

THE LAST APPRENTICE

RAGE OF THE FALLEN



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The Last Apprentice: Rage of the Fallen

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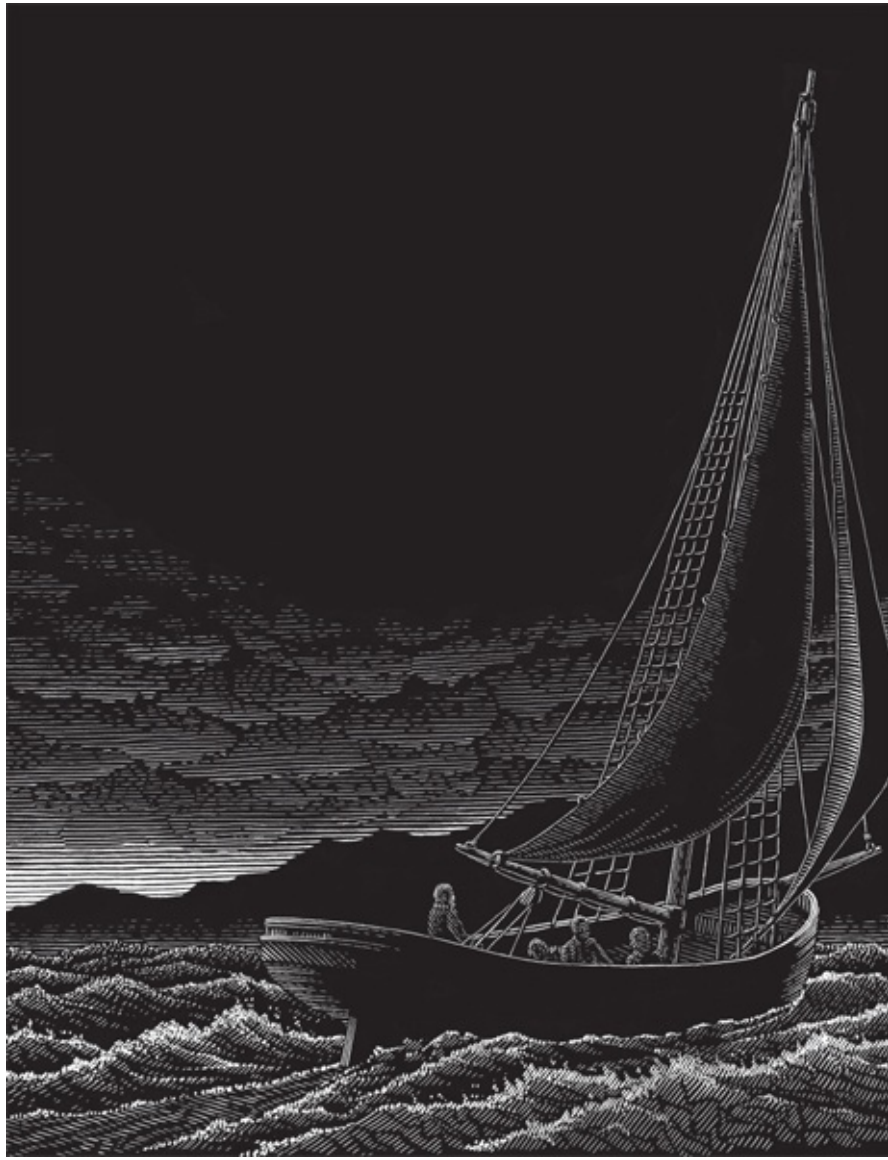
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BEWARE THE JIBBER!



DRIVEN by the gentlest of breezes, our small fishing boat was sailing slowly west, bobbing gently toward the distant shore. I was staring ahead to the green hills of Ireland, trying to take in as much as I could before the light failed. In another twenty minutes it would be dark.

Suddenly there was a roaring, howling sound, and the fisherman looked up in alarm. From nowhere a great wind blew up. A black cloud raced toward us from the north, zigzag lightning flickering down into the sea, which was now boiling and surging so that the small boat rolled alarmingly. Our three dogs began to whimper. The usually fearless wolfhounds—Claw, Blood, and Bone—didn't like sea voyages at the best of times.

I was on my knees, clinging to the prow, cold pinching my ears, sea spray stinging my eyes.

The Spook and my friend Alice were cowering down below the gunwales, doing their best to take shelter. The waves had suddenly become much bigger—unnaturally so, I thought. We seemed about to capsize. As we slid down into a trough, a gigantic wave, a sheer wall of water, came out of nowhere and loomed above us, threatening to smash our fragile craft to match wood and drown us all.

