

DRAKIA

THE ISLAND OF IMAGINATION

BY JOE SHANDROWSKI

What if, the origin of something we all seem to take for granted: IMAGINATION - isn't simply a strand of DNA, but rather a gift, and like most gifts, its treasure can be used for good or evil?

It's a question Joshua Taylor, a bullied fourteen-year old, will confront and his courageous battle against Skull, the Gothic Pirate King (and his army of Zula Beasts) will determine the outcome, and our ultimate destiny.

THE GHOST

Chapter One

It was a quiet, sunny morning on Avalon Beach in California. The waves, which typically would be crashing across the shoreline, were unusually calm. Fourteen-year-old Joshua Taylor, a senior at Wooster Middle School, stood alone on the beach building a medieval sandcastle fifty-feet from the water's edge. Josh had a brilliant imagination and whether by pen, keyboard or the use of beach sand as his artform, he loved creating mystical worlds that never existed before.

Josh built his castle a good distance up the beach because he was terrified of the water. Six years earlier, while learning to swim, a sea creature snatched his leg and tried to pull him under. Luckily, his father was just a few feet away and was able to secure his release.

Some say it was a sand shark and others suggested it was a giant moray eel that had slithered up the coast in search of food. Joshua's version of the attack was a far cry from the common thought and a much less believable yarn. "It was a fish-like creature with long fangs, jagged claws and skin made of fire," was his quote to the newspaper reporter on the scene.

Obviously, no one believed his tall tale. The burn marks on his right leg were determined to be abrasions caused when the creature's rough skin rubbed against him. Joshua, however, believed his story to be true and though he loved to sail on the family boat and fish from the beach, he stayed clear of stepping into the water ever since.

“Joshua!” a voice yelled out.

Josh looked across the beach and noticed his father waving to him from the back porch of their beachfront house.

“Were leaving when your sister gets back from gymnastics. Put a move on it kiddo,” he shouted.

Josh, his fifteen-year-old sister Keri and his mom, Janine and dad, Brian, were leaving for a two-week vacation later in the morning.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” he yelled back.

Josh picked up a twig of driftwood out of the sand to add the finishing touch to the widow’s perch located at the peak of the castle.

“From the perch the Princess’ guards can now warn the villagers of a pending attack by the winged gargoyles that live in the maze of dark caves on the out skirts of the castle,” Josh said.

He paused when he noticed something very peculiar out of the corner of his eye. A thick fog began to rise from the surface of the ocean water. So dense in fact, you would have thought the ocean was ablaze. Though there was not so much as a breeze in the air the mysterious mist rolled across the calm water and began to slowly creep its way up the sand. Leading Joshua to ponder the thought, were the winged gargoyles indeed just a figment of his imagination.

Just then Ivan Skulinski, a classmate of Joshua’s at Wooster Middle School and a handful of his mischievous friends, wondered onto the beach. They walked over and started feeding the sea gulls at the edge of the shore. It, however, wasn't as innocent as it looked. They were maliciously feeding the sea gulls seltzer tablets that would fizzle in their tiny stomachs and make them quite ill.

Ivan noticed Josh in the distance and an evil grin flashed across his face. Ivan did not like Josh because he kept to himself and in his mind acted weird. Joshua was also much smaller, barely 100lbs soaking wet, and didn’t have a lot of self-confidence to stand up to Ivan and his gang of thugs and thus he made for easy prey.

“Hey, look dudes, it’s the weirdo freak!” Ivan said.

“He is probably playing imaginary pirates,” his friend Waldo replied.

“Well then, let’s sneak attack!” Ivan said as he tapped his chest twice with a closed fist. He was wearing a tank top with an imprint of a black skull and cross bones. Joshua had no idea Ivan had even walked onto the beach let alone about his malicious intentions.

Rumbles of thunder began to echo in the distance. The thunder was actually a comforting sound to Josh. His ‘winged gargoyle’ theory was replaced by a much more sensible explanation. He figured the fog was probably due to an approaching storm so he bent down to pick up his backpack and head home when a bright flash of white light

filtered through the fog practically blinding him. Josh squinted to protect his eyes. "It must be coming from the beacon," he thought.

The beacon light was about a mile out to sea. It was used to help guide boaters away from the shallow and rocky waters, especially during low tide. There was, however, a kink in the theory. Given the fact the fog was quite dense, and the beacon was a mile away, "How could it be so bright?" Josh said.

