

DEFENDERS OF THE LAND

— BOOK ONE: ORIGINS —



— JAY JONES —

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Jay Jones

FREE SAMPLE: CHAPTERS 1-3

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01

THE GLOVE THAT HIT BACK



Dr. Daniel Orkleson was an eccentric scientist with wild white hair, enormous round glasses, and little patience for anyone else's opinions. At a Cleveland auction in 1987, he outbid three collectors for a boxing glove. The catalogue identified it as a glove worn in the ring by a powerful professional heavyweight: scuffed red leather, padded knuckles, and a worn white cuff. The other bidders wanted sporting history. Daniel wanted what the fighter had left inside it.

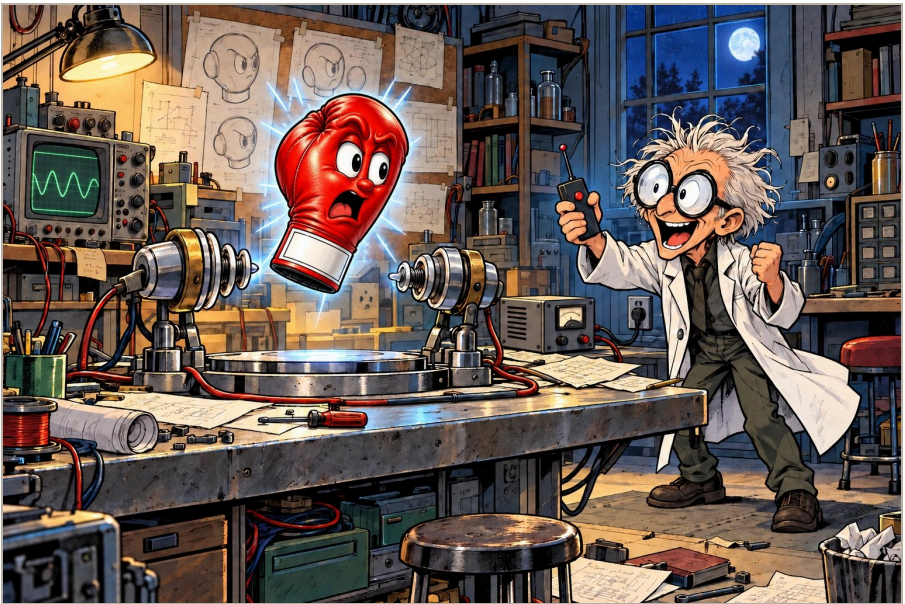
Daniel called his experiments reanimation. He collected discarded objects, hoping traces of their owners' sweat or saliva would help him bring them to life.

His notebook was full of promising results. None had given him a useful assistant.

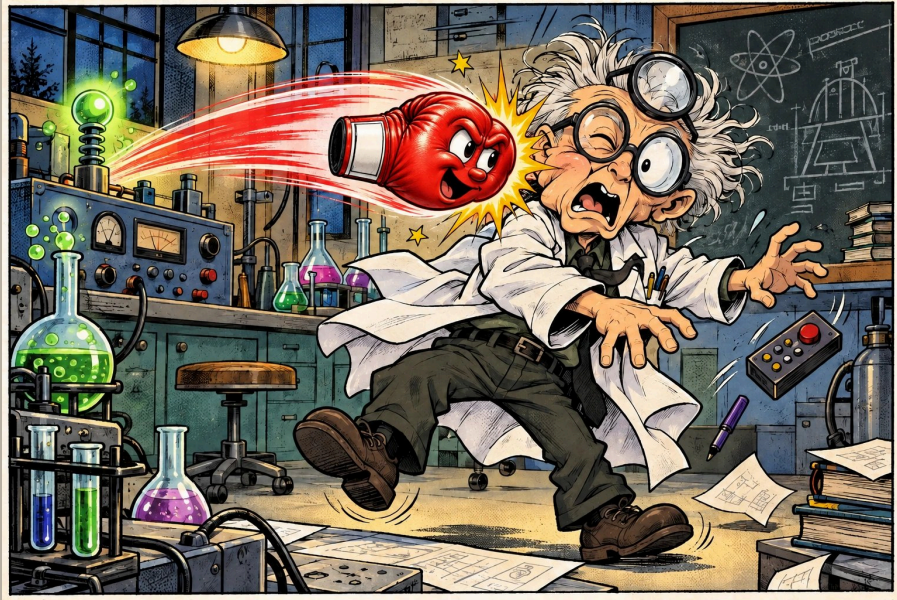
The glove had belonged to a strong man. Daniel hoped it would inherit that strength—and obey him.