But somehow we survived and rode up the wave to its crest. A torrent of hail came then—pebbles of ice, raining down onto the boat and us, beating at our heads and bodies with stinging force. Again lightning flashed almost directly overhead. I looked at the mass of churning black cloud above us and suddenly saw two orbs of light.

I stared up at them in astonishment. They were quite close together and made me think of two staring eyes. Then, as I watched, they began to change. They were eyes—very distinctive eyes, too, peering down from the black cloud. The left one was green, the right blue, and they seemed to glitter with malice.

Was I imagining it? I wondered. I rubbed my own eyes, thinking that I was seeing things. But no—they were still there. I was about to shout to get Alice's attention, but even as I watched, they faded away to nothing.

The wind dropped as suddenly as it had arisen, and within less than a minute the huge waves were no more. The sea was still livelier than it had been before the storm, though, and the wind was once more at our backs, driving us toward land at a much faster rate.

"Five minutes and I'll put you ashore!" cried the fisherman. "There's a good side to everything, even a storm."

I thought about the eyes in the cloud again. Maybe I'd only imagined them, I thought. It might be worth mentioning to the Spook later, but this wasn't the time.

"It was strange the way that storm came up so suddenly!" I shouted.

The fisherman shook his head. "Not at all," he said. "You see strange things at sea, but that was just a squall. They often blow up out of nowhere. Mind you, that sea was something. Almost like a tidal wave. But this old tub is sturdier than she looks." He looked quite pleased with himself. "I need to be back well before dawn, and we've got a bit o' wind to fill our sails now."

The Spook had paid him generously with almost the last of his money, but even so the fisherman had taken a big risk. We'd sailed away from the Isle of Mona about eight hours earlier, making the crossing west toward Ireland. We were refugees from the invasion of the County, and the Spook, Alice, and I had spent many dangerous months on that island. Now the inhabitants of Mona were returning any refugees they found to the County—into the hands of the occupying forces. Intensive searches were being made. It had been time to get away.

"I hope we get a better welcome here," said Alice despondently.

"Well, girl, it couldn't be much worse than last time," said the Spook.

That was true enough. On Mona we'd been on the run almost immediately.

~~"You should have little trouble here!"~~ shouted the fisherman, trying to make himself heard above the whine of the wind. "Very few of your folk will have ventured this far, and it's a big island. A few more mouths to feed won't worry them much. You might find there's work for a spook, too. Some call it the Haunted Isle. It certainly possesses more than its fair share of ghosts."

Spooks deal with the dark. It is a dangerous trade, and I was in the third year of my apprenticeship to my master, John Gregory, learning how to deal with witches, boggarts, and all manner of supernatural creatures. Ghosts usually posed little threat and were the least of our worries. Most didn't even know they were dead and, with the right words, could be persuaded to go to the light.

"Don't they have spooks of their own?" I asked.

"They're a dying breed," said the fisherman. There was an awkward silence. "I hear tell there are none working in Dublin, and a city like that is bound to be plagued by jibbers."

"Jibbers?" I queried. "What's a jibber?"

The fisherman laughed. "You a spook's apprentice and don't know what a jibber is? You should be ashamed of yourself! You need to pay more attention to your lessons."

I felt annoyed by his comments. My master was lost in thought and didn't seem to be listening to the fisherman. He had never mentioned a jibber, and I was sure there was no account of such things in his Bestiary, which was tucked safely away in his bag. He had written it himself, an illustrated record of all the creatures he'd encountered and heard of, with notes on how to deal with them. There was certainly no reference to a jibber in the Ghosts section. I wondered if he even knew they existed.

"Aye," continued the fisherman, "I wouldn't like your job. Despite its storms and moods, the sea is a far safer place to be than facing a jibber. Beware the jibber! Better to be drowned than driven mad!"

At that point the conversation came to an end: The fisherman brought us alongside a small wooden jetty that ran out into the sea from a bank of shingle. The three dogs wasted no time in leaping from the boat. We clambered out more slowly. We were stiff and cold after the voyage.

Moments later, the fisherman put out to sea again, and we made our way to the end of the jetty and up the shingle, our feet crunching on the stones. Anyone would be able to hear our approach from miles away, but at least they wouldn't be able to see us in the gloom. And in any case, if the fisherman was right, we should be in no danger from angry islanders.