He lowered his head away from the light. "What in the world," he said. The light pierced through the widow's perch at the top of the castle and reflected off the driftwood like it was a mirror and down to the front gate where the sand glittered like broken pieces of crystal glass.

Curiously, he squatted down and scooped up a handful of the sand. The crystals filtered through his fingers leaving behind a metal object in the middle of his palm. "A key," Josh said. This key, however, was very different from the one he used to unlock his door at home. His first thought was that it was very old, it had a dull copper finish with three distinctive square notches. "A skeleton key," he thought.

His imagination began to soar as he thought about the possibilities. "Maybe it is a key to a lost pirate treasure just beyond the shore. Or maybe a key to a dungeon that is home to some type of prehistoric creature. He then looked out across the ocean and a much more sinister thought engulfed him as the fog continued its methodical crawl up the beach. "Maybe the same creature that attacked me years ago. Only now grown up and ten times the size."

His train of thought was broken when he heard a faint voice whisper through his ear. He fell dead silent and scanned the beach, but there was nobody there. He turned to see if maybe it was his father's voice, but he was busy scrubbing the barbecue grille. Figuring, once again, it was just his imagination playing tricks on him he shrugged it off and drew his attention back to the skeleton key.

A moment later he heard the voice again. Only it was much clearer. "It is the key to the hidden treasure that will lead you into the darkness," the voice said in a very soft precious tone.

Josh looked towards the lifeguard stand a few feet from the edge of the shore. Rising from the fog was a shadowy figure, of what he believed to be a man, staring out across the ocean. It was kind of strange because he wasn't there just seconds ago. "A ghost?" Josh wondered.

His thought may have been a bit out of the realm of reality but from his perspective it was quite an eerie coincidence, especially since the man's identity was not only hidden in the blanket of fog, but also buried underneath a long, loosely fit black over coat, with a raised collar trimmed in red that resembled a cloak worn by medieval Vikings in the 15th century and more recently by Caribbean pirates in the early 1800's. An uneasy feeling wavered through the pit of Joshua's stomach, as an avid reader of ancient

mystery and fantasy novels, he realized the garment was also fashionable attire for witches, vampires and even wizards.

“Why would anyone be wearing a cloak, especially on a warm day like this? It’s not Halloween,” Josh thought.

“Oh, this is crazy. What am I thinking? A ghost? I’m just freaking myself out. He is just a man walking on the beach. So, what if he is wearing a cloak. This is California, there are all kinds of nuts, and, besides, it couldn’t have been his voice. How could I hear him whispering from that far away?”

Still, he was not totally convinced. He opened his hand and looked at the key. “It is the key to the hidden treasure that will lead you into the darkness,” the voice repeated. He looked up quickly but the ‘ghost’ was gone. No trace, no trail. Before he had time to mull over what just happened he heard another voice. This voice, however, was far from soft and very recognizable.

"Sneak attack!" Ivan screamed from behind. He leaped over Josh and purposely kicked him in the head with his untied work boot. Josh dropped the key and grabbed the back of his head in pain. Ivan landed in the middle of his castle and showed just how crude he could be by destroying every last bit of Joshua's piece of art.

“The enemy has arrived,” Ivan shouted, “And he shall conquer the world!”

His buddies applauded his destruction and laughed at Joshua as Ivan kicked backwards and booted a load of sand into his face. He then lifted both his arms and flexed his muscles, “I’m the ruler of this beach you little twerp. If I ever see you here again I’m going to do to you what I just did to your dumb castle. Got it chicken turd?”

Josh didn’t say a word he just sat there with his arms over his face trying to protect himself. Ivan and his gang turned and walked away laughing at Joshua’s expense.

Josh cleared the sand and tears out of his eyes and stood up. He was very angry as he stood over his castle in ruins but what could he do? The simple answer was to do what he always did when it came to Ivan, nothing, just drop his head and go home.

He picked up his backpack, "Ouch," he said stepping on something sharp. He quickly checked the sole of his foot, to his relief, there was no blood or obvious sign of a cut. He squatted down and combed his fingers through the sand to see what it was he had stepped on and once again came across the skeleton key. He turned the key over in his hand and dropped it again, or at least he thought he did for a second. Though it was no longer visible he could still feel it in his palm. He picked the key up between his fingers and turned it back over. Amazingly, it reappeared.

