

The Perilous Pathways of Necro-Boy and Death-Head

Chapter 1

It was a bright and sunny morning in Mortonia, the land where death never dies, and everything has eyes. Well, not everything, but a good lot more than you would think should. Everywhere Necro-Boy looked, he was confused by what he saw, and he was confused by that because he saw these things everyday. It was a new day, a bad day, a day that he would either remember forever, or forget on purpose. His Necro-

Family had been taken from him, and all of his friends, too. Who had done it, he did not know, but he cried little black tears from his empty eyeholes in the ruins of his once happy village. All day and all night he sat there in the mud and cried, until a man came and talked to him.

"Why are you crying?"

Necro-Boy explained. "That truly is a terrible thing that has happened to you. May I tell you I can help you right this wrong, young Necro-Boy?" "You just have, and how would this wrong be righted?" said Necro-Boy. "Through the power of vengeance," said Death-Head, a bonely man like everyone else here,

with an exceptionally large head, and an unusual proclivity for the color black. "What is vengeance, Death-Head?" asked Necro-Boy. "Vengeance is when you find the person who took something from you, whether it was a toy, a friend, or your dignity, and you take something from them in return," said Death-Head. The sky was darker behind him than it was anywhere else. "That doesn't sound like a good thing to do," said Necro-Boy. "It may not be a good thing to do, but this is not a good world," said Death-Head. "And it will make you feel good, and you will be punishing a bad person, so where's the

wrong in that?" "But if I do something that makes me feel good and it hurts someone else, that isn't good," said Necro-Boy.

"Even if that person is bad." "And why is that," asked Death-Head.

"Because it makes me no different than the bad person. In the process, I become bad because I become like they are."

"Your logic is infallible," said Death-Head. "But you fail to explain why being bad is a bad thing, and why you should not feel good at any cost.

Furthermore, I've already told you this is a bad world, and you are part of it, aren't you? Doesn't that make you bad, too?" "I

don't know," said Necro-Boy. "But I know good is good, and bad is bad." "But how do you know that," said Death-Head. Necro-Boy looked at the mud he had been sitting in, and took the blue and white ball-cap with a red bill from off his naked skull and looked at it, too. "I don't know," he said. "Now what if I told you you could bring your family and friends back?" said Death-Head. Necro-Boy looked up at Death-Head and beamed with hope, as much as someone with no face could do. Then his expression fell. "Would I have to take... vengeance... to do so?" he asked. "Yes," said Death-Head. "But that

is not wrong, because it is for a good reason." Necro-Boy contemplated, looking down. "Okay," he said. "I'll do it." "Good," said Death-Head. "I'll go with you a short way, and show you what to do, and explain what happened to your family and friends as we go." "You won't go with me to the end?" asked Necro-Boy. "How will I succeed? How will I know where to go?" "Trust me. You'll get where you need to go," said Death-Head.

Chapter 2

Necro-Boy and Death-Head walked along the pathway leading out of Calsio County and deeper

into the forests of Death-Country than Necro-Boy had ever been. "Where are we going? Who took my family?" asked Necro-Boy. "We are going to the land... of the living," said Death-Head. Necro-Boy was shocked. "The Land of the Living?" he said. "No, we can't go there! Please, don't make me go there." "I'm not making you go there," said Death-Head. "You want to go there, because that's where you'll get your family back." "You don't mean to tell me Living Man took them?" said Necro-Boy. "I'm afraid I do, my dear boy," said Death-Head. "No, no! I can't face them. The living! They're

terrifying!" said Necro-Boy. Death-Head laughed from within his hollowness. "Let me tell you a little secret, Necro-Boy," he said. "The Living? They're just as afraid of you! And what's more, they're weaker."

"How's that," asked Necro-Boy. "They can die," said Death-Head. "What?" said Necro-Boy. "You mean they're not dead like us?"

"Of course not, you nincompoop!" said Death-Head. "That's why they're The Living! That's what Living means. It's why they're different from us."

"Oh," said Necro-Boy.