There were dense clouds above and it was now very dark, but the shape of what we took to be a dwelling loomed up in front of us. It proved to be a dilapidated boathouse, where we sheltered for the night.

Dawn brought a better day. The sky had cleared and the wind had dropped. Although still chilly, the late February morning suggested the approach of spring.

The fisherman had called this the Haunted Isle, but its other name, the Emerald Isle, was hopefully more apt—though in truth the County was just as green. We were descending a grassy slope below us lay the city of Dublin, its dwellings hugging both banks of a big river.

"What's a jibber?" I asked the Spook. As usual, I was carrying both bags and my staff. He was striding along at a brisk pace, making it hard for Alice and me to keep up.

"I don't rightly know, lad," he said, glancing back at me over his shoulder. "It's probably the local name for something we're already familiar with—that's the most likely explanation. For example, what we call a boggart is known as a bogle or even a bogeyman in some parts of the world."

There were many types of boggart, ranging from bloodthirsty rippers to relatively harmless hall

knockers that just thumped and banged and scared people. It was odd to think that some folk called them by different names.

I decided to tell my master what I'd seen in the storm the previous night. "Remember when that squall hit us?" I said. "I saw something strange in the dark cloud overhead—a pair of eyes watching us."

The Spook came to a halt and stared at me intently. Most people would have been incredulous; others would have laughed openly. I knew that what I was saying sounded crazy, but my master was taking me seriously.

"Are you sure, lad?" he asked. "We were in danger. Even the fisherman was scared—although he tried to play it down later. In situations like that, the mind can play strange tricks on us. Our imaginations are always at work in that way. Stare at the clouds long enough, and you can see faces in them."

"I'm sure it was more than just my imagination. There were two eyes, one green and one blue, and they looked far from friendly," I told him.

The Spook nodded. "We need to be alert. We're in a land that's strange to us—there could be all sorts of unknown dangers lurking there."

With that, he set off ahead again. I was surprised that Alice hadn't contributed anything to the conversation; she had a worried expression on her face.

Just over an hour later, we smelled a whiff of fish on the air; soon we were threading our way through the narrow, congested streets of the city, heading toward the river. Despite the early hour, there was noisy hustle and bustle everywhere, people pushing their way through, street traders haranguing us from every corner. There were street musicians, too—an old man fiddling and several young boys playing tin whistles. But despite the chaos, nobody challenged our right to be in the city. It was a far better start than we'd had in Mona.

There were plenty of inns, but most of them had notices in their windows saying that they were full. At last we found a couple with vacancies, but at the first the price proved too high. My master had scarcely any money left and hoped to get us accommodation for three or four nights while we managed to earn some. At the second inn, we were refused rooms without any real explanation. My master didn't argue. Some folks didn't like spooks; they were scared by the fact that they dealt with the dark and thought that evil things would never be far away.

Then, in a narrow backstreet about a hundred yards from the river, we found a third inn with vacancies. The Spook looked up at it doubtfully.

"No wonder they got empty rooms," said Alice, a frown creasing her pretty face. "Who'd want to stay here?"

I nodded in agreement. The front of the inn needed a good lick of paint, and two of the upstairs windows and one on the ground floor were boarded up. Even the sign needed attention; it was hanging from a single nail, and each gust of wind threatened to send it tumbling down onto the cobbles. The name of the inn was the Dead Fiddler, and the battered sign depicted a skeleton playing a violin.

"Well, we need a roof over our heads, and we can't afford to be too fussy," said the Spook. "Let's seek out the landlord."

Inside it was so dark and gloomy that it might have been midnight. This was partly caused by the boarded window but also by the large building opposite, which leaned toward this one across the narrow street. There was a candle flickering on the counter opposite the door, and beside it a small bell. The Spook picked up the bell and rang it loudly. At first only silence answered his summons, but then footsteps could be heard descending the stairs, and the innkeeper opened one of the two inner doors and entered the room.

He was a thickset, dour-looking man with lank greasy hair that fell over his frayed collar. He

looked down in the mouth, defeated by the world, but when he saw my master, he took in the cloak, the hood, and the staff, and instantly his whole demeanor changed.

“A spook!” he exclaimed eagerly, his face lighting up. “To be sure, my prayers have been heard at last!”

“We came to inquire about rooms,” my master said. “But am I to understand that you’ve a problem I could help you with?”

“You *are* a spook, aren’t you?” The landlord suddenly glanced down at Alice’s pointy shoes and looked a little doubtful.