"Holy crap!" he said, "This is totally awesome!" It was as if the key had only one side. "Wait," he said, "The magician." In the springtime the town recreation department had James the Magician visit the beach and he put on a show for the children. "It must be his key. That’s it. I’ll give it to Dad. He’ll know how to return it."

Josh slipped the key in the small side pocket of his backpack, flipped the pack over his shoulder and went to head home, unbeknownst to Josh, as he was preoccupied with the mystery behind the key, the drifting fog had rolled across his feet cementing him to the sand. “What’s happening?” he said with terror in his voice.

The fog had devoured the skin and muscle around his feet, leaving nothing but bone, and it began to slowly creep, inch by inch, up his ankle. “It’s eating me alive! Make it stop!” he said in desperation.

Instinctively, he tried to sweep the fog away with his right hand. The move only exasperated the situation. The fog attached itself to his hand with the same chilling results. There was nothing but skeleton bone from his wrists down. Though there was no pain involved, it did little to calm Joshua’s nerves. “Make it stop!” he shouted again, and he tried to shake the fog off his hand to no avail.

He turned to his house, his heart thumping with panic, “Help!” he shouted at the top of his lungs, “Dad! Help! Help!” Though his father was still out in the yard cleaning the grille, and within obvious range to hear his screams, he never turned around.

Another rumble of thunder followed. Josh timidly shifted his eyes towards the shore. Out of the depths of the ocean rose a dark and menacing black cloud, encircled by an ominous red and yellow glow that resembled flowing lava. Within seconds the cloud consumed the once bright, blue sky turning the day into the dead of night and the cool air into a sweltering heat. “OMG! A cloud demon,” Josh said, as he wiped the dripping sweat from his brow with the back of his left hand. “No doubt about it. It’s official. I’m now totally freaked out!”

“Do not be frightened Joshua, for it is in you that I place my faith,” returned the soft whispering voice. Josh jerked his head back in the direction of the lifeguard stand and within a whirl of the fog re-appeared the ‘ghost’ wearing the cloak.

Though it was pitch dark all around him, the ghost’s frame was illuminated by white, fluorescent light. The ‘ghost’ slowly turned his head towards Joshua. His identity was partially hidden behind his raised collar, but Josh did notice he was an older gentleman with a long white, almost slivery like beard that came to a point at the center of his chest.

“Please help me,” Josh whispered back.

The ‘ghost’ didn’t answer Joshua’s plea. Instead, he turned his attention back towards the ocean and the head of a king cobra appeared from the front of his right shoulder.

The serpent slithered across the back of his neck and down his left arm. A blast of thunder ripped across the darkened sky and the snake dangled down and turned to marble in the shape of a gold handled scepter with a diamond-studded crown at its point.

“Incredible,” Josh said, momentarily, focusing his attention away from the flesh-eating fog. He quickly dug into his backpack with his left hand for his phone. “I have to get a

picture of this. No one will ever believe me.” Before he could snap a photo, the screen went black. The battery, which was fully charged, not only died it physically melted like butter inside the phone and oozed out the bottom.

“Yikes!” Josh said and hastily dropped the phone into the fog. “This is...” he paused in mid thought and slowly lifted his eyes and watched in awe as the ‘ghost’ raised the scepter towards the Cloud Demon and a brilliant streak of lightening flashed from its crown. Josh lifted his left arm to shade his eyes from the bolt of lightning as it pulsed through the black cloud like beams of light in a plasma sphere. The cloud roared in a fit of anger, “Foolish child. You shall pay for your imposition. The wicked will always ravage the unwise,” it said in a deep and disturbing voice. The cloud then exploded into a spectacular array of light and a million star-like particles reigned down upon Joshua.

The cloud dissolved, leaving in its wake blue skies, cooler temperatures and a brilliant triple rainbow reaching as far as Joshua’s eyes could see.

“Do not be afraid,” the ‘ghost’ whispered once more, “It is in you I place my faith.”

“What do you mean? What does this all mean? Why is this happening?” Josh asked.

The ghost slowly turned his head once again in Joshua’s direction, only this time he lowered the collar. Because of the distance, Josh still couldn’t get a good look as to his identity, but he was right about his age, the man was quite old. “In his 70’s,” Josh figured.

