

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon when all hell broke loose. Which, John Hennessey had to admit, was about as convenient as hell's timing ever gets. He'd been rearranging the furniture in his new room atop the art studio at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. They'd offered him a choice between this studio loft and some lodgings in the teachers' wing of the castle, but he enthusiastically preferred the little loft, as had the previous art teacher before him. The art studio was a small, squat building removed from the main castle, close to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. That alone might have been enough to entice him into it, for he had not come to Hogwarts simply to teach art, but also to keep an eye on the forest. Specifically, he was keeping an eye on the hidden portal to the multiverse which lay nestled deep within it, known only to himself and to the history teacher Kate McAlister. Happily, the room was also adorable, and so he had had no doubts on the matter.

Tomorrow was the first day of classes, and amid his myriad preparations he had noticed how the sun pierces one side of the room rather aggressively at midday, so that the other side feels very dark. It was on that dark side that all his darkest furniture was located. It occurred to him to move his old trunk to the light side, which might balance out the room and would also showcase the detailing on the wood. The next thing he knew, he was dragging armchairs and tables here and there, trying to reconcile practicality with aesthetics.

He was mulling over this puzzle when the little crucifix that hung around his neck began to vibrate. He put his hand to it to make sure he was not just imagining the vibration. The timing was uncanny. A false alarm? He'd only just arrived at Hogwarts. Kate had only included him in the alarm system a week ago. But he could not ignore it. The vibration meant that there was someone in the vicinity of the portal. He dashed across the room and flung open his wardrobe. He pulled out a flat gray stone about the size of one's palm, with a large foreign character engraved on one side. He traced the character with an index finger, visualizing his destination. In a flash of green light, his adorable but now disarrayed surroundings disappeared.

The forest was cold. Dappled light streamed through tall, expansive oak trees. He spun around, dead leaves crinkling under his feet, as he tried to orient himself in the clearing. He knew the portal lay in the center of the clearing, though it was invisible at the moment. At the other end of the familiar clearing stood a decidedly unfamiliar figure. It wore a gauzy, hooded black robe with tattered edges that swayed in the breeze. The thing looked like a great green lizard. Standing on its hind legs, it was as tall as John was. It had large, expressive eyes that glared menacingly from under its dark hood. Its reptilian hands held a carved wooden staff, which was trained on John. The creature stood as still as a statue. It was eerie, how the cloth moved but the living animal did not. In the moment it took John to register the lizard's appearance, his heart was clutched with an icy fear. Not a fear *of* the poor creature. Fear *for* it.

John slowly raised both his hands. "Hello, friend!" He called out in Planeswalkiri, the rudimentary universal language of the multiverse. In the blink of an eye, the lizard darted away from him into the depths of the forest. John bounded after him, summoning something that could run faster than he could. Two cheetahs appeared at his side, and with a wave of his hand they flew past him, after the lizard. John ran as fast as he could through the old-growth forest, but tall grass and twigs slowed him down. The ground was uneven. He jumped over a fallen tree. He could barely make out the cheetahs, yellow blurs in the distance. Then he heard an inhuman cry that turned into a hiss. John sent the cheetahs away and called up something that could keep the lizard rooted to the spot.

When he caught up, panting, he found the lizard pinned in a headlock by a large ogre with pale skin relieved only by a small loincloth. The ogre had fangs jutting out from an underbite and a fat, stubby horn protruding from his forehead. There was blood smeared on its leg, but no wound. It must have been the lizard who was wounded. In his other hand, the ogre held the lizard's staff.

"Please," said John to the lizard in breathless Planeswalkiri, clutching a cramp in his side. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want to talk."

The lizard glared up at him from where it hung, doubled over in the ogre's grasp. He waved his hand and something struck the side of John's head with what felt like the force of a train. When John caught his breath, he was on the ground and his head was exploding with pain. His vision was dark. Psychedelic colors swam around him. Momentarily, his vision returned. He looked up to see that the lizard had overpowered the ogre and was wrestling back his staff from the fallen brute. Just then, a bloody blade burst forth from the lizard's chest. Kate McAlister appeared behind him, as if out of thin air. As swiftly as she had inserted it, she withdrew the blade. The lizard sunk to the ground. While he was still on his knees, Kate grabbed the top of his head, thrust the tip of the blade into the back of its skull, and withdrew it again. The lizard fell and lay still.

"There is no point talking to it," she said with unceremonious bluntness.

John propped himself up onto one elbow, teetering. "He might have been lost," he said, looking at the pitiful corpse. His own blood was streaming down his face. It threatened to trickle into one eye, and he wiped it aside.

"It was not lost. Talking to it just gives it an opportunity to escape."

"How do you know he wasn't lost?"

"There was lust in its eyes."

John scoffed. "You guessed. You could have been wrong." She extended a hand to him and he took it, slowly standing up. His vision began to go dark again as he stood, but then it cleared. The wound on the side of his head was healing with unnatural speed, as his wounds always did.

"Even if the creature was lost, it doesn't matter," said Kate, her English very lightly dusted with that ambiguous, perhaps vaguely Slavic, accent which John found painfully attractive. "No one who visits earth can live to tell the tale. But this creature wasn't lost. It ran strategically. It was a Planeswalker searching for plunder and glory on an uncharted plane. Now, the few Planeswalkers who've heard of earth will continue to regard it as a point of no return. If friends or detectives come investigating, we will kill them, too. We have been over this, John."

John swayed a little as he stood, though whether it was from the blow to his head or to his heart he could not have said. He adored Kate, but her ruthlessness never ceased to startle him.

"Could you take care of the body?" she asked. "I'm in the middle of a meeting."

"It's Sunday," he replied, looking at her in confusion.

"History never sleeps." She planted a light kiss on his un-bloodied cheek, and walked a few paces away from him. She pulled a stone from the pocket of her robe, traced its surface, and disappeared in a flash of green light.

"History never sleeps," John muttered mockingly. "Aye, and it doesn't clean up its own messes either."

He looked down at the lizard, a forlorn puddle of leathery green skin, black gauze and crimson blood that was beginning to coagulate. He did not bury bodies on principle. For one thing, he was claustrophobic, and for another he'd risen from the dead himself six hundred years ago, so the idea of burying one's dead was repulsive to him on several levels. Whether it was living, dead or undead, underground was no place for a body. As a brand new teacher at Hogwarts he did not know the campus well, and he preferred not to be caught disposing of a body in his first week on the job. He would think on what to do, and do the deed tonight.

Not wanting to act, but also not wanting to leave, John sank onto his knees beside the corpse. The lizard looked more like an object than an animal, in its contorted position. John thought of a used rag. He went on his hands and knees and arranged the body into a more dignified position. Then he sat beside it, gazing at the shafts of light that slanted through the trees, at the exuberant gnats dancing within them.

Did the lizard have a mother, John wondered. Obviously he had, but did she care for him still? Was she waiting at home, thinking her son was safe and sound? Would she go to bed tonight and thank her god or gods for the continued health of her family?

“I’m sorry,” he said mournfully. A gentle breeze rustled through the trees, and a few birds were chirping gaily. It might have been a tranquil moment, if John’s heart had been at ease.

“It’s nothing personal,” he said defensively to the corpse. “It’s political, you know. Things are just better when there isn’t contact between planes. Whenever planes make contact, the stronger one will always ravage the weaker one. This is not just theory, it’s history. A tape that’s been replayed on many planes. One will conquer the other, and sooner or later they’ll both be conquered by the Hegemony. Earth may be a bit of a train wreck, but we’re still more free than we would be under the Hegemony. Even if you’d promised not to disclose earth’s location here in the outback, you see why we simply couldn’t take the risk. What’s one life, or a few lives, when entire planes are at stake? Isn’t it better to be too cautious, to take no chances?”

A fly landed on one of the lizard’s glassy, open eyes. John waved it away and sighed. He had been here two weeks, and already he had practically committed murder. If Kate hadn’t done it, he would have. Probably. For the millionth time, he wondered whether he was doing the right thing. Could there ever be a justification for such a heinous act as killing someone who had done them no harm? Perhaps it would be better to let earth and the broader multiverse discover one another. Sooner or later, they would do so anyway. John and Kate were just buying earth more time. But what good was time, really?

John envied the dead. Even more, he envied the dying. Which, as far as he knew, included everyone in the multiverse except himself, Kate, and a few others scattered on other planes. Immortality was a relentless slog. There was no promise of peace, of a time when he might rest on his laurels before the great finale. There was only the world, which endlessly beckoned him to remain invested in its affairs. Mortals did not have to worry about the long-term. The closer they got to death, the more free they were to throw up their hands and say to the next generation, “it’s your problem now!” He did not have that luxury. Future generations’ problems were his problems, too.

As much as he despised the world, he loved it in equal measure. For it was only in the world that he could find some purpose that might make his miserable existence worthwhile. A task, a direction, that was what he craved. Throughout his life, that task had usually been art. What higher purpose could there be than to bring a smile to a neighbor’s face through some song or painting? To spread beauty, joy and peace?

Here, in defending the portal, and so defending the secret location of earth and Aezeroth from the ragged claws of the Hegemony, he should have found all the purpose and direction he needed. But it was not *his* purpose.

He knew all the arguments. The greatest good for the greatest number. One death was a trifle compared to the genocide and exploitation that would most likely follow earth’s first contact with another plane. Surely a murder could be an act of love, if it was done for the right reasons. Since time immemorial, warriors had defended their fatherlands, their families, on this principle. Earth’s freedom would not be defended with songs and smiles. Earth needed a warrior, not a sensitive artist. He just had to stay focused on the big picture. Yet somehow the most thorough, logical, undeniably correct justification could not wipe away the feeling in his heart that an abomination had occurred and he was responsible for it.

He shook his head, as if to shoo away his doubts like so many persistent gnats. What was done was done. And what had to be done next was to clean up the mess. He picked up the lizard’s bag and rifled through it. There was nothing terribly interesting in it. Gold and silver coins, maps, a knife, a lot of food, various magical-looking stones and totems, and what looked like the trappings of a Planeswalking kit, including three wheels for reading the portals’ energies. Kate was probably right; the lizard did not seem lost. He seemed like a Planeswalker who knew that he was going on a long and dangerous journey. For a moment, John wished that the lizard had been a lost innocent, just to prove Kate wrong. Then he chastized himself for thinking such a thing.

He picked up the lizard's staff. John was not particularly sensitive to magical energies, but even he could sense that this staff was loaded with magic. If it could speak, what might it say, he wondered. He ran his fingers gingerly across the carved wood. It was a medium-toned wood, with a wavy grain and a matte finish. The body of the staff was carved in a gentle spiral that wound its way to the top, upon which was carved a small-ish but otherwise realistic falcon. It was a handsome piece. Charismatic, even. It seemed rather a shame to dispose of such a powerful artifact.

But there was nothing to be done. Magical artifacts were only useful if you knew how to use them, and John didn't trust this one to take orders from him. With a pang of disappointment, he summoned a fire to engulf the staff. Fire was his specialty, an Aezerothi mage power not subject to the whims of chance like his chaos magic was. His fires always obeyed him, and they never burned him. Flames spread out from his hands, licking the staff all over. But the staff did not seem to be catching. He watched the fire work for several minutes. It was to no avail. He dismissed the flames. The wooden staff was perfectly intact. It was not even hot.

Flummoxed, he stood and tossed the staff on top the body. He would figure it out tonight. Probably he would sink the body and its possessions in the sea. Hogwarts was on the coast, after all. He stood before the body, and then grew still and quiet and said a prayer. The dubiousness of praying for one's own victim was not lost on him, but still, he thought it better than no prayer at all.

He pulled a new stone from his pocket. It was typically not possible to have multiple Aezerothi hearthstones set for transport to different places, but Kate had picked up some magical tricks over the last two thousand years and this was one of them. He traced the engraving with one finger.

The dappled shade of the forest gave way to ethereal green light, and then to the yellow shaft of sunlight that still pierced his room above the art studio. The place already felt like home, and he was relieved to be back. He had lost interest in rearranging the furniture. He would get to it shortly. First he would rest a few minutes. Then he'd shower off the dried blood that caked his hair and covered his ear. He flopped into an armchair that now lingered indecisively between the living area and the bedroom area. He melted into the high-backed chair, angling himself so that the bloody side was not touching the fabric. He'd left the chair at a random angle. Currently it was facing the wardrobe, which he'd left open in his haste. Amid the robes and scarves and shoes, something decidedly unfamiliar caught his eye. It was the wooden staff, its falcon gazing vaguely outward.

"Oh dear," he sighed.

~

The welcome feast that evening was even more decadent than John had expected. The high vaulted ceiling of the great hall was enchanted to look like the starry night sky. Levitating candles bobbed beneath it, giving the effect of a great dispersed chandelier. A couple of ghosts drifted about, unsettling him. He supposed he would have to get used to the ghosts, as they were a fixture of the castle and grounds. The joyful chatter of hundreds of excited students warmed the great hall like a fire in the hearth. The entire student body was sitting at four enormous, long banquet tables that stretched from one end of the hall to the other. Perpendicular to the student tables was the teachers' table. Only one side of it was populated, so that no teacher had their back to the students. The drab uniformity of the students' black school robes was offset by their bright eyes and flushed faces, as well as the cheerful autumn-themed sprigs and centerpieces that decorated the tables.

Before the food was served, the students sipped spiced cider and the teachers sipped wine while Albus Dumbledore, the school headmaster, stood up and called the room to order.

"Good evening!" he said, beaming with pleasure. He must have been magically amplifying his voice somehow, for the little old wizard, with his slightly hunched posture and his white beard that reached down to his waist, hardly seemed like someone who could project across such a space. His enormous wizard's hat seemed to be threatening to swallow him up.

“Before we begin our feast, it is my solemn duty to convey a few words of welcome,” he continued. “So, let’s see. Welcome, bienvenidos, willkommen, namaste, huanying, bienvenue, croeso, witamy... alright, now that’s eight words of welcome...”