Women and girls who wore pointy shoes were often suspected of being witches. That was certainly true of Alice; she’d received two years’ training from her mother, Lizzie the bone witch. She was my close friend, and we’d been through a lot together—Alice’s magic had saved my life more than once—but my master was always concerned that one day she might drift back toward the dark. He frowned at her briefly, then turned back to the innkeeper.

“Aye, I’m a spook, and this is my apprentice, Tom Ward. The girl’s called Alice—she works for me, copying books and doing other chores. Why don’t you tell me why you need my services?”

“You sit yourselves down over there and leave your dogs in the yard,” said the landlord, pointing to a table in the corner. “I’ll get you some breakfast and then tell you what needs to be done.”

No sooner were we seated than he brought across another candle and set it down in the center of the table. Then he disappeared into one of the back rooms, and it wasn’t long before we heard the sizzle of a frying pan and a delicious aroma of cooking bacon wafted through the door.

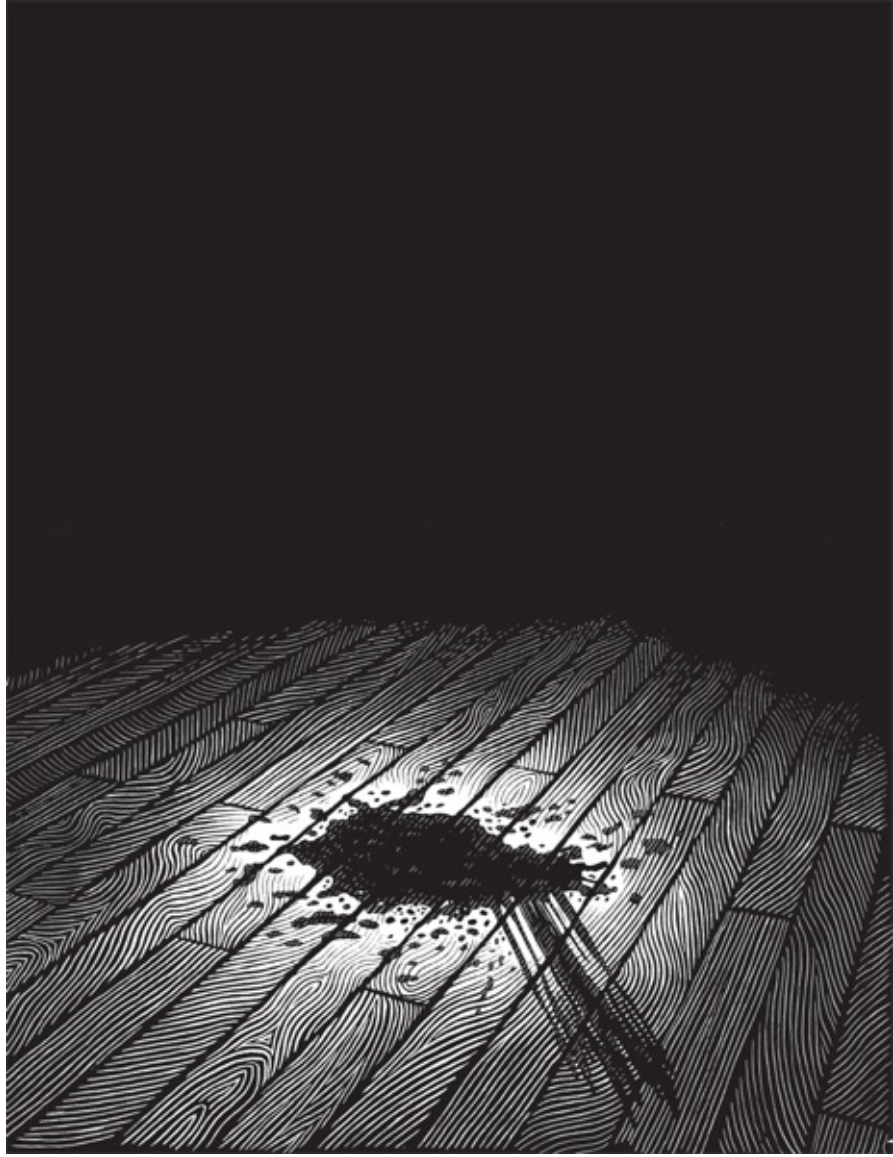
Soon we were tucking into large, steaming platefuls of bacon, eggs, and sausages. The landlord waited patiently for us to finish before joining us at the table and beginning his tale.