Back in his locked laboratory, he set the glove beneath the metal arms of his reanimation apparatus. A black remote lay beside the controls. He tested its relay, then started the experiment.

At first, only the meters moved. Then blue-white light jumped between the metal arms. The glove rose from the table, its scuffed red leather swelling far beyond an ordinary glove's size. Two enormous eyes opened above its padded knuckles. It floated on its own, with no hand or arm inside the white cuff.



The glove looked straight at Daniel. He opened his mouth to give its first command.



The whole glove flew forward and punched him in the face.

Daniel staggered into a stool. His glasses went sideways, and the remote hit the floor with an expensive crack. The glove hovered before him, inspecting the table, cables, and locked door.

Daniel called himself its creator and ordered it back onto the table. He pressed the damaged remote. A relay clicked. The glove stayed where it was.

“You said something,” it told him. “I said no.”

The glove examined its empty cuff and its reflection in the oscilloscope. When Daniel reached for it, it moved out of range. He reminded it that he had bought the original specimen.

“You bought a glove,” it said. “You didn’t buy me.”

It knocked the remote from his hand and smashed it against the table. Daniel lunged. The glove slipped overhead, and he struck the apparatus with his hip. One metal arm scraped the ceiling; sparks snapped across the frame.

While Daniel struggled to keep the equipment upright, the glove noticed an open window above the cupboard. The door was locked, but it did not need a door.

Daniel warned that it knew nothing about the world outside. The glove glanced at the broken remote.

“Got a pretty good understanding of the world in here.”



It shot through the window and into the alley. Air rushed around its white cuff as the laboratory light fell away behind it.

“You haven’t even got a name!” Daniel shouted. The glove paused beyond his reach.

“Fist-O-Mite.”

“Absurd,” Daniel said.

“You’re yelling at a boxing glove.” Fist-O-Mite rounded the building before Daniel could answer.

He nearly struck a chimney and corrected course with an indignant spin. Flying would take practice. Choosing his own direction was already easy.

In the laboratory, Daniel surveyed the broken remote and empty table. He wrote CONTROL FAILURE hard enough to tear the paper.

Above Cleveland, Fist-O-Mite rested beside a parapet. Far below, lettering on a delivery truck called Cleveland THE LAND. He tried the name aloud. “Cleveland. The Land. Plenty of room.” The scientist would probably come looking. “Nobody owns me,” he said, then picked a direction and flew on.



02

JAWS O' DEATH

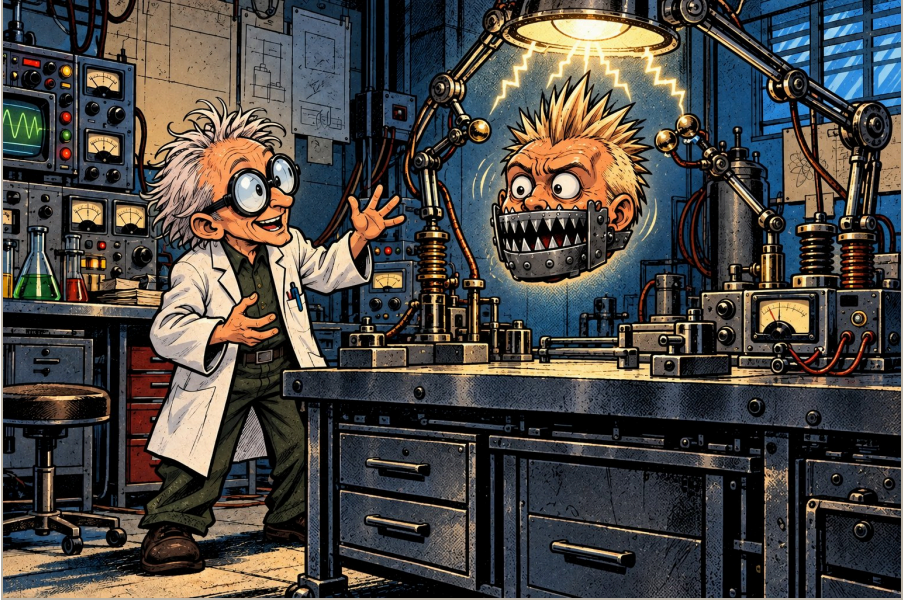


That evening, Daniel searched the laboratory for something that would not argue with him. The glove had escaped. He needed a creation that would bring it back.

In a cupboard beneath the workbench, he found an old iron bear trap. He lifted it out and tested its heavy jaws with a length of wood. They snapped shut. Daniel smiled.