“In due time my child,” the ghost replied, “The answer will be clear. You shall know the truth of the journey that awaits you.”

“Journey? You mean my vacation?” Josh asked with a look of confusion. The ghost comforted Josh with a distant smile. “In due time,” he answered once again and turned his attention back to the ocean. He dropped the crown of the scepter into the fog. “Until we meet again my child of wonder,” he said and twirled the crown through the fog.

The fog began to whirl and astonishingly molded itself into a horse-like creature that, according to the legend and folklore books Josh had read, only existed in the mythical world of the ancient Greek gods. And yet there it was as clear as day. “A unicorn,” Josh said.

The creature rose up with a flowing mane of gold and to Joshua’s surprise, wings made of fire. Leading Joshua to realized that what he was witnessing was beyond the realm of possibility. “A unicorn with wings?” Josh said. Even in the most ancient writings of mythology, at a time when the lines between reality and dream were often blurred no mention of such a creature exists. With the exception, as in modern times, in the passage of a child’s fable. Some writers called it a Pegasus, others crowned it Alicorn and even in some creative circles it was known as a Beccasus.

Joshua watched in amazement as a stream of the fog whirled into its spiral horn and soothing music filled the air. “A message to the God’s maybe?” Josh thought. The

“ghost” pulled back on the reins and the unicorn lifted off the beach. The majestic beauty sailed over the ocean water and faded into the rainbows. The fog released Joshua from its grasp and followed the unicorn back out to sea. Josh looked at his hand and then to his feet, to his great relief they had returned to normal, as did the day itself.

“Put a move on it. You have five minutes!” yelled his father.

“Okay. I’m coming,” Josh replied a bit dumbfounded. He could kind of understand his father not hearing him scream for help, old people can’t hear very well, but the cloud demon? “How could he miss that? The sky turned pitch black, and not to mention, there was a winged unicorn!”

All that, you would think, Josh thought, even in a world where every act is caught on video and uploaded into our brains instantaneously, making us immune to both the beauty and casualties of life, would still turn a few heads.

His father’s reaction led Josh to ask himself, “did this really happen?” The tender bruise on his head made it perfectly clear his encounter with Ivan was real, but what about the ghost, cloud demon and the winged unicorn?

“There is only one way to know for sure,” he said and walking, with apprehension, over to where the “ghost” had appeared.

The beachcomber had raked the sand earlier in the morning so if the experience was genuine Josh expected to see one a set of footprints and four hoofs. To his astonishment, he did not. There was no evidence to suggest anyone or anything had been standing there.

“It was a ghost. It had to be,” Josh thought. He then quickly realized the absurdity of his observation. “Wait a minute you idiot. There are no such things as ghosts. This is crazy. It was just my imagination. Just my stupid imagination! Maybe Ivan was right, maybe I am just a loser.”

His negative reaction and self-deprecation seemed to anger the calm water. A wave crashed onto the shore and splashed over Josh’s feet. Petrified, Joshua’s knees wobbled like jelly and he collapsed to the sand. The wave rolled gently back out and the water calmed once again.

“I said get off my beach, chicken turd!”

Josh glanced over his shoulder to find Ivan standing over him. Ivan stuck his boot into Joshua’s back and pushed him face first into the wet sand. “What a loser,” Ivan said. Waldo gave him a high five and Ivan and his gang of thugs stumbled away.

MYSTERY HUNTER

Chapter Two

Josh's dad was super ecstatic about their long-awaited vacation. He let his family believe they were simply embarking on a cross-country trip to Florida, which was true, however, he also had a surprise in store for them once they reached the sunshine state.

Josh walked into the house, "Are you ready to rock, son?" his dad said and he patted him on the shoulder.

Josh walked past him with his head down and he did not say a word. He didn't want his dad to know how upset he was from his encounter with Ivan. "Okay, I will take that as a no," he said.

His mom's voice appeared from her bedroom as he walked down the hallway, "I left a surprise for you on your bed, honey," she said.

Josh paid little attention to her words as well and he moped into his room, pushed the door shut and flopped onto his bed. The shades were drawn and the only light flickered from a candle flame placed in the center of a real life crocodile's head on the end table to the right of his bed.

Joshua's Grandpa said he found the reptilian remains while hunting deep in the jungles of Africa for what he referred to as the prehistoric ancestor of the crocodile, the legendary fire-breathing dragon.