“I haven’t one paying customer staying here, and it’s been the same for nearly six months. They’re too scared. Nobody will come near the place since it arrived—so I’m afraid I can’t pay you a coin. But if you get rid of it, I’ll let you have three rooms free of charge for a week. How does that sound?”

“Get rid of what?” demanded the Spook.

“Anyone who meets it goes stark staring mad within minutes,” the innkeeper told him. “It’s a jibber, and a very nasty one at that!”

BLOOD EVERYWHERE



“**W**HAT exactly is a jibber?” my master inquired.

“Don’t you know?” asked the landlord, his face once more showing doubt.

“We don’t have anything called a jibber back in the County, where I come from,” explained the Spook. “So take your time and tell me all about it—then I’ll know better what I’m dealing with.”

“A jibber often appears within a week of somebody killing themselves, and that’s what’s happened here,” the landlord told us. “The chambermaid had been in my employment for over two years—a good hardworking girl, she was, and pretty as a picture. That was her downfall. She attracted someone above her station. I warned her, but she wouldn’t listen.

“Well, to cut a long story short, he made her promises—ones that he had no intention of keeping. And even if he’d meant what he said, there’s no way his family would have approved of their liaison. He was a young man with an inheritance to come and a good family name to uphold. I ask you—was he likely to marry a poor servant girl with not a penny to her name? He told her he loved her. She certainly loved him. But, predictably, it turned out badly. He married a titled lady—it seemed the marriage had been arranged for months. He’d been lying all the time, and when the girl found out, her heart was broken. The silly creature cut her own throat. Not an easy way to go. I heard her choking and coughing, and ran upstairs to see what the matter was. There was blood everywhere.”

“Poor girl,” murmured Alice, shuddering.

I nodded, trying to get the image of her terrible death out of my head. It was a big mistake to kill yourself, no matter how bad the situation seemed. But the poor girl must have been desperate, not really knowing what she was doing.

“There are still stains on the floorboards,” continued the landlord, “and no amount of scrubbing will get ’em out. She took a long time to die. Got her a doctor, but he couldn’t help. Doctors are useless, and that’s a fact. I wouldn’t give one the time of day. Anyway, she’d have gone to a pauper’s grave, but she’d been a good worker, as I said, so I paid for her funeral myself. She’d been dead less than a week when the jibber arrived. The poor girl was hardly cold in her grave and—”

“What were the first signs of its arrival?” interrupted the Spook. “Think carefully. It’s important.”

“There were strange rappings on the floorboards—there was a rhythm to them: two quick knocks then three slow ones, over and over again. Then, after a few days, an icy chill could be felt at the spot where the poor girl had died—right above the bloodstains. A day later, one of my guests went mad. He jumped through the window and broke both his legs on the cobbles below. His legs will heal, but his mind is beyond repair.”

“Surely you weren’t still using that room? No doubt you warned him about the rappings and the cold spot?”

“He wasn’t staying in the room where the girl died—that was a servant’s room in the attic, right at the top of the building. A jibber haunts the very spot where a suicide occurs, and I assumed that it would stay there. Now they tell me that it can wander anywhere inside the building.”

“Why do they call the thing a jibber?” I asked.

“Because of the noise it makes, boy,” the landlord replied. “It makes jibbering and jabbering noises. It natters and prattles away to itself—sounds that don’t make any sense but are terrifying to hear.” He turned back to the Spook. “So can you sort it out? Priests can do nothing. This is a city full of priests, but they’re no better than doctors.”

The Spook frowned. “Now, as I said, I come from a different place—the County, which is a land across the sea to the east,” he explained. “I have to admit that I’ve never heard of what you’re

describing. You'd have thought that news of something so odd would have reached us by now."

"Well, you see," said the landlord, "jibbers are new to the city. They first started to appear about a year ago. They're like a plague. They were first sighted in the southwest and have slowly spread east. The first cases reached the city just before Christmas. Some think they're the work of the goat mages of Kerry, who are always dabbling in dark magic. But who can say?"

We knew little about the Irish mages—only that they were in a state of constant war with some of the landowners. There was just a short reference to them in the Spook's Bestiary. They supposedly worshipped the Old God Pan, in return for power. It was rumored that human sacrifice was involved. It was a nasty business.

"Am I right in saying that this jibber of yours is only active after dark?" inquired the Spook. The landlord nodded.