Death-Head and Necro-Boy came to a canyon in the forest, with a large tree-log across it. With

eyes. In fact, just about the only things that didn't have eyes in Mortonia were the people. The eyes were small compared to the rest of the tree, and fitted in little holes. The tree-eyes watched as the two of them walked over it to the other side. Before reaching the other side, a strange person shuffled toward the end they were walking to from the other side. "Halt!" it said. "What do we do," asked Necro-Boy. "Halt," said Death-Head. "Good day to you, thing," he said to the strange person. "Why does he look like that?" said Necro-Boy. "He looks kind of like us, but with weird things coming out of his

bones." "He's a Half-One," said Death-Head. "He's half-way between a Dead, like us, and a Living." "Why does he want us to stop?" "Why don't you ask him yourself?" "Half-One," said Necro-Boy. "What is your name?" "I have not been given a name yet," said the Half-One. His voice sounded strange, gravelly and mushy at the same time. "I'll call you Bill," said Necro-Boy. "That's fine, but they'll give me a new one when I become a Living," said Bill. "Why won't you let us pass?" asked Necro-Boy. "I was told to." "By who?" "By... he told me not to tell." "But you must tell me, I need to get across so

I can find my family," said Necro-Boy. "Where are they?" asked Bill. "I don't know, but Living Man took them." Bill was tense. "I uh... I don't know anyone named Living Man, that's for sure."

"But you just said you're becoming a Living, aren't you? That they'll give you a new name?" "Right," said Bill. "Right. I'm sorry, kiddo, I can't let you pass today." "What about tomorrow?" "Any day.

There are no days where I can let you pass. I'm sorry." "But Bill, my family! And my friends!" said Necro-Boy. "I know kid... I have orders. Sorry," said Bill. "Death-Head!" said Necro-Boy. "What do we

do?" "We kill him," said Death-Head. "What does kill mean?" asked Necro-Boy. "It means to take a Living and make them Dead," said Death-Head. "Well that won't be all bad," said Necro-Boy. "In fact, that'll be good! He'll be just like us!" "No, it won't be good," said Death-Head. "For him." "But he's not a Living," said Necro-Boy. "He's a Half-One. So we can't kill him!" "No, you're right," said Death-Head. Necro-Boy looked relieved. "We'll have to half-kill him." "No!" said Necro-Boy. Death-Head held out his skeleton hand and with a thought, and a Bang!, the flesh fell off of Bill's bones. "Ah!" said Bill

in surprise, and fell to the ground. "Death-Head!" said Necro-Boy. "What have you done?" "Come on, now," said Death-Head, leading him across the rest of the tree-trunk, its eyes glaring. "What will happen to him now?" said Necro-Boy, looking at the bones on the ground. "He'll be a Dead, like us," said Death-Head. "But he isn't supposed to be one, or at least he thinks he isn't. And he'll be on the ground like that for some time." "But he doesn't want to be a Dead," said Necro-Boy. "No, he doesn't. But he was blocking your way. Keeping you from your family." Necro-Boy was sad as they walked through

the forest on the other side. Little skeleton birds flitted around, as well as little Half-One birds and squirrels.

Chapter 3

"How am I supposed to fight like you did on the tree-bridge if I need to?" asked Necro-Boy. "You will need to," said Death-Head. "And it's easy. You look inside yourself, and you imagine the person die. Then you stick out your hand, and it happens."

"That easy?" "Yes," said Death-Head. "What if I don't want them to die," said Necro-Boy. "Or what if I just want them to not be in my way anymore? Or

what if the person is really tough, or what if they try to do that to me?" "Good questions," said Death-Head. "Truth is, even with this trick I've taught you, it won't work on everyone. To be sure, you need a weapon. It will kill any person who doesn't give up, and will take down most of the tougher ones if you hit them enough." "Most?" "Some you'll have to run away from." "Where do I get a weapon?" "Here," said Death-Head. He used his right arm to take off his left fore-arm and hand, and laid them on the ground. He rearranged them into a sword-like thing, with two fingers forming the point, and the

rest of the fingers and hand-bones forming the handle and crossbar of the sword. He then stuck his remaining hand out toward it, and the bone-sword lit up with purple flame. "Pick it up," said DeathHead. Necro-Boy did. "Won't you need your arm?" he asked.