Joshua's Grandpa was the world-famous mystery hunter and bestselling author Dray Taylor, whose life was a constant adventure to find answers to our world's greatest curiosities.

His ultimate quest took him to the far ends of the world in search of the origin of something we all seem to take for granted...IMAGINATION. It was his belief that it was not simply something we humans were born with, but rather a gift or treasure, and like most treasures, as Mr. Taylor suggested, its riches could be used for good or evil.

Joshua idolized his Grandpa, or Gramps, as he and his sister Keri would lovingly address him. Each time he came to visit he would tell Joshua a fascinating tale about his recent adventure. "Top secret," his Gramps would always say, "Utter not a word." In fact, to keep their communications on the down low they even came up with an invisible code of letters to relay messages to one another through postcards.

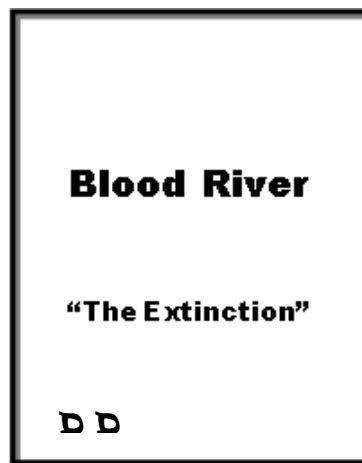
How did one decipher the invisible code? Gramps gave Josh a pouch filled with black ashes he said were created out of a magic potion stirred up by three little witches he encountered when he accidentally stumbled upon the lost city of the Gnomes. "Only with a blow of the ashes," the witches said, "will the message be told."

The potion was supposedly concocted of melted snow from a blinding blizzard, dinosaur bones, magic stones and the eyes of a wizard. Obviously, Joshua's parents shrugged it off as nothing more than just another one of Gramps tall tales. Joshua, however, believed it as fact.

Unfortunately, the post card messages ceased four years ago. Gramps disappeared while on one of his many secret trips in search of the lost treasure.

A Morse code operator, one of the few still in existence at the time, captured his rather troublesome final words. "You can question the tale I am about to tell but do not ever question the power of imagination. The treasure is real. It is truly a world beyond belief. The spirit has welcomed me with open arms, but the cloud has darkened and I fear..." The message went silent in mid-sentence. It was the last time anyone ever heard from him again.

Josh dropped his face into his pillow and felt something under his shoulder. He leaned away to find a huge pack of his favorite gum called Bubble Blast. It was the surprise his mom had left for him. A single chunk of bubble blast gum was known to blow a bubble five times the size of any ordinary gum. His favorite book...



...was also present.

"Blood River, The Extinction" was the third book from the popular, Mystery Hunter, series. The fourth book in the series was due for release the day Joshua was scheduled to return from his vacation. He was so eager to read the new book, he was more excited about returning from vacation than the actual trip itself.

Unlike his sister Kari who was a connoisseur of great literature and poetry, Josh, as mentioned earlier, was fascinated by ancient mystery and fantasy themed books, but also modern tales of adventures. Novels, short stories, famous authors, not so famous authors, best sellers or not, it didn't matter. "A roller coaster ride through the world of imagination," he would always say, "Those are the type of books I enjoy."

In fact, his father was so elated that Josh loved to read, on his 10th birthday he surprised Josh with a reading room. This however, was no ordinary reading room. It was located 15 feet up the 100-year-old oak tree in the center of his front yard. The reading room came complete with a padded seat, head rest, a foot bar and even a beverage holder. It wouldn't be unusual for Josh to climb up into the tree with a new book and not come out, even to pee, until he read the book from cover to cover.

Though his teachers tried to get him to "expand his literary horizons" they did so with a sense of caution. After all, unlike most of their students, who were fixated on pads, phones and video games, he loved to read. They didn't want to discourage his passion.

No book series inspired his imagination more so than the, "The Mystery Hunter," series. The books were so visually expressive Josh could imagine the stories taking place right before his eyes. Each of the previous three books had the same theme. The reader would be taken on a suspenseful adventure through the ink stained pages as one villain after another tried their vile best to capture the island of imagination in the name of evil. The storyline, however, was only part of the reason behind Joshua's fascination. The mystery behind the author's identity was equally as intriguing.

The author signed his books simply with a D. D. in a flame style font. Though his identity was a mystery, most believed D.D was a French mystery novelist by the name of a Daniel DuPont.

