

**The Deer Skull**

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From the earliest days of my childhood, my father had groomed me with a most heavy hand, seeking to mold me into his own brilliant sculpture of humanity. Unlike many of my peers, I was raised without a mother, with only my father to shape me into the man I would become. In fact, I know not who my mother even was- my father had simply discovered me as an infant in the woods, cold and starving, unable to survive on my own. It is for this reason that, regardless of his enslavement to liquor- and the maddening wrath it would instill in him- I had always greatly respected my father. For he was, indeed, my father, if not in blood, teaching me all he knew, in contrast to my birth parents, who surely must have been amongst the most wretched breeds of society, abandoning their own child to the dangers of nature.

Our existence was what could be considered a privileged one. We were a moderately wealthy pair, with my father managing a successful timber business, and myself being the heir to whom he taught all his skills. Due to this occupation, we lived deep within the woods, but not to the point that we were cut off from civilization- we were not savages, after all! Like everyone

else, we possessed electricity, running water, and any other luxury shared by those from the town nearby, but our existence was nevertheless somewhat isolated. Still, we had many interactions with the town, and people would come seeking our expertise on many an occasion, and I myself often went to the bustling area on my own in search of drink and cheer. Of course, my father would punish me severely for doing such things without his permission, and he was certainly justified in his actions, but I still do not regret those days.

Of the things I was taught by my father, however, one stood out in particular: the act of hunting. My father taught me how to slay animals, how to skin their hides, how to clean the meat upon their bones, and, of course, to extract the bones themselves. My father had placed particular emphasis on these skills, so that I would never be caught vulnerable in the wild, as I was in my infancy. The art of the kill was always I was grateful for this, but I was also stricken by a more personal fascination. Bones, of both man and beast, had always been a topic of keen interest to me. At the end of nearly all my hunts, I would seek to claim at least one of the bones present from the deceased creature, and preserve it for my own amusement. But this was not the foolish and absurd action of trophy hunting, done for mere vanity- no- it was much more important, tied to the human condition itself! Human memory was so fickle, and it was so easy to forget even the most crucial things. But if one had a physical benchmark to draw on, they would never forget. In this sense, so long as a single bone remained of my victim, Truly, was there anything more indicative of immortality than the very symbols of mortality? My father, for his part, found the calcite infatuation to be odd, but never truly stopped it from occurring, and even instructed me on how to better hone my craft. This, too, I am grateful for. I would never be able to pursue my passion without his benevolent guidance.

My father would pass upon my twenty-first birthday, no doubt due to his heavy drinking habits. At the time, I was put into a deep depression at the loss of one so close to me, even if not my blood. Knowing that I could not live without him, I ordered that his skull be extracted from his body, and placed it within my study, so that my father's wisdom may forever ring throughout my household. Whenever the trials and tribulations of life strained my mind, I would speak to my father to calm myself, and be enlightened by his wisdom, still sharp even in death. And I could rest easy knowing that when I died, my own descendants would do the same to me. I imagined a future in which my own skull was placed upon that wall, and I, too, would bestow my own knowledge upon those who came after me. A future in which I would live forever in the minds of my children, with those sacred bones being my avatar. Yet- whether simply due to poor fortune or some fundamental issue with my condition- I would never marry, having horrid luck with women, who seemed to avoid me as if I was afflicted with some invisible sickness. It was of little consequence, of course; I knew that one day, just as my father had, I would discover a successor of my own, and raise him as my son. This search for progeny of my own would continue for many years, and I would grow more and more desperate as they went by. For if I did not follow in his footsteps, how could I ever face my resplendent father? How could I ever hope to match him?

Nevertheless, I still found pleasure in my hobby, and it would be this hobby that sealed my doom. In one of my week-long hunting trips, this one done alone instead of with my good fellows from the town over, I would discover what could only be described as an abomination. It looked like a deer, like any other deer I had slain, yet it was not! Its antlers were amongst the largest I had ever seen, such that for a moment, I felt a tinge of regret at having to end its life. It

stood motionless in the middle of a field of flowers, heedless of any danger, and around it, an aura emanated which- and I do not lie when I say this- seemed to make the wilderness around it heal, as if influenced by some otherworldly power. Taking aim with my rifle, I let loose a shot which I daresay to be the most magnificent I had ever done, tearing directly into the creature's heart. I could not help but allow a smile to cross my face at my handiwork, knowing that I had surely captured the greatest of prizes on that day.

Yet, the deer did not fall. After taking a shot which undoubtedly should have killed it instantly, it instead simply... stood there, blood leaking from the wound and staining the grass below. I rubbed my eyes, unsure of what I was looking at. For a moment, I believed that the creature had died standing up, unlikely as it was. But just as I was about to move from my cover and examine it closer, the creature's head *turned*, its bloodshot eyes staring directly at my location. I could have sworn that it seemed as if it was gazing at *me*, directly into my soul, as if stripping me down to my most base animalistic instincts. I felt a coldness enter my bones, a coldness which came not from the exterior winds, but from within, crawling upwards like a serpent escaping its skin. And then, it was over. The creature dropped to the ground face first, crumpling downward into a hap-hazard jumble of legs jutting outwards at awkward angles.

Perhaps, had I left my kill to rot within the confines of that field, I would not have fallen to such future lows. But the fear of that encounter was outweighed by excitement. Such a fascinating creature must have had an equally fascinating skeleton. It must have! So, the moment I returned to my shed with the day's bounty, I immediately got to work, stripping the creature bare with a speed and fervor which I had never displayed before. And what a specimen it was! Every joint was ideally aligned, the ribcage showed not a sign of injury, the femurs were

amongst the most durable I had ever seen, and the skull- oh, the skull! Every part of that skull was perfect, such that it defied all explanation. Such an avatar of aesthetic splendor did not deserve to languish in the wild- it would take its place in my study, with its skull manning the wall just above my father.

