling blank as he dropped like a punctured balloon.

There were only a couple still in front of him, the others having turned and fled back through the homeless camp. A simple uppercut took out one of them, who had been too stunned even before that to scurry away. That left Blake, knuckles scraped raw by broken teeth and bone fragments, gazing at a skinny runt in a stained

undershirt, barely old enough to shave.

“Kid...” It had been so long since he had spoken out loud that his voice rasped deep in his throat. “You just standing there isn’t making me any happier.”

The young skinhead just trembled and covered his ashen face with his hands.

Have it your way. He obliged the kid by picking him up, hoisting him over his head, and tossing him onto the railway tracks. The kid bounced once, then scampered away. Blake watched him, then turned back toward the empty platform.

He figured it would be morning before the homeless recovered enough courage to come creeping out from beneath the wooden freight carriages and back to their cardboard hovels. That would give him at least a few hours use of the warmest nest he could find, to sleep off the fatigue from his long traveling and the fight with the skinheads. And maybe something to eat—the recalled vision of the potato charring on a stick roused a grumble in his empty stomach.

Just how tired he was didn’t register until he got jumped again. If his senses hadn’t been dulled, he might have heard them coming up from behind. But before he knew it, as he was leaning down to lift the flap of one of the empty cardboard boxes and check the rags inside for lice, the back of his skull seemed to explode in a red-tinged, shimmering wave. Teeth clenched against the dizzying pain, he turned his head enough to see his attacker, face crusted with blood from the struggle before, whipping the steel rod down for another blow. It caught him on his ear and one side of his jaw; he could feel the rebound against his skull as he toppled onto his back.

Another skinhead planted knees on his chest and a choking hand at his throat. A nasty little short-bladed knife drove toward his ribs.

He avoided the knife by rolling onto his shoulder, shoving aside the rags and cardboard box. The blade missed his chest, driving through the front and back of his overcoat instead, the sharp metal point pinning the grime-darkened cloth to a crack in the platform.

With the last of his strength, Blake lurched forward onto his knees. The pain and blood from before was nothing to what happened next. The skin over his rib cage ripped away, the raw muscles beneath clenching in torment.

The two skinheads backed up, gazing wide-eyed at the sight before them. The rod dropped clanging onto the platform.

With the sound of ripping gristle, Blake staggered to his feet. Still pinned to the concrete, the red-drenched overcoat tore from his shoulder and dangling arm, revealing how it and the raw flesh beneath were fastened together, as though some demented surgeon had imagined himself a tailor, combining skin and cloth into a garment that could never be shed.

The pain wiped out all of Blake’s thoughts. He might have stopped before, when the gangs had run away—but not now. Now it was too late.

His blood-spattered hand shot forward, grabbing one skinhead by the throat. He squeezed until he could feel the cartilage grinding and snapping, then slung the dead body like a club, knocking the other figure to the ground. He ground his boot into the second one’s face, until the hands stopped clawing at his leg and dropped away, lifeless.

Blake slumped down onto his knees, in the widening pool of his own blood. He had just enough strength left to tug the overcoat free from the knife, then wrap the joined

cloth and flesh tighter about himself, his fist clenched just above the pounding of his heart.

He let his head drop, eyes fluttering closed. The groan of pain and despair from his whitening lips was all that was needed to damn the curse that had made him this way.

3.

Only a madman would tend a garden in weather such as this.

The dark storm clouds hung low in the sky, filling every direction visible to the naked eye, from one horizon beyond the city's tall office towers to the masses of craggy hills that ranged even farther in the distance. Rain pelted down, hammering the streets as well as the people and cars on them. The gutters ran like rivers, swift and engulfing, the muddied waters sloshing across the sidewalks and into the doorsteps of the grey buildings. Yet somehow there were never enough streaming torrents to wash away all of the city's filth and grime. The rain sluiced down along the buildings, leaving them just as filthy and blackened with soot as before.

The madman was so lost in the swirling tatters of his thoughts that he might not even have felt the lash of the rain upon his bent back. Through close-shaven stubble, his scalp shone pale and wet as he scrabbled through the contents of the frayed gunnysack at his feet.

With elaborate, methodical care, the madman set out the elements of his rituals. From the sack, he took out a child's toy, a plastic action figure, worn and scuffed. Something that he had rescued from a rubbish can set out at the curb. The broken ends of a wooden toothpick had been stuck to the doll's forehead, giving it what might have been horns. The plastic skin of the toy's face had been painstakingly colored red with a marker. One of its feet had been snapped off and replaced with the cloven hoof of a farm-toy goat. The madman knelt down and set the ugly figure in place, digging its plastic feet into the wet ground so it would stand menacingly upright.

