

# The Beast Within

“Dr. Merritt! Dr. Merritt!” Brighton shouted as he raced down the ER corridor. Merritt turned to find the young intern rapidly approaching. Brighton finally caught up with the other man and placed his hands upon his knees as he tried to catch a breath.

“What can I do for you Jerrod?” Merritt asked.

“I was trying to find Jack, but you’ll do,” he responded smugly. “I saw two men leaving Jack’s office earlier. At first I had no idea what was going on, but when I saw the empty office I realized what had happened. My first reaction was to find Jack, but when I noticed that one of them was carrying the monitor, I thought I better follow them instead. So I did.” Brighton smiled, pausing for a suspenseful cue.

Merritt finally spoke up. “And? Where is it now?”

“Well, the two men split up. Of course, I followed the one with the monitor. It wasn’t easy. I didn’t want him to spot me. You know?”

“I get the point Jerrod. Your enthusiasm is appreciated. So where’s the monitor now?”

“In the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab over in the Neurology building,” he said ostentatiously.

“Good work Jerrod. I’ll let Jack know as soon as I see him.” Merritt acknowledged him with an approving smile and began to walk away.

Before he could take another step, the younger man intervened. “Dr. Merritt—Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, what is it?” Merritt countered impatiently.

“Well, you know I’m behind Jack one hundred percent, but I was hoping you’d tell me what’s really going on.”

Merritt was slightly taken by the imposition and spoke cautiously. “Look, I appreciate the information that you’ve provided, but I think it would be best if you just stayed on the sidelines.”

Brighton wore a look of genuine frustration. “I don’t know why you feel it’s necessary to hide things from me. I’ve been here for almost two years now and I’ve always come to you whenever I had a problem. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Merritt considered the young man’s plea and responded kindly. “Well, let me tell you this. What Jack’s doing is going to revolutionize the field of neurology. Imagine being able to predict a heart attack or let’s say—even a stroke, simply by scanning a patient’s brain waves. If we had that kind of diagnostic capability, we’d be able to treat the problem long before it became life threatening. It all has to do with understanding how the brain interacts with the rest of the body. That’s what the Delta wave research is all about.”

Brighton chimed in politely. “I understand that, but be honest with me. Is there any truth to the rumors that Jack’s trying to tap into the human soul?”

Merritt stood silent for a moment, but finally responded. “Jerrod—people interpret things in many different ways. All I can tell you is that Jack’s a lot further along than even I know. Right now he’s already collected enough information to do exactly what we just talked about.”

“So are you saying that he’s already completed the Delta wave research?”

Merritt didn’t respond, but his expression said volumes.

“Well, personally I think it’s all very exciting and I honestly hope that Jack succeeds,” Brighton said, wearing an impish grin.

“So do I,” Merritt retorted and headed down the corridor.

Wright had found his way back into the ER and was passing the nurse’s station. He couldn’t help but notice Nurse Hardcourt’s gaze focused upon him. What disturbed him most was her expression. Normally, he would have expected a scowl or loathsome sneer, but hers was a look of kindness—perhaps even approbation.

“Jack! There you are,” Merritt exclaimed.

Wright, in somewhat of a trance, was startled momentarily by the otherwise innocuous greeting. “Chris—what’s going on?” he said, still slightly perplexed.

“I just talked to Jerrod. Apparently, he witnessed two men leaving your office with the monitor.”

“Really? He didn’t bother telling me,” Wright countered with discernible skepticism in his voice.

“Well, according to him, he had to make a choice—follow the monitor or find you. He chose to follow the monitor. And you’ll never guess where they took it.” Merritt smiled with anticipation.

“To the Neuroelectrical Instrumentation Lab,” Wright responded nonchalantly and produced the small black box.

“What the...” Merritt stammered, baffled by Wright’s presentation of the unit.

“Things are starting to get really weird around here!”

“What do you mean?” Merritt queried reluctantly.

“Well, first of all. I went up to Bradford’s office and he wasn’t there. So I have this confrontation with his secretary, Andrea, and she literally goes out of her way to help me. The next thing I know, perhaps out of guilt, she tells me about a spy...”

“So you confirmed that Bradford’s got someone spying on you?” Merritt interjected.

“I have no doubt that someone’s spying on me, but she didn’t know who it was. *How convenient*, I thought. Next, she tells me that Bradford and Hardcourt are romantically involved. That didn’t surprise me.” Wright rolled his eyes.

“That surprises me,” Merritt retorted. “I can’t imagine what Gayle would see in that overblown windbag.”

