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SPAWN

BOOK ONE: "HOUR OF THE WOLF"

(based on characters and situations created by Todd McFarlane)

adapted by

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PROLOGUE: (REBIRTH)

Dead and gone.
Dead and gone.
Al Simmons is dead.
And now he's back.
But he doesn't belong.

The Red Hook district is a bad part of Brooklyn. People live here only when they have no other place to go, its neighborhoods neglected and its streets unsafe to walk after the sun goes down. Human predators of all shapes and sizes prowl Red Hook between dusk and dawn.

Tonight a mean storm is brewing over Red Hook.

Piled purple clouds roll across the sky, the leading edge of a Canadian low pressure system. The summer day was blistering hot, the kind where dumb bored people fry an egg on the sidewalk. Now, as the clouds swarm over Red Hook, the temperature begins to drop.

Fast.

Quicksilver plummets inside thermometers and soars inside barometers. The storm transforms a cool western evening breeze from a zephyr into a gust that threatens to rage into a four-alarm gale. On the streets scraps of outdated newspapers and other castaway paper products spin in the wind. These scraps mix with every speck of curbside dirt and sand, supplying the bluster with enough shrapnel to blast anyone with common sense indoors.

Out over Upper New York Bay a chorus of thunder rumbles, echoing with the sound of tall timber being fell in a forest on the far side the horizon. Then, without warning, lightning cuts loose from the purple clouds. The lightning resembles a skeleton's hand, splintered fingers reaching at Red Hook as the thunder, suddenly overhead, batters and bangs the rafters of the sky. Windows all over the district rattle as heavy droplets of rain splatter like bugs on a windshield against their trembling panes.

The storm is here, bringing with it foul climates and ill-tidings.

In ~~the center of~~⁹ Red Hook stands an abandoned tumble-down church. Long-time residents claim it is haunted. These oldsters report that evil men practiced black magic and committed human sacrifices in the church during the 1930s. Since then only swallows, pigeons, stray cats and mongrel dogs have entered the

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sanctuary. ^{Red} Hook's ~~nomadic~~ homeless ~~even~~ refuse to go inside, even to get out from under a cloudburst like this.

Up on the church's steeple is a lonely cross. It is the highest point in Red Hook. One purple cloud hovers so low in the sky that the cross' peak carves an incision into the belly of the storm. Out of the incision another lightning bolt reaches out. Another clap of thunder follows. When the light and sound show is over, the solitary cross has a companion.

Perched on the precarious belfry, clutching onto the cross' bar like a ~~peregrine~~ falcon, squats a silhouetted man wearing a Dracula cape, its folds billowing around him like a flag.

I don't belong, Al Simmons thinks as he looks down from the cross at Red Hook. The bet was rigged. He made me believe. Now there's darkness in my soul. I can feel it, like a tumor, hungry and eager to devour me. I want to die...again.

A third bolt of lightning spurts and sizzles across the sky, trailed by an eerie thunder whose rumblings mimic gross laughter.

But I chose to come back, Simmons continues, glaring up towards the thunder. Why? Why would I want to come back from the dead? Why would I trade my soul to a demon to do it? And why...can't I remember...why?

One final bolt of lightning erupts from within the clouds, igniting inside them like a depth charge, followed by another round of sinister, mirthful thunder.

Al Simmons was dead. And now he's back. But he doesn't belong.

CHAPTER ONE: (HOUR OF THE WOLF)

The Woman woke up. Shaking.

What frightened her? She had no idea. Not a nightmare. She was certain she had not been dreaming. Something else must have woke her, but all she could remember was a sick sensation overtaking her sleep, as if she needed to ^{shove up} ~~pop~~. An absurd feeling that someone might have tripped over her grave. And then she realized...not *her* grave, but *Al's*. Al Simmons, her first husband.

Thunder and the patter of rain on the roof alerted her to the storm.

It must have been the weather, she thinks, half-relieved. She had always been sensitive to weather changes. That was probably the culprit behind her ^{queasiness} ~~brief sickness~~.