"Well, in that case we'll try to sort it out tonight. Would you mind if we took our rooms in advance of the job? We'd like to catch up on our sleep so that we're fit to face this jibber of yours."

"By all means, but if you fail to sort it out, I'll expect to be paid for every day you stay here. I don't spend one minute in this place after dark—I sleep at my brother's. So, if it proves necessary, pay me in the morning."

"That's fair enough," said the Spook, shaking hands with the landlord to clinch the deal. Most folk didn't like to get too near to a spook, but this man was in serious financial trouble and grateful for my master's help.

We each chose a room and spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon catching up on our sleep, having arranged to meet in the kitchen about an hour before dark. Mine was a troubled sleep: I had a terrifying dream.

I was in a forest. There was no moon, but the trees were glowing with an unearthly silver light. Alone and unarmed, I was crawling on all fours, searching for something that I needed very badly—my staff. Without it, I realized, I wouldn't survive.

It was just a few minutes to midnight, and I knew that something was coming after me then—something terrible. My mind was befuddled and I couldn't remember what this creature was, but I knew that it had been sent by a witch. She wanted revenge for something I'd done to her.

But what was wrong with me? Why couldn't I remember things properly? Was I already under some sort of spell? Somewhere in the distance, a church bell began to strike ominously. Petrified with fear, I counted each chime.

At the third one I leaped to my feet in panic and began to run. Branches whipped at my face, brambles snatched and scratched at my legs as I sprinted desperately through the trees toward the unseen church. There was something after me now, but it wasn't running through the under-growth; it wasn't something on either two legs or four. I could hear the furious beating of gigantic wings.

I glanced back over my shoulder, and my blood turned to water. I was being chased by an immense black crow, and the sight of it increased my terror. It was the Morrigan, the Old God of the Celtic witches, the bloodthirsty deity who pecked out the eyes of the dying. But I knew that if only I could reach the church, I'd be safe.

Why that should be I didn't know—churches weren't usually places of refuge from the dark. Spooks and their apprentices preferred to rely on the tools of their trade and a sound knowledge of the practical defensive steps that could be taken. Nevertheless, I knew that I had to reach the church—or die and lose my soul to the dark.

I tripped over a root and sprawled headlong. I struggled to my knees and looked up at the black crow, which had alighted on a branch, making it creak and bend under its weight. The air shimmered in front of me, and I blinked furiously to clear my vision. When I could finally see, I was confronted by a terrible sight.

In front of me stood a tall figure wearing a black dress that came down almost to the ground. It was splattered with blood. The figure was female from the neck downward, but she had the huge head of a crow, with cruel beady eyes and an immense beak. Even as I watched, the crow's head began to change. The beak shrank; the beady eyes softened and widened until the head was fully human. I suddenly realized that I knew that face! It was that of a witch who was now dead—the Celtic witch who the spook Bill Arkwright had once killed in the County. I'd been training with Arkwright and had seen him throw a dagger into her back; then he'd fed her heart to his dogs to make sure she couldn't come back from the dead. Bill had been ruthless in his treatment of witches—much harder than my master, John Gregory.

And in that moment I knew that none of this was real. I was having a bad dream—and it was one of the very worst kind: a lucid nightmare where you're trapped and cannot escape, cannot wake up. It was also the same one that I'd been having for months—and each time it happened, it was more terrifying.

The Morrigan was walking toward me now, her hands outstretched, talons ready to rend the flesh from my bones.

I fought to wake myself up. It was a real struggle to break free. I opened my eyes and felt my feet gradually fall away. But it was a long time before I calmed down. I was wide awake now and couldn't get to sleep again. It didn't leave me in the best state of mind to face a jibber—whatever that might be.

We met down in the kitchen, but we weren't planning to eat anything substantial. We were about to face the dark, so the Spook insisted that we fast, managing with just a little cheese to sustain us. My master missed his favorite crumbly County cheese, and wherever we happened to be, he was always complaining that the local fare wasn't a patch on it. But on this occasion he nibbled in silence before turning to me with a question.

“Well, lad, what are your thoughts on all this?”

I gazed into his face. It looked as if it had been chiseled from granite, but there were new, deeper lines on his brow, and his eyes were tired. His beard had been gray from the moment I first saw him, almost three years before, when he visited my dad's farm to talk about my apprenticeship. However, there had been a mixture of other colors in there, too—mostly reds, browns, and blacks. Now it was entirely gray. He was looking older—the events of the past three years had taken their toll.