“Nevertheless, everything Andrea’s told me so far has been true. She was the one who knew exactly where to find the monitor. Oh, and that’s another thing. You know the two morons who took the monitor? They had it completely disassembled. I managed to reassemble it, but apparently they damaged one of the co-processors. I’ll have to take it home to fix it.” Wright looked at the monitor, shaking his head in disgust. “I actually got into it with this one guy, whose ego rivals even Bradford’s. The worst part though, was when Bradford walked into the room. I thought I’d never get the monitor back. Boy was I wrong. Bradford told the assistant in no uncertain terms to just hand it over. I was literally stunned. Here I thought I’d be facing a major confrontation, but the man just smiles and acts as if everything’s peachy. Oh, and did I mention that Andrea was in the middle of all this. I’m not sure what to make of her. Either she really wants to help or she’s just playing the part to win my trust.”

“Jack—not everyone’s out to get you,” Merritt said with a reassuring smile.

“I realize that, but after everything that’s happened, I’d rather be a little overcautious than not cautious enough,” Wright replied and then continued. “Anyway—to top it all off, I’m walking by the Nurse’s station just a few minutes ago and noticed Nurse Hardcourt. Normally I can expect the customary dirty look, but this time she was actually smiling at me. Explain that one.”

Merritt considered the question carefully for a moment and finally responded. “I think there are a lot of underlying issues that neither one of us really know about, but if I had to guess, I’d say that Dr. Bradford probably burned his bridges with Nurse Hardcourt today. I also think that he’s made certain concessions with the Medical Board and can’t back out now. So in that regard you may have the upper hand.”

“Well, at this point I’m just hoping to get another chance at a reading before Bradford can make his next move. If you’re right, he may be panicking and I’d rather not find out what he’s willing to try next.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Merritt concurred. “Oh, by the way. Seeing as you’re not going to be doing any readings tonight, I thought maybe we could get together with my father this evening. He just flew in from California on business and I’m sure he’d like to see you.”

Wright spoke reluctantly. “I don’t know. I really need to fix the monitor first. Replacing the co-processor is going to take me at least two hours.”

“Jack—it’s a little after four. Go home, fix the monitor, and meet us in the Flats at nine. That gives you plenty of time. And I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” Merritt said, smiling confidently. Wright hesitated for a moment, but eventually conceded to his friend’s request with a simple nod.

It was an unusually clear night as several bright stars glimmered through the azure dusk. Wright entered their usual haunt, working his way through the crowd. After scanning the interior of the restaurant he stepped outside. There was a small covered bar as well as several tables scattered about the wooden deck overlooking the river. Merritt and his father were taking advantage of the cool night air as they indulged in a glass of wine. The flame from a single candle flickered brightly in the center of the table.

Merritt's father, John, was a distinguished old man with kind eyes and an honest face. His hair was still full, but the gray had almost entirely enveloped the few remaining patches of brownish blonde. His build was not dissimilar to that of his son's with the exception of his waist which extended out slightly beyond his belt line.

"Jack—it's great to see you again," John said resoundingly and stood up to receive the man.

"It's good to see you too, Dr. Merritt," Wright responded, countering with a solid handshake.

"Please Jack, call me John," the older man retorted.

Wright nodded and took his seat between the two men. As the waitress approached, he fumbled for a menu.

"Are you ready to order now?" the waitress queried. John looked over to Wright, who was leafing through the menu. After a moment, Wright finally looked up and nodded.

"Yes, I'll have the Lobster Tail, a baked potato with plenty of butter and sour cream, and a side order of steamed clams—extra butter and Tabasco sauce," John exclaimed, concluding his order with a smile.

Merritt gave his father a disapproving stare and placed his order. Wright noticed the exchange, but chose not to interject. The waitress finally took Wright's order and rushed off.

“So Jack, Chris tells me you’ve made some significant progress in your research,” John said inquisitively.

“Indeed, but it’s been very difficult keeping the proverbial hands out of the cookie jar—if you know what I mean,” Wright quipped sarcastically. John acknowledged him with a sharp nod and Wright continued. “In all honesty, I can’t wait to finish this project. It’s been a major headache. I’m sure Chris has told you.”

“Well Jack, nothing that’s worthwhile in life comes easy. Just remember. It’s not the research that makes a man great. It takes a great man to make the research great. Consider how many times researchers went off half cocked, trying to sell their ideas and theories only to discover their research had already been disputed.” John paused momentarily for a dramatic climax. “I’m still not sure how many eggs I can eat in one week,” he cracked keenly and everyone chuckled in response.