"No, I'll get another one somewhere." "You still didn't answer my question of what happens if someone tries to do that trick to me," said Necro-Boy. "Easy," said Death-Head. "You're already Dead. You can't die!" "Oh!" Said Necro-Boy. "Of course."

Chapter 4

After many days of walking, Death-Head and Necro-Boy came to a great mountain. "This is where I must leave you," said Death-Head. "What? But why?" said Necro-Boy. "I can go no further. I am too Dead to travel any closer to the Land of the Living." "But how will I survive? How will I find my way?" "You will know the way, in your Dead-Heart," said Death-Head. Necro-Boy peered into the blackness in his chest, and knew what Death-Head meant. "I will send you a companion. You will meet her along the way. Now, go, child. Into the Land of

the Living." Necro-Boy spoke, but Death-Head had already faded from view. "Wait!" Necro-Boy looked around at the forest, very afraid. He knew he had to go over the mountain. After a long day of climbing, Necro-Boy met a bear, standing on fours behind the rock. "Ho, there!" said Necro-Boy. "Huh-huh-huuuAAAAGGHHH!" said the bear, in a normal speaking voice, and not at all like a bear growl. "What was that?" said Necro-Boy. "Huh-uh-uhAAAAGGHHHghuumpfh," said the bear. "Why can't you speak?" "Oh, I can speak," said the bear. "I was just told I had to growl like that when I saw

someone." "That's odd," said Necro-Boy. "Why would you make those silly sounds if you can talk?" "I don't know," said the bear. "I guess it's supposed to scare someone. Did it scare you?" "No. I was scared when I saw you, but I'm not now I know you can talk." "Why wouldn't I be able to talk?" "I've just never seen a bear before, though I've heard about them in tales," said Necro-Boy. "And the tales never mentioned we could talk?" said the bear. "No, not that I recall." "Some tales." "Have you ever heard tales about me or my folk," asked Necro-Boy. "No. We bears don't much go in for

tales. Or tails, apparently."

"Are you surprised to see me?" said Necro-Boy. "No," said the bear. "Why not?" "I don't expect anything at all, and when something new happens, I'm not surprised. I don't expect the same thing that happened yesterday to happen, though it often does."

"What do you do for fun?" said Necro-Boy. "Get off the mountain," said the bear. "What?" "You heard me clear enough. I've been chatting because I don't get a lot of company, but now you've got to go." "Or what?" said Necro-Boy.

"Let's not talk about that. You can just go now, nice and free, and I won't have to do anything that will

upset my digestion tonight. Cheerio?" "Well, you see, I've got to get across here to get to my family," said Necro-Boy. "Oh, gosh, come on now, why'd you have to go and say that. I don't need to hear that." "I don't know what you mean, but I'm getting through, and I'd like you to let me." "I can't do that, little skeleton man, I'm sorry! Just go now. Please," said the bear. "You know I have to get by you. And it's Necro-Boy." The bear gave an exasperated sigh and a normal-person growl and charged Necro-Boy, who pulled out his arm-sword from Death-Head and poked the bear with it and the bear became a

skeleton and collapsed around Necro-Boy. He crawled out from under its rib-bones and looked at them before walking away. "Not bad," said a voice from up in the trees. "Who are you!" said Necro-Boy, holding his sword aloft, looking in the branches until he saw the person. "I'm Skeleto-Kid," said the skeleto-girl. She looked just about like him, but had a pink bow on her head, and blue overalls and a baseball bat and ball. "And that won't work on me, so you'd best put it away." "Are you here to help me," asked Necro-Boy. "Might as well," she said. "Until I get bored." "Ohgoodness," said Necro-Boy.

Chapter 5

"What do you like to do for fun," asked Necro-Boy. "I don't," said Skeleto-Kid.

"But you've got a baseball bat and ball there with you," said Necro-Boy. "And I've got a ballcap!" "Oh, these aren't for fun."

Necro-Boy hung his head as they walked. "You are the cheeriest skeleto-boy ever, aren't you?" said Skeleto-Kid. "No," he said.

"I'm the saddest." They stopped for food. "I'm so hungry," said Necro-Boy. "I haven't seen any good loam in a day or more."