The joke was painfully corny but John appreciated the personal touch.

Dumbledore went on to convey his delight at having students once again back at Hogwarts, who were, after all, the lifeblood of this campus. He was pleased to announce that construction of the new greenhouses was finally finished. And, while they had unfortunately bidden farewell to two professors who had retired last year, Professor Spragg of potions and Professor Flutterspool of art, they were pleased to welcome two new members of the faculty.

“Please join me in warmly welcoming George Widdershins, your new professor of potions,” said Dumbledore, and a tall man with salt and pepper hair stood up and gave a little wave amid polite applause. “And John Hennessey, your new professor of art,” he gestured to John at the other end of the table, who stood and waved as well. It seemed to him that there were a few cliques of students who did not clap. They seemed to be looking around sourly and even whispering to each other while the new teachers were being introduced. John sat back down. Dumbledore kept his welcome speech mercifully short, ending with a few logistics, the most significant of which was that classes would begin tomorrow. Finally, he ended with the imperative to “dig in!”

With that, a bounty of colorful fare magically appeared on the tables. There were pork pies, aromatic herbed bread, root vegetables in garlicky gravy, pumpkin soup, roast goose in some sort of berry sauce and several other dishes that John would not get to.

John was sitting between Kate McAlister on his left and Sabine Roche, the divination teacher, on his right. He leaned left.

“Am I imagining things,” he asked in a low voice as they loaded up their plates, “or did some of the students seem to be less than warm in their welcome?”

“Perhaps they detected your secret disdain for wizards,” she suggested innocently, but speaking quietly in Orcish so that their neighbors would not understand if they heard.

“From across the room on our first day? Come on, I’m not *that* bad a liar,” he replied in English.

“You’re a pretty bad liar. Especially for a man your age.”

John put a hand to his heart as if he’d been struck. “As usual, Kate, you cut me to the quick.”

She smiled, speared a chunk of goose on a nearby platter with her fork, and plopped it onto her plate.

“You’re not imagining things,” she said, as she began sawing into the meat. “Hogwarts is a small community and gossip spreads fast. You and Widdershins are both outsiders with ties to the muggle world. Dumbledore likes that of course, but he’s a bit of an odd duck. The hires were controversial. And now,” she paused, allowing her loaded fork to dangle in her hand, “listen, don’t worry about it. There’s just been some foolish nonsense going round the last few days and you’re an easy target. Apparently the demonstration lesson you gave as part of your interview was *radical*.” She said the word ‘radical’ with some relish.

“What?” replied John, confused. “It wasn’t remotely radical. We didn’t even talk about magic. We just talked about art.”

“Perhaps that’s what made it radical.”

John rolled his eyes. He picked up a spoonful of soup and blew on it. “Well, it’s lucky for me that you’ve got your pulse on the Hogwarts rumor mill.”

“Oh my friend,” she said indulgently, “you don’t know the half of it. The things I could tell you.” Her dark eyes glittered.

“Kate!” he said in shocked voice. “I would have imagined such vulgarities were somehow beneath you.”

She laughed brightly, an unrestrained laugh that was swallowed up by the merry chatter around them. Then she smiled playfully at him, and returned to working on her plate.

“Well come on then,” he said. “What things could you tell me?”

“Let’s see.” She washed down her bite of food with a swig of cider.

“Professor Pandershoot doesn’t read his students’ papers. Once, a student submitted a paper about her favorite rock band when the assignment was supposed to be about area-of-effect spells and she got an A. Professor Quigley once got very excited in class talking about Aramaic runes, and got a full-blown erection right in front of the class. He promptly sat down at the teacher’s desk, but most of the students had already seen it. I don’t know which would be more embarrassing for him, if he got it from looking at some supple young student or from thinking about Aramaic runes,” Kate mused.

“Professor Spector has been known to refer his students by racial slurs, but only in front of his favourites, the scoundrel. Argus Filch, the night watchman, confiscates prohibited items from the students and keeps them for himself. Dung bombs, fanged frisbees, and the like. I hear he’d once saved a stockpile of exploding sponges, which a few students stole from his office. They threw them all into a toilet at once, and the thing exploded like a bomb. A couple of them would have been disfigured for life if Madam Pomfrey hadn’t gotten to them in time. Oh, and Professor Shaw likes to be stepped on during sex. That, or he wants to be,” she concluded decisively.

“Oh, come on, that one’s just a guess.”

Kate shook her head. “I’d bet a hundred galleons on it. It’s a personality type. Plus, you can see it in the way he looks at women’s feet.”

“My goodness, Kate. You’re just a common guttersnipe, aren’t you? And now you’re collecting gossip about me too?”

She shrugged. “Not really. In passing. But I don’t imagine I’ll ever need it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean if I ever need something from you, I don’t expect you’ll be hard to persuade.”

John forcefully put down his wine glass. “Hang on,” he said. “Let me get this straight. You’re collecting gossip and secrets about all the teachers, on the off-chance that you might need to blackmail one of them someday?”

“No!” said Kate indignantly. “No, not blackmail. It’s just a bit of leverage.”

He looked at her in astonishment. “Christ, Kate. That’s so... strategic. Sometimes I wonder if you’re actually cold-blooded.”

“Keep calling me names like that and you’ll never find out,” she said with a devilish smile, bringing her cider to her lips and avoiding his gaze.

*This woman will be the end of me*, he thought. She was deliberately flirtatious with him because she knew it drove him mad. While he was trying to think of something clever to say, Kate “coincidentally” reached for the same pork pie as her neighbor on her left, and they took up chatting about the food. Soon they were making small talk about their respective summers, and John was merely lingering on the edges of their conversation. He gave up trying to be part of it and turned away.

He gazed out into the sea of mirthful students and reflected spitefully that he didn’t need Kate’s company. On his right, Sabine Roche was pecking daintily at her plate. Despite being a small, gray-haired old woman, the divination teacher carried herself with confidence and exuded vitality. A tarnished emerald brooch on the high collar of her evening dress caught his attention. He complimented her on it, and soon they were speaking affably about the start of term and how he was settling in at Hogwarts.

“Are you looking forward to tomorrow?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “Definitely. We’ll ease into the term, get to know each other a little, talk about the big picture. The first day of school is always fun.”

“Hmm,” she said, gazing into his eyes. “You seem troubled.”

“That must be my artistic genius showing.”

She did not smile.

“Well, in all seriousness,” said John, suddenly a bit self-conscious, “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel some first-day jitters, but I’m sure we’ll find our rhythm.”

“Yes, you will find your rhythm eventually,” she said firmly.

The word ‘eventually’ struck John as very odd. Her reassurance was hardly reassuring.

“So, Sabine,” he said, trying to sound friendly and relaxed, “you’re an expert on the future. Do you have any predictions for this school year?”

“Yes, of course. But you weren’t at my divination party, were you?”

“Oh, er, I wasn’t aware of any party.”

“You were invited,” she insisted.

“Well, I didn’t know...” John trailed off, thinking it better not to accuse her of failing to reach him. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“That’s alright, you can come next year. I host it every year just before the start of term. That’s where I make my predictions for the coming year. It was quite a good one this year.”

“The party or the prediction?”

“Both, actually. There will be some commotion this year, mark my words. Something to do with a stolen magical artifact. And also to do with death, though I’m quite sure nobody will die. There will be damage, though. Mostly to things, not to people. By far the most interesting fact we learned is that a dark wizard has come to Hogwarts, or they will come very soon. And he or she will stay here for seven years.”

“Oh, well, come on,” John replied dubiously, his voice rising in step with a sudden burst of anxiety. “That sounds unlikely. And awfully specific. I mean, no offense, but aren’t the signs always open to interpretation?”

Roche’s eyes flashed. “That is a stereotype of divination, and an undeserved one. The signs are quite clear and precise. It is people who make mistakes. People think they can decide for themselves what a sign means, so that they can conveniently brush aside the centuries of research that have been done on that sign.”

John sensed that he had touched a nerve, but he couldn’t help himself. “But the signs demand reinterpretation!” he cried. “Reinterpretation isn’t about just making up new meanings willy-nilly, it’s about appreciating that the most useful signs are inherently ambiguous. It’s precisely their ambiguity that makes them useful.”

Roche narrowed her eyes. “I asked the gazing pool if there are any people we should not trust this year. It showed me a two-faced wizard with a backward wand, crossing a river toward a right-side bank on which there were seven sheaves of grain, and the constellation of Cygnus was in the sky but it was blinking and fading. You could not ask for a clearer sign.”

“Hmm. The bundles could mean a lot of things, depending on the type of grain. So could the two faces. They might refer to a period of war...”

“That is a common misreading of Cedrenus’ *Historiarum Compendium*. If you read the text closely, Cedrenus implies that the two faces could represent any era with a firm beginning and end.”

“It could also literally refer to a person with two faces. Rubenstein would argue that the simplest explanation is the best place to start.”

“Oh bummer Rubenstein! He and the other experientialists like Priggs and Vela are easily proven wrong, but they remain popular because they promote fantastic ideas that people want to believe in. Their ideas are attractive but they simply don’t hold up in the real world.”

“I always liked Rubenstein.”

“And when you followed his methods, were your predictions accurate?”

“Occasionally. In any case they were always fun.”

Roche scoffed. “What could possibly be more fun than being right?”

John opened his mouth to speak, but he merely sighed. This was a battle he could not win. “Well,” he said, forcing a smile, “I look forward to attending your party next year, so that I may see how it’s properly done.”

“Yes. Perhaps next time you’ll get my invitation,” Roche replied coolly.

The dinner wore on, and Kate continued chatting with her neighbor. John stubbornly avoided looking at her or at the old crone. He was getting slightly drunk on the white wine, which was the only disappointing item on the table. There was something off about it. Cork rot, maybe.

Seven years. He hadn’t decided how long he would stay at Hogwarts, but somehow he’d imagined it would be longer than that. The prophecy was obviously referring to him, regardless of whether one took the Rubensteinian interpretation. He was a chaos magician, not a wizard, but wizards did not acknowledge that distinction. He did magic in an unregulated way, and that made him a dark wizard. Of course, none of the wizards knew his secret. If they ever decided to test him they would see that he did not really know the proper incantations, and he was not really using his wand, but merely mimicking the gestures. Perhaps that’s why he would leave in seven years, because his falsity would be discovered. Or perhaps he would leave because of... *her*. Caitlyn. The coming calamity. Or perhaps not. It was too soon to tell. There was any number of reasons he might abandon Hogwarts, not the least of which was that seven years was rather a long time to live in a nest of emerald vipers who couldn’t tell the difference between evil and fun.

As John wallowed in tipsy petulance, he noticed a ghost hovering nearby, a forlorn figure looking wistfully up and down the teacher’s table. The ghost was of a man in what looked like early nineteenth century dress. He wore a smart tailcoat, a patterned vest, and an elaborately tied white neck cloth at this throat. He sported the long sideburns that were fashionable back then. Like all ghosts, he was transparent and without color besides a silvery sheen. This made it hard to guess the ghost’s age, but John might have guessed he looked about forty or so. The ghost seemed to be lamenting something. John tried not to pay attention.

Ghosts could only speak or understand the Language of the Dead, also charmingly called Gutterspeak on the plane of Aezeroth. The language was innately known by all things dead, but was so complex and so fluid that it was essentially impossible for the living to learn. John, being now partially dead, and once upon a time fully dead, spoke it easily.

He had of course spoken with ghosts on many occasions. He’d regretted it every time. Most ghosts were mad, capable of spouting only repetitious nonsense, or fixated on some unfinished business they thought might help them pass over, that is, to finally be at peace. Often the unfinished business was something that couldn’t be done—to exact revenge on someone who was also already dead, to find bones that couldn’t be found, or to convey a message to someone unreachable. Even when it could be done, and was done, it often didn’t make any difference. In most cases, the ghost would continue to pester John, begging him to do their deed, not understanding that the deed was not the holy grail they thought it was.

And then of course, there was his little secret. His embarrassing peculiarity. No one could ever find out about that. Perhaps he could tell Kate, who would merely tease him. That was not so bad. But if the ghosts ever found out.... He shuddered. If the ghosts found out, they would ruin him. But they would not find out. Ghosts were pathetic, depressing, annoying creatures and he would not, under any circumstances, have anything to do with them.

So he tried to disregard the nineteenth century gentleman. The ghost was languidly drifting down the teachers’ table, moaning about something.

“... blissfully unaware, unaware that so much is invisible to you until it stops working. But then, by that point, it is too late. And you will wish that you’d appreciated it when you’d had the chance. But the good life can never be appreciated, because life can only be good as long as it is free from fear. One cannot appreciate a thing if one does not have at least a little fear of losing it. So there are only two choices, gratitude and fear, or ignorant bliss...”



John tried not to be interested. He could not tell whether the ghost was making an interesting point or simply gushing nonsense. He wished that they would hurry up and conjure the dessert.

“... so go ahead, enjoy your pork pies and your revelry. Pay no attention to the ugly truths underneath it all. Never mind the ghosts who linger in tortured silence. Never mind that that goose you’re eating once had a life, a mind, and a family. Never mind the peasant who broke his back harvesting your carrots. Never mind that Gus the disgruntled house elf pissed in the wine...”

John, who had in that very moment been nonchalantly sipping the white wine and pretending not to listen, choked in horror. He spluttered, accidentally spilling wine all over the front of his robe.

Sabine Roche turned and began making a fuss over him, using her napkin to help mop up the mess. John felt himself blushing fiercely as he tried to push her away, insisting that he was fine. His hands shook as he dabbed at his shirt with his own napkin.

“Really, Sabine, it’s nothing. Just went down the wrong pipe, that’s all.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Still, I sense your aura is charged with nervous energy. I would recommend dandyroot tea and a dreamtime charm before bed. That should help with those first-day jitters.”

“Yes, yes, thank you,” said John dismissively. He kept his head down. He did not want to look up because he could feel ghostly eyes penetrating him, as if he were the one who was transparent. When his shirt front was as dry as he could make it, he took a deep breath and looked up.

The ghost was hovering not two feet in front of him.

“You understood me,” the ghost said quietly.

John averted his eyes, trying to look anywhere except at the ghost. He shrunk back in his chair. Many of the students were staring at him. He couldn’t see most of the teachers, but he was willing to bet a few of them were, too. The ghost was attracting their attention. John’s heart was pounding, threatening to leap out of his chest.

The ghost leaned in, bringing his face directly in front of John’s. John leaned back as far as he could. If the ghost had been a living man, John would have been able to smell his breath. Instead, he merely felt a chilling mist.

“You understood me,” said the ghost again.

Just then, Kate stood up and waved the ghost away as if he were smoke from a burning pancake on the stove. The ghost did not dissipate like smoke, but, looking indignant and annoyed, he drifted away, turning back one more time to look at John as he did.

As she sat back down, Kate sighed with obvious disappointment.

The desserts appeared.

John barely noticed.

“What the hell was that?” Kate asked pleasantly.

John muttered something indistinct.

“Come again?” she asked even more sweetly.

“I hate ghosts.”

“You don’t like wizards, you don’t like ghosts, is there any group that you do like?”

“Not really.”

“That’s not very strategic.”

John did not answer. The gentleman ghost was watching him darkly from across the hall.

~

Four neat rows of students in ironed black robes sat amid the colorful, eclectic art studio. The art studio had large windows and glass-paneled doors that would have afforded lots of light but for the fact that it was a cloudy morning. A wooden staircase on one side of the studio led to his flat, a closed loft that did not comprise an entire second story. The main studio was an airy, high-ceilinged room with two long tables in the middle. Pushed up against one wall was a small fleet of potter’s wheels. The

other walls were crammed with easels and drying racks, shelves of paints and glazes, and counters and cabinets containing scissors, papers, and all other manner of artistic miscellany.

Four paintings placed on easels were spread about the perimeter of the room. Each painting was of the same scene: a woman, alone in what might have been a park, sat on the edge of a fountain. One painting was in a classical style, one impressionist, one in something resembling a baroque style, and one rather modern and abstract.

The students had visited each painting and written down their answers to certain questions about them. At each painting, the last question had been, *How does this painting make you feel?* The students had been visibly disappointed that they would not actually be painting today, but merely having a discussion about paintings. John had tried to emphasize that it was worth taking one day to pause and think about art appreciation. The students had not seemed convinced.

“Very good,” said John, clasping his hands together as the students finished the writing activity and settled back into their seats. He was sitting on a tall stool at the front of the room. “The rest of our class today will just be a discussion about that exercise. How did it feel to do that? Did anything come up for you? Please, no need to raise hands, just speak.”

No one spoke. John waited an unnaturally long and painful minute. Then he said gently, “Don’t be shy. There are no right or wrong answers.” Another awkward minute ensued. The room was so quiet that he thought he could hear the ticking of his own pocket watch. Finally, speaking up slowly, he said, “If it’s easier, we can just start with the first question. Let’s talk about light and shadow. How about it, eh?”

Still no one spoke. After waiting more than an appropriate length of time, John was growing rather desperate. “My goodness!” He said. “Is it just early, or perhaps you’ve never had a discussion class before! Come on, you’re bright students, I know you have some good ideas. Let’s just look at this painting then,” he said, indicating the baroque one, in which the dramatic shadows highlighted the woman’s isolation, and she looked expressively toward the heavens. “How does this one make use of light and shadow? What did you feel, looking at the shadows in this painting? What effect did it have on you, personally?”

Finally, a tall girl with long auburn hair raised her hand. “I liked it,” she said.

“Wonderful,” said John, relieved. “That’s an excellent start. What about it did you like?” he prodded gently.

And so their discussion proceeded, slowly. It was mostly the same two or three students who did the talking. John did a fair amount of talking himself, trying to guide them toward some of the points he thought interesting. He asked whether the impressionist painting didn’t look a little odd, the way the hills sloped one way and the trees sloped the other. He asked about their sense of time in the modern painting. He seized on a student’s comment—one of the two big talkers—that the modern painting felt removed from time.

“Aye, that’s good thinking!” he said. He encouraged the student to dig deeper, but they only managed to rephrase the initial comment. John opened up to the group, but no one had anything to add. It was as if most of them didn’t have any ideas of their own, and they didn’t have any emotional reactions beyond “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it.”

John wondered that his students were so quiet. Maybe it was something about their age. Perhaps they were too old to be shameless, but too young to be confident. Still, he’d taught this age before and they had not been so taciturn. Monks at a medieval monastery were apt to be more lively, as he knew from experience.

As they were finally, mercifully, approaching the end of the period, something suddenly snatched up the students’ attention. Their gazes abruptly turned toward the right-hand corner behind John, in the direction of the classical painting. The few students who were not facing that way followed their peers’ eyes and turned round. John, who could not see the corner behind him, had a sinking feeling that they were not looking at the painting. With trepidation, he turned. The nineteenth century

gentleman from the previous night had drifted in silently. He did not speak nor come close to anyone. He merely lingered in the corner.

John whipped his head back toward the students and needlessly cleared his throat. The students looked away from the ghost.

“Any final thoughts about the use of color in the modern painting, or any of the others?” he said a little more sharply than he’d intended.

No one spoke. He waited another minute, too annoyed to bother offering the students any further prompt.

“Well, that’s about all the time we have,” he said, pulling out his pocket watch and glancing at it. They still had a few minutes left, but no one would mind ending early.

“Thank you all, I really appreciate your giving this a go. You did splendidly. I’ll just end with a few words about why I like this exercise.” He straightened himself up on the stool where he was perched, and tried to forget the ghost idling in the margins of the classroom, which irritated him like a toothache.

“I told you that this first day was all about looking at art, but one never simply looks at art. Ten people may look at the same painting and see ten different things, and none of those ten things is really the actual painting. When we look at art, we see our own feelings. We see ourselves. I didn’t just want you to look at art today, but at yourself. Because the real judge of your work in this class, the person you really have to please, is not me. It is you.

“Our fearless leader, the student who started this discussion...” here he gestured to the tall girl with the auburn hair who’d spoken first. “Your name, please,” he said.

“Clara,” she replied.

“Clara,” he continued emphatically, “was absolutely right to begin with her emotional impressions. The point of art is to make more of what you like, and you can’t do that without knowing what you like. But you also have to understand how to get there. Once you decide, for example, that you want a soft light, you will become curious about it and you will wonder how other artists accomplished it. You’ll look at their work and you’ll pick up their tricks. If you want to learn the techniques, really learn them, you must first be invested in their aesthetic and emotional purpose, and that’s not something anybody can explain. You must see it and feel it for yourself.

“I want this class to be a space where you can have fun. Don’t worry about whether your work is good, or whether you’re doing it right, or whether it’s practical or even whether you’re improving. As long as you make a genuine effort, you’ll get good marks. Take my advice once, and then feel free to abandon it. You must learn the rules in order to break them, but break them you must. No artist ever became great by following the rules. And every artist, no matter how miserable they may seem, makes art for the same reason: because it’s fun.

“If you learn one lesson from this entire course, I hope it will be this: There is only one right way to do art. And that’s *your* way.”

He beamed as the students began to gather their things. He hopped off his stool and breathed deeply with relief. He strained to hear what they were saying. He picked up on one male voice that murmured softly.

“He didn’t actually teach us anything.”

John’s heart sank. He tried not to take it personally. It was only his first day, after all. His questions were too open-ended, too challenging. He would revise this lesson in the future.

This was everything he disliked about teaching. Most of the time, it was like trying to inspire a brick wall. What was the point in trying to teach people who didn’t want to be taught, to help people who didn’t want to be helped? He would much rather teach a passionate idiot than a clever, gifted person who only wanted some quick tips.

The students made their way out. None of them lingered to ask questions. Finally, the room was empty. Or, nearly empty.

“Well, that looked like it was an interesting lesson. I hope I didn’t distract you. I was enjoying watching, truly,” said the ghost amicably in Gutterspeak as he drifted toward John. John scowled at him. He’d been preparing for this moment, and he’d already made his decision. He picked up one of the four paintings and began folding the easel.

“Of course I probably would have enjoyed it more if I could understand any of it, but still, I like the idea with the paintings,” the ghost went on.

John placed the easel alongside a collection of other easels that were leaning against one wall. Then he proceeded to gather the next painting.

“Oh come now,” said the ghost. “We’re alone, you don’t have to pretend you don’t understand. I won’t tell anyone. Who could I tell?”

“I don’t understand you,” John said in English.

“Don’t do this,” said the ghost.

John ignored him as he collected the remaining paintings and put away the easels.

“Why are you doing this?” The ghost began to plead with him. “I know you can understand me. I simply won’t believe that what happened last night was a coincidence. I saw you watching me, you were listening to me when I mentioned the wine.”

John walked over to the stairs to his loft. He began ascending the stairs, while the ghost simply ascended.

“This is cold, you know that? And that’s saying something, coming from a ghost. Believe me, I know cold. And right now you’re being a selfish, cold-hearted brute.”

John winced a little.

“Aha! You do understand me, I know it! For God’s sake, just admit it!”

John entered his room and closed the door in the ghost’s face. The ghost simply drifted through it.

“What’s your plan here? To just ignore me until I go away? Are you really so repulsed by me that you can’t even acknowledge me? Would it kill you to simply say, ‘Please go away, mister ghost sir, I’ve no time for you?’”

“I don’t understand you,” said John in English again. He took off his shoes and placed them in the wardrobe. The ghost maneuvered himself so that he was in the wardrobe. His head was just above the shoes, and his lower half was obscured by the wardrobe, which he simply passed through.

“I’ll make you regret this,” warned the ghost looking up at him. “I’ll haunt you! Really, you think that if it comes down to a battle of wills that you can outlast me? I’ve literally nothing to do all day, ever. My tolerance for boredom will astound you.”

John slammed the wardrobe door. As he did, something inside clattered, as if it had fallen. He would worry about it later. He turned his back on the wardrobe and began walking away. Then, he distinctly heard a second clatter. He stopped in his tracks. Ghosts couldn’t touch anything solid. What had made the second noise? Could something else have fallen? With apprehension, he turned back toward the wardrobe.

“Well well well,” came the ghost’s muffled voice from within. “You, my friend, are full of surprises.” John winced again, debating whether to open it. The ghost, however, saved him the trouble. He drifted through the wardrobe, this time holding the lizard’s staff. Like the ghost, the staff was now colorless except for a silvery sheen. It was as if the staff was a part of the ghost’s apparel and always had been. John’s eyes opened wide. Impulsively, he shot his hand toward the ghostly staff, but his hand merely went through it.

The ghost laughed. “I’ll give it back if you ask nicely,” he said in a sing-song voice.

John balled his hands into fists. He summoned a block of cloudy white ice that encased the ghost. An ordinary man would have been trapped, but the ghost merely drifted through it. He emerged laughing even harder.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you to use your words?”

John summoned a sort of ghostly cage, trying to recreate the same misty material the ghost was made of. But the ghost passed through that, too.

“Tsk tsk tsk,” he clucked. “Well, I can see that you’re in a mood. I’ll give you some time to cool off that hot temper.” With that, the ghost languidly drifted through the wall, out toward the castle grounds.

John laughed a choked, nervous laugh. “That’s fine, that’s just fine!” he said, his laughter reaching a hysterical pitch. “What could possibly go wrong?!” he exploded at no one in particular.

~

The ghost would not rest in peace, and he seemed determined that John should not either. John did not see him with the staff again. He hoped that that meant the ghost had stashed it somewhere safe. The ghost followed John around daily, constantly, usually blathering on about nothing in particular. Sometimes he made comments specifically to provoke a reaction out of John. Comments like, “Your robe’s unbuttoned,” or “Gus the house elf spat on those,” or “I wouldn’t go in there, someone set off a dung bomb in there this morning.” Always, John ignored such comments, but as Kate and the ghost had each independently pointed out, John was not a particularly convincing liar.

The ghost was not so obnoxious as to pester John while he was teaching, or perhaps he was merely clever enough to realize that such behavior might force the teachers to take drastic action. So while John was teaching or meeting with other people, the ghost merely hung around, watching. It was when they were alone together that he was at his most annoying. He would tell stories without a clear point or even without a clear ending, one topic leading aimlessly into the next. He would complain about old enemies. Sometimes he sang songs. One night, he sang “One hundred bottles of beer on the wall” in its glorious entirety as John was miserably trying to fall asleep. If he’d had one or two bottles of beer, he’d have surely hurled them at the untouchable ghost.

Everybody in the school noticed that one of the ghosts was apparently fascinated with the new art teacher. The rumor that John was the dark wizard Sabine Roche had predicted intensified, as it was said that only dark wizards had dealings with ghosts. Ezra Hornswood, the defense against the dark arts teacher, readily confirmed this latter point. Kate suspected that Hornswood had started the rumor himself.

John, for his part, insisted that he had no idea why the ghost was so interested in him. He suggested that he must resemble someone the ghost had known in life, with whom the ghost had some unfinished business. Dumbledore and many of the other teachers readily accepted this explanation.

All of this would have been more distressing to the students and faculty if not for the fact that they had a bigger problem on their hands. Bouts of bizarre, sometimes destructive magic were cropping up around the school. One day there was an earthquake. A few nights later, all the windows on the fourth floor of the castle mysteriously broke all at once. One day, the entire campus was overrun with cats. They were perfectly ordinary cats, tabbies and calicos and black cats and fluffy white ones, but there were hundreds of them. A number of students and several teachers were barricaded in the infirmary due to allergies, and some were in bad shape. No one knew where the cats had come from. The next day they were gone.

A couple of weeks after that, another chilling act of mysterious magic occurred. The entire campus was covered in an odd sort of graffiti. It was red, and it covered just about every wall, many benches, and even a few trees. The strangest part was that it did not say anything in particular. It was mostly made of letters, but there were a lot of characters that only looked like letters, as if someone were mimicking English writing. Occasionally there was a stick-figure drawing of what appeared to be a girl. Much of it seemed to be written in a kind of frenzy, with letters or random scribbles often overlapping each other.

The atmosphere at the faculty meeting the following day was tense. The teachers sat at a long table in a small but high-ceilinged hall with tall windows and an unlit fireplace. Some were making quiet conversation as they waited for the meeting to begin, but no one seemed to be in the mood for laughter or jokes.

"I believe we're all here, so let's get started," came Dumbledore's voice over the mild chatter, which promptly subsided. "Happy Friday everyone. That's one thing to celebrate at least. But there's no sense beating around the bush. I imagine we are all concerned about the recent chaos around campus. My sincerest thanks to all of you who have been pitching in with repairs. I am glad to report that the fourth floor windows are entirely restored, and we are making good progress on clearing up this writing, too. We've nearly finished removing it from the southeast wing of the castle. With luck, we might have it all cleared up by this time next week."

Dumbledore sighed and folded his hands. "As for the question of the perpetrator, I'm afraid I have nothing to report on that front. We have ascertained that the writing is not in blood, as some rumors had it, but is merely some kind of red paint. We don't know who or even what kind of spell might be responsible. We are still looking for clues, and of course, if any of you stumble onto some information that might be relevant, please do not hesitate to report it."

There was an anxious pause. "Is it true that this was the work of dark magic?" piped up Professor Sprout.

"I believe it is," said Professor Hornswood, answering for Dumbledore. Hornswood was Dumbledore's rival in age and in political leanings, though not in accomplishments. He did not have a beard like Dumbledore, just a horseshoe ring of thinning hair around his head. His face was sallow and his eyes sunken, and his voice was heavy with the gravity of self-importance.

"The earlier attacks on our campus might have been the work of a powerful ordinary wizard," Hornswood continued. "But this most recent one smacks of dark magic. Argus Filch was on watch when it appeared, and he claims that it appeared very suddenly, all at once in fact. There is no known spell to produce such a proliferation of such bizarre writing in so short a time."

"Who could have done such a thing? And why?" came a voice at the other end of the table.

"I think we should not rule out the possibility that a dark wizard has entered into our midst," Hornswood said solemnly, looking at John as he spoke. Several heads turned toward John and the ghost, who was hovering by the wall behind him. Both John and the ghost raised an eyebrow at this, in an uncanny synchronicity.

"If you have something to say, Hornswood, just say it," said John.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Dumbledore cut in.

"I'm only agreeing with Dumbledore that we should be on the lookout for clues," said Hornswood, in a gentle, innocent tone.

"What sort of clues?" asked Professor Flitwick nervously.

"Oh, anybody whose magic seems to be a little off, or who might be engaging in unconventional magical practices," Hornswood intoned slowly. "Maybe you've simply noticed somebody acting strange. If you have any doubts, just speak up."

"Really, it's a crime to be strange now?" John sneered.

"Ezra," said Dumbledore reprovingly.

"Why are you so quick to defend him?" snapped Hornswood at Dumbledore.

"Why are you so quick to accuse me?" snapped John in return.

"Gentlemen, please," said Professor MacGonagall impatiently.

"Arthur Crowe is one of Hogwarts' most sensible, intelligent ghosts," Hornswood persisted. "It seems unlikely that he would confuse you for an old acquaintance."

"Oh so you know what the ghosts are thinking, do you?" John replied hotly. "You seem quite familiar with them yourself."

“That is enough, both of you!” roared Dumbledore with surprising vigor. Then he continued more calmly. “This is not the time or place for this discussion. Incidentally, Ezra, we have already had this discussion, and I have told you that I am taking your concerns into consideration. I am considering all potential clues. Now, unless anybody has any *new* information on the matter, I think we will proceed with the next item on today’s agenda.”

No one spoke, and Dumbledore proceeded with the meeting. John looked fixedly at Dumbledore, avoiding anyone else’s gaze. The ghost of Arthur Crowe hovered behind him, his face placid, perhaps, one might say, even a little pleased.

~

“Did I ever tell you about the time I happened to meet a distant cousin while I was on holiday in Bruges?”

John was quite certain that they both knew he had.

“Well, actually I had wanted to spend our holiday in Paris, but my wife, the second one, you know, the younger one, she insisted that that would be too expensive. It’s funny, she was always very conscientious about money in the abstract, but then when we were walking past shop windows she simply couldn’t restrain herself. She played the role of the virtuous wife so well, but that was as far as it went. Anyway, we were staying with an old university friend of mine who had relocated to Bruges several years earlier...”

Just, then, a great flood of students came streaming down the main staircase, which John happened to be climbing. He had recently acquired the habit of going for walks in the most trafficked areas of the castle, since Crowe’s ghost was on his best behavior while they were in public.

He stopped a student who he recognized from one of his classes.

“Isabelle,” he called. “What’s going on?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. They told everyone to evacuate the fourth floor,” she said, and then strode after her friends.

“Ooh,” said Crowe. “Is something happening? Let’s look and see, can we, please?”

Of course John said nothing, but he began climbing the stairs more briskly, grateful that Crowe had been distracted from his story. He moved against the current of students until he reached the fourth floor. He walked past an empty dormitory, along the dark and dingy corridor. A thick red carpet muffled his steps. He did not hear or see anything remarkable, and began to wonder if this was not merely some sort of drill. Then he heard an unfamiliar voice wailing in Gutterspeak.

“Oh, it is all my fault of course. It’s my fault she’s dead. My baby, my heart. It was all my selfishness. I treated her like a stray dog and I shall never forgive myself!” It seemed to be coming from around the corner.

“Ah, another day in the life of the dead,” sighed Crowe calmly.

John rounded the corner. Several teachers were there, all of them facing a ghost hovering at the far end of the hall. The ghost was of a large woman, large in both height and girth. John could not see her features very clearly. As he peered more closely, he saw that her dress suggested the uniform of a servant or a maid. She was carrying the lizard’s staff, complete with its ghostly little falcon on top.

“Here she goes again,” said Crowe.

*Could this woman have conjured the graffiti?* John thought. *Has Crowe known all this time that she had the staff?* He resisted the urge to turn round and give Crowe a nasty look.

The ghost woman struck the floor with the base of the staff, and the floor shook and the paintings on the walls rattled. A couple of teachers shot stunning spells at her, but these simply passed through her.

“Dumb old Hilda doesn’t know anything, you say,” the ghost woman snarled, suddenly turning wrathful. “You think I don’t hear you whispering about me? Demons and devils whispering all the time. You poured poison in her ears!”

She waved her staff but John couldn’t see any effect. Then, Professor Stebbins cast a spell to protect herself in a sort of transparent magical bubble. The other teachers followed suit, each surrounding themselves in their own bubble. A black cloud seemed to be hurtling down the corridor. John heard buzzing. It was a swarm of wasps. He grabbed his wand, for appearances rather than out of necessity, and tried to produce a bubble like the other teachers had. His was not the same color nor the same size as theirs, but it served, and no one was paying him any attention anyway. The wasps bounced harmlessly off of the bubble.

“Yes, yes, you all like old Hilda well enough when she’s cleaning your toilets with a smile on her face, but as soon as she wants something for herself you all reach for your wands like she’s a fox in the hen house. You killed my baby! You killed her! But now Hilda’s hour has come. All will tremble and grovel before the great spirit! The prophets heard my prayers and foretold this moment!”

Red sparks emerged from her staff. Diminutive Professor Flitwick sent a white light emanating from the tip of his wand which encircled the ghost like a magical lasso, but the lasso simply passed through both the staff and the ghost, falling limply to the ground. The ghost woman sent a ball of fire hurtling toward him. He dodged it, but the floor where he’d been standing caught fire, and another teacher magically doused it with water.

“Where is she? My angel, my dear heart! What have you monsters done with my daughter?!” cried the inconsolable ghost, her words increasingly indiscernible as they blended into a miserable howl.

John looked on the whole scene with despair. Again and again, the teachers tried desperately to incapacitate the ghost or to wrestle back the staff from her, but none of their wizard magic seemed to have the slightest effect. He doubted that his chaos magic would do any better, just as it had not on the day that he’d tried to take the staff from Crowe.

Then, the ghost of Arthur Crowe said quietly, “I know where her daughter is.”

John froze. He stood dumbly, paralyzed with doubt. The ghost woman cast a circle of greenish light about her on the ground, and then she swung the staff like a bat. The green circle hurtled toward the teachers, knocking three of them to the ground. John closed his eyes and sighed deeply. Crowe had been right from the beginning. John’s plan to ignore the ghosts had been a bad plan.

He began to back away, reluctant to tear himself away from the chaotic scene. He took one last look, and then briskly walked back in the direction he’d come. Crowe hovered ahead of him, floating backwards and keeping pace with John. A look of delight spread across his face. Then he turned to face forward and began floating even faster.

“Come, this way,” said Crowe. “I know a place where we can speak in private.”

They passed the main staircase, and continued walking toward the other side of the floor. The ghost motioned him through a small door, into another corridor John had never been to. This part of the castle smelled more musty, and there were cracks in the walls and the tile floors, some of them old and stained. Here and there, chunks of the stone walls had crumbled away. They reached a door with a little wooden sign that said, “Women”. The ghost drifted through it. John hesitated.

“Come on,” said Crowe, poking his head out through the closed door. “It’s quite safe, nobody ever comes in here.”

John looked nervously up and down the corridor, and then entered.

The women’s toilet had six stalls, three on either side, and a row of sinks along the far wall. Like the corridor outside, it seemed somewhat neglected. The white tiles were yellow with age. Orange stains on the walls radiated from under the sinks. There were cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. For some reason, John thought of a tomb. He felt he was intruding on a space that was meant for dust and silence.



Arthur Crowe hovered in the middle of the room, his expression positively gleeful. John scowled.

“Fine. You win. I surrender. You don’t have to look so damn happy about it,” he said testily in GutterSpeak.

“Is my happiness really so unbearable to you?” asked the ghost, still smiling.

“It’s not that,” said John vaguely, trailing off.

“Why have you been so determined not to speak to me?”

John looked up at the self-satisfied specter. “I just don’t speak to ghosts. As a rule,” he said, thinking of his embarrassing secret. But he merely added, “Once they find out that I speak GutterSpeak, er, the Language of the Dead, they’re always pestering me to help with their unfinished business, which I rarely can. And, look I’m sorry, but to me ghosts are obsessive, half-mad and terribly annoying.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Oh, well, I’m sorry my ghoulish afterlife is a minor annoyance to you,” he said sarcastically.

“One hundred bottles of beer on the wall was more than a minor annoyance.”

The ghost started to speak, but then he stopped himself and sighed. “I’m sorry that I have been annoying,” he said, hanging his head. “But you can’t know what it’s like. Honestly, it was nice just feeling like someone was listening to me, even if you did hate me for it.”

Neither of them spoke for a minute. John didn’t know what to say. He felt a twinge of revulsion for the ghost as well as a deep pity for him.

“I’m Arthur Crowe,” said the ghost, extending a hand and then, remembering himself, withdrawing it. “Please, call me Arthur.”

“I know. Your reputation precedes you. I’m John. John Hennessey.”

Arthur bowed his head as a manner of greeting. “Do I have a reputation? I didn’t think anybody noticed my existence.”

John shrugged. “Just that you’re one of the most sensible ghosts at Hogwarts. Which, from what I can tell, is true. You’re more cogent than the average ghost.”

“Oh. Well, thanks, I suppose. I’ve always felt that I was much cleverer when I was alive. This existence, it... wears down the mind.”

John was again at a loss for words. He changed the subject. “Are you going to tell me where the daughter is?” he asked.

Arthur smiled. “I may be a dull knife, but I’m not that dull,” he said. “I won’t give something for nothing, so that you carry on ignoring us again.”

“Alright,” said John, crossing his arms. “Let me guess. You want me to help you resolve some unfinished business so that you can pass on. Come on then, let’s hear it.”

“Not exactly. I want you to help all of the ghosts at Hogwarts to pass on. Or at least as many as you can. That’s my price.”

John laughed. Though it was a small room, his laughter seemed to echo over the scuffed and faded walls. “You must be joking,” he said, when Arthur did not react. “Why? What’s it to you? I’ll help you pass, isn’t that enough? Do you know how many ghosts would kill for such opportunity?”

“There’s one down the hall who very well might,” said Arthur grimly.

John knitted his brow. “You’re serious about this.”

“You may be surprised to know that I’ve given the matter of my final passing some thought,” said Arthur pensively. His gaze wandered above John’s head, as if he were not talking to John so much as to himself. “For years, I wondered what unfinished business I might possibly have. I have grudges, to be sure. But are my petty resentments enough to condemn a man to this awful purgatory? Doesn’t every man die with a certain amount of unfinished business? Or did they all walk into the arms of the reaper with glad serenity, and I just never noticed? This whole business of unfinished business never made any sense to me. Nobody ever wronged me so gravely that I should wish to linger in agony simply to watch his demise.

“One more thing that always bothered me. Why should I be gifted, or perhaps cursed, with this faculty of mind? As you say, most ghosts are a little dotty, if not incoherent. Is it just random chance? Or is there some higher purpose for which I am meant to put this mind to good use?” John looked at Arthur warily as he picked up steam.

“When I look back on my insignificant little life, what stands out to me now is not any particular piece of unfinished business, but rather the long list of wrongs I committed against my fellow man. And so, I believe this is the solution to the riddle of my present predicament: it is not the sins that were done to me that keep me out of heaven, but the sins that I have committed against others. Granted, I never had ill intentions. In fact, it was precisely my good intentions that led me to believe that I was incapable of any grave wrongdoing. But oh, the havoc I wreaked simply by doing what I thought was right, while I never once humbled myself before God and asked whether I was indeed right! So many pointless quarrels, so much hurtful gossip, so much scheming for my own selfish gain.” The ghost was wringing his translucent hands.

“I isolated myself from my fellows, convinced that most people were damnable wretches. But the wretched are the most worthy of love, the most important to love, for it is in loving the wretched that we may come to know God. If I could give my life for another human being now I would do so gladly, for there is no greater act of love, and there is no greater joy in life than doing real, tangible acts of love. But now it is too late. Back when I was alive, I had all the means to do good, and none of the wisdom for it. Now I have the wisdom, but no means. This ghoulish afterlife has been, after all, a very fitting punishment for me. Through my forced isolation, I have finally come to appreciate the worthlessness of good intentions alone.”

There was a fire in the ghost’s silvery eyes. His voice grew in a strong and passionate crescendo. “And here you have come along, like a gift from God. John, my friend, think of what good we could do together! For what purpose was I granted this mind if not to use it for good, and for what purpose were you granted your gift of speech if not to do the same? Think of how many lost souls we could save! As much as I loathe this existence, if an angel came down from heaven now and offered me entrance, I swear to you I would not take it. I would tell him, ‘Nay, exalted one, I cannot go with you for I have unfinished business here! I have a life’s worth of good deeds still to do, and I cannot rest until I see them done!’ And now that you are here, John, you can help me do them! Oh dear friend, how I would embrace you if I could!”

With that, he enveloped John in an attempt at an embrace. John shrieked in terror.

“Stop it! Get away!” He screamed violently, backing away and thrashing his arms in a futile attempt to push away the mist. He backed into the wall. The mist filled his mouth and lungs, and seemed to reach into his ears and even to surround his brain. A grotesque, familiar lightness came upon him, as if he were floating away. Soon, he felt as though he were a bystander looking on the scene, but from where exactly, he could not say.

~

Arthur Crowe found himself slumped in a crouching position, his back against the wall. The first thing he noticed was the discomfort in his back. It took him several more moments to realize that this the most vivid physical sensation he’d felt in well over a hundred years. He blinked slowly. He awkwardly stumbled forward, landing on his hands and knees. The tile floor was smooth and cold under his hands. He lingered a moment, caressing the tile with the fingers of his right hand. The sensation was so bizarre that he could barely think. He marveled at his hands. But they were not his hands. They couldn’t be. He swallowed. Slowly, very slowly, he stood, savoring the stretching and straightening of each little joint.

He looked toward the mirrors above the sinks, already suspecting what he would see in them. He walked closer to get a better look. John Hennessey’s reflection blinked back at him. But if he was

John, then where was John? He looked around, half expecting to see a silvery ghost in John's form somewhere nearby. But he was alone. Or was he? He closed his eyes. He sensed some other presence with him. And it wasn't just Moping Myrtle, the ghost whose toilet they were encroaching upon and who was probably hiding in one of the stalls, as she most likely had been this entire time. There was an additional presence, an angry, bitter energy simply watching him. That must be John.

He opened his eyes before the mirror and came up close to it, marveling at his own reflection. He touched the mirror. He touched his face. He wanted to touch everything, as if by touching things, he could be more certain that his experience was real. He turned on the faucet. The water was icy cold. He began giggling with childish joy as his fingers started to turn numb under the cold water. He splashed the water onto his face. It stung, but it was also delightfully refreshing. He laughed harder, throwing back his head. He turned off the faucet and ran his wet fingers through his hair. Not since his childhood had he felt so delighted to be alive, to hear his own breathing and to feel blood in his veins.

"Myrtle, are you there?" he said, turning toward the stalls.

"No," came a soft voice.

Arthur chuckled. "Listen, I want to try to speak English, and I want you to tell me whether I'm still speaking the Language of the Dead."

Myrtle remained hidden and didn't respond. Arthur searched deep in his memory for the words. Perhaps he would try a familiar phrase.

"Hello, how do you do?" he said.

"Not well at all," said Myrtle.

"Damn," said Arthur aloud. "Oh, what I wouldn't give to be able to go out there and talk to someone," he sighed wistfully, gazing at the door. "Still, we could do such good together, I know we could," he said to the angry energy that clung to him. He walked toward the door, nudging the doors of the stalls along the way, just for the simple thrill of watching them react to his touch. He had no plan. His thoughts were muddled. He was almost giddy. He grabbed the brass handle, but then he merely stood there, stroking it, letting his hand warm the cool metal.

Where would he go? For starters, he could go down the hall and try to talk Hilda out of her rage. But he didn't need John's body to do that, and if he did, John's secret would be exposed. Besides, he'd already tried persuading Hilda to give up the staff with no success. Perhaps it would be better to start with another ghost, one whose unfinished business was more clear and achievable. Yes, that would be better. He didn't need John. All he needed was a body. That would be enough to begin fulfilling his purpose. With this body, these solid hands, he could make a difference in the world, and so finally prove that he was a changed man.

His grip on the door handle loosened. Suddenly, he felt overcome with shame, as his own folly dawned upon him. His heart grew heavy and his eyes felt hot. He leaned his forehead against the closed door. The solid wood supported him even as it blocked his path. He knew what he had to do, and he grieved at it. Tears began trickling down his face. Even as he cried with disappointment, he felt relief at being able to cry. How he so missed the simple joy of being solid, of belonging to the world. He yearned to rush out and embrace someone. But he knew he would not. This was not his body. This was not the fate that God had chosen for him. It was not the right thing to do. Still crying, still leaning his head against the door, he brought his hands to his shoulders, and squeezed tightly. He embraced himself. It was more than he deserved, anyway. He wanted to soak up every sensation, so that the moment might be imprinted on his memory forever. He shook with emotion as he spoke.

"I want to do good. But it can't be like this."

~

When John came back into his body, he was sitting on the tile floor, his back against the wall, his legs straight in front of him. He felt detached and uncoordinated, as he always did after coming

back from a possession. He didn't move, for he knew that moving would require a lot of deliberate concentration at that moment. He would feel right again in a couple of minutes.

The ghost of Arthur Crowe paced up and down the short central corridor of the women's toilet. It was odd to watch a ghost pace, as the misty figures of his legs blended into a sort of blob while he moved quickly, and then reformed into legs again when he remained stationary. He occasionally looked up at John, but said nothing. Then John noticed another silvery figure. The ghost of a girl, or maybe a young teenager, was peeking her head up from one of the stalls, staring wide-eyed at him. She had large glasses and wavy hair that might have been dark while she was alive, though it was hard to tell now. When John met her eyes, she immediately dropped back down into the stall.

He looked up at Arthur. "Thank you," he said softly.

Arthur stopped pacing and looked at him sullenly. "Hmph," he grunted, and resumed pacing.

"Please don't tell the other ghosts that I can be possessed," said John in a weak voice. "And that goes for you too Myrtle," he added, closing his eyes and willing his head to lean back against the wall.

"Oh, Myrtle won't tell anyone. Won't you, Myrtle?" said Arthur. No response came. "See, she's already keeping quiet."

John smiled. He was annoyed that Arthur had included her in the conversation, but he couldn't be angry at her. "I already can't trust you to keep a secret, Crowe," he said.

"Myrtle is my friend. We can trust her."

John nodded. It felt like someone else was performing the motion, like his head was being nodded for him.

"Will you help the ghosts of Hogwarts?" Arthur asked nervously.

"Is that still your price?"

Arthur paused, then spoke slowly. "No," he said. "I'll ask no price. I'll take you to Hilda's daughter if you wish."

John opened his eyes and looked at Arthur in surprise. "Really?"

Arthur nodded. His face was despondent but his voice was strong. "It is the right thing to do."

A pang of emotion struck John's heart. In spite of his good fortune, he felt miserable. The more virtuous the ghost was, the more selfish he felt. "Damn you," he said.

Arthur smiled out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm afraid the devil beat you to it."

"Well, then damn him, too." John pulled his knees toward his chest and slowly stood, keeping a hand on the wall to steady himself.

"I wouldn't get your hopes up about the daughter, by the way. I doubt she'll be of any help."

John groaned in frustration. "Brilliant! So what are we supposed to do?"

"What do you mean 'we'? What can I do, without a body? This is your problem, my friend."

"You're the one who gave her the staff!" John complained.

Arthur crossed his arms haughtily. "I did not give her the staff. I put it some place where I thought it would be safe."

"Aye, well lucky for Hogwarts you're not in charge of security."

"I already told you I'm a dull knife. There's no need to rub it in."

"Right," said John, softening a little. "So now a madwoman's got a dangerous magical artifact, and it's up to a dull knife and a bad liar to win it back. How are we supposed to beat an opponent we can't touch?"

Neither of them spoke for a moment. The room was still and silent. Then, Myrtle poked her head above her stall. They both turned to look at her.

"Did you say something about winning?" she asked.

Arthur grinned. "Yes, that's right. We're playing a game, Myrtle! It's called 'Capture the Staff'. Right now Hilda's got it, and we're trying to get it back." Turning toward John, he said in a low voice, "Myrtle loves games."

"Oh!" said Myrtle, her eyes widening. "Can I... er, I mean, do you think... I could... "

“Of course you can play,” said John kindly. “You can play on our team.”

Myrtle smiled bashfully. She drifted down into her stall, and then passed through the door to hover beside them. It was John’s first look at her whole body, and he noticed that she was slightly chubby and she was wearing a nightgown. He wondered sadly what fatal reckoning had crept up on this child in the middle of the night.

“Alright, let’s review our options,” he said, mustering an authoritative tone. “You already tried to persuade Hilda to give up the staff.” He looked at Arthur, who nodded.

“So one option is to try again.”

“You’ll find she’s not a very good listener. And we’ve nothing to bargain with.”

“Except the daughter,” said John. Arthur grimaced.

Myrtle silently pointed at John. They both looked at her, puzzled. “And your body,” she said.

It was John’s turn to grimace. “Moving on. Option two: bring together daughter and mother. Maybe the daughter could persuade her to give up the staff, or help her pass on.”

“Not a good idea, probably won’t work,” said Arthur succinctly.

John frowned. “I’d still rather meet the daughter and judge that for myself.”

Arthur bowed his head in a conciliatory nod. “Any other ideas? Some magic that can call back the staff?”

John shook his head. “That staff is as mysterious to me as it is to you. It doesn’t obey me. I tried to destroy it several times on that first night, but it kept coming back. And I’ve never seen magic that allows something to move between the ghostly and material worlds. Well, that’s not entirely true, I suppose. I’ve seen something a little bit similar, but it’s not the same. Honestly I’ve never seen anything like this staff.”

“What’s the thing that’s similar?” asked Arthur.

“Oh, it’s not really similar,” said John dismissively.

“It might help,” chimed in Myrtle.

John smiled, a little pleased that they had insisted. He began chanting in Gutterspeak:

“Through darkest night or winter storm,  
There is a hearth that’s always warm.  
It’s not in any place I know  
But follows me wherever I go.  
This humble hearth demands no wood  
While lasting longer than fire could.  
A gentler beast you’ve never met,  
I’m always home while I have my pet.”

An intricate magical rune appeared on the tile floor before him, traced in silver light. On top of the rune, a ghostly short-haired cat appeared. John bent down and beckoned him. The ghost cat trotted forward jauntily and rubbed against the proffered hand. John stroked the cat’s little cheek and scratched behind its ear.

“He’s not a real cat, of course. He’s not even a real ghost. It’s just a spell. A gift from a friend. But, well, I get attached. You can pet him, too. Look, Spooky, over there! New people!” He pointed to the ghosts.

Spooky trotted over to them. Arthur descended from where he was hovering, and Spooky began weaving around his legs. Arthur looked down, perplexed, but then he crouched and began to pet the cat, who eagerly nuzzled into his hand. Arthur’s expression became soft, and in his gaze there was a profound, unspeakable joy.

“I’d ask the fellow who gave him to me about the origin of this magic, but he’s dead,” said John. Then he added, “Very dead.” Myrtle reached down to pet the cat, too. “Still,” he continued, “I’ll

ask around. We'll call that option three. Maybe I'll find someone who's knowledgeable about this sort of magic."

The ghosts were not really listening. They were both engrossed in petting Spooky, who was purring and adoring their attention. When the ghost's hands met, they passed through each other. How sad it was, that they could each touch the cat but they could not touch each other.

As he watched them, John's heart swelled with pity. As much as he disliked being immortal, certainly these wretched ghosts were worse off than he. But was it just pity? No, there was something else, too. Kinship, perhaps. What tugged on his heartstrings in that moment was not their differences, but the wretchedness that they all shared. The ghosts longed for gentle contact just as he did. They were wracked with the same existential uncertainties that he was. And Arthur... John did not intend to inform Arthur that having a body did not confer immunity from a relentless sense of isolation. They all craved the simple kind of joy that Spooky offered, these moments of sharing and delight that made the agony of consciousness bearable. Perhaps this was love, here in the simple joy of contact. Contact, that was all they needed, just another ship passing in the night, that each might be reminded that at least they were not alone. John still wanted to ignore the ghosts, but he was haunted by them. It was not Arthur's pestering nor Hilda's threats that haunted him. It was something much deeper.

~

It was night when they reached Hilda's daughter's haunt. John, Myrtle, and Arthur had been creeping about the grounds outside the Natural Sciences building when Arthur stopped at a seemingly random spot. They were in a covered exterior walkway with an arched stone ceiling. On their right was the building, and on their left were columns that faced a small, simple courtyard. Flush with the building at regular intervals stood the occasional bust or sculpture, each elevated to eye-level on a stone plinth. Arthur stopped at one of these sculptures. It was a stone garden vase, elaborately carved but otherwise unremarkable. A large arch was carved on the wall behind it, giving the visual impression of a shallow niche.

"Well, here's the door," Arthur said, gesturing vaguely toward the vase and the wall.

"Unfortunately I don't know how to open it. I've never needed to, of course. And I've never seen a living person go in or out so I'm not even sure exactly where it is."

As if to demonstrate, Myrtle drifted through the vase, and then through the wall, and she did not re-emerge. John was tempted to comment that being bodiless did have certain advantages after all, but he thought it better to hold his tongue.

He stepped up to the wall behind the vase and began running his fingers down the carved archway. There was a crevice just beneath the arch, unnoticeable to anyone who was not looking for it. He summoned something small enough to squeeze through the crevice.

A green slime began to form all around the inner edge of the arch, filling the crevice. The slime penetrated deeply. Surely this was the edge of the door. John looked down at the ground. The slime also filled the seam beneath the door. With a wave of his hand, he replaced the slime under the door with an army of ants. The ants marched forward, and with them the slimy door edged forward, too. John summoned more ants under the stone plinth, so that the sculpture marched aside to make way for the emerging door. He used both hands to steady the stone slab as it came forward. Then the ants carried it to one side of the doorway, and John finally leaned it against the castle wall beside the dark opening.

"John, may I ask you something?" began Arthur. John turned to look at him. "Are you a dark wizard?" he asked.

John scowled. "No," he said flatly.

"In my day, anybody who did magic without a wand was considered a dark wizard," Arthur pressed.

"I'm not a dark wizard," John snapped.

“You know I don’t care if you are.”

“I’m not a dark wizard!” John repeated in agitation, balling his fists like a stubborn child.

“When I was young, this was how we all did magic, me and my friends. We just made it up as we went along. Magic was magic. Until some wizards came along and told us there was a right way and a wrong way to do magic, and ours was the wrong way. And suddenly magic wasn’t magic anymore, it was an institution with traditions and laws and prejudices. ‘Dark wizard’ is just a label that wizards made up to demonize magical people they don’t understand. They’d rather believe in enemies who use wild magic than admit that magic wants to be wild, and that they have no enemies except those that they’ve created. And now their young people don’t know how to experiment or think for themselves, because they’ve been taught that all the right answers have already been discovered and written down in books, and the wrong answers are of no value whatsoever.” John stopped and swallowed the saliva that was gathering in his mouth. He was breathing heavily.

Arthur looked somewhat taken aback, but he merely said, “I’m sorry.”

John looked at his feet. “It’s alright. You didn’t mean to...” he waved his hand and trailed off.

“I mean,” said Arthur gently, “I’m sorry for whatever it is you’ve been through.”

John shrugged, embarrassed for having lost his composure. He turned back toward the dark doorway and peered into it. Then he began laughing uncontrollably. His nervous laughter pierced the quiet night. “No,” he said between laughs. “No no no no no.” He backed away from the opening without taking his eyes off of it.

The room beyond the doorway was barely a room at all, being only a bit larger than a broom closet. However, the floor beneath it opened onto a stone stairway that led underground. Just then, Myrtle appeared from somewhere down below, hovering over the dark stair.

“Nope. We’re done here,” said John in a cracking voice. “I don’t go underground. I mean, alright, maybe I’ll go into an underground railway station or something if I really must, but in general I don’t go underground. And I don’t go into tight spaces, and I definitely don’t go down tiny, creepy haunted underground staircases behind heavy stone doors.”

Myrtle blinked at him. “She’s down there,” she said.

“I don’t care if Christ himself is down there,” said John adamantly.

Myrtle furrowed her brow, as if not quite understanding. “Here,” she said, floating toward him, and then directly on top of him, as he tried to back away. “I’ll help you.”

~

Arthur was right, it did feel good to touch things. Even if there was nothing to touch but the cold stone walls of the underground passageway, that still felt nice. Perhaps it had been worth coming out of her toilet after all. Myrtle missed her toilet. Nobody ever bothered her there. Arthur came in sometimes, but that was alright. Arthur was nice. John seemed nice, too. Though he did seem very worked up. She didn’t understand what there was to be so worked up about. She didn’t get worked up about things. Except games. Maybe that’s why John was so worked up. He wanted to win the game.

Myrtle was descending the stairs very slowly because she couldn’t see anything. When she had come down here a moment earlier, she’d been able to see a little bit by her own silvery light, and she could move faster, too. But now she was in John’s body so she didn’t have a light, and she might trip and fall. It was a long staircase.

Myrtle wanted to win the game. Arthur and John said that Hilda’s daughter might help them win the game of Capture the Staff. Winning was the best feeling in the world. Myrtle remembered when she had won the tri-wizard chess championship. That was the best day of her life. Everybody had been so happy for her. She had never been sure if anyone at school liked her, or even if her parents liked her, but when she won the championship, everybody had wanted to talk to her and get a picture with her. That was a good day.

Now nobody wanted to talk to her. Which was alright, too. Being alone was easier than talking to people and trying to figure out what they wanted, or what they were thinking about you. In chess, if people were being tricky, you knew why. It was because they were trying to win. But in real life, you could never tell why people were being tricky. Real life was so complicated. Luckily, none of it really mattered to Myrtle anymore. She was tired of wanting things that didn't make her feel better. Nothing ever made her happy. Except winning, sometimes.

~

It took John a moment to remember where and what he was. It was pitch dark, except for two sources of faint silvery light. Myrtle. The daughter. The stairs. Did he have a body? He felt light as air. He put a hand on his abdomen. It didn't feel like his, the hand or the abdomen. Certainly someone had put a hand on someone's abdomen. Had he felt it? He wiggled his fingers on his abdomen. Yes, he felt that. They must have been his. That was the most logical conclusion.

He was a person again, and he was underground. He had no idea how large or small the space was. Terror pressed in on all sides. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine that he was in a big, dark room above ground. It wasn't working. He still felt like he was in a tiny room underground and the world was crushing in on him and he would never get out. He wanted to claw his way out but he hardly knew where his hands were. Myrtle had brought him down here. That meant he would probably never be able to get out by himself. He was trapped, trapped forever deep underground and no one would ever hear his immortal screams.

*Breathe, John.* In through the nose, out through the mouth. Empty belly at the end of the exhale. Notice the pause between inhale and exhale. Now try to keep the cycle continuous. His nose. His mouth. His belly. His body, all one, together. One system. Was he sitting or standing? He had to think about it. He lifted his right heel and then lowered it back to the ground. He was standing. He was standing, breathing, not being crushed.

He opened his eyes. The two silver lights reappeared. One was Myrtle, who was watching him closely. The other was farther away, and something was obscuring it. A post? Bars? Something inside of John was screaming that the only thing that mattered was getting out of here, back up to the surface and to safety. The mere knowledge that he was underground was weighing down on his chest and shoulders, constricting his lungs. But he had already made it this far, and now he was so close. He reassured himself that crossing the room would not bring him any deeper underground, nor make him any more trapped than he already was.

Gingerly, he began to walk through the blackness toward Hilda's daughter, or rather, toward the light that must have been Hilda's daughter, but he stopped himself after two paces. He called up a little ball of fire in his hand so that he might see better. The small flame seemed incredibly bright in that dark place.

He was in a dungeon. There were three cells. Hilda's daughter was in the central cell. Somehow, seeing the size of the room eased his fear a bit. At least he was not in a truly tiny space. "Hello?" he called in Gutterpeak, his voice landing dully, as if absorbed by the earth pressing in around him. He received no answer.

Even amidst his fear, John reflected sadly that nobody should be living out their afterlife in this awful place. He would get out of here. At least on some level he understood that. He looked on the silver form in the central cell and wondered whether she could say the same. He crossed the room with determination and entered the cell. The door was already open, so John only had to open it a smidgen further to squeeze through and enter. His heart skipped a beat as the hinges creaked. Once in the cell, he approached the girl.

There was a bench beside the far wall of the cell. The girl was not really lying on the bench, but levitating a couple of inches above, as if she were lying on it. Her thin hair dangled vertically down



through it. She did not move as John approached. He stood over her. She was young, perhaps six years old. She stared at him, frowning deeply in a sad expression that might have been comical if it were not so genuine. Suddenly conscious that he was disturbing her, John put out the light that he was holding. The room disappeared. The light emanating from the girl was extremely faint, but it became stronger as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. As the girl came back into his vision, he saw that her frown had become a grimace. A squeal began rising out of her. It grew louder and louder until she was almost screaming. Tears began streaming down her face. John took a step back.

“I’m sorry!” he said desperately in GutterSpeak. “I just...” the girl went on squealing and sobbing. Between the girl’s cries and his claustrophobia, he felt paralyzed by an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. His whole frame shook as panic swept over him. He feared he might faint. He couldn’t run. It was now or never.

“I just wanted to ask you about your mother!” he spat out.

The girl roared ferociously. She sprung up from where she lay, and clawed at his face as if she meant to tear his eyes out. John was frozen, too terrified to back away. It was all he could do to just breathe. So he breathed in the silver mist.

~

where did the strange man go what does he want with my body feels different heavy they all want the same thing that’s what mother used to say give them an inch and they’ll take a mile spare the rod spoil the child you never wanted a child mummy you said so yourself so can’t we just pretend mummy that I’m a woman and that you love me but not like daddy’s pretend games I told Vero about them she said that was gross but you said I was lying so am I gross or am I a liar or am I a woman now I’m dead and he can’t touch me and you can’t find me remember how we used to play hide and seek no you don’t it was just hide in the kitchens watching the house elves chop with their big knives and I imagined who I would chop daddy or you or me sometimes I wanted you to find me and sometimes I didn’t but it didn’t matter you never came looking for me did you ever love him are you did you ever love me are you looking did you ever love are you looking for me now mummy because I’m still hiding but I don’t want to be found this time I want to find you and the longer you hide the worse it’ll be for you remember that mummy when you used to say that mummy used to say the silliest things

~

For a second time, John woke to the subterranean darkness and the post-possession disorientation. He did not even try to locate his limbs. He just needed his face. Speech. He just needed to find it.

He groaned. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

“Myrtle,” he croaked.

Nothing happened. He was settling into his body, slowly. He felt he might be lying down. Probably on the ground. Maybe on something else.

“Myrtle!” he shouted.

“What,” came Myrtle’s flat reply.

“Get me out of here!” he barked.

Myrtle did not need to be told twice.

~

Kate did not tease John for his embarrassing peculiarity. On the contrary, she listened intently and spoke seriously.

"I can't say I've ever heard of possession by ghosts," she said as she sipped her tea. "Demons, sure, that's another matter. But ghosts? Hmm."

They were in John's flat above the art studio. It was another quiet Sunday afternoon, and they were in his living room, which is to say the side of the flat that was not the bedroom area. They sat about his fireplace, by far the most luxurious aspect of the flat, though it was not lit at the moment. Kate was on the sofa and John was in an armchair.

"I was sort of hoping that you might have the same, er, ability, for lack of a better word," said John, blushing slightly.

Kate shook her head. "We have many abilities in common, but that is not one of them." Her wheel-thrown ceramic teacup clinked dully as she returned it to its saucer. "You know, John, it's funny," she said slowly, "I am older than you, obviously—"

"Obviously," he muttered.

"—yet I sometimes feel as though you are somehow more immortal than I am. Does that make any sense at all?"

John looked at her, perplexed. "No," he said. "Especially considering that of the two of us, you're the one who actually enjoys being immortal."

She smiled faintly. The light streaming in through the window behind her head framed the outlines of her small nose, her large mouth, and her full black hair which she wore loosely and naturally that day.

"It's not so much that I enjoy being immortal, it's just that I am generally glad to be alive, and I also happen to be immortal. From the perspective of a fruit fly, an ordinary human is practically immortal. But the ordinary human feels her life is too short."

"I doubt that an ordinary human would appreciate your analogy," he said, grimacing.

"Oh, you know what I mean," she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I mean I'm just living my life."

John leaned back in his chair, gripping his teacup in both hands. "Your zeal for life is mystifying to me. Don't you ever get tired of it? The hustle and bustle, the constant striving. And for what? The good things in life never last, and the problems always stay the same."

She thought for a moment, and said, "Of course I feel weary sometimes. Often. But I always feel as though I still have unfinished business left to do."

"Hmm," said John, absently tracing the rim of his cup with his index finger. "Yes, that would be the trick to it."

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and they sipped their tea in silence.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked.

"About your life or about your ghosts?"

"The ghosts!"

"You're asking my advice?"

John appreciated that she asked this question before giving advice. Or, usually asked. "Yes," he said. "With the full disclosure that I may or may not take it."

"Of course," said Kate, setting down her cup and saucer on the coffee table. "But you're not going to like it."

"I still want to hear it." He put down his teacup as well.

She turned toward him, resting one arm on the back of the sofa. "I think you should ignore the ghosts. Arthur won't give you any more trouble for fear of sullyng his virtue, Myrtle just hides in her toilet, and God knows the girl in the dungeon won't be coming after you. So you're off the hook. Which is what you wanted from the beginning, isn't it?"

John groaned and looked at the ceiling. "You make it sound so easy."

"It would be easy. Just do nothing."

John looked at Kate despondently. “But what about the staff? Hilda’s still got it and it’s all my fault. And then...” he struggled to put his anguish into words. “The little girl in the dungeon was so broken, and Myrtle is so melancholy and Arthur is so miserable, and there are loads of other ghosts at Hogwarts who are mad or getting there. Maybe if they just had someone to talk to, that might make a real difference for them.”

“What makes you so sure that you can make a difference?” said Kate kindly, as if trying to soften the blow. “You don’t know how to get the staff back from Hilda any better than anybody else does. And no one knows how to help the ghosts pass on, or even to feel better. The process of passing is mysterious and spontaneous. It’s something they need to work out for themselves. The ghosts will take care of themselves, John, as they have done since time immemorial. They will learn what they need to learn, perhaps all the sooner without your meddling. The ghosts’ problems are not your responsibility, and frankly, it’s rather presumptuous of you and Arthur to assert that they are.”

John pouted where he sat, slouching in his chair with his hands interlaced on top of his belly. He sighed fretfully. Finally, he said, “But even if I could only help a few of them, doesn’t that make it worth a try?”

Kate shrugged. “You would probably help a few. You would probably hurt a few. I only worry that you are setting yourself up for disappointment.”

John continued pouting. After a pause, he said softly, “I just want to believe that they can be saved.”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said thoughtfully. “And I just want to believe that they can save themselves.”

Again, neither of them spoke. A fly hovered above a limp, damp tea bag that lay on one of the saucers. It circled above the bag a few times, then landed on it and began to inspect the terrain.

“There is a part of me,” said Kate suddenly, watching the fly, “that wishes that you were more like me. But there is another part of me that believes that you are perfect exactly the way you are.”

John was startled by this unprompted confession. “Well,” he said. “I know which part I like better.”

Kate merely smiled at him enigmatically. Then she returned her gaze to the fly.

~

Hilda continued to terrorize the school. She summoned rain in classrooms. She sent a stampede of savanna animals through the quidditch pitch. She coaxed an impressive quantity of algae to grow in the fountain in the central courtyard, until the algae turned into a sort of bog monster that had to be subdued by several teachers.

Once it was discovered that Hilda was behind the chaos, Dumbledore and the teachers who were friendly to John saw this as proof of John’s innocence. Hornswood, Roche, and others saw it as proof of his guilt. He had some connection to one of the ghosts, and a ghost was behind all the chaos, so it clearly followed that John was somehow responsible for the chaos. To John’s relief it was all talk, and nothing came of their complaints and their whispers.

“Most wizards don’t want to believe that their friend or neighbor might be a dark wizard,” Kate reassured him. “They want to believe that dark wizards are ugly old lepers, or disfigured hunchbacks who live in caves, and they only emerge when they’re trying to take over the world. With most ordinary wizards, you could wave dark magic in front of their faces and they still wouldn’t see it.”

John was somewhat reassured. His most pressing problem, though, was how to get back the staff. He asked around Aezeroth, but the experts in necromancy knew only how to summon ghosts, exterminate them, or entice them to relocate, but not how to touch them or take things from them. Makers of pets like Spooky agreed that ghost pets could be petted by ghosts, but they hadn’t the faintest idea how to grasp a ghostly thing or make it solid. Meanwhile, Arthur tried to reason with Hilda

on several more occasions, without mention of her daughter's hiding place or of John's peculiarity. Suffice to say that Arthur was lucky her spells could not hit him.

Initially, Hilda had been elusive, but more and more frequently she was seen during the day and in front of many people. One day, she appeared during a choir rehearsal. The teacher immediately ordered the students to evacuate, but Hilda levitated several students and tossed them about. One girl was tossed rather violently into a pile of music stands and spent the night in the infirmary.

Winter was approaching and the days were growing short. For the first time, a fire was lit in the faculty meeting room, where the teachers gathered for their monthly meeting. Shadows danced on the walls and on the long faces of the teachers. A newcomer was seated next to Dumbledore. He was tall, of medium build, with graying brown hair. He sported a fashionable robe and a well-kempt beard.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Let's begin, shall we?" The old wizard looked around the long table at the teachers' anxious faces. There was no need to call them to order for the room was already quiet.

"Perhaps we should have expected that this day would come. The ghost of Hilda Himmelbach has injured a student, despite our best efforts to keep her at bay with boundary charms and banishing hexes. It's become quite clear that more serious measures must be taken. Allow me to introduce Charles Purcell, a private contractor in matters of ghost management. He comes highly recommended to us from the school board of governors, with a long list of accomplishments including the de-hauntings of Caddington Manor and the docks of Devonshire. I'll let Mister Purcell himself speak about our plans for this ghost problem."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," said Purcell. He spoke in a confident and matter-of-fact tone, like someone who has experience negotiating expensive deals with important people. "And thank you to all of you for entrusting me with this matter. I will do my utmost to resolve this situation as quickly I can, with as little disruption to your operations as possible. As you all know, the situation is a delicate one with many moving parts. The problem is not the ghost per se, but the magical artifact she seems to have picked up somehow. To take an item off of a ghost's person has never been done before. Still, there is some promising new research that suggests it might be possible. This will be my first approach. It has a low chance of success but the best outcome if successful. I will try to take the staff back from the ghost using experimental spellwork.

"If the experimental rituals are not successful, we will resort to banishment. We cannot exterminate ghosts except in the most dire cases, as extermination is not considered humane. Unfortunately, banishment of a particular ghost on a heavily haunted premises like Hogwarts is very complicated. On the bright side, the ritual poses no risk to the living. Now, I will of course do everything in my power to ensure that the ghost, and only the one ghost, is safely banished to a remote location where she cannot harm anyone. Nevertheless, we should be prepared for the possibility of mishaps. The most common mishaps are either: the work is too weak and nothing happens, or the work is too strong, and additional ghosts are banished. The banishment of one ghost may trigger the banishment of another ghost in proximity. In a place like Hogwarts, where the ghosts are all in proximity to each other, it is possible that all ghosts might be banished. So I will start conservatively, and it is simply a matter of not overshooting the intensity of the spell."

John stared at Purcell in confusion, trying to process what the consultant was saying. He understood, but his mind was reeling. He had a hundred questions, but he did not want to cause yet another scene in the faculty meeting.

Luckily, someone else asked the question that was at the top of his mind.

"What are the chances that all the ghosts will be banished?"

"Well..." intoned Purcell indecisively, though he had clearly been expecting the question.

"That's very hard to say. Very hard. Assuming the experimental ritual doesn't work and we go to the banishing ritual... I am reluctant to give you a number. Every haunted site is different. I would say it is... less than fifty-fifty."

John's eyes widened and his heart sunk in his chest. That it was anywhere close to fifty-fifty seemed like utter madness. His mind began working furiously. If proximity was an issue, then he would just tell the ghosts to leave the campus for a day or two. No, Arthur would have to tell the ghosts to leave, because John couldn't reveal that knew Gutterspeak. But then how many of them would believe Arthur, if he could not reveal his source? And what about the ghosts who couldn't understand what was going on? It would be like herding cats. Surely the dotty ones would never be convinced to evacuate. What a mess, what an utter disaster!

He looked pleadingly across the table at Kate. She regarded him sympathetically. He mentally begged her to do something. She could not read minds, but John had faith that between her ancient wisdom and her feminine wiles she could probably read his.

She sighed and looked away from him. "If I may speak freely, Mister Purcell," she began. "I wonder whether it is truly humane to risk banishing all the ghosts to avoid exterminating one. Their spiritual business calls them to this place. Their work is here, and displacing them would be a grave interference with their process. Though I am no expert on this subject, I wonder whether banishment might, at least for one or two of them, be tantamount to a kind of extermination."

"Unfortunately that is out of my hands," said Purcell mournfully. "The Ministry Code of Law on ghost management prohibits extermination in all but the most dire, life-threatening cases. We could apply for an extermination permit, but the process is lengthy and approvals are rare. I think this case would have little chance of being approved."

Kate responded in a cool but stern voice. "Is this not precisely the kind of case for which such exceptions are intended?"

Purcell looked at Dumbledore, betraying genuine hesitation for the first time.

Dumbledore spoke firmly but not unkindly. "We have decided upon banishment for both practical and moral reasons. While it was not my intention to present the issue for faculty debate, I am sure the board of governors will reconsider their position if the faculty feel strongly on the matter. Who else feels that they might favor extermination of Hilda Himmelbach over the banishment ritual?"

The room was silent. The teachers turned this way and that, eagerly peering around for a full view of the room. George Widdershins raised his hand. John slowly raised his. No other hands moved.

"I will convey your concerns to the board of governors," said Dumbledore respectfully.

~

The underground passage yawned before him like the gates of hell. Midnight was approaching, and John stood gazing into the abyss. On the other side of campus, the banishment ritual would begin shortly. Arthur and Myrtle had fled with as many ghosts as they could rally. Many ghosts remained, unable or unwilling to leave.

Arthur and John had agreed on that first night that they would not disturb Hilda's daughter again. It had seemed coarse to use her for their own ends, when she wanted to be left in peace. Now, however, the fatal hour was approaching, and it was time for desperate measures.

Logically speaking, John should have been happy with this turn of events. As Kate had said, this was what he'd wanted from the beginning. Hogwarts without ghosts, or at least without the looniest ones. He had every rational reason to want them gone: less chance of harassment, of possession, of discovery by the other teachers. Apparently most of the faculty didn't care for the ghosts either.

And yet here he was, about to immerse himself in a suffocating underground deathtrap in order to save the ghosts of Hogwarts. Moonlight illuminated the thick layer of dust that coated the walls of the little room before him. The hole in the floor revealed only three stone steps, and the rest were swallowed in darkness. As usual, he had no plan. He had only his magic and a lot of good intentions.

In spite of Arthur's pleas, he might still have been able to walk away if it were not for this little girl. John would not be able to live with himself if she were banished. He could barely live with

himself already, knowing that she was languishing in that dungeon beneath their happy campus. The other ghosts were more annoying, and perhaps more to blame for their own misfortune. But what could this little girl possibly have done to deserve such a miserable fate? Better that he should suffer in hell, better that ten thousand sinners should suffer in hell, than that an innocent child should pay for her parents' sins. It was this ghost, more than any of the others, who haunted him. The one ghost who had never asked anything of him had become the hardest to ignore.

Why was he so inexorably drawn to the ghosts, who offered him nothing and to whom he owed nothing? Was it pity? Kinship? Self-aggrandizement? Did he believe, like Arthur, that good deeds would be his salvation? It was all of these. And none of them. He felt that he was shouting into that dark pit before him, "Why must I do this thing?!" listening for wisdom in the pit's silent reply. The pit did not give explanations and yet it called out to him, wordlessly beckoning him toward salvation and ruin. As much as he wanted to, John could not give up on the ghosts. There was no logic, no reason to it. There was only the inexplicable siren's call of destiny.

~

As he summoned a flame and looked on the three cells, he was no less terrified than he had been the first time. The walls threatened to crush him, panic clutched at his breast, and in his gut lay a deep despair that he would never see the surface again. The only difference was that this time he also felt a righteous determination alongside the fear, which he supposed was what people mean by 'courage'.

To John's amazement, there were not one but two ghostly figures in the central cell. Hilda's daughter was standing, or as close to standing as ghosts get. Her tangled blonde hair draped down her shoulders, wayward strands sticking out here and there like twigs in a bird's nest. She watched him through the bars with deep suspicion. Beside her was Spooky the ghost cat.

Where had Spooky come from? Only John, Arthur and Myrtle knew the incantation. One of the two ghosts must have taught it to her. Probably Myrtle. Apparently Myrtle could be quite bold when the possibility of winning was on the line.

John bowed deeply, and then spoke quietly where he stood.

"I am sorry for intruding on you. Last time and this time."

Hilda's daughter said nothing, but merely continued to stare at him and scowl.

"I'm intruding because I have an important message, and I also have an important question to ask you. The message will be hard to hear, but you deserve to hear it."

The girl seemed to be listening intently, with a frown of concentration, as if listening required great effort on her part.

"The living need your help. Your mother is looking for you." He paused, letting his message sink in. "I came to ask whether you will help us. More importantly, I came to ask whether you feel ready to help yourself."

Her frown deepened, and John guessed that her mind was working rapidly. He felt the urge to say more, to try and explain the situation more clearly, but he caught himself and kept silent. He had done his part. The matter was in her hands now. She looked down at the cat. Spooky returned her gaze. Then she broke from Spooky and looked off into the distance, as if watching something no one else could see. John waited tensely. She continued gazing into the distance for so long that he began to wonder whether she had forgotten he was there. Finally, she balled her fists and looked steadfastly ahead. She floated forward, through the bars of the cell. In a spasm of panic, John stepped aside as she approached. But she merely floated past him, toward the dark stair to the surface.

~

John, the girl, and the cat crossed the courtyard and made their way to the great hall, where the banishing ritual was slated to take place. Purcell would summon Hilda to that spot, and then commence with the work.

John felt immensely self-conscious as he strode through the dark grounds with Hilda's daughter floating by his side. If anyone saw him now, it would be difficult to explain his way out of yet another association with ghosts. But he would not abandon the girl, who was letting him lead the way. Perhaps he should have prepared a disguise. As it was, he had only one disguise. He had only his Aezerothi face, the face he never let out on earth except when he was alone. He looked down at his navy blue wizard's robe. It was fairly nondescript. He hadn't worn it often. He wouldn't wear it again.

As he was about to speak to the girl, he faltered. He slowed his walk. "If I may ask," he said delicately, "What is your name?"

"Winnie," she said. It was the first word he'd ever heard her say. She pointed to the cat. "What's her name?"

John smiled warmly. "Spooky," he said.

Winnie nodded, apparently satisfied.

"Winnie," he began. He stopped walking altogether and turned toward her. She stopped and looked him over with her characteristic frown. "We're getting close now, and I'm going to have to change my face. I'm not going to leave you. I just want to warn you. It'll be a scary face, but it will still be me inside. You won't be scared, will you?"

"I'm not scared. I'm not scared of anything."

"That's wonderful. If you do get scared though, that's alright, too."

She looked at him with pursed lips and a stony expression.

He glanced down at his hands and watched the skin wither until it clung loosely to his skeleton, and the bony joints of his knuckles protruded from the torn, papery flesh. Chilly air wafted into his face, as his left cheek and his nose rapidly melted away, leaving behind blackened rotting cavities. His whole frame became hunched and bony as he changed into a living corpse. He smiled the lopsided smile that was all he could do in his undead form, since the left corner of his mouth naturally ended in a twisted grimace.

She did not flinch, but looked steadily into his glowing yellow eyes.

"Thank you, Winnie," he said. Together, they proceeded toward the great hall. *Well Hogwarts*, he thought to himself, *here comes your dark wizard*.

~

They could hear Hilda's shrieks from outside the heavy doors. Whether she was shrieking because the wizards were doing something to her, or simply shrieking of her own accord, was difficult to guess. John was casting on himself every sort of protective charm, shield and aura he could think of. Although their divine light faded in an instant he knew they were still working. He was about to be bombarded with magic, but he was not too concerned. This was, after all, the real reason that wizards had always feared chaos magic. Chaos magic was unpredictable, but when it came to a contest of strength, a good chaos magician would beat a wizard every time. Wizards were limited to known spells, which required precise execution of special words and movements. Chaos magic bore no such restrictions. For better or for worse, it moved at the speed and strength of imagination.