The Woman looked at the clock-radio tucked into its cubbyhole in the headboard. Its digital numbers glowed 3:00.

"In the morning," she moaned sadly. Three A.M., what her grandfather called "the Hour of the Wolf." The most silent sixty minutes between sundown and sunrise. The hour when natural and supernatural hunters prowled the night.

She was keyed up. There would be no more sleeping tonight, the Woman knew. Careful not to wake her husband, she slipped out of bed.

The night was pitch-black, thanks to the storm. The Woman had to crouch and feel for the robe she had cast to the floor four hours earlier. When her fingertips brushed against the garment she grabbed it and slid it on. Using her outstretched hands to guide her, she left the master bedroom and walked down the hall, past her daughter's bedroom (where she paused long enough to listen to her little girl breathing) then into the kitchen. Here the electric emerald microwave clock lighted the way into the study. Inside the study she closed the door behind her and shuffled towards the desk and turned on the lamp.

After her eyes readjusted to the dim light she moved to an antique attorney's bookshelf behind the desk and knelt down. From the top shelf the Woman removed a thick leathern-bound photo album, the second in a series of four memory books placed beside her family Bible. The four albums chronicled the Woman's life in pictures and keepsakes, beginning with her birth announcement to the present.

With a flip of her wrist the memory book fell open to the page she wanted. She had not even glanced at this page for a year, but there was a time when she could not go a day without rereading Al's obituary. During that time the ritual had worn a permanent groove into the album's spine.

Five years, she marvelled as she stared at the date on the lengthy newspaper clipping. *Can he really be dead five years? We were only married for three.*

A mutual friend had introduced them during the Woman's senior year at Vassar College. Al was a decorated Marine veteran, temporarily working for the Secret Service. He was four years older and much more worldly than she.

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Nevertheless, the two were attracted to each other, although they pretended they weren't, even to themselves.

It was not until Al was shot while protecting the President of the United States that they stopped denying how they felt. Less than six months later, the Woman and Al were pronounced man and wife.

Now here she was, eight years later, her life unlike anything she had planned it to be on that wedding day. But how could she have foreseen Al's career change?

After saving the President, Al was offered a job with a top-secret government task force. It was the chance of a lifetime for Al Simmons, a soldier itching to right some of the world's wrongs. And at first he was satisfied with his job, even when it took him away for days or weeks, Heaven only knows where. His service oath forbade him from telling even the Woman where he went and what he did while he was gone. These times away from Al were not a problem for her at first because of his satisfaction. That changed as the months passed and Al grew disenchanted with the task force. The Woman never knew exactly why Al stopped liking his job. She was tempted a thousand times to ask, but she knew Al would honor his oath and not tell her. This hurt her. He had always been there for her. She wanted to be there for him. And then, before she knew it, it was too late. Two weeks after their third anniversary Al was sent to Botswana on what turned out to be his last mission.

After Al's funeral, the Woman pasted her husband's obituary into her memory book. Instead of burning a candle like Grandma Blake, she read the clipping every day to keep his memory alive. Bit by bit the pain of his death began to fade, and,

without noticing exactly when, Al Simmons became a part of the Woman's past. In hindsight it seemed cruel, but she refused to feel guilty. She realized moving on was all any person could do after mourning had run its course. The Woman was also positive that Al would have wanted her to get ^{on} her life.

But, now, since waking, nothing felt the way it should. Something was wrong with the world. She could sense it. What was wrong, she had no idea, but for some mysterious reason in the pit of her stomach she felt it involved Al.

The sick sensation gripped her again, and again the Woman began to shake. Then, as quickly as it had struck, the stabbing sickness passed, but not the shaking. She could not stop shaking. So she closed the memory book and pressed it against her chest, like an infant clutching a security blanket. The Woman stayed like that, unable to get off her knees, until the first rays of dawn broke through the study's bay window and snapped the spell.

CHAPTER TWO: (9*9*9*9)

Three A.M. in New York City on an unholy night.