"That's because we were up too high," said Skeleto-Kid. "We're lower now, so

there should be some around these trees." She was right. They went over to the trees, scooped up some dirt, and sat down and put it in their mouths. "Mm," said Necro-Boy as he chewed, and the soil vanished as it went down the back of his mouth. "Where does it go, when we eat it?" he asked. "I don't know," said Skeleto-Girl, her teeth clacking as she finished a bite. "And I don't care." They kept shoveling dirt into their mouths. "Wow, I'm full," said Necro-Boy. "Yeah. Me, too," said Skeleto-Kid. "We should take a nap." "Alright." They dug some holes in the soft dirt, deep enough and long enough

for them to lay in, and did so, scooping in as much of the dirt back on top of them as they could.

"Good night, Skeleto-Kid," said Necro-Boy. "Mmh," said Skeleto-Kid, muffled by the dirt. Morning came, and with it brought dew that fed living things.

"Ugh, gross!" said Necro-Boy. "I hate mornings, but this is a whole new level of disgusting." "You're right, but you get used to it out here," said Skeleto-Kid, rising from her grave.

"Make your grave, my mom always told me," said Necro-Boy. "Now I don't have to!" He hung his head again. "But I wish she were here to tell me." "What happened to

your family?" asked Skeleto-Kid. "They were taken by Living Man." "So were mine!" said Skeleto-Kid. "But long ago." "Maybe we can find them, too!" said Necro-Boy. "I doubt it," said Skeleto-Kid, "but it's worth trying."

Chapter 6

"I love you," said Skeleto-Kid. "What?" said Necro-Boy. "You heard me." "I know..." said Necro-Boy, and stuck a skeletal finger into a non-ear on the side of his head, twisting. "It's what I heard that bothers me." "You don't know what you're talking about!" said Skeleto-Kid, and ran off into the woods. Necro-Boy

sighed a big, airy, dry sigh, one that would have dried his bones had they not already been completely dry. He walked on through the woods, climbing a tree to see if he could see Skeleto-Kid anywhere. He thought he saw her up ahead, crouched under a bough. "Hey!" he yelled. "Is that you?" The little skeleto-person seemed to look up, and scattered. Necro-Boy began to climb back down in a hurry and missed a branch and slipped. He fell, knocking his skull-head against some branches and bouncing, snapping, and thudding. Necro-Boy woke to see Death-Head staring at him, upside-

down. "What have you done?" said Death-Head. "I don't know," said Necro-Boy. "Where is Skeleto-Kid?" "I don't know," said Necro-Boy again. "You already said that," said Death-Head. "I know. I thought you couldn't come any further with me? What are you doing here?" "Am I really here?" "I don't-" Necro-Boy began, but Death-Head had vanished. He got up and looked around. "Skeleto-Kid!" he yelled. He cupped his bone-hands around his bone-face. "Skeleto-Kid!" No answer. "Where could she be?" he asked himself, and continued down the path. But there was no path! The road had ended,

withering down into a little trail that sputtered into the brush. Only animals knew the way forward from here. A deer looked at him and sprinted away, leaping and bounding over fallen tree-trunks and chamomile. "I'll follow that deer," said Necro-Boy, but he couldn't keep up.

He followed anyway, going the way he thought the deer had gone. "Wait for me," he said, but the deer couldn't hear him, and if it could, it probably wouldn't have understood. "Oh, well," he said, and tripped and fell into a hole where a very large badger was eating a vole and looked up at him and said "Oi, wot're you doin' in my 'ouse,

mate?" "Sorry! I'm sorry," said Necro-Boy. "I didn't mean to intrude." "Sorry, are you?" said the badger. "Well sorry don't pay the bills, and it won't fix me ladder you've just broken." "Oh goodness," said Necro-Boy. "I'll help you fix it." "No, you won't," said the badger. "You've got stuff to do, I can tell. I need to put a sign up that says 'Badger's 'Ole, No Falling,' or something like that." "Sure, I mean, alright, I mean, thank you Mr. Badger Sir." "No, I'm not a knight. But I know someone who is!" "You do?" said Necro-Boy. "Sure! You don't want to meet him, though." "Why not?" "Never mind that. I'll let

you go, but you have to do something for me in return." "What's that?" "Tell me what it is you've got to do." "I'm going to find Living Man, and take back my family." "Wot..." the badger squinted at him, and then his eyes got wider. "Oh, you're Dead! Well, blather me in a biscuit! Good luck, then, you'll need it! You're far from home." "Indeed I am. Do you know the way to Living Man's castle?" "I do, but it's a long and perilous way. You won't be able to make it." "I have a friend... well, had a friend. I lost her." "What did you do?" "Never mind that. Tell me the way to Living Man." The badger snorted. "Fine.