“That’s why Bradford detests you so much,” Merritt interjected, his tone somewhat more serious. “He stands on the shoulders of great men, taking credit for their work as if it were his own. Don’t get me wrong. The man is a magnificent neurosurgeon, perhaps one of the best in the world. But he lacks one crucial talent—creativity—one of the key ingredients for a truly successful researcher.”

Jack smiled and replied. “Well, it’s been a long hard road, but I’m very close. So I’m not about to give up now.”

Just as he said that, a loud horn sounded off in the distance. One of the large railway bridges resting over the river began to rise. Gradually, it ascended until finally it reached the top of the girded structure. Only moments after, a large ship passed slowly beneath, clearing the bridge by just a few feet.

John was mildly impressed. “To be honest, I didn’t think that ship was going to clear the bridge.”

“Believe it or not, the bottom of that ship’s only a few feet from river floor,” Wright retorted keenly.

John took the opportunity to impart some wisdom upon the two younger men. “That brings up a great point. Just imagine what would’ve happened if the bridge operator and the ship’s pilot had failed to communicate. Certainly, disaster would’ve ensued.”

Wright and Merritt glanced at one another with a look of confusion. John motioned toward the retreating ship and continued.

“No, I’m not going senile. I’m just trying to make a correlation between that situation and yours. Chris was telling me that this project has put a real strain on your friendship.” Wright and Merritt nodded simultaneously.

“It’s so important to remember what friendship’s all about. Without friends you can’t communicate your ideas, your feelings, your experiences, among other things. You may not even realize it, but many of what you consider to be your best qualities are usually developed from the friends you respect and admire the most. And let’s face it. Women are wonderful, lovely creatures that enhance and enrich our lives, but there are just some things you can’t share with them. The problem is, more often than not, you meet that special someone and wind up alienating yourself from the rest of the world—sometimes even your family.” John momentarily glanced at Merritt and then repositioned himself in his chair. His tone was suddenly very solemn.

“I don’t mean to be long winded, so I’ll get to the point. Stark observation hasn’t always been my strong suit, but it’s quite obvious to me that you rely on one another more than

you'd probably like to admit." John paused for a moment and then looked towards Merritt again. "When Erica left you, you were absolutely devastated. And when all your yuppie friends shunned you as a divorcee, who was the one friend who came to you in time of need?"

Merritt wore a look of compunction as he motioned towards Wright. John nodded and then drew his attention upon the man in question.

"And Jack, I know you don't like to talk about it, but who was the one person that kept you going when you lost Cassandra?"

This time Wright drew his eyes upon Merritt and nodded remorsefully.

"I guess what I'm really trying to say is that you've always been there for one another. Don't let that change now. Don't ever let the communication break down." John concluded his speech by smiling kindly upon both men.

The waitress had returned with a second waitress, each toting a large tray of food. After distributing the entrees accordingly, they left the three men to enjoy their feast.

John immediately delved into a bowl of steaming hot clams, slathering each one with an excess of butter and Tabasco before placing them into his mouth. For the second time Merritt gave his father a disapproving stare. This time Wright was slightly bothered and imposed upon Merritt.

"Is there a problem Chris?" he inquired in a disconcerted tone.

Merritt glanced at his father again and then turned to Wright. "No, I'm just worried about his eating habits. He's disregarded my advice, as well as the advice of his own physician. He's already been warned about his blood pressure and cholesterol level, yet he still eats like a twenty year old."

John quickly swallowed a portion of food and then cleared his throat. “Look here Chris! I’ve been a doctor longer than you’ve been alive. I don’t need a second opinion about my own health. I’ve lived my life to the fullest and I don’t intend to stop now. When my time’s up, I’ll relish in that knowledge.”

Wright, sensing the tension, attempted to lighten up the situation. “Now that’s a man who knows how to live.”

“Damn it Jack, don’t encourage him! That’s the foolish justification of a stubborn old man,” Merritt retorted angrily.

John recognized his son’s anguish and responded with kind words. “Chris, I appreciate your concern, but at this point, I’ve accepted the fact that I won’t be around much longer. And I’m okay with that. I miss your mother and I’d like to join her soon.”

Merritt placed his hand over his eyes, shielding them from view. Wright responded by placing a hand on Merritt’s shoulder in an attempt to console him.

“Chris? Are you alright?” Wright spoke softly. “Is this about your mom?”