The storm spreads out from Red Hook over the rest of New York City, and as clocks strike three the stars above the purple clouds dim and fade into the dark light of a new moon. Meanwhile, underneath the clouds throughout all five boroughs, the Apple's shadows turn bad. Like cankered fruit the shadows grow so black they resemble holes ^{falling} into the foul nether kingdom of a cackling, quivering Beelzebub.

Something has gone wrong in the big city. Something really, really wrong. And now that it is three A.M., it is about to get worse.

In Red Hook, Joy McGee is walking home.

Her boss at the screenprinting shop, an annoying pinhead not to mention a slave-master, had kept the entire four-to-midnight shift working two and half hours late finishing a rush order of bumperstickers for a friend of the shop's owner. Two and a half hours without a break or benefit of time-and-a-half. After the last sticker was dried, cut and stacked, Joy telephoned Checker Cab, but the

soonest she could have a taxi was four. Frustrated and exhausted, she borrowed an umbrella and started walking the two miles to her Brewster Street flat.

Joy was 22, pretty and tall, three inches under six feet. She wore her curly brown hair short, because she liked the cropped European look, and dressed comfortably, which in the summer usually meant denim jeans and a Travis Tritt or Reba McIntire muscle tee.

"Yo! ~~pretty~~ mama! Over here!"

The shout came through the rain from an alley next to the deserted church on Chelsea Street. Joy's heart stopped beating for two seconds, then kicked in again at a too-fast pace, getting in the way of her lungs and making it hard to breath.

Just keep walking, she thought, picking up her step. Ignore whoever it is. Maybe they'll leave you alone. You're only three blocks from home.

But the voice from the alley shouted again: "Yo! Mama! Don't you walk away from us when we're talking to you!"

'Us?' A gang?

Joy wasn't going to wait to find out. She ran away from the alley, screaming for help. Behind Joy a herd of footsteps began pursuing her from out the alley, whoever was chasing her teasing and jeering her as they closed the distance.

"Where you off to, baby?"

"Shouldn't make us chase you in the rain!"

"Dropped your umbrella, honey!"

"Look at you run, sweet thing!"

Two hands clamped onto Joy's shoulders to rope her in and spin her around. A tall muscular man with long black hair, day-old stubble and a pierced nostril-

ring panted into her face. "You're fast, mama," he grinned as three more men came up to surround her. "Ain't she fast, boys?"

"She's something, Shank," replied a pudgy man with a mohawk and wearing wrap-around sunglasses.

Joy jerked her head to look at the other two men. The third was lanky and pale, while the last was stocky and short. All four men appeared to be the same age, a couple of years younger than she. None of them had on gang colors. They were dressed like street toughs in tattered jeans, black t-shirts and engineer boots, along with individual choices in body-piercing jewelry.

"You got money, mama?" Shank asked.

Before Joy could answer the lanky man pointed out to Shank that "She ain't got no purse."

"Well, maybe she's got a wallet in her back pocket! You ever think of that?" Shank leaned into Joy's face. "You caring a wallet, mama? Better hand it over if you are. Otherwise, we might have to hurt you."

From behind Shank, a creepy voice said, "Leave her alone."

The men turned to look while Joy craned her neck so she could see past Shank at whoever was trying to help her. All five people gasped.

"Hey, Shank!" the pudgy man said. "He looks like one of them Youngbloods!"

The stranger certainly fit the part. Built like a linebacker, he was six feet four inches and ^{appeared to be} two hundred and twenty-five pounds of hard muscle, wearing a skin-tight sable body suit with crimson torso and matching gloves and boots trimmed with white. On the face of a sable veil that covered his entire head was a white bat, blistering green sockets shining through eye-slits in the bat's extended

wings. Around the newcomer's waist was a chain belt with a skull buckle; the chain was fantastically long and seemed to twine and twirl with a life all its own. Leather straps studded with formidable steel spikes girded the stranger's right knuckles and calf and left forearm, and a crimson Bela Lugosi cape completed the costume, attached at the neck by a short chain with skull clasps.

"Get out of here," Al Simmons warned. "Now! Or you're all dead."