Go up and out, and that way, toward the sun as it's setting until you reach the arch tree, and you take a right, then a left, then two lefts, then a right, and it's beyond the gray mass they call 'The Fay.'" "Huh? What's that?" "Oh, uh, never mind, I made that last part up. Good luck!" And with that, the badger pushed him up out of the 'Ole and back onto the ground where he belonged. Though Necro-Boy did like being underground; it made him miss the comfort of being in his own grave back home. Necro-Boy despaired, but knew he had to go on, and so kept walking toward the setting sun, hoping he

would find the arch-tree,
and that badger-man
hadn't made everything up.

Chapter 7

"I don't want to do this
anymore," said Skeleto-Kid,
wiping black tears from
below her eye-holes. "I
don't think you have an
option," said Death-Head.
"You agreed to do this, it's
the only way to get your
family back." "But I don't
want to!" she said,
pounding her carpals
against her femurs. "Too
bad!" said Death-Head,
and he disappeared in a
ghastly wail.

* * *

"Hello again!" Said Skeleto-Kid, at the top of a rise. "What? Skeleto-Kid!" Said Necro-Boy, and scrambled up the dirt and mossy hill to meet her. "I thought I lost you!" "You did, silly. Now come with me, or we'll never make it." He did. They walked in silence for a while. "I'm sorry about what I said," said Necro-Boy. "What did you say?" she said. "I said 'it's what I heard that bothers me' when you said 'you heard me' when I said 'what?' when you said 'I love you.' I'm sorry." "You shouldn't have brought that up," said Skeleto-Kid. "I didn't mean it." "What do you mean you didn't mean it? Why did you say it?"

said Necro-Boy. "I don't know. But you shouldn't have brought it up, Necro-Boy." "I'm sorry." "Stop saying you're sorry." "But I am." "Then keep it to yourself." They walked in silence for a lot longer, then. When night came, they made their graves as far apart as possible without losing sight of each other. When morning came, they only looked at each other when the other wasn't looking, and only walked closer when they had to leave. "When do you think we'll get there?" Asked Necro-Boy. "Another few days, maybe," said Skeleto-Kid. "I don't know if I can take this much longer." "What?" "The

silence. And everything."
"Which is it, the silence, or everything?" "Both. But mostly the silence." "You have only yourself to blame." "For the silence, or everything?" "Both. But mostly the silence."

Chapter 8

"I love you, too," said Necro-Boy.

"What?" said Skeleto-Kid. "I" "You can't just say it like that, so soon. You can't possibly mean it." "But I do." "Then why didn't you say it the first time?" she said. "I was afraid." "Afraid of what?" "Afraid of what it'd mean. For us. For me. For you," he said. "And what would it mean?" "I

don't know. It would mean... Death." "But for us, Death is Life." "So then we-" "Sh!" said Skeleto-Kid. "Wh-" started Necro-Boy, but she put a bony finger to his non-lips.

"There it is," she whispered, and pointed into the distance. And there it was, appearing larger the more they looked at it.

"Living Man's Castle." "It's huge," said Necro-Boy.

"And terrifying." "As terrifying as me?" said Skeleto-Kid. Necro-Boy would've raised an eyebrow, but he didn't have any. Instead he started blankly at her, which probably didn't play well. Then again, all their stares were blank. Seeing

her response, he said "Um," but she turned away and said "Let's go." The hill they had been climbing sloped down into a wide plain nestled between mountains, with the castle in the center, still far away. The terrain became more and more disgusting as they went along, with more varieties of trees, flowers, bees, birds, petunias, which were just a really gross flower, and worst of all: Running Water. The place stank of honey and clean dishes. Necro-Boy shivered, and you could actually see it go up his spine. "Take courage," said Skeleto-Kid, "we're not there yet." "That's hardly encouraging," said Necro-