Merritt looked up. His eyes were slightly red and swollen. He glanced over at his father. John was wearing a look of sorrow. “Yes. I’ve always had a hard time dealing with her death. And right now the last thing I want to do is bury my father!”

“Chris—everyone dies eventually. That doesn’t mean that you lose them forever. It’s all about what you keep up here.” John tapped on his temple. “The memories, the experiences—that’s all I have left of your mother.”

“You just don’t understand. You weren’t there when she died,” Merritt responded as his eyes began to well up with tears. The candle in the center of the table continued

to burn brightly as Merritt began to recollect the day of his mother's death.

Young Merritt sat in a chair at the foot of his mother's hospital bed. The room was huge and intimidating to his six-year-old eyes, and his sleeping mother seemed to be a million miles away from him. He sat there quietly, as his father conferred with another doctor, all the while wanting so badly to participate in the conversation. But he knew better than to interrupt. The two men paused for a moment and the boy took his cue to finally speak up.

"Daddy—is mommy ever gonna get better?" Young Merritt inquired. The distress was apparent in his voice.

Merritt's father exchanged a few more words with the other doctor and then dismissed him. Walking over to the young boy, he knelt down. "Son, you know how I told you that my job is to keep people from going to Heaven before they're supposed to. Well, sometimes we can't stop people from going to Heaven." Merritt's father had to pause momentarily as the emotion rushed up through his throat and began to press on the backs of his eyeballs. "What I'm trying to say is that soon it'll be your mommy's time to go to Heaven."

"But I don't want her to go. If she leaves I won't have a mommy. Who's gonna be my mommy?" Young Merritt began sniffing as his father tried desperately to console him.

"Christopher, I know how hard this is, but your mommy's in so much pain, and where she's going will bring her peace and happiness. Don't you want mommy to feel better?"

"Yeah. But isn't mommy happy here? How come you can't make the pain go away? You always make my pain go away," young Merritt retorted and continued to sob.

Merritt's father stammered as he tried to respond to the barrage of questions.

"Christopher darling, come here and let mommy take away those tears," Merritt's mother said, slowly opening her wearied eyelids.

Young Merritt's eyes lit up with joy. "Mommy," his tiny voice resonated as he rushed over to his mother's side. She extended an arm and young Merritt latched onto it like a lost fledgling returning to the safety of its mother crest.

"It's okay Christopher," she said in a soft tone. "I don't want you to cry anymore. There's no need for tears now. I'm here."

Producing a tissue, she leaned over slightly and blotted his eyes. Young Merritt finally fought back the tears, but continued to sniffle. His mother smiled at him lovingly. He responded with a huge grin.

"That's better," she said, taking his small hand into her own. There was a brief moment of silence as they stood there just enjoying one another. Merritt's father smiled for the first time, but said nothing, so as not to intrude upon the tender moment.

Young Merritt finally broke the silence. "Mommy? Is it true that you have to go to Heaven? Please tell me it's not true. Pleeease." His eyes began to well up with tears again.

Merritt's mother sighed and responded softly. "I'm not going to lie to you sweetheart. I have to go soon, but that doesn't mean that I won't always be right here." She placed her hand gently upon his chest as he began to sob again.

"Christopher—please don't cry. Come on now. I want you to listen to me," she said, pleading with the young boy. "I'll always be in your heart. Don't ever forget that. If you ever feel like you're missing me, all you have to do is close

your eyes and think of me, and I'll be there." Merritt's mother held his hand firmly as she spoke, rubbing his knuckles with her thumb.

"What do you mean?" he queried woefully.

"Just close your eyes and think of one of the best times we ever had together. It can be whatever you want. Like our trip to the mountains or the time we drove to Aspen or maybe even the time we went to Hawaii. Hey, you remember that little Hawaiian doll you had?"

"Yeesss," he responded in a silly voice and began to giggle.

"Remember how much you loved that doll and took it everywhere we went? You even slept with it."

Young Merritt smiled with the joy of the memory.

"See how easy it is sweetheart. Those memories never go away. And neither will I," she said, smiling back at him.

Suddenly her expression became very distraught, as if a knife had been thrust between her ribs. She looked over to Merritt's father, but did not speak. She didn't have to. He knew what she was feeling.

"Are you okay mommy?" young Merritt murmured, feeling uneasy again.

"Yes sweetheart," she labored out forcefully.

Merritt's father moved to her bedside, leaning over to talk to her. She grabbed his shoulder harshly and whispered something in his ear. At first, he shook his head, but she persisted and he finally caved into her demand.