Shank was impressed. He was also scared. So were his three companions, but unlike them, as leader of the pack, he couldn't afford to show his fear. Instead of doing the smart thing, he took a stiletto out of a pants pocket, popping its blade. "Check this out, guys." Shank charged towards Simmons. "I'm going to carve me a super--"

Simmons' right hand lashed at Shank like a cobra.

Husky taloned fingers bit into Shank's windpipe, cutting off his air as well as his words. The two fighters traded stares for a second as Shank dropped the stiletto, Simmons' angry unnatural eyes narrow and the whites around Shank's irises wide with terror. Then Simmons tossed Shank away like a Frisbee. Shank crashed into the far side of Chelsea Street, his limp body rolling up over the curb and onto the sidewalk.

The pudgy man yelled: "You killed him!"

"Maybe. Are you going to make the same mistake?"

"I ain't going to dance with a Youngblood, if that's what you mean."

Kneeling, the pudgy man reached into his right boot and removed a revolver from a concealed holster strapped to his ankle. "And with this I don't have to." He

fired, the bullet piercing Simmons' forehead above the tip of the white bat's right wing.

"Ugh!"

The impact snapped Simmons' head back, but he refused to fall. Instead he raised his head and twisted it until his neck cracked, while the three men and Joy gawked at the hissing dot of green sizzling where the bullet had entered his brow.

"Nice shot," Simmons said before raising his left hand and extending its index finger. From the peak of its claw a tiny green eldritch ember ignited and floated towards the three men, crackling like a sparkler as it skipped across the air, leaving a sparse trail of steam that reeked of brimstone in its wake. Joy instinctively crouched, covering her head with her arms as she dropped, as Simmons added, "Boys, you're way out of your league."

The ember erupted, exploding with a teeth-rattling *BANG* and blinding brilliance.

Whether Shank was dead or not was forgotten. The three men broke in different directions and split the scene.

Alone, Simmons walked up to Joy, the woman still crouching and protecting herself with her arms. "It's all right," he said as soothingly as he could with his eerie voice. "They're gone. You don't have to be afraid."

Joy wasn't convinced. "Please...don't. I'll do what you say. Just don't hurt me."

"Why would I hurt you? I just helped you. Get up and look around. Those muggers are gone, and I--" But the next word died in his throat. Simmons

suddenly couldn't breathe. He was being attacked. Not his body, but his mind, assaulted by personal revelations.

He had wanted to remember *why* he had traded his soul away to return from the dead. Now he was being shown why through a series of images that scalded his hindsight, flashing behind his eyes as if projected by a strobe light.

It begins with a beautiful Woman with caramel skin and a heart-shaped face. Her eyes are closed and she is smiling, as if she is asleep and dreaming. Who she is, Simmons has no idea.

The smiling face is replaced by the sight of the Woman at a funeral. She is wearing widow's black and standing beside a coffin draped with an American flag. Simmons can tell that she is feeling deflated, as if her life's purpose is being buried along with the pine box.

And then Simmons realizes who is inside the coffin.

It is him.

Like Ebenezer Scrooge, Simmons is seeing his own grave. He is dead, and the nameless Woman is his wife. *She* is the reason he has come back.

The funeral blinks away, and there is the image of a man. His suit is expensive, his mustache and beard professionally trimmed, and his stern face the picture of self-confidence. Whoever the man is, Simmons senses he is powerful, merciless and dangerous. Simmons also knows that he hates this man as much as he loves his wife, and that is a lot.

Then the man is gone, replaced by Simmons himself.

Alive.

The proud and handsome soldier acting in the line of duty, dodging bullets for his country in some God-forsaken battlezone. And then a skull--the Grim Reaper?--looms in front of him, and Simmons remembers dying, his brains fried by a laser fired at close range that bursts the back of his head like a water balloon. Worse than dying, he remembers that he was betrayed, murdered by someone he knew. But...*who*? Who killed him? The dangerous man with the beard?