Boy. "Well, it's all I've got for now, so pretend it is." Across the lively meadow, they soon came to a small wooden bridge over a little river. At the end of it stood a Living Man. "It's Living Man! Look out!" said Necro-Boy. "Sh! No, it's just a living man. Now you've alerted him to our presence." "Sorry." Skeleto-Kid glared. "Well, hello there, A Living Man," said Necro-Boy. "What'n'huh?" said the living man, snuffing his nose in surprise and turning around. "We've come to find Living Man, and take back our families," said Necro-Boy. "Who now?" "Living Man. You know, the one who rules the Land of

the Living?" "Oh, yeah uh huh. I guess that's me." Necro-Boy's cold, black, little heart melted with fear. "SK," he said under his breath, "what do we do?" "Leave it to me," she said. "My name is Skeleto-Kid, and this is Necro-Boy. We've come to take what's ours!" And she tossed her baseball into the air, swung her bat, hit the ball, and sent it flying at the Living Man. He caught it. "Nice ball you've got here. Say, what's gone and happened to all your flesh? By golly it's... gone! You two are dead!" He panicked, and ran, and dropped the ball. Necro-Boy laughed, and Skeleto-Kid would've smiled, but,

well, you know. That's the thing about skeletons.

They're always smiling! It's like they know something we don't. Or maybe they're grimacing. That would make more sense. "Nice job, SK!" said Necro-Boy.

"Thanks, NB," she said. "It really is easier to say our names when we

abbreviate them. We should've thought of that earlier." "Yeah," said

Necro-Boy, or NB for short.

"Where do we go now?"

"We're still going to the castle." "What? Why?"

"That wasn't Living Man," she said. "But he said "I

know what he said. Either he didn't understand the question, or he lied." "Oh.

Time to die, then," said

Necro-Boy. "You stupid," said Skeleto-Kid. "How many times do you have to be told? You can't die! We're already dead!" "Oh yeah!" said Necro-Boy, and cheered up for a moment. "But wait," he said. "What happens to us if we come alive?" "We can't," she said. "That's the thing about Death. It's permanent." "Hm," he said, and thought about it for a long while as they walked toward the castle. The lilies were pungent as they passed them, and the fetid rabbits were nibbling away in the cheery groves.

"What if they make us come alive?" said Necro-Boy. "They can't," said Skeleto-Kid. "What if they

have some evil light magic?" Skeleto-Kid paused for a while. "I don't know. Let's just hope they don't." "Because what else would they be trying to do to our families? And where else would Living Man get all his Living Power?" "I don't know. Let's just hope the darkness is strong enough to win over them." "I hope so, too," said Necro-Boy. "Necro-Boy," said Skeleto-Kid, after they had gone some way more, "I don't love you. I'm sorry." "What?" said Necro-Boy. "I just said that so you'd trust me." "Why... why wouldn't I trust you?" "Because I was sent to follow you by Death-Head." "Yes, I know, he said

he would send me a companion." "No, I mean, he wanted me to sabotage you." "What?" "Stop saying what." "Sorry." Skeleto-Kid glared again. "He said the only way to save my family was to betray you to Living Man so he could have yours." "No... that's not possible," said Necro-Boy. "I've known Death-Head for a long time... he wouldn't do that!"

"Well, he did." "Why did you agree?" he said. "I had no choice! It was your family or mine. I chose to save mine. But then I realized... you're just like me. And I don't like being me. And I can't let someone else become like me. And the way you

responded hurt me because... maybe I do love you. In some weird, twisted, way. Even though I tried to get your family alive." "So do you love me?" "I don't know," said Skeleto-Kid. "I guess... maybe... But I do know that I'm sorry. So very sorry, for trying to do that to your family." "Wow. Well, I forgive you," he said. "And I guess, maybe I love you too." "No," she said, "no you don't. There's no way you could after what I did to you, what I planned to do." "But I do," said Necro-Boy. "You couldn't," she said. "Not until I save your family." "No, it doesn't work like that." said Necro-Boy. "Love is free. I give it to

you, even though you don't deserve it. And you give it to me, even though I don't deserve it. Because nothing we do could ever be enough to earn love. Even saving each others' families' deaths." "Do you mean it?" said Skeleto-Kid. "Yes." "Well then something is changing," she said. "A new night is falling. There is hope for the dead yet, so let's hope they stay dead!"