He cleared the workbench and placed the trap beneath the Animator. The glove had refused his instructions. Perhaps something made to catch things would be more useful.

Daniel checked the apparatus and positioned its metal arms above the trap. He threw the switch. The lamp flared. Then something rattled beneath it.



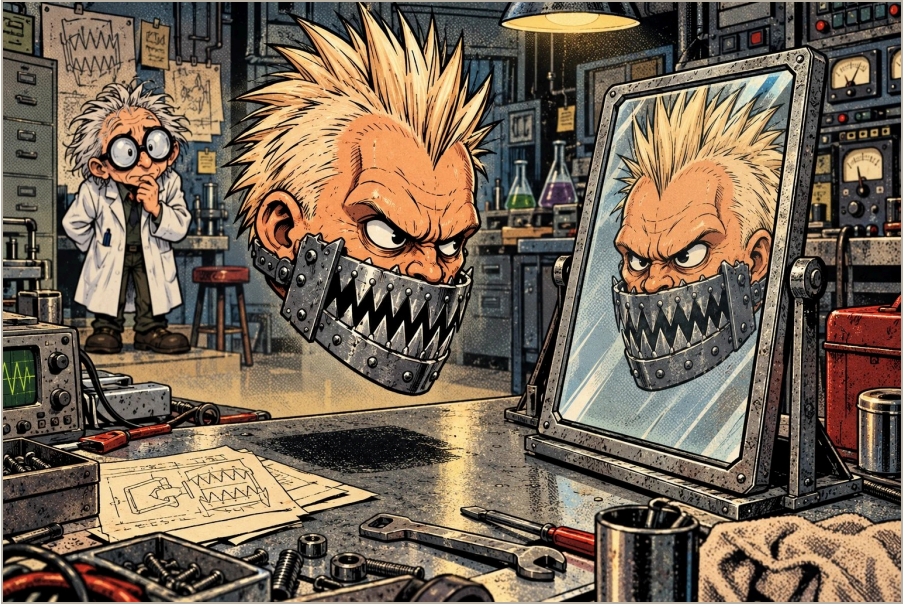
The trap rose above the workbench. A face had formed above its iron teeth, with wide eyes and a crown of blond spikes. It turned toward Daniel.

“Where’s the rest of me?”

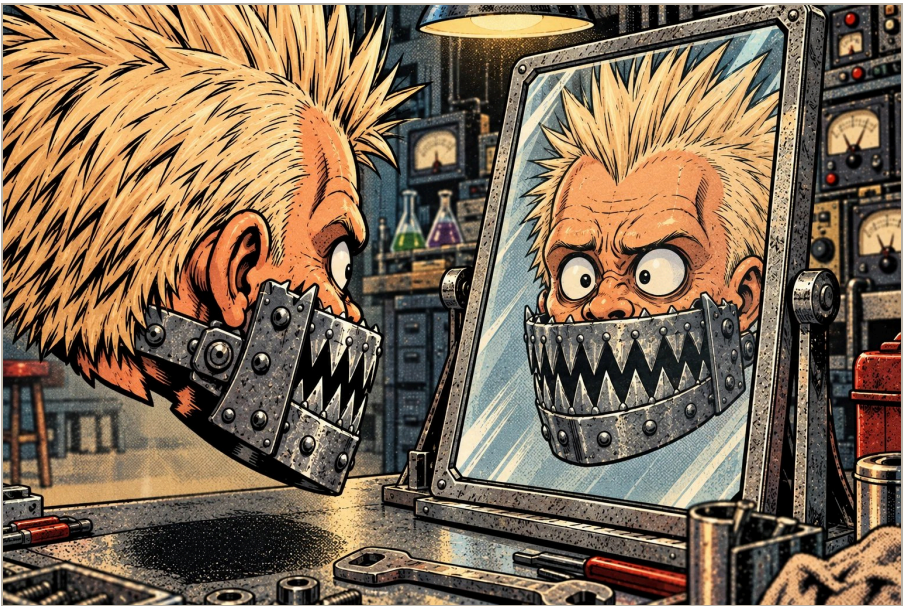
Daniel adjusted his glasses. “That is all of you.”

The jaws opened. Closed. The new face looked down at the empty air beneath them.

“Then make more.”



He drifted toward the workbench mirror. His eyes followed Daniel's reflection as the scientist picked up a pencil. Then he looked beneath his own jaw again.



“I want hands. And feet.”