Finally, the revelations end with the grinning beast image of a demon-lord squatting in the middle of a supernatural realm of shadows. Simmons was brought before the demon-lord and offered the chance to live again. His desire to return to the Woman was all the reason he needed to forfeit his soul in exchange for a new life with her.

Now Al Simmons is back.

Except he has changed. And the world has changed. How different they were he didn't know. Not yet. His memories were limited to arriving at the abandoned church and these painful visions. Except for these scraps, the book and volume of his brain had been wiped clean by the demon-lord. To learn more he was either going to have to investigate his past or wait for further revelations, more of which he somehow felt sure would be coming when he least expected them.

Suddenly he could breathe again, as well as feel arms holding him. A woman's arms, gentle and warm and safe. For two seconds Simmons thought it had all been a nightmare. That he was at home in bed and the Woman was waking him up. Then he recognized the woman he had rescued and began to cry when he realized his life had become a nightmare.

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Joy McGee whispered "It's okay" into his ear, pressing him against her chest the way a mother comforts its whimpering child. "You're all right. It's all over now."

Simmons let her go on for a few moments before asking, "Who...who are you?"

She told him her name. "Thanks for the save. So who are you? I've never heard of a Youngblood who broke down and cried after helping someone before."

Instead of telling her his name, he opted for a half-truth. "I...I don't know, Joy. I...honestly don't know who...or what I am." The only thing he was positive of was that he had to find the Woman from his visions. He *had* to. If he didn't, he would have ~~damned~~ ^{condemned} his soul for nothing.

CHAPTER THREE: (HEARTLESS CHARACTERS)

Detective Sergeant Sam Burke, New York Police Department, looked up at the high security building. If he squinted and concentrated, he could pick out the broken apartment window forty-four stories above. As large as the hole in the pane must be, down on the street it appeared no bigger than a golf ball.

An hour earlier, at three A.M., a person or persons unknown had yanked the apartment's resident, Carlo Giamotti, out of his bed and tossed him through the window. Giamotti was heaved with such force that he sailed over Park Avenue and crash landed on the sidewalk across the street.

"Heck of a throw," Burke said. A barrel-bellied tall man with shrewd small eyes, Burke's most attractive feature was a luxurious head of black hair. Removing a Marlboro from a near empty pack, he touched the cigarette with the flame from a Bic lighter and began puffing. "The Met's could use a guy with an arm like that."

"Maybe you should look for suspects at Shea Stadium." This came from Buzz Sweany, the medical examiner called to the scene. Sweany knelt beside Burke as he zipped Giamotti's pulverized remains into a black polyurethane body bag.

"Don't tempt me. A ball park hot dog sounds awfully good right now. Too bad the Cubs are playing. I hate Chicago."

"Not as much as someone hated this poor sucker."

"Don't pity Mr. Road Pizza, Buzz." Burke paused as Sweany stood and motioned for two waiting paramedics to cart the body bag to a parked ambulance. He continued, "Carlo's the most cold-hearted contract killer on the Spang family's payroll. The lousy ice pick deserved worse than taking a header out his bedroom window. Feel sorry for the sidewalk. He really cracked the concrete there."

"If you say so, Sam. Except the fall didn't kill him."

"Really? Carlo was dead before he went out the window?"

Sweany nodded.

"So what was the cause of death?"

"Heart failure."

"You mean like a heart attack? His ticker gave out on him?"

"No. Giamotti's heart was ripped out and crammed into his mouth before his carcass was flung out the window."

Burke shook his head in disbelief. "I don't remember seeing no heart in Carlo's mouth."

"Trust me. It's in there. Considering the condition of Mr. Road Pizza's corpse, I'm almost impressed you figured out what part of his face was his mouth." Someone walking across Park Avenue towards them caught Sweany's attention. He pointed and smiled. "Here comes your partner."

Burke's partner, "Twitch" Williams, looked as much like a big city detective as Larry Fine from *The Three Stooges*. A tad below average height, skinny and

shaped like a pear, Williams was a four-eyed chinless wonder with curly sandy hair and mustache. But despite his appearance Williams was a tireless investigator and one of the finest marksmen to graduate from the New York Police Academy.