It did not take long for the memetic, insidious nature of that damnable skull to soon enter my brain. As I worked at my desk, I felt its empty eyes gazing at me, as if judging my every action. But this was not the warm scrutiny of my father. It was cold and calculating, just like the woods it had come from. Eventually, my curiosity got the best of me, and, as if in a trance, I placed the skull upon my face, as if a mask. Instantly, I felt that same coldness which I had felt in the woods wash over me. Yelping in surprise, I dropped the skull as if it were a bomb. Putting it back to its place of survey, I dared not touch the skull again, lest I be corrupted by whatever force it contained.

That night, the skull appeared in my dreams. It spoke to me, claiming that I was a false creature living a false life. It said that I did not understand, but soon would. To this day, I still do not understand. When I went to my study, there was an immaculate skeleton of a crow standing on my desk. I marveled at it, unsure of where it came from. Yet I could not help but feel a sense of unease, and gazed up at the deer skull. Nevertheless, I brushed it off, thinking it only my imagination. Yet, two days later, the skull appeared in my dreams once again. It claimed, in a tirade which I do not bother to summarize, to be a manifestation of my own soul- a sign of my own wickedness. A ridiculous notion, one which I did not intend to even humor. But in spite of the sheer ridiculousness of the notion, when I woke up and got ready for the day just as I always did, I could see yet another skeleton on my desk, this one of some kind of snake. The unnerving

nature of the skull, and the way it seemed to suck all the warmth out of the room, only seemed to enhance my fear of it. But I still felt that familiar sense of captivation from the skull's seemingly mystical nature, and I was resolved to not move it. I asked my father, his empty sockets still gazing upon me, what I should do with it. Move it? Store it away? I received no answer.

The next night's dream was the most intense of them all. The skull took me on a journey within my own mind, showing me memories I did not know I even had. It showed me my birth, my abandonment in the woods, my discovery by my father, and my earliest years of life. The skull called this life a betrayal, a denial of my true, animalistic nature. An absurd notion, one which I rightly pointed out, for it was my father who raised me, not some beastly creature. It laughed in response to this. Who do you think cared for your frail body before your father arrived? Who do you think ensured your survival? It was us. It was always us. And we want you back. In rage, I lunged at the cackling skull, but my arms hit nothing but air, and was wrenched from my dream.

I dared not go to my study that morning, the fear of the skull overriding all else. And so, as in every other day, I went to work as usual. Yet as I spoke to the workers, I overheard something which chilled my blood. A man on the night shift had seen something- a man wearing the skull of a deer as a mask. I felt bile rise to my throat as the implications of the words enter my brain. The skull must have been controlling me, influencing my actions while I slept! The thought terrified me. Should I simply not sleep? No, that would simply give the obscenity a greater sense of satisfaction. The moment I returned to my home, I went back to my study, heart simmering with rage, and prepared to remove the skull by force- but I stayed my

hand. Was this the right course of action? Could it still control me, even from a different distance? And, most importantly, would this be a victory? Would destroying it just give the monstrosity what it wanted, knowing that I had given in to my animalistic instincts? I pleaded with my father for advice, but once again, he was silent. This only caused my rage to simmer more, and I said words to him that I now profoundly regret. In the end, in my anger and indecision, I fell asleep within my study.

Of course, the skull returned that night, no doubt wishing to take advantage of my weakness. It did not speak this time. I called it a liar, a scoundrel, nothing more than a beast come to ruin me. Yet it still did not speak. When I awoke that morning, my head was upon my desk. I looked up, and shrieked in horror as I saw another skeleton- this one of a cat. I looked up at the skull, and back down at my hands- which, only then, did I realize were stained with dried blood. Now, let it be said that while I had killed many a beast by this point, I had never done so to a cat. What reason would there be? The killing of a cat only signified one's cruelty. There was no money to be made, no benefit for such an action. I recalled what my employee had said yesterday. No... no! That was not my fault. It was not me! It was this... this thing, this *creature*. It was the one committing these actions, not me! I felt as if my world had been upended. If this continued in the path I suspected, then I may do something horrible which I could not justify. Trembling in fear, I took the skull off the wall, went outside, and threw it into the stream, intending to wipe my hands clean of it once and for all.

When I awoke the next morning, the skull was gazing upon me, nailed to the wall parallel to my bed. And this time, it spoke to me outside of my dreams, telling me to look outside. And, to my horror, I saw what could only be the skeleton of a man, dangling from a

rope outside my window. This is your true nature, it said. This is who you are. In a fit of hysterical rage, I tore the eldritch monstrosity from the wall, and immediately stormed out of my room, descending the stairs to the door leading outside. Entering my shed, I searched frantically for my salvation from this hell, before laying my eyes upon a sledgehammer leaning against the wall. Throwing the skull to the ground, I raised the hammer above my head, and with terrible finality, brought it down upon the skull with a massive crash, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

But, alas, it was far too late to save my soul. This madness could not continue. I knew what I had to do. When the police arrived that evening, having heard of the remains which still dangled from my window, for I could not bring myself to remove them, I immediately confessed to the crime. I write this to you from a cell within a maximum security prison, the only place which a man of my deeds can remain without harming others. Yet the skull still continues to haunt me in my dreams, and I fear the day when its insidious hatred returns.