“It worries me,” I said. “It's something we've never dealt with before, and that's always dangerous.”

“Aye, it is that, lad. There are too many unknowns. What exactly is a jibber, and will it be vulnerable to salt and iron?”

“There may be no such thing as a jibber,” said Alice.

“And what do you mean by that, girl?” demanded my master, looking annoyed. He no doubt thought that she was putting her nose where it didn't belong; meddling in spooks' business.

“What if it's the spirit of each dead person that's somehow trapped and causing the problem?” she said. “Dark magic could do that.”

The frown left the Spook's face, and he nodded thoughtfully. “Do the Pendle witches have such a spell?” he asked.

“Bone witches have a spell that can bind a spirit to its own graveside.”

“Some spirits are bound like that anyway, girl. We call them graveside lingerers.”

“But these don't just linger, they scare people,” Alice pointed out. “The spell is often used to

keep people away from a section of a churchyard so that witches are able to rob the graves and harvest the bones undisturbed.”

Bone witches collected human bones to use in their type of magic. Thumb bones were particularly prized. They boiled them up in a cauldron to obtain magical power.

“So, taken a step further, if these are trapped spirits, they’re somehow being forced to drive people to the edge of madness. That all makes sense, but how and why is it spreading?” my master asked.

“If it is a spell,” Alice said, “then it’s out of control—almost as if it’s developed an energy of its own, spreading its evil, working its way east. Bony Lizzie once cast a powerful spell that got out of control. It was the first time I’d ever seen her scared.”

The Spook scratched at his beard as if something wick were crawling there. “Aye, that makes sense,” he agreed. “Well, I reckon we should visit the place where the poor girl killed herself first. I’ll need the lad with me, so no doubt you’ll be joining us too, girl.”

That last sentence was spoken with an edge of sarcasm. Alice and I were in a very bad predicament, and he could do nothing about it. The previous year, in order to save the lives of many people, including the Spook and Alice, I’d sold my soul to the Fiend—the Devil himself, the dark made flesh. He had been summoned to earth by a gathering of the Pendle witch clans and was now growing ever more powerful; a new age of darkness had come to our world.

Only Alice’s dark magic now prevented the Devil from coming to collect my soul. She’d put three drops of her blood and three drops of mine together in what was called a blood jar. I carried it in my pocket, and now the Fiend couldn’t come near me—but Alice had to stay close by in order to share its protection.

There was always a risk that somehow I might get separated from the jar and be beyond its protective spell. Not only that: When I died—whether that was six or sixty years hence—the Fiend would be waiting to claim what belonged to him and would subject me to an eternity of torment. The only way out was to somehow destroy or bind him first. The prospect of the task weighed heavy on my shoulders.

Grimalkin, the witch assassin of the Malkin clan, was an enemy of the Fiend; she believed that he could be bound in a pit if he was pierced with silver-alloy spikes. Alice had made contact, and Grimalkin had agreed to join us in order to attempt this. But long weeks had passed, and there had been no further communication from Grimalkin: Alice feared that, invincible though she was, something had happened to her. The County was occupied by foreign troops—maybe they had moved against the Pendle witches, slaying or imprisoning them. Whatever the truth, that blood jar was as important as ever.

Soon after dark, carrying a candle, the Spook led us up to the attic—the small, cramped room right at the top of the inn where the poor servant girl had lived and died.

The bed had been stripped of its mattress, sheets, and pillows. At the side of the bed nearest the window, I saw dark bloodstains on the floorboards. The Spook set his candle down on the little bedside table, and the three of us made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the floor just in front of the closed door. Then we waited. It was reasonable to expect that if the jibber was in need of victims tonight, it would come for us. After all, there was nobody else staying at the inn.

I’d filled my pockets with salt and iron—substances that usually worked against boggarts and, to a lesser extent, witches. But if Alice’s theory was correct and we were dealing with a trapped, dangerous spirit, salt and iron would be ineffective.

We didn't have long to wait before the jibber arrived. Something invisible began to rap on the floorboards. ~~There were two quick knocks, then three slow ones. It happened over and over again,~~ and my nerves were on edge. Next the candle flickered and there was a sudden chill in the air; I had an even colder feeling inside—the warning that a seventh son of a seventh son often receives when something from the dark approaches.

Directly above the bloodstains, a column of purple light appeared; the sound that emanated from it confirmed that the jibber had been well named. The voice was high and girlish and sibilant. It jabbered nonsense, jarring my ears, making me feel uncomfortable and slightly dizzy. It was as if the world had tilted and I was unable to keep my balance.