There was still more to be set out for the madman's devotions to be complete. He dug more small figures from the sack, then knelt down with them at one side of a massive peach tree at the center of the garden square. Its withered, leafless branches raked like skeletal fingers through the rain-filled air above his head. When he stood back up, three more plastic action figures stood on the rain-soaked ground. Rescued from the trash, each now held a twig in its small, upraised hands, as though brandishing a weapon. The madman stepped back, nodding his head in approval of the miniature tableau.

"You know that tree's dead, don't you?"

The voice wasn't one of those that nattered and yelped inside the madman's head. Even he could tell that these words were real. Anyone in the deserted square might have heard them.

Startled, the madman looked back over his hunched shoulder. Across the sodden rubbish and brown weeds straggling up between the paving stones, a figure sat on one of the broken benches at the side. Vandals' boots had broken apart the bench's wooden planks, leaving just space enough for one person to sit. The dim moonlight that

managed to slide through the shafts of rain revealed only the glint of blue eyes watching the madman.

“You’d better get away from there—” The madman didn’t like having his private rituals observed. “Before you get yourself in trouble.”

“Trouble?” The figure sitting on the bench sounded amused. “What kind of trouble?”

The madman dragged his gunnysack closer to the blackened trunk of the dead tree.

“This place is dangerous,” the madman muttered darkly. “*He* doesn’t like people coming in without his permission.”

“He?” A fragment of a smile emerged in the darkness. “Who exactly are you talking about, old man?”

“Him!” The madman could tell that he was being mocked. Face set in quivering anger, he pointed to the red-faced, cloven-hoofed toy figure imbedded in the ground. “If he sees you here, you’re done for. I can promise you that!”

“But how would he see me?”

“From up there, you idiot!” The madman pointed beyond the figure sitting on the bench, to the black office tower at one side of the garden square.

The figure on the bench didn’t bother to look up. “What’s that thing sticking out of his chest?” He nodded toward the horned doll in front of the peach tree. “Is that a nail?”

“That’s because they killed him!” The madman’s voice rose in demented triumph. “Look—it’s gone right through him.” He snatched up the doll and held it out before himself. With the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, he grasped the iron nail that had been thrust into it. The plastic squeaked as he pulled the nail out a bit, then shoved it back in. “With a great big spear—just like this! Killed the evil bastard dead!”

In the shadows at the side of the garden square, a scowl replaced the smile on the watching figure’s face.

“Killed him?” A sneer sounded in his voice. “But I thought he lives in that building? How can he do that if he’s dead?”

“I ... I don’t know,” muttered the madman. He pawed at the side of his head, as though he could somehow dig through the bone of his skull and release some of the chaotic images trapped inside. “It’s all ... mixed up. Maybe it hasn’t happened yet. But it will!” His eyes shone with absolute certainty. “I know it will! I can see it! As clear as I can see you sitting there! It’s all true—I know it is!”

“And who is it...” The watching figure’s voice softened as he studied the madman crouched near the dead pear tree. “Who’s going to kill him?”

“The three of them, of course—who else? Look—can’t you see them?” With demented certainty, the madman squatted down and laid the red-faced doll at the other toys’ feet, the fatal nail sticking up from its chest.

“Just like that! That’s how they did it! That’s how it’ll be!” The madman gazed down at the toys, fixated by the depiction of their victory. “This one here—” He tapped a dirty fingertip on the nearest one’s plastic head. “This one’s name is *Courage!*” His hand moved to the next. “And this is *Self-Sacrifice!*”

“And the last one?” The sneer in the watching figure’s voice had hardened to contempt. “What is he called?”

“That’s the one the Devil fears the most!” The madman nodded slowly. “His name

is *Resolve*.”

Goaded into a flurry of action, the madman dragged more objects out of his tattered gunnysack. With the rain sluicing down his upraised face, he hung three more action figures on the lowest of the dead tree’s branches. They slowly turned about as they dangled there, with crude cut-out paper wings taped to their shoulders.

“It’ll bloom—” The madman muttered low to himself as he draped the leafless branches with salvaged holiday tinsel. “I know ... I know it will!” He stepped back from the tree, looking at everything with which he had adorned it. The effect was of a handmade shrine, a place of single-minded devotion. “There’ll be leaves ... and fruit! Like you’ve never seen! And on the day that it blooms, there’ll be an army, too...”

He drew out handfuls of other, smaller plastic figurines from the sack. Toy soldiers molded from dark green plastic—he carefully arrayed them in the grass at the tree’s base, surrounding the three action figures with their twig weapons raised above the one toppled over, with its red-painted face and toothpick horns.

