

Toby Fisher and the Arc Light

Book One in the Toby Fisher Series

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For JMG and eternal friendship

Prologue

Troubled Shadows

THROUGHOUT THE summer months the village of Luss on the southwest bank of Loch Lomond is reluctantly surrendered to the hordes of tourists that buzz around like pesky mosquitoes, treating the quaint and ancient village like a theme park. They poke their abnormally large noses through private cottage windows and gawp with their gossip-greedy eyes at stumpy old Harry MacTavish whilst he sits by his lifeless fire smoking on his long elven pipe, or they pester poor old Ginger Tom while he nurses his diabetes with a pint of dwarf ale sitting at the bar in the cupboard sized pub called Liquid Regret. Then the long winter months with their wild winds and thick flurries of snow drive the invaders back to their warm city apartments to be lost in reality TV whilst ninety-five-year-old Mrs MacKintyre breathes a sigh of relief and jogs up the local mountain for a ‘wee bit of fresh air’ with her aging father sitting on her shoulders. And Mr Brearly, who is one hundred and forty-nine, competes in the fifty mile swim-sprint against Winnie, Loch Lomond’s very own kelpie who, it has to be said has an undeserved yet fearsome reputation for luring children into the dark depths of the loch where she allegedly devours them with a pinch of salt and a little seaweed garnish. You can read Winnie’s autobiography, *Me and Nessie*, bought for a fair price of twenty-six shells and two pebbles from the world-famous Fisherman’s Book Store. Just look it up on the Inter-sea-net.

Every year Luss’s human residents invite the local dignitaries from the elven, brownie and dwarf community to celebrate the winter solstice. It is a deliriously happy occasion with dancing, singing and enough drinking to drain the loch dry – mostly by dwarves, it has to be said. And it was during last year’s festival that a white-haired man from London called the Professor unexpectedly turned up and started talking to Albin McPherson, the elven chief. They laughed and joked giving the residents the impression they were old friends. And yet, not so long ago the professor returned, seemingly ignoring Albin’s invitation for a ‘wee dram’, and looking considerably older. It was as if he was carrying the world on his shoulders. And social niceties were far from the professor’s mind as he fidgeted like an expectant father of sextuplets waiting anxiously for the arrival of Robert his erstwhile and resourceful assistant who was to provide desperately needed intelligence about a highly deranged man known as the mad monk. And it appeared to have a great deal to do with an old adversary, a bitter and vengeful ghost called the General who had returned after a two-hundred-year absence.

A sharp knock on the heavy wooden front door nearly forced the professor’s heart to leap out of his mouth. He swallowed a fat lump of something unpleasant and reached for the thundering door as if it was being headbutted by a troll who had eaten the wrong kind of mushroom. The professor yanked at the latch and rapidly stepped aside as the door freely swung open and a dishevelled looking Robert fell through the gap with the dignity of a drunken dwarf.

‘Where have you been,’ growled the professor as he closed the door. Robert shook his head wearily, clawed himself upright, staggered over to the fireside and stared at the flames as if they gave him comfort before trembling like a man diseased. ‘Are the letters still arriving regularly?’ said the professor with a softer tone.

‘Almost daily,’ said Robert in an strained voice, ‘but I don’t get to see them anymore. He reads them, screams in pain when his tattoos go wild and then burns the letters – nothing but ashes. And he’s got visitors too. I can hear their whispers.’ Robert cringed and squeezed his hands over his ears that turned white with

stress as if terrified by the memory until his shoulders slumped and the exhaustion robbed the strength from his muscles. ‘It sounds mad but I can feel a change in the room, like someone’s peering over my shoulder.’

‘Manic!’ said the professor.

A furry little ferret with an eye patch and a dagger dangling from its belt popped its head out from a carpet bag on the floor. ‘Yes, sir,’ it squeaked sharply, snapping to attention.

‘Check the room,’ commanded the professor.