Chapter 9

The vast, white, gleaming gates of Living Man's castle towered in front of the skeleto-children.

"What's inside?" said Necro-Boy. "We're about to

find out," said Skeleto-Kid. She knocked on the door, hard, but not pounding. It echoed and rang like a great bell, tolling their doom with each impact of her white knuckles. Silence. The doors opened slowly, with a rush of sound and a noise like a great being taking in a deep breath, never to exhale. Inside were two living guards in shining silver armor, halberds in one hand, helmets revealing their eyes, nose, and mouth, though none of those things gave any indication of what they felt. "I guess we just..." said Skeleto-Kid, and they walked in as the guards watched them. The ceilings soared above

them at least a hundred feet, the sterile architecture conflicting with what they thought was necessary for life. The castle seemed symmetrical, and there were no indications as to where to go: they faced a wall and two very long, giant hallways on either side. "This way," said Skeleto-Kid. They went left, she leading him by the hand. Pillars rose on either side of them as their bone-feet clacked against the marble floors. They walked for what seemed like an hour, but was probably only fifteen minutes, before they reached an open archway with stairs leading into a wide, and

tall, but more tall than wide, room. It was a very fancy room, with black and white patterns in the floor, and hanging golden chandeliers, and paintings, and other people. They were all dressed differently and very importantly, and there were also a few guards. The most striking feature of the room, which had tiers of flat areas, separated by short and wide flights of stairs that stretched nearly the width of the room, was that they led up to a central, smaller platform with a golden throne on it, and on the throne, a man. Living Man. He gleamed and smiled and shone almost of his own accord. "Welcome!" he

said, and everyone in the room turned to look at Necro-Boy and Skeleto-Kid, who froze. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit from the Land of the Dead? It must have been a long journey." "It was," said Necro-Boy. "We've come to get our families back." "Your what now?" said Living Man. "Our families, you vivacious fiend!" screamed Skeleto-Kid. "My goodness, calm down now, young one. I was merely asking for clarification. See here, we don't have families, we all just live alone, and like it that way. Though, I have heard of them, and their common place among the dead." "What have you

done with them," asked Necro-Boy. "We have only done what we would have done for our own families, had we any." "No!" said Skeleto-Kid. "I didn't even say what it was I did yet, child," said Living Man. "You made them... you made them alive, didn't you?" said Necro-Boy. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I did. And they're so much better for it!" "Why?" demanded Skeleto-Kid. "Why?" said Living Man. "Well, because I wanted to, of course! I wanted to see if it could be done! And now that I know it can, I'm going to do it to you!" he said, and stood off his throne, and the guards closed the doors behind them, and

Living Man raised his hands and said, "Magic, please," and a bunch of people around him in matching white robes with gilded edges all bowed their heads and pointed their hands at him, sending beams of wavy light into him, which made him really glow, and he shot the light-beams at Necro-Boy and Skeleto-Kid. The beams hit them like a ton of feathers, that is to say, softly, but a ton is still a huge amount of weight, and would be very painful to be under if the weight were not properly distributed, not to mention the poky bits. And there were poky bits this time. The pain swelled and filled

their minds, until flesh began to grow on their bones under their clothes, and they became living. When he had finished, they looked down at their hands and their feet and arms and legs in horror, touching the soft, spongy stuff that covered them all over. "Ah!" said Skeleto-Kid. "It hurts! I can feel!" "Me too," said Necro-Boy. "It does hurt! Really bad!" "That'll go away soon," said Living Man, "as you get used to your new flesh. In the mean time, welcome to the Land of the Living! Your families are waiting for you." "Where?" they said simultaneously. "Here," he said, and their families came in from the side-

doors of the room. "Mom! Dad!" said Skeleto-Kid and Necro-Boy as they ran to their parents. New, clear tears ran from their eyes, though Skeleto-Kid cried the more, as she had not seen them in much longer. They hugged their parents, and their siblings, and asked them questions, like "are you okay," and "what happened to you," and "why do you look so fleshy," but none of them responded. They didn't even hug back. They shambled along, looking vacant with their clean, fresh eyes. Skeleto-Kid and Necro-Boy importuned their families to respond, but they would not, nor could they. "What's wrong with