Burke: "Finished questioning Carlo's neighbors?"

"Yes, sir," Williams said. "Uniformed officers are canvassing the floors directly above and below Giamotti's apartment. Discounting Giamotti's screaming and the sound of breaking glass, nobody we've interviewed so far heard or saw anything."

"What about building security?"

"I met with them just now. They also saw and heard nothing."

Sweany and Burke shared dumbfounded expressions before the medical examiner said, "Giamotti's heart was ripped out of his body before he was thrown through the window. What's his bedroom look like?"

"Quite bloody. The forensic investigators were impressed."

"What has forensics uncovered so far?"

"Nothing."

Burke shook his head again. "No way! That can't be!" He snatched his cigarette from his lips, flicked it to the sidewalk and crushed the burning ash with the toe of his shoe. "If the bedroom's so gory that forensic is impressed, then there's got to be bloody footprints or handprints left by the killer. At the very least, the building's security cameras should have recorded somebody suspicious entering or leaving the place."

"Everything you say is true, sir, but it does not change the facts. There should be clues, but all we have is the mess without the clues."

Burke glanced at Sweany, the detective's expression pleading for help.

"All I can do is conduct my autopsy, Sam. You'll have my preliminary report by lunchtime. That's all I can do on my end."

"Okay. Thanks, Buzz. Talk to you later."

The detectives watched as Sweany climbed into his car and followed the ambulance to the city morgue. "Twitch," Burke finally said, "this is nuts."

"Agreed, sir."

"A hit man getting his heart stuffed in his mouth at three in the morning? New York City is going to Hell, Twitch."

"You may have a point, sir. What would ^{you} like to do next regarding this investigation?"

That's a good question, Burke thought. Eventually he had to admit that, unless the uniformed officers uncovered something, there was nothing they could do until forensics and Sweany filed reports with them. "Come on. Let's go back to the precinct and fill out our ^{Fives} ~~own~~ reports. We'll pick up breakfast at Emil's on the way."

"I'm behind you like always, sir."

* * * * *

A few blocks away, Giamotti's killer was busy boasting to a scraggly tomcat in an alley behind Penn Plaza.

Hardly more than four feet tall, the killer was built like a bowling ball, tipping the scales on the plus side of two hundred pounds. His sloped shoulders

made it appear that his football-shaped head, bald except for two tufts of steel wool hair sprouting from behind his ears, rested on his chest without benefit of a neck. His arms and calloused hands were enormous, but his fat and flabby gut was so distended his khaki chinos and striped white and gray muscle shirt could not contain it, leaving his hairy naval exposed. Over his back he wore a dark raggedy tuxedo jacket one size too small for his rotund frame. Odd as his appearance and attire were, what really set the killer apart from the crowd were his clown makeup and evil eyes. White greasepaint edged with black covered his double chin, sardonic lips, meaty nose, both cheeks and forehead. An M-shaped design crowned his eye brows. Glaring out of this weird makeup were the killer's red eyes, otherworldly orbs sweltering inside narrow triangle ^{sockets} ~~sides~~.

Alone in the alley except for the cat, the killer joyfully explained to the tom how "--then I'll tell 'im, if he begs really, *really* nice like, I might only amputate one leg. *But!* If he puts up a fight, I'm gonna rip his innards out, make fillets outta his lungs, make a milk shake outta his heart, and soft-boil his eyeballs, 'cause (and here the killer paused to take a breath) I'm the *Violator!*"

The tom meowed.

"Impressive. I know. But, when you're striking fear into the hearts of others, a little bravado goes a long way. Besides, it seems to work in comics.

"Anyways, it'll finally come down to that long, drawn-out battle. *But!* Just when I'm about to pull his spine through his nose--I'll stop!" Inspired by the gory picture he painted with his words, the killer began to wave his arms like a ham stage magician, foul emotions squinching his face into a series of exaggerated smirks and sneers. "I'll tell 'im real pleasant like how I could ice 'im sixty-five

different ways, but *I'm not allowed to!* Oh, that will ruin his day! He'll start to beg me, and I'll spit in his face. Then he'll cry, at which time I'll kick his teeth in! And when he thinks it can't get any worse, I'll pulverize 'im into a little itty bitty cube and suck 'im like a Lifesaver!"

