

## THE SKULKER

By  H. Amannensis Sharkchild

It came from the distance with patience and dedication. From a point of origin lost beyond the seas of matter, it traveled, setting out upon a path to reach the destination of which it chose—ages before knowledge was an aspect of existence. Once the path was formed, it did not stray—not for time or desire or any other manifestation of choice. It made but one decision in its life and no more. Perhaps it knew the stars, or perhaps it knew the art of divination, for its entrance into linear transfiguration was immaculate. If it left too soon or strayed too late, it would miss its goal and perish in shame. Like threads of fate, it knew the lengths of everything that lived, from birth to death.

Its character was benign, but its intentions were demented. When considering the borders and grooves of both things good and evil, this entity succeeded in being something that could be categorized as neither. Everything that encompassed its purpose was against the very grain of what was believed, in fashion of faith and the calibrations of spirituality; purely, it destroyed belief in all of its shapes, forms, and functions. It did not think ill upon anyone or anything, nor did it have affection; it did what it did for it was what it knew.

This thing of extraordinary life and unlimited boundaries was no inhabitant of realms most traveled, but, like the bees and the flowers, its catastrophic ways were a hidden element of nature. The event of its arrival was very rarely seen, but I did witness it, and that, unlike the rest of humans present and past, was how I learned so much about what I call, the skulker.

It came on the night I visited my grandfather for the last time. He rested asleep in the dreary sheets of his hospice bed while I sat reading in one of the two chairs lining his bedside. The television was on, but its sound was barely a hum. On the wall, the clock ticked irregularly loud. The dimness of dusk began to clutter the ambiance of the hall outside and it crept into my grandfather's room, mixing and changing the hues and contrasts of light and darkness.

My eyes were beginning to get sluggish; the words on the pages of Dan Simmons' *Hyperion* were blurring and becoming annoyingly incomprehensible. I was about ready to set the book down and drift off to sleep when the air I was breathing began to gain a texture and taste that lingered on the back of my throat. I tried to swallow it down, but it held fast and filled my mouth with an awful aroma. And in another attempt at relieving the strange residue, I coughed, but I had no greater luck.

My grandfather awoke briefly at the sound and turned in my direction. He stared at me for a moment and then fell back asleep.

Following the cough, I sat the book down, collected myself, rested my head back against the wall, and tried to drift to sleep, but the potent air would not let up. I could not go to sleep, so, instead, I stood up and started a walk down the halls of the hospice. As I moved away from my grandfather's room, the air loosened and dried, and my breaths became comfortable once again. I took a big, long breath of the fresh air to cleanse my throat and lungs of what had previously been there.

Even though I quickly felt better, I continued to wander around the hospice. I passed confused souls sitting in their wheelchairs, speaking to the

clandestine presences hovering invisibly before them; I peered into rooms where ghosts of people screamed in pain and loneliness, weeping and shouting as if they had returned to an age of unmet nurture; and I avoided eye contact as wearied minds reached out to me with their words, calling upon me as their lost kin.

The hospice was a sad place that neither life or death could save. Condemnation was its palette and the colors expressed the nightmares that became the finale of so many different pasts, whether bright or hazy.

I noticed toward the latter end of my walk that the residents still awake began to speak in different tones and expressions. They gripped their words tightly as if choking them. But, most frightening of all, was the sudden intelligence behind the words. They sounded acute and purposeful, and the topic within them started to link itself between those speaking. What they spoke of was unsettling. They spoke of themselves as vessels of healthy grain, waiting for their turns to be harvested beneath the scythes of distant witnesses that clambered between the corridors of nothingness. They whispered of feasts spreading across vast distances, accumulating glory for the coming of future generations.

Finding my nerves scathed to their cores, I ran back to my grandfather's room, each of my steps thudding in loud echoes throughout the halls. By the time I had reached the room, the event of the skulker had already begun.

My grandfather was still asleep in his bed, but I had the dire urgency to awaken him for comfort—for interaction of any sane kind. I moved forward towards my grandfather to lay my hand upon him, but when I reached the proximity of space but two feet from him, I became stuck in the air. I could feel the weight of the air pressed against the front half of my body. As I took breathes, a thick contingency of gas vibrated down my throat, barely giving me the oxygen I needed to remain conscious. The air contained the same, thick fetid plague I had noticed earlier. My eyes, to my undying horror, were stuck as well. I could not blink or move them in any direction other than the one they entered the immurement——facing my grandfather. Soon following their entrapment, they began to burn with dryness.

I felt like screaming, but I could not fully embrace the sound. My tongue was also sealed in rigidity. Instead of screaming, I moaned, bringing desperation to life from the pit of my stomach.

After what seemed like several minutes, a pulse emanated through the thick air holding me in place. And then again there was a pulse, and again, and again, in an irregular pattern. Once the pulsing began, it never ceased. Through the touch of the pulses, I could sense things: visions, words, and presence. Like putty molding around an object and retaining the object's imprint, the pulses brought forth sonar-like imagery into my mind. I saw the skulker and I saw its shape. I saw its path and I saw its wake.

Un-numbered centuries of traveling led to the fruition of a single, epic moment of meaning. The skulker wrapped around my grandfather and pressed itself beneath his flesh. It flexed its unexplainable mass and then consecrated the man that it held, folding him completely inside out before pulsing him into pieces against the shield of air. For a moment, the pieces of his body hung in suspension, as if frozen in time and space. And then, slowly, each piece began to burn as if it were an ember, glowing and shining. Eventually, the pieces became nothing but orbs of pure light, and in this state, they bolted forward

through everything, cutting like spears through the layers of physicality and its philosophical jargon, leaving windows of clear sight that led through all places unimaginable and unreachable. There, in these far off places, the pieces—the seeds—of my grandfather were sent out to become the offspring and future voyagers of the skulker, carrying off the fragments of new life. Once they had been delivered, the portals closed and the air softened.

I fell forward onto my grandfather's bed. I remained there for a few minutes, recalling my grandfather and the memories we shared. Then, I mourned his departure.