them?" said Skeleto-Kid. "What did you do?" "Well, you see, the process doesn't always take well. In fact, it never does. You, too, will soon be as they are... the transformation has already begun. It will take you over, forming a brain inside your skull until you cannot think or feel or hurt." "You cruel person," cried Necro-Boy. "Why are you doing this?" "Because the Dead are a nuisance to us. They haunt our graveyards, and scare our children, and scare everybody, really. These new Living-Dead are scary, too, but at least they don't look as bad. And they're docile, they just walk around, not hurting anyone.

They take up space, though. So we'll have to deport them eventually." "To where?" "Oh, I don't know, probably the Land of the Dead where they came from." "Why didn't you just leave them there? They weren't bothering anyone!" "Well, um, sometimes they were, yeah. Once in a while one would make its way up here, lost or something, and scare people, and sometimes the Living ones here would die and come back as a Dead, and be all bony and what-not, scaring folks that way. It's really easier if you go along with it now." "No, I won't!" screamed Necro-Boy, and he grabbed his left wrist with his right

hand and pulled and pulled and yelled and yelled until POP! It came off at the elbow, and some weird juice came out and it hurt like nothing had ever hurt before, but he held his arm by the wrist and looked at Living Man, who was taken aback, and ran at him, yelling some more. Living Necro-Boy ran up the steps to Living Man's throne and swung his arm and slapped him hard across the chest with the broken end of it. Nothing happened, but Living Man looked down at the juice smear across his white gown chest and got hit in the face with a baseball very hard, which made him fall asleep and hit the floor

because he fell over from being asleep. Necro-Boy looked behind him to see Skeleto-Kid holding her baseball bat. She looked very weird with a fleshy face, but he also thought she looked very pretty. Then he knew what he had to do. "Come here!" he said to Skeleto-Kid. The random people were fleeing, and the guards were running back from the door. "Death-Head taught me this trick!" "What is it?" she said, looking over her shoulder and running to him. "Just look deep inside yourself, and imagine these robe-people dead, and stick out your hand!" he said. She did it. The robe-people who had shot light-

beams at Living Man became skeletons, one by one, and fell to the ground. "Now, do it to me, and I'll do it to you, at the same time!" said Necro-Boy. They pointed their hands at each other, palms open. "What if it doesn't work?" she said. "It will! Hurry, the guards are almost here!" And they did the thing, and made each other dead again. "It worked!" She said, and observed her skeletal limbs. They turned and faced the guards, turning them into skeletons as well. "What about Living Man?" said Skeleto-Kid. Necro-Boy tried to do the death-trick to him. It didn't work. "Here, do it with me at the same time," he said. They

both did. "He's too powerful! We can't think him to death." "What do we do?" she said. "I know," he said, and tried to pick up one of the dead guard's halberds. "It's too heavy! Help me with this."

Together, they picked up the heavy silver halberd, and held it over Living Man. "On three," said Necro-Boy. "One, two," Living Man opened his eyes. "Three!" They plunged the halberd into him, and he began losing juice quickly. His face was aghast with shock. "I can't..." he started, but couldn't finish. "He's dead!" said Necro-Boy. "Woo-hoo!" said Skeleto-Kid. "Now let's kill our families, quick!" he

said.

"Wait," said Skeleto-Kid. Their families' flesh was changing. It started rotting, and began to fall off. The grand cathedral they were in began to crack and crumble. Finally their skeletons were revealed. "Mom, Dad!" they cried, and ran to meet them. This time, they returned their hugs, and so did their siblings. "You're dead!" they said with tears of joy. "And so are you," replied their parents, smiling as they always did. They looked out the grand window behind Living Man's throne and watched as the cities of the Living crumbled. "I always loved a happy ending," said

Skeleto-Kid, and looked at Necro-Boy to wink, but couldn't because she had no eye or eyelid with which to do so. "I really should have tried that when I had the chance," she said. "Tried what?" said Necro-Boy.

THE END