It was too wonderful even for the killer's diseased imagination. The Violator began laughing, a sick and malicious ground-glass cackle that bellowed out of the alley into the street, where, overheard by passerbys, it made the listeners feel feverish and break out in a clammy sweat.

"I gotta tell ya, Mr. Pussy," the killer shouted, "I'm having far too much fun. The boss will be *totally* impressed. Hell, *I'm* totally impressed! Oh, I love being me! And I'd hate to be him."

The tomcat meowed again, this time in the form of a question, or so it sounded to the killer. "Who?" the cat seemed to ask.

"*Spawn!*" the Violator answered. "I'd hate to be *Spawn!*"

CHAPTER FOUR: (QUESTIONS ARE THE EASY PART,
ANSWERS RAISE THE DOUBTS)

Simmons spent the day haunting the abandoned church.

He wasn't tired and he did not feel hungry. He just wandered around like a ghost in a horror paperback, his precious few memories hounding his mind. His train of thought kept returning to the divine Woman and the profane demon-lord like a tongue working a painful tooth, nothing else in the world mattering to him.

Somewhere during the late morning or early afternoon Simmons found himself back outside, crouching on top of the steeple. Shank had woke up and taken off hours ago, not much the worse for wear but hopefully wiser. Now, looking down at Red Hook, Simmons was watching his new neighbors, homeless people wandering in and out of the many warehouses surrounding the church. They seemed misplaced, like cattle set loose in the city, with no place of their own and nothing to do except commiserate in groups or drink alone to pass the hours. Men and women without purpose, society's castaways, drifting through life by chance or from choice. These lost people, though mortal and alive, seemed to Simmons to be as ~~damned~~^{condemned} in their own way as he was in his.

Later, back inside the church, Simmons' mind returned to his memories and his troubles. *All I wanted was to live again*, he thought. *To get back to the woman I love. Now here I am, but what I am going to do? How am I going to find her? And what am I doing wearing this crazy outfit? And how did I create that spark last ni--?*

It was so obvious, Simmons couldn't believe he had forgotten about it. "The spark!" He had performed magic! He had powers!

"What kind of powers? What kind of things can I do?"

Spreading out and turning his hands palms up, he stared at them. For the first time he noticed his taloned fingers. His heart crashed and he chocked.

"Good Lord, what's happened to me?"

Reacting on instinct, Simmons grabbed the veil covering his head to tug it off. The snug material had its own will and resisted being removed, but he kept tugging until it did. It was the same story with his left glove. What he saw after it was removed almost made him faint.

The texture of his hand was rough and rotten. Splotches stained the skin and there were several small patches that were pitted and scarred. Raising his trembling fingers, he examined his exposed face. Its skin was cold with a zombie's complexion. He moved his fingers to his scalp and felt only a few scant hairs.

"What...am I?"

Losing control of his body, Simmons fell to his knees, tears rolling from his eyes. He gnashed his teeth to try to choke off a scream and failed. Bending over until he could bury what was left of his face in the floor, he reached up towards the church's ceiling with his left hand.

"Please, God," he pleaded. "Please help me. I'm...sorry...for what I did. I'm so sorry."

Outside the church a hot summer wind began blowing around the forsaken building. It seeped inside through every fracture and fissure of the old structure, the wind imitating the sound of vicious, mocking laughter. The laughter echoed for a few seconds before drifting away, leaving the church silent except for Simmons' lonely sobbing.

* * * * *

Outside the church, four homeless men stood on Chelsea Street and listened to the crying coming from inside the sanctuary.

The largest of the four, Billie-Bob Rosell, shivered. "I tell you, that's creepy."

"Hey, I told you." This was from Dennis "Cap'n Comic" Stick, a balding fat man with a Santa Claus beard and mustache. "I told you guys I saw a ghost sitting up on the cross earlier."