Josh, in the back of his mind, wasn't so convinced. Even though he couldn't figure out the connection to the letters D.D, he had a suspicion Gramps had penned the words to the books. His reasoning was two-fold. First: His grandfather's last mission was to search for the 'origin' of imagination and the setting for the "Mystery Hunter" series was: The Island of Imagination. Second: The first book of the series was released exactly one year to the day his Gramps went missing. Coincidence? Joshua thought not.

Joshua was also of the belief the stories weren't simply fictional tales, rather first-hand accounts from his Gramps diary that depicted the battle to keep the Island of Imagination, from being overtaken by the forces of evil.

"Blood River," was a perfect example. It told the eerie tale of an intelligent species of mutated scorpion vampires that lived at the center of the earth. Their civilization was threatened by the lack of blood rich food.

Thus, out of desperation, upwards of a million scorpion vampires followed a river of superheated magma 4000 miles towards the earth surface. They used their powerful pincers, lined with sharp, jagged edges and blood-stained fangs to grind their way through rocks, boulders and all other obstacles.

100 years later, a horrific volcanic eruption of biblical proportions occurred in an area of the world we have now come to know as Mexico. Out of the spewing lava, that reached heights of a thousand miles, crawled these bloodletting creatures.

Soon thereafter, the scorpion vampires would come face to face with the largest and most powerful force to ever roam the earth's surface - dinosaurs. Many believe the extinction of the dinosaurs was due to a massive meteor explosion that eventually disrupted the dinosaur's food chain. It was called the Cretaceous-Tertiary, K-T, extinction event. According to the Mystery Hunter series, however, another option was in play, it was called the "The Feast of the Devils".

Though much smaller in stature, only about 12 inches in length, the scorpion vampires overwhelming force, intelligence and unrelenting thirst for blood was no match for the prehistoric beasts. The dinosaurs were quickly transformed from hunters to the hunted.

The volcanic eruption ignited a firestorm that quickly consumed the earth's surface trapping the dinosaurs like caged animals in a zoo. The Vampiro's new, however, their attack needed to be swift and unrelenting. They couldn't risk the loss of a single drop of blood. Luckily, their weapon of choice, was more lethal than even the blazing fire consuming the land.

A microscopic puncture by the poisonous venom-injecting barb, the size of a railroad spike, located at the end of its tail was enough to paralyze the most powerful of dinosaurs. Even the legendary Tyrannosaurus Rex had no defense against this enemy. Once paralyzed, the scorpion vampires would live up to their insidious name and suck until their translucent bodies turned blood red.

Within a just a few days, not years, as archeologists have indicated, all the dinosaurs had been eradicated and an endless Blood River flowed back to the center of the earth. It was a feeding frenzy for the scorpion vampires that would last for over 650 million years.

Many progressive scientists, though not expressing it publicly, due to the risk of serious backlash, believed the reason why so many dinosaur bones have been unearthed is because the scorpion vampires tactical attack and the intense heat from the fire left the dinosaur bodies in a mummified state and thus preserving their bones for millions of years.

Once the river ran dry, however, the Vampiro's returned to the earth surface, but this time they encountered a much more intelligent and formidable species, humans, and more specifically deadly pesticides. The scorpion vampires knew they couldn't simply take control of us by force. They needed to outwit us, and what better way to do so than by tricking our imaginations. By doing so, they could round us up like cattle and stamp their meal ticket for another 650 million years.

Their quest for victory, however, abruptly ended at the shores of the Island of Imagination. The scorpion vampires were soundly defeated and were forced to retreat to the earth's core where they supposedly have remained ever since.

D.D. would always use the final chapter of each book to introduce the newest threat to the island. Usually the chapter would be quite short. Just long enough to angle the storyline in such a way as to leave his readership with an "edge of your seat" cliffhanger.

The final chapter of “Blood River,” was different. It was nearly 40 pages in length and was quite detailed. To Joshua, if he was right and the books were actual true stories, the length of the chapter wasn’t just a creative way for D.D. to sell more books, it was his way of seriously warning the readers of Drakia’s next evil threat. Someone so diabolical that in D.D.’s words, “could, if not stopped, turn the tide of history and shadow the world in a blanket of fear from which there would be no escape.” The next villain went by the name of, Skull, the Gothic Pirate King.