“Just ... just like that!” He looked over at the figure watching from the shadowed bench. “But the secret is, this army, it’s invincible! It’s so tough that no one can beat it. Not even him!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!” The madman stood up from his crouch, shivering in excited certainty. “When they come out to fight him, then you’ll see. Because then it’ll be all over!” He pointed to the dark office tower. “Over for him!”

“You seem very sure of yourself.” The watching figure tilted his head to one side, studying the madman. “How do you know all this?”

“Because the archangels told me!” The madman pointed to the winged action figures dangling from the branches. “They know everything! They planned it all.” His voice turned hushed and reverent. “They planted the tree, you see. To bring hope. To the people ... to everyone...”

He didn’t wait for any more words from the figure sitting on the bench. More objects came out of the gunnysack as the madman knelt down. Candle stubs, with burnt-black wicks at the center of the pale wax. With a half-empty book of matches, he managed to light them, their small flames wavering in the storm’s cold wind. He leaned back where he knelt in the wet grass, delighting in the effect of the trembling glow, then glancing over his shoulder to see if the watching figure had noted it as well.

Just as he did so, a car passed by on the street beyond, the beam of its headlights sweeping through the garden. That was enough to illuminate the figure sitting on the bench. The madman drew back, his eyes widening at what he saw.

A man—but something more than that. Tall and powerfully built, in the full strength of his early fifties. That was what the figure looked like. Garbed in an expensive cashmere coat that was somehow not dampened by the rain that drenched the garden square, and with a leonine, tawny hue to his skin and hair, as though descended from the ancient kings of Persia. The hard, chiseled planes of his face spoke of a barely bridled virility, the kind possessed by those sharp-clawed predators at the top of the world’s food chain.

The headlights swung off into the darkness, the garden square falling back into the night’s deep shadows.

Cowering back against the dead tree, the madman kept his wary gaze upon the

watching figure. In the chaos of his thoughts, a dreadful realization was forming.

“What else,” the figure said slowly, “do you know?”

“There ... there’ll be a battle.” As though hypnotized, the madman couldn’t stop himself from speaking. And revealing the rest of the prophecy lodged in his addled brain. “When the tree springs to life and blooms for all the world to see...” He pressed his knotted hands against his chest. “That’s when the people will know that the day has come. The day of the final battle. That’s when the three of them and their army will face down the Devil and his demons. They’ll fight—and that battle will decide the future of us all...”

Another set of headlights, coming from one of the cross streets beyond, sent their harsh beam straight into the other man’s face. His eyes now shone with the piercing, inhuman blue of burning sulphur.

The madman shrank back against the blackened trunk, terrified. The beam from the passing headlights disappeared. But the other man’s eyes remained lit up, bright as two intense flames.

“Who...” The madman found his voice. “Who are you?”

“Why don’t you ask your archangels?” The watching figure sneered at the madman’s terror.

The figure stood up from the broken bench and walked forward, into the center of the abandoned garden square. The madman’s sight dropped to the man’s feet. He could see now that the figure’s left foot was misshapen and heavy, producing a dragging limp.

“I know...” He looked up at the man’s sneering face. “I know who you are...”

“As you said—” The Devil towered above the cowering lunatic. “I don’t like anyone coming here without my permission.”

“I ... I’ll go. Right now...”

“And then to hear all this ... this nonsense.” The Devil glared down at him, face tightening with rage. “Just as if I’d never had to listen to it before. I know all about your archangels, and your heroes, and their invincible army. I’ve been listening to that fairy tale for centuries. And you know something?” Eyes burning even fiercer, he leaned down toward the madman. “It’s never come true. And it never will.”

The madman crouched down lower, but there was nowhere else to go.

“But all the same, no one has ever been fool enough to come to my front door and talk about it to my face before.” The Devil squeezed his hand into a fist. “Not until now.”

The Devil looked up from the quivering figure at his feet. He brought his gaze to the paper-winged toys dangling from the leafless tree. They burst into flames, spreading to the tinsel draped across the branches.

Crying out in dismay, the madman sprang to his feet, trying to beat out the fire racing across the tree. The flames spiraled like luminescent serpents down its trunk, engulfing the candle stubs and action figures set out in the grass.

The fire dwindled away in seconds, its purpose accomplished. The dead tree remained undamaged. But the ashes drifted from its branches, like black snow settling upon the shapeless blotches of melted plastic below.

“You...” The madman turned his face, tears mingling with rain, toward the Devil standing behind him. From somewhere inside himself, amidst his disordered thoughts,