The next man, David Arnold, was called "Moped Quixote" because of his resemblance to Don Quixote and his broken-down Honda moped. He seriously asked, "You sure it's a ghost, Cap'n?"

"What else could it be? The church's haunted. Everybody knows that."

"Yeah, but it could be a vampire. Vampires live in old crypts under old churches, you know."

"That's plain stupid, Moped! Vampires can't come out during the day!"

The last spectator, Crazy Dave Wilson, a muscular little man with black hair and intense eyes, interrupted by shouting, "It's Satan! It's the Apocalypse! The Four Horsemen of Revelations have ridden into Brooklyn on the gales of last night's storm and..."

Stick: "Can it, will ya', Dave?"

Rosell asked Stick, "What are you going to do?"

"About what?"

"About that crying?"

"Nothing! I ain't going inside that church! If some ghost wants to ball his eyes out, I say let him. I've got enough problems without getting myself offed by some spook. You want to cheer up Casper, you go in there."

Moped Quixote advised Rosell not to go. "It could still be a vampire."

"It's Satan!" Wilson shouted.

"It's none of our business!" Stick shouted louder. "If we're smart, we'll leave well enough alone."

The four men continued staring at the church a while longer, intrigued by the crying.

"You know, Cap'n," Moped Quixote finally said, "it could be a vampire. A really sad vampire."

"Shuddup!"

* * * * *

After the sun went down that night, Simmons returned to the cross on the steeple.

My wife, he thought. I've got to find her. Let her know I'm back. I'm alive. What's she going to think?

A voice in the back of his brain suggested that was not going to matter much if he could not find the Woman.

That's true. I don't know where we lived, or where we worked. God I wish I could remember her name.

Simmons cursed the demon-lord. *He's playing with my memories, giving me bits and pieces at his leisure. It's all some sick game to him. And I fell right into his trap. He gave me power. Life. But it cost me my soul, my identity. The scum even stole my face.*

He glanced at his hands.

I don't even think I'm human anymore. So why would my wife want me again? He shook his head, angry at the thought. *Can't worry about that now. I need her! That's what matters. It's all I have.*

Something out of the corner of one eye caught Simmons' attention. He looked, and saw a short roly-poly man waving at him from the roof of the nearest warehouse. At first he mistook the man for just another of Red Hook's homeless, until he noticed the man was wearing white makeup on his face. Before Simmons could react in any way, the little man disappeared into the roof's shadows.

Strange. I wonder what that odd little fellow was waving at. If he wanted me, why did he go away?

The distraction gone, Simmons' thoughts returned to his immediate problem. Finding the Woman. And, without his own memories to act on, the only tool at his disposal was his powers.

Why'd I even get these powers? All I wanted was to see her. To hold my wife. He snorted a sad laugh. Joke's on me. Why would she want to hold me when I look like a corpse? Don't even know if I'm alive, much less a man. Things made more sense when I was dead.

Simmons cursed the demon-lord a second time, removing his veil and both gloves. "Well," he said to himself, "let's see exactly what these powers can do. Maybe they can make me whole again."

Not giving himself time to think about what he was doing, Simmons raised his hands to make a wish. A ball of eldritch energy instantly bathed him, searing his skin from within as it passed out of his body and through his costume. The air crackled in his ears and the church steeple erupted with starlight.

When the light faded, he was left feeling dizzy in the darkness. He closed his eyes to regain his balance. "Man! What a jolt!" But, after the dizziness stopped, he actually felt pretty good. "I'm almost afraid to look, but..."

He opened his eyes and raised his left hand.

The skin was healed. The magic had worked. He looked healthy and alive, but the color of his skin made him gasp.

"No!"

He made another wish, felt the eldritch energy bathe his body again, but this second attempt left him the same as the first, so he tried a third time.

"Come on! *Work!*"

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But the result was the same. "Not again. This can't be." All he could do was stare in dread at the hand with the caucasian skin. "I'm a *black* man!