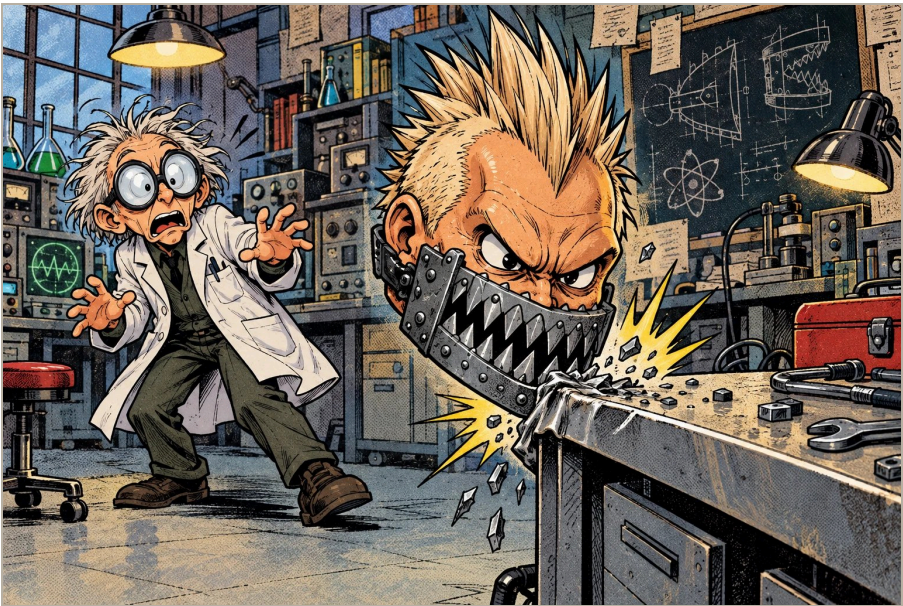
Daniel watched him study the pencil. “A body will take more work.”

“You made me. Finish me.”

Daniel pointed toward the open window. “A glove escaped from this laboratory. Bring it back, and I’ll build you a body.”

The head turned from the mirror. “Where is it?”

“I am going to find out.” Daniel reached for his notebook. The jaws snapped at the movement before their owner could stop them.



The iron teeth caught the workbench corner. Metal folded between them. The head jerked backward, dropping a broken piece onto the floor.

Daniel stared at the bite marks. He wrote Jaws O’ Death in his notebook.

“That’s your name.”

Jaws tested his teeth. “And my body?”

Daniel tapped the notebook. “The glove first.”

Jaws looked once more at Daniel’s hands. Then he moved toward the window. “Find it.”

Daniel took his coat from the door. “Stay here. I’ll have instructions for you when I return.”



Daniel stepped outside and searched the roofline. Then a bright streak cut across the sky toward Lake Erie. He stopped on the steps. The light filled his glasses; for a moment, he forgot the glove.



03

THE KID BY THE LAKE



That morning, before the light appeared over Lake Erie, seventeen-year-old Seth Zerdowski had reached the bus stop just as the bus pulled away. Tall and narrow-shouldered, he seemed to have more elbows than he knew what to do with. He pushed his untidy brown hair out of his blue eyes. His carton of milk had leaked through his backpack. At school, he had knocked over a stack of books while helping someone reach the top shelf.

At lunch, Seth sat alone while the next table argued about Friday's plans. He lingered over his sandwich, hoping someone would invite him. Sometimes he rehearsed something funny to say. By the time he found the courage, the conversation had moved on.

After school, he walked to the lake because the lake never asked how his day had gone. Downtown stood behind him, its windows catching the last light. Seth sat on the rocks, his orange hoodie damp at the cuffs.

"At least somebody knows what they're doing."

A gull worked at a discarded sandwich wrapper. Seth watched it win.

He imagined a rescue, sometimes. Nothing elaborate. A person who needed help. Himself knowing exactly what to do. In the imagining, he never arrived late and never tripped over anything. Out here, he could barely keep his shoelaces tied.

Then a second sunset appeared above the water. A bright streak tore across the sky. Seth stood. It was moving too fast for a plane, too low for a star. The light grew until he could see his own shadow stretching inland.



The streak struck beyond the rocks. A wall of water rose, lit from within. Seth took one step backward. There was no time for another.

The wave hit. For an instant he could feel every seam in his clothes, every stone beneath his feet. Then there was only white light, the taste of lake water, and nothing.

Farther along the path, a blonde jogger in a pink running top stopped at the thunder. The wave swept over her shoes and struck her knees. She shielded her face from the bright spray, then stumbled toward the streetlights. Behind her, the lake went dark again.