The ferret shoved its fidgeting nose into the dark recesses with the speed of an attacking falcon. ‘Clear, sir,’ it said with a smart salute before diving inside the carpet bag without another squeak.

But the professor was not so easily convinced. He removed some bright blue powder from his pocket and threw it into the fire’s flickering flames. A soft explosion of light and smoke sent sparkles out into the room with thousands of mini white and blue stars that drifted in the air like feather-light snow on a breeze.

‘What’re they doing?’ said Robert fearfully, staggering backward against the wall with a thump.

The professor watched with deep concentration as his flock of sparkles changed with swooping curves like a gang of vultures searching for prey, dipping under furniture and soaring around lamps until they appeared to lose their strength and popped silently like fireworks until there was nothing left but a memory sparkling in the professor’s eyes. He nodded with nervous satisfaction.

‘Professor?’ said Robert in an agitated tone.

‘Shadow wraiths – the mad monk’s new companions. As cold as ice and as heartless as the witch king. And not here, thankfully,’ said the professor.

Robert shivered as his eyes seemed to lose a little life to a near-miss nightmare. He then groaned, staggered to the nearest armchair and slumped into it riddled with exhaustion. The professor closed his eyes to the flash of a haunting memory as the disease of regret slowly strangled his resolve like poisonous witch-weed.

‘How’s Toby?’ said Robert.

The words filtered through the dense, choking layer of self-pity and shook the professor as thoughts of his nephew reminded him of his mission. He placed his head in his hands and coughed unnecessarily loudly. ‘I found out something about him, something that—’ As the words stuck in his throat he turned toward the fire feeling the warmth ease his pain as he said, ‘Do you remember the explosion at Trafalgar Square, when Toby had first seen the general?’

Robert smiled weakly. It was as if he believed the false happiness would suddenly make everything go away. He then nodded slowly and said, ‘Nearly a year ago. I’ll never forget it!’

1

The Invisible Ghost

TOBY PULLED back the dusty old curtains in the old red-brick house in Richmond and wafted at the choking sediment with his free hand. And then laughed as the thought of spending an evening with his best friend Charlie filled his cheeks with joy. It was late August and the last of the summer's bank holidays had passed and yet Toby's smile stretched from ear to ear as he peered at a rare copy of a ghost calendar which listed two hundred and sixty-two regular bank holidays.

'In one year?' said Toby in dismay when Charlie had told him before reminding him that ghosts could have as many or as few days in a year as they wished; time really didn't matter. In Toby's mind that was a lot of days away from school. Ghosts or no ghosts, it was unfair.

'Life must be really good fun for you lot,' he grumbled.

'Being dead is not always as lively as it may seem,' said Charlie in a cautionary tone.

Officially and unofficially and for anyone who cared to listen it was the Huntsman's Bank Holiday, a day to commemorate the capture and execution of the most feared hunter that had ever existed. An evil man known as the Witch Finder General had taken great pleasure, and a fortune in gold to capture and kill any suspected witch – many of whom were now good friends with Toby.

The young lad checked the time as he stood by the window and ran through the journey in his head counting each stage out with his fingers: *Change at ten past; start flying at a quarter past; fifteen minute journey; arrive at eight thirty; change back; ready!* Charlie had something important to say and the waiting was churning his stomach like a washing load on full spin. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his jeans and huffed loudly with the impatience of a ravenous Viking denied a meaty joint as his nerves frazzled like a fat box of ignited firecrackers. Toby stepped out on to the third-floor window ledge and looked out across the rooftops. A familiar tingling built up in his toes, trickled up his legs and swept through his stomach with a queasiness that had once left Mr Biggins's cat covered in half-digested carrots and mushy peas. He took a deep, soothing breath and felt the nausea ease as he slowly stretched out his arms as if preparing to leap off a diving board. And then Toby's joyful laughter turned into a high pitched *Cheereek*, as his gangly thirteen-year-old body was smothered with layers of striking mottled orange and red-black feathers that unfolded like a venