

"Her duty?" Josiah Worthington, Bart, shook his head, as if to dislodge a strand of cobweb. "Your duty, ma'am, is to the graveyard, and to the commonality of those who form this population of discarnate spirits, revenants and suchlike wights, and your *duty* thus is to return the creature as soon as possible to its natural home—which is not here."

"His mama gave the boy to me," said Mrs. Owens, as if that was all that needed to be said.

"My dear woman . . ."

"I am not your dear woman," said Mrs. Owens, getting to her feet. "Truth to tell, I don't even see why I am even here, talking to you fiddle-pated old dunderheads, when this lad is going to wake up hungry soon enough—and where am I going to find food for him in this graveyard, I should like to know?"

"Which," said Caius Pompeius, stiffly, "is precisely the point. What *will* you feed him? How *can* you care for him?"

Mrs. Owens's eyes burned. "I can look after him," she said, "as well as his own mama. She already gave him to me. Look: I'm holding him, aren't I? I'm touching him."

"Now, see reason, Betsy," said Mother Slaughter, a tiny old thing, in the huge bonnet and cape that she had worn in life and been buried wearing. "Where would he live?"

"Here," said Mrs. Owens. "We could give him the Freedom of the Graveyard."

Mother Slaughter's mouth became a tiny O. "But," she said. Then she said, "But I never."

"Well, why not? It en't the first time we'd've given the Freedom of the Graveyard to an outsider."

"That is true," said Caius Pompeius. "But *he* wasn't alive."

And with that, the stranger realized that he was being drawn, like it or not, into the conversation and, reluctantly, he stepped out of the shadows, detaching from them like a patch of darkness. "No," he agreed. "I am not. But I take Mrs. Owens's point."

Josiah Worthington said, "You do, Silas?"

"I do. For good or for evil—and I firmly believe that it is for good—Mrs. Owens and her husband have taken this child under their protection. It is going to take more than just a couple of good-hearted souls to raise this child. It will," said Silas, "take a graveyard."

"And what of food, and the rest of it?"

"I can leave the graveyard and return. I can bring him food," said Silas.

"That's all very well you saying that," said Mother Slaughter. "But you comes and you goes and nobody keeps track of you. If you went off for a week, the boy could die."

"You are a wise woman," said Silas. "I see why they speak so highly of you." He couldn't push the minds of the dead as he could the living, but he could use all the tools of flattery and persuasion he possessed, for the dead are not immune to either. Then he came to a decision. "Very well. If Mr. and Mrs. Owens will be his parents, I shall be his guardian. I shall remain here, and if I need to leave I shall ensure that someone takes my place, bringing the

going to give you a little refund. Ten dollars. Think of this as a refund on your future. You should stop and get a cheeseburger on the way home, honey. Get two cheeseburgers. And some fries. Take it all to Oscar. He'll be so grateful, I can guarantee. If you love him, he's bound to stay alive for a while. Then go out bowling tonight with him like a good girlfriend. Do you like bowling? You do go bowling, don't you?"

"I guess."

"Okay. Go bowling with Oscar. 'Cause what I see is . . . you want something to eat? I'm making some meatloaf back there, in the kitchen."

"No thanks." *I figured I had to ask.* "Is it bad, Mrs. Maggarouliau, what you see? You gotta tell me. I paid you all this money. It's like this week's savings. Wages and even tips, that our customers put in the jar on the front counter? I have to know. About Oscar?"

"Listen to me." She gave me a moment to look into her eyes. There was another person living in there, at least. You couldn't tell if what was inside Mrs. Maggarouliau was human or just an honorary human. Maybe she was a resident alien. The IRS wouldn't dare audit her, 'cause they'd find out she was an alternate life-form, and they don't have income tables for that. "I can't believe he's alive, this Oscar of yours," she said. "But if you really love him, he'll stay alive for a while longer. Trust me on that. People can keep other people alive, you know. Now go, honey. You dive home."

"I will." I stopped at the door. "Mrs. Maggarouliau," I said, "are you really a girl?"

She didn't even look up. "No, dear," she said, sniffing. "I am a lady."

WHEN I CAME INTO the apartment, Oscar was all over the bed, half-asleep after his exertions and his shower and his beers. He had

the TV on to baseball, and his eyes were closed, and I figured, worst-case scenario, that he was dead. So I took my shoes off and I put the two cheeseburgers and the big thing of French fries on the kitchen table, and I went running over to where he was, and I gave him a good shake. And, just like that—presto—his eyes open.

"Hey, Chloé," he says, "whassup?"

I'm straddling him, and shaking him, and he smiles at me. "How was basketball?" I ask.

"Great," he says. "Man, I was so hot, I was like an action figure. Hey, I see you took the car. Wheredja go?"

"Ypsi," I said. "I went to a psychic. Mrs. Maggarouliau. I wanted to find some things out."

"Yeah?" he says. "Cool. What'd she say?"

And that's when I took a deep breath, and I looked down at Oscar, and I said, "Oscar, I've got this idea. Don't get mad at me, okay?"

"Naw," Oscar says, "I wouldn't get mad. What's your idea?"

"Well," I say, "I know it's early and all, and maybe we should go slow and everything, and I know that girls aren't supposed to say this, but after talking to Mrs. Maggarouliau I've been thinking that maybe I should. I mean, this is going to sound real weird, 'cause here it is Saturday afternoon anyway, what I was wondering was, Oscar, maybe we should get married. Oscar, would you marry me?"

And Oscar, who's said that he loves me about a thousand times in the last week alone, he doesn't even stop to think about it, he just sits up a little in bed, and he says, "Oh, yeah." Just that, "Oh, yeah." Like it's a great idea that he hadn't thought of recently, but should have. Then he says, "That's a real cool idea, Chloé. You and me married. Like I'd be your husband, and you'd be my wife, right? Wow. I'd *like* to do that."

Some things you think can't ever happen, and then they do.



him a bungling amateur and said he was out of his depth. Well, I have to say, Stevens, that American chap was quite right. It's a fact of life. Today's world is too foul a place for fine and noble instincts. You've seen it yourself, haven't you, Stevens? The way they've manipulated something fine and noble. You've seen it yourself, haven't you?

'I'm sorry, sir, but I can't say I have.'

'You can't say you have. Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to do something about it. If Father were alive, he would do something to stop it.'

Mr Cardinal fell silent again and for a moment - perhaps it was to do with his having evoked memories of his late father - he looked extremely melancholy. 'Are you content, Stevens,' he said finally, 'to watch his lordship go over the precipice just like that?'

'I'm sorry, sir, I don't fully understand what it is you're referring to.'

'You don't understand, Stevens. Well, we're friends and so I'll put it to you frankly. Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. All the better because he's sincere and honourable and doesn't recognize the true nature of what he's doing. During the last three years alone, his lordship has been crucially instrumental in establishing links between Berlin and over sixty of the most influential citizens of this country. It's worked beautifully for them. Herr Ribbentrop's been able virtually to bypass our foreign office altogether. And as if their wretched Rally and their wretched Olympic Games weren't enough, do you know what they've got his lordship working on now? Do you have any idea what is being discussed now?'

'I'm afraid not, sir.'

This lordship has been trying to persuade the Prime Minister himself to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler. He really believes there's a terrible misunderstanding on

the Prime Minister's part concerning the present German regime.'

'I cannot see what there is to object to in that, sir. His lordship has always striven to aid better understanding between nations.'

'And that's not all, Stevens. At this very moment, unless I am very much mistaken, at this very moment, his lordship is discussing the idea of His Majesty himself visiting Herr Hitler. It's hardly a secret our new king has always been an enthusiast for the Nazis. Well, apparently he's now keen to accept Herr Hitler's invitation. At this very moment, Stevens, his lordship is doing what he can to remove Foreign Office objections to this appalling idea.'

'I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot see that his lordship is doing anything other than that which is highest and noblest. He is doing what he can, after all, to ensure that peace will continue to prevail in Europe.'

'Tell me, Stevens, aren't you struck by even the remote possibility that I am correct? Are you not, at least, *curious* about what I am saying?'

'I'm sorry, sir, but I have to say that I have every trust in his lordship's good judgement.'

'No one with good judgement could persist in believing anything Herr Hitler says after the Rhineland, Stevens. His lordship is out of his depth. Oh dear, now I've really offended you.'

'Not at all, sir, I said, for I had risen on hearing the bell from the drawing room. I appear to be required by the gentlemen. Please excuse me.'

In the drawing room, the air was thick with tobacco smoke. Indeed, the distinguished gentlemen continued to smoke their cigars, solemn expressions on their faces, not uttering a word, while his lordship instructed me to bring up a certain exceptionally fine bottle of port from the cellar.

At such a time of night, one's footsteps descending the back staircase are bound to be conspicuous and no doubt

"Poor kid," the producer said. "Did Arthur have anyone he was close with?"

This provoked an uncomfortable silence. Arthur had been carrying on an affair with the woman who looked after the child actresses. Everyone present knew about it, except the producer, but none of them knew if the others knew. Gloucester was the one who said the woman's name.

"Where's Tanya?"

"Who's Tanya?" the producer asked.

"One of the kids hasn't been picked up yet. I think Tanya's in the kids' dressing room." The stage manager had never seen anyone die before. He wanted a cigarette.

"Well," Gonerl said, "who else is there? Tanya, the little boy, all those ex-wives, anyone else? Siblings, parents?"

"Who's Tanya?" the producer asked again.

"How many ex-wives are we talking about here?" The bartender was polishing a glass.

"He has a brother," the makeup artist said, "but I can't remember his name. I just remember him saying he had a younger brother."

"I think there were maybe three or four," Gonerl said, talking about the ex-wives. "Three?"

"Three." The makeup artist was blinking away tears. "But I don't know if the latest divorce has been finalized."

"So Arthur wasn't married to anyone at the time of he wasn't married to anyone tonight?" The producer knew this sounded foolish but he didn't know how else to phrase it. Arthur Leander had walked into the theater just a few hours ago, and it was inconceivable that he wouldn't walk in again tomorrow.

"Three divorces," Gloucester said. "Can you imagine?" He was recently divorced himself. He was trying to think of the last thing Arthur had said to him. Something about blocking in the second act? He wished he could remember. "Has anyone been informed? Who do we call?"

"I should call his lawyer," the producer said.

This solution was inarguable, but so depressing that the group drank for several minutes in silence before anyone could bring themselves to speak.

"His lawyer," the bartender said finally. "Christ, what a thing. You die, and they call your lawyer."

"Who else is there?" Gonerl asked. "His agent? The seven-year-old? The ex-wives? Tanya?"

"I know, I know," the bartender said. "It's just a hell of a thing." They were silent again. Someone made a comment about the snow coming down hard, and it was, they could see it through the glass doors at the far end of the lobby. From the bar the snow was almost abstract, a film about bad weather on a deserted street.

"Well, here's to Arthur," the bartender said.

In the children's dressing room, Tanya was giving Kirsten a paperweight. "Here," she said, as she placed it into Kirsten's hands, "I'm going to keep trying to reach your parents, and you just try to stop crying and look at this pretty thing," and Kirsten, teary-eyed and breathless, a few days shy of her eighth birthday, gazed at the object and thought it was the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the strangest thing anyone had ever given her. It was a lump of glass with a storm cloud trapped inside.

In the lobby, the people gathered at the bar clinked their glasses together. "To Arthur," they said. They drank for a few more minutes and then went their separate ways in the storm.

Of all of them there at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later on the road out of the city.

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