Gingerly, he tried to open the central doors to the great hall, but they were locked. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a skeleton key. The key, of course, had only been conjured in the instant he reached for it. He smiled wryly as he noticed that the key he held in his bony, undead hand had a little skull at the top. Chaos liked to add nice touches like that.

He opened the door a crack. He looked back at Winnie, who stared ahead fiercely. Slowly, he pressed the door open and crept through.

The usual dining tables were nowhere to be seen. In the center of the cavernous room, an elaborate magical seal glowed on the ground. Floating candles surrounded the seal, and Hilda towered above it. Her voice rose over the circle of wizards who looked on the whole scene.

“I’ll kill the lot of you! The falcon god has chosen me, can’t you see that, you fools? I am on a holy mission, that’s why you cannot touch me! Go ahead, do your worst. I’ll kill anyone who tries to stop me! You are bugs, do you hear me? Bugs! Skittering, crawling insects. And I will stomp on you one by one if I have to, I will stomp and stomp and I will not stop stomping until there is no one left on this cruel earth but me and my daughter!”

As she ranted, she flung curses at the wizards on every side, who blocked them but who did not bother to retaliate, which would have been futile. She waved her staff and a few of the wizards began levitating.

“That’s enough, Hilda!” John roared in GutterSpeak from the back of the room. “Put them down!” All the wizards immediately turned to look at him. Hilda’s eyes boggled. She tossed aside the floating wizards, and John summoned mattresses under each of them just before they hit the ground. The wizards standing in the circle began unleashing curses and stunning spells on him, but his magical auras absorbed them.

“Insolent fool!” shouted Hilda. “Nobody commands me!”

Just then, Winnie glided forward, Spooky still by her side. Hilda cried out in shock, and then sped toward Winnie.

“My baby!” she called in ecstasy.

Winnie said nothing. She stood tall and proud, and silently crossed her arms.

“My darling...” said Hilda, as if in a daze.

A few of the wizards continued to cast spells at John, who lazily threw up more shields and occasionally parried their curses with his own bolts of magical energy. More and more wizards, however, were turning their attention to the ghosts, appreciating that something significant was happening.

Hilda appeared to be collecting herself. “Dear heart,” she said, her voice rich with feeling. “I am sorry. I am so, so sorry for how I treated you. I was a terrible mother, terrible. I never meant to make you suffer, but I did. I should have paid more attention to you. I should have listened to you and believed you. I was bossy and cruel, and I neglected you when you needed me most. You have every right to judge me, more right than God to judge me. But I can make it up to you. I want to be a good mother. You can tell me how and I’ll listen. I promise I’ll listen. Oh my dearest, my dear daughter, can you ever forgive me?” Hilda leaned forward expectantly, her posture meek and humble.

Winnie extended her open hand. “Give me the staff, mother.”

Hilda’s eyes narrowed, and she seemed to tighten her grip. Nobody moved, not even the wizards, as Winnie waited and Hilda glanced back and forth between the staff and the girl. Winnie was patient. Hilda stood up a little straighter. She did not back away, but she leaned back as if to put more distance between herself and Winnie. “Do you forgive me?” Hilda asked cautiously.

“I love you mother, and I always will,” Winnie said matter-of-factly.

Hilda gave a joyful cry and embraced her daughter, more symbolically than literally since the two could not touch. They parted and Winnie looked seriously at Hilda. She held out her hand again. Finally, as if it physically pained her to do so, Hilda slowly relinquished the staff.

Winnie accepted it like a little queen dutifully receiving her scepter.

“I shall always love you, mother, but I shall never forgive you,” she pronounced. “I don’t care if you’re sorry. I don’t care what you believe or what you think of me. I’m not a child and I don’t need you anymore.”

A soft white light seemed to open inside of Winnie then. It grew and grew, radiating out from her. Soon the girl could not be seen anymore, as she was engulfed by the bright light. In that instant, a swift silver blur shot forward out of the shadows and pierced the white apparition. All was muddled and



confused as the bright light momentarily blinded all the spectators. In the next instant, it faded and was gone. In its place was the familiar silver form of Moping Myrtle. The onlookers gawked stupidly. Hilda shrieked with fury.

“Myrtle!” cried John, recovering from the shock himself. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“WINNING!” she exclaimed gleefully, raising the staff in triumph.

~

Kate had no idea what was causing the ruckus, but she was pretty sure John was behind it. It was nearly one o’clock in the morning. She had been coming out of the gymnasium—she liked to exercise late at night, partly for the privacy and partly because she was simply a night owl and slept little—when she heard a clamor coming from the music hall. As she approached, the clamor became a waltz. It sounded like a live orchestra, competing with the energetic chatter of its listeners for dominion over the night’s silence.

For a moment, she worried that another ghost might have gotten hold of the staff again, which John had recklessly insisted on keeping. He had sworn that to hide it better than Arthur had. That had been little comfort to Kate, who recognized that the two of them were delighted by the same things and prone to the same mistakes. Still, she was soft at heart, and she let him keep the staff. He had wanted it desperately, though he was slow to admit it, and absolutely unable to admit that he loved the lizard’s staff for the same reasons that wizards love their wands.

With her keen sixth sense, she detected someone approaching. She immediately activated her stealth, which is how the Aezerothi rogues spoke of their ability to become invisible. The ghost of Arthur Crowe rounded the corner of the building. He floated steadily, encircling the music hall as if he were on patrol, though he was looking down and muttering something to himself as if deep in thought. *Only John would be so optimistic as to appoint a ghost for a sentry*, she thought as she slipped past Crowe through the main doors.

The hall was illuminated by torch wall sconces and floating candles, in an impressive imitation of what John would call ‘wizard magic.’ Kate gracefully dodged a pair of women in colorful 19<sup>th</sup> century evening gowns with leg-of-mutton sleeves as they brushed past her. The hall was full of people in similar period dress. The front half of the hall consisted of many tables, populated by party-goers and brimming with tantalizing and aromatic foods. At the rear half of the hall was a dance floor, complete with a small orchestra at the far end. Kate did not recognize any of the party-goers, except one.

John was among the dancers, being led in the waltz by a tall, attractive man. Occasionally the man leaned intimately toward John and whispered comments in his ear, to which John either giggled girlishly or eyed him with playful reproach. Kate sighed and dropped her invisibility. No one seemed to notice her appearance out of thin air, or if they did, they paid it little attention.

She sat down at an abandoned table and propped her feet indelicately on top of it, so that the dishes of half-eaten dinner clinked as her feet thudded onto the table beside them. She leaned back in her chair and began picking from the nearest dish with her fingers. Within a few minutes, the song ended. John was flushed as he curtseyed to his partner, holding out his wizard’s robe. Just as the two of them were about to part, the handsome partner pulled John in close and whispered one more thing to him. Then Kate distinctly saw that he slapped John on the arse as he stepped aside and made his way off the dance floor. John’s pink face flushed to deep red. He walked with an effeminate sashay back to a group of women who stood by the wall at the edge of the dance floor. He talked with the women for a couple of minutes, fanning himself with a hand fan he seemed to have pulled out of thin air.

Finally, he pivoted abruptly away from the women, and as he did so a silver mist began to float out from him. The mist immediately gathered itself and became the ghost of a young woman in an elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century evening gown. She darted through the wall and out of the music hall. John swayed

where he stood, blinking slowly. Then he shook his head and began to walk toward the tables. A moment later he stumbled a little, grabbing onto a chair for support. Then he saw Kate seated among the guests, smiled and waved. He stood up again, steadied himself, and walked toward her with his usual gait.

“Well this is a surprise,” he said cheerfully as he approached.

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing.”

“How did you get past Arthur?”

In answer Kate merely raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, right,” said John, shaking his head. “Sometimes I forget about your invisibility.”

“Not that I needed it,” she replied, popping an olive into her mouth from her absent neighbor’s plate.

“How’s the food?”

“Pretty good for an illusion.”

John smiled proudly. “It’s not illusory. Merely contingent.”

“Hmm,” said Kate. “You’ll have to explain the difference to me precisely sometime.”

“Gladly.” John pulled out a chair beside her and sat down, suddenly looking rather tired.

“So, who’s the party for?” she asked. “Don’t worry, I’m not sore that I wasn’t invited.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t think you would be.” He picked up somebody’s glass of wine from the table and took a swig. “Her name’s Evelyn Dittmer. The original party wasn’t for her but this re-creation of it is. It’s the night that haunts her. She wants to practice going through it again, but she’ll react differently this time. It’s hard for her, though. She needed to be alone with her thoughts for a few minutes just now.”

“Ah,” was all Kate said, nodding.

“Do you think it’ll work?” he asked a little nervously.

“No,” she promptly replied. John’s posture slumped a little. “But then again,” she continued, “I would not have guessed that giving Winnie a cat would work either.”

John brightened a little, his confidence returning. “Me either. Apparently she’d always had a fondness for cats, even when she was alive. She didn’t trust people, but she felt she could be vulnerable around cats. Of course, Winnie had already mostly worked through her unfinished business before we ever got to her. I think the right cat came along at the right time. Some time with Spooky and a few conversations with Myrtle were all she needed.”

“Did she tell you all this, that night?”

“Oh, hell no. Myrtle told me later. Did I mention we’ve begun playing chess every other Sunday?” He took another sip of wine.

“Yes, you mentioned that.” The band had taken up another jaunty waltz, and Kate watched the colorful dancers twirl and dip and glide. The men smiled proudly, the women blushed, and here and there the occasional misstep was recovered with a laugh.

“That’s not to say that we didn’t help,” John broke in.

“Hm?”

“I mean, Winnie wouldn’t have passed when she did without our help.”

“Mostly Myrtle’s.”

“Yes, but we all played a part.”

“Of course you did,” said Kate graciously. “How is Hilda holding up?”

“Not very well I’m afraid. I think she still has a lot of work to do.”

“Don’t we all,” said Kate distantly. They both sighed. Just then, her sixth sense pricked up. “Somebody is coming,” she warned. “And I expect that they will see your sentry before your sentry sees them.”

John bolted out of his chair and across the room. Kate did not need to turn around to sense him frantically waving away the party. The lights went out. She stood, and just in time, for the tables and

chairs disappeared a moment later. Calmly, she disappeared as well. As she turned and made her way invisibly toward John at the front of the dark hall, Arthur Crowe darted in from outside.

"The night watchman is coming!" he cried importantly in Gutterspeak.

"Yes, yes, thanks Arthur," muttered John hastily, waving away the last of the guests. Arthur drifted away and out of the hall again, looking more than a little disappointed that he had not been needed.

Kate crept up beside John just as the door to the hall swung open. Argus Filch stood in the doorway, framed in the bright moonlight.

"What's going on 'ere?" he queried gruffly. "There was music coming out from 'ere a moment ago."

"Uhh..." John stammered. Kate and Filch waited dubiously for John to give some excuse, which in spite of his active imagination he seemed to be struggling to invent. Kate was amazed that in all his planning and preparation for this event, he had not bothered to prepare an explanation in the event of discovery.

"I was just... practicing. My... violin," he said finally.

"What violin?" snapped Filch, searching John with his good eye. John gestured toward the back of the hall. Shafts of moonlight from the large windows revealed a music stand before a single chair, a violin laid across its seat. Kate reflected that perhaps this was why he was such a bad liar. He was such a good magician that it didn't matter.

"No, sir. I 'eard a whole band, and voices, too!"

"Perhaps you should see a healer about that."

The night watchman only became more annoyed. "You're practicing your violin," he said acidly, "in the music 'all at one in the morning, in the *dark*?"

"I uh... well," John stammered again, realizing his blunder in putting out the lights. "I don't need it. There's enough light from the moon."

The old man, who, Kate expected, was not really old but merely prematurely aged by a hard life, shook a little in his fury as he squinted suspiciously at John. A vein in his forehead stood out prominently in the moonlight. John shook too, with ill-concealed nervousness.

"No sir," said Filch again in a threatening tone. "I know what I 'eard. You're up to something. I'll make sure Professor Dumbledore knows about this, and Professor 'ornswood, too. And you best stop whatever it is you're putting on 'ere."

Filch was about to turn away when John cut in. "Argus," he said, leaning in conspiratorially, "may I ask you something?"

Filch stared daggers at him.

"Is it true that that incident with the exploding toilet started with your stockpile of confiscated exploding sponges?"

"What?!" Filch opened his good eye wide in fear and disbelief. "'ow could you know anything about that? You weren't even 'ere when that 'appened!"

"Perhaps Dumbledore and Hornswood ought to be fully informed about that incident," said John meaningfully.

"Why you!" he spluttered, "You've got a lot of nerve! And no proof!"

"Neither have you."

Filch looked at him darkly. He made a sound resembling a low growl. Finally, he said brusquely, "I don't want to catch you getting up to any more mischief again, you 'ear me?"

John said nothing, but merely regarded Filch with a defiant stare. The night watchman turned around and walked away in a huff. As his figure disappeared into the night, John closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief. Kate came out of her stealth. John jumped a little as he turned and saw her.

She said placidly, "That was very strategic."

He smiled. "Never underestimate an old dog's ability to learn new tricks."

A presence appeared behind them. They turned to see Evelyn Dittmer floating in the center of the music hall, pouting with her hands on her hips.

“Can we go again?” she asked in Gutterspeak.

“Yes, we will. I just need to cast a little silencing magic around the music hall first so nobody else hears us. Then we’ll go again.”

She looked pleased.

John took one last look at Kate. With a smile of farewell, he said, “Duty calls!” and proceeded toward the center of the hall. He waved his arms, and the candles reappeared and the torches were lit again.

“I do not doubt that something calls,” whispered Kate. Then she crept out of the hall as quietly as she had crept in, happy to leave John to his business.