"Alright honey, I'll see what I can do," he exclaimed and rushed out of the room.

Young Merritt, confused by the exchange, made an innocent inquiry. "Is daddy going to take your pain away?"

“He’s going to try,” she responded in a weak empty tone. “You just hold my hand and maybe the pain will go away on it’s own.”

She fought the excruciating discomfort just to wear a genuine smile for her young son. He smiled back at her, but the pain was intensifying. Her grip on his small hand was becoming tighter and the boy finally squealed.

“Ouch Mommy—you’re hurting me,” he exclaimed, but she was no longer in control. Her eyes rolled back into their sockets and her body began to convulse.

Young Merritt looked on in horror, all the while trying to release his hand from her painful grip. He tugged several times and eventually broke lose. Her arms began to flail violently as her head crashed down upon the pillow.

“Please mommy stop! Pleeese!” he cried, but she continued to convulse. Out of sheer terror, he shuffled backwards just beyond her reach, ultimately dropping to his knees. Gasping for a breath, he yelped, but nothing came out. Again, he tried to cry out and again he failed to make a sound. The young boy was breathing rapidly as tears began to pour down his cheeks. He felt totally helpless.

Suddenly, she stopped convulsing as her arms dropped to her sides. The room filled with an eerie silence and young Merritt could now hear his own heartbeat pounding upon his eardrums. After a few tense moments, he finally stood and approached the motionless body.

“Mommy?” he uttered timidly. “Mommy? Please wake up.” He shook her hand gently, but she failed to react.

“Mommy,” he shouted more forcefully, but still no response from his mother. All at once the realization had hit him—his mother was gone.

“Mommy!” he cried out pathetically and began to weep.

The center candle was nearly extinguished as it flickered precariously. Wright sat with an expressionless look on his face.

“I couldn’t save her. That’s what kept going through my mind. I felt completely helpless.” Merritt sighed momentarily and continued. “After her death, I spent many sleepless nights trying to piece together any fragment of a happy memory, but as time passed I could no longer visualize her beautiful face. That’s one of life’s greatest ironies.”

Wright nodded with conviction.

“When I got a little older I knew I wanted to be a doctor—for no other reason than to save lives. And it’s my greatest aspiration to do everything in my power to save each and every patient that comes through the ER doors. If I can spare a wife, a mother or even a child the pain that I’ve endured, it is only then that I can rest my conscience.”

John wore a look of total bewilderment. “I had no idea Chris,” he uttered remorsefully.

Few words were exchanged thereafter as the three men quietly finished their meals. The rain clouds, which had held off for most of the night, began to roll in, signaling the conclusion of a somewhat cold and somber evening.

Wright sat at the edge of his bed examining the prescription given to him by Merritt. Grasping a small paper cup, he placed a large caplet onto his tongue. With only a moment’s hesitation, the pill quickly began to dissolve. His face contorted slightly from the bitter taste and he finally washed it down with a mouthful of water. Adjusting the pillows beneath his head, Wright made a conscious plea for a restful slumber. Several minutes passed, and he was already completely motionless.

Wright's eyes opened to a blinding white light causing him to shield them at first. Lowering his arm slowly, everything seemed blurry and he strained to focus. As his eyes adjusted, several figures came into view. He began to make an assessment of his surroundings. With his eyes completely adjusted, he found himself standing in the middle of a funeral. The faces were familiar as well as the setting.

Cassandra's casket was resting above an open grave and the minister was reciting a passage in familiar fashion. "The Lord is my shepherd—I shall not want," the man uttered with great conviction. Wright stood in silence scanning the mourners. The sight of familiar faces provided some solace. He took a deep breath, nodded his head and began to focus on the words of the minister.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul—a soul in which you have no business calling upon!"

Wright jerked his head up abruptly. He looked to the minister, but the man continued to recite the passage, and no one else had reacted to the bizarre phrase. Wright shook his head gently from side to side as if to shake off the delusion. The minister continued.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil—unless, of course, you delve into things that are better off left alone!"

Again Wright turned towards the holy purveyor and again no one else seemed phased by his taunting quip. Wright cautiously scanned the mourners again, but everyone and everything seemed normal. He decided to maintain a watchful eye on the minister.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life—and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

The word *forever* seemed to resonate unnaturally in the cold December air.