I sensed the malevolence of the jibber: It wanted to hurt me very badly. It wanted my death. No doubt the Spook and Alice could hear the same disturbing sounds, but I glanced right and left, and neither was moving; they were just staring, wide-eyed, at the column of light as if transfixed.

But despite my dizziness I *could* move, and I decided to act before the jabbering got right inside my head and made me do exactly what it wanted. I rose to my feet and strode forward, plunging my hands into my breeches pockets: My right hand seized salt; my left, iron filings. I flung both handfuls at the column of light.

The substances came together perfectly, right on target. It was a good shot. The bad news was that nothing happened. The column continued to shimmer, and particles of salt and iron fell harmlessly and ended up scattered across the floorboards beside the bed.

Now the jibbering started to hurt. It felt as if sharp pins were being driven into my eyes and a band of steel was tightening across my forehead, slowly crushing my skull. I felt panic rising within me. At some point I would no longer be able to tolerate the pain. Would I be driven to madness? I wondered. Pushed to do something suicidal to end my torment?

With a shock, I realized something else then. The jabbering wasn't just meaningless prattling. The speed and sibilance had fooled me at first. This was the Old Tongue; a pattern of words. It was a spell!

The candle suddenly guttered out, plunging us in darkness—though the purple light was still visible. All at once I found that I was unable to move. I wanted to leave this claustrophobic attic where that poor girl had killed herself, but I couldn't—I was rooted to the spot. I felt dizzy, too, and lost my balance. I tottered and fell hard onto my left side. I was aware of a sharp pain, as if I'd fallen on a stone.

As I struggled to rise, I heard another voice—a female voice, also chanting in the Old Tongue. This second voice grew louder while the first quickly died down until it had faded away altogether. To my relief, the jibbering had stopped.

Then I heard a sudden anguished cry. I realized that the second voice was Alice's—she'd used a spell of her own to end the jibber. The spirit of the girl was now free, but in torment. It knew that it was dead and trapped in limbo.

Now there was a third voice, deeper, male—one that I knew well. It was the Spook.

"Listen, girl," he said. "You don't have to stay here...."

Befuddled as I was, for a moment I thought he was talking to Alice; then I understood that he was addressing the spirit of the dead girl.

"Go to the light," he commanded. "Go to the light now!"

There was a wail of anguish. "I can't!" cried the spirit. "I'm lost in the mist. I can't find my way."

"The way is in front of you. Look carefully and you'll see the path to the light."

"I chose to end my life. That was wrong, and now I'm being punished!"

It was always much harder for suicides and those who had died sudden, violent deaths to find

their way to the light. They sometimes wandered within the mists of limbo for years. But it *could* be done. A spook could help.

“You are punishing yourself unnecessarily,” my master told the girl’s spirit. “There’s no need. You were unhappy. You didn’t know what you were doing. I want you to think very carefully now. Have you a happy memory of your earlier life?”

“Yes. Yes. I have lots of happy memories....”

“Then what’s the happiest one—the happiest one of all?” he demanded.

“I was very young, no more than five or six years old. I was walking across a meadow, picking daisies with my mother on a warm, sunny morning, listening to the droning of the bees and the singing of the birds. Everything was fresh and bright and filled with hope. She made a chain out of the daisies and put it on my head. She said I was a princess and would one day meet a prince. But that’s just foolishness. Real life is very different. It can be cruel beyond measure. I met a man who I thought was like a prince, but he betrayed me.”

“Go back to that moment. Go back to the time when the future still lay ahead, full of warm promise and hope. *Concentrate*,” the Spook instructed. “You are there again now. Can you see it? Can you hear the birds? Your mother is beside you, holding your hand. Can you feel her hand?”

“Yes! Yes!” cried the spirit. “She’s squeezing my hand. She’s taking me somewhere....”

“She’s taking you toward the light!” exclaimed the Spook. “Can’t you see its brightness ahead?”

“I can see it! I can see the light! The mist has gone!”

“Then go! Enter the light. You’re going home!”

The spirit gave a sigh full of longing, then suddenly laughed. It was a joyful laugh, followed by utter silence. My master had done it. He had sent her to the light.

“Well,” he said ominously, “we need to talk about what’s happened here.”

Despite our success, he wasn’t happy. Alice had used dark magic to free the girl’s spirit from the spell.

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