Several mourners began to weep as the minister concluded the Psalm. Wright sighed with relief. The woman next to him finally began to sob as if she had been holding back through the entire precession. He placed his hand gently upon her shoulder and turned to embrace her. As he looked into her eyes his body convulsed with terror.

“I don’t know why everyone’s making such a fuss. I feel fine. Now give me a kiss!” the woman spouted. All that remained of Wright’s deceased wife was a rotting corpse. He yelled out, but everyone was still focused on the casket as it was lowered into the opening.

“Damn it, get away from me you sick bitch!” Wright shouted, but the hideous corpse retained a powerful hold. She opened her mouth and hundreds of maggots dribbled out off the edge of her lip. In an embarrassing moment, she released one of her hands from Wright and proceeded to shove the slithering larvae back into her mouth. Wright wore a grimace of nausea as she daintily pushed the few remaining maggots between her lips with a single finger as if they were a tantalizing delicacy.

“Sorry,” she gurgled and began to chew the contents. Wright took advantage of the distraction, breaking free from her clutches. As she tried to recapture him, they both stumbled and fell onto the casket. Wright looked up and pleaded for assistance, but everyone was oblivious to his plight.

As the funeral concluded, the mourners quietly dispersed. Wright continued to struggle with the corpse as a light rain began to saturate the grave sight.

“Stop struggling my dear. Isn’t this what you wanted? To be with me forever?” she spouted in a gravely tone.

“You’re not my wife damn it! You’re not my wife!” he shouted repeatedly.

The rainfall had intensified. The ground was becoming soft and the heavy casket began to sink into the muddied earth. More and more rapidly the opening to the grave was becoming smaller. Wright finally kicked the tenacious corpse away and stood on the edge of the casket trying to pull himself out. To his misfortune the ground had become soft and he was merely pulling more mud into the grave.

The corpse leapt up at Wright again and both came crashing down onto the casket, causing it to sink even farther. He tried to get up, but she had knocked the breath from his lungs.

“Don’t fight it my love. We were meant to be together. It’s our destiny,” the corpse exclaimed, wrapping her arms tightly around his torso.

“Jack!” a voice rang out from above. “Jack—take my hand!”

Wright looked up at the narrow opening and saw Cassandra extending a hand into the grave. He wore a look of shock, which quickly melted into confusion. She looked completely normal. Her face was more beautiful than ever. He reached skyward, but she was too far away. He struggled to stand, but something was preventing his actions. It was then that he had realized if Cassandra was above, who or more specifically what was pulling at him from beneath. He hesitated to look, but finally glanced down at the gruesome figure.

The hideous corpse of Cassandra was no longer a corpse at all. The long black talons of a horrible demon were now tearing into his flesh. The face of the beast was horrific with black, penetrating eyes and mandibles like that of an insect.

In the center of the mandibles was a large opening, laced with several rows of razor sharp teeth.

Wright kicked violently, trying to break loose as the evil beast sunk its claws deeper into his flesh. The intense pain was beginning to drain his energy. He gathered every ounce of strength in his wearied body and made one last attempt to reach Cassandra. With arm extended, he kicked away from the horrid beast and finally captured the hand of his love.

The beast quickly regained its grasp and began to work its way up Wright's tattered body, tearing new flesh as it ascended.

"Pull Cassandra! For God's sake pull," Wright shouted desperately.

"I'm trying Jack," she cried, "Just don't let go!"

Suddenly, the weight of the beast was tremendous and the muscles in Wright's arm began to burn from the increased load. He looked down to find that the grave had opened up to a huge cavern. The floor of the cavern, perhaps several hundred feet below, was a glowing canvas of molten lava. Cassandra screamed at the hellish sight.

The beast had worked its way up to Wright's face, its claws now tearing into his ribs. "Where do you think you're going," it hissed grotesquely, exposing its razor sharp teeth again. The beast cocked its head back slightly as it prepared to strike.

"No!" Cassandra shrieked as the beast sunk its teeth deeply into his skull.

Wright awoke gasping for breath. He scrambled from his bed and spun around several times scanning the entire room. He finally exhaled a single sigh of relief and headed for the bathroom.

Drenching his hands under the icy water, he soaked his face several times. The chilling liquid began to penetrate his skin. He took several deep breaths and finally reached for a towel. As he blotted his face dry, he opened his eyes to a horrific sight. The reflection of the rotting corpse was now staring him directly in the face.

Wright awoke again screaming. He sprang from his bed and searched the entire house. Satisfied that he was finally awake and alone, he walked over to the nightstand beside his bed, retrieved the prescription and poured the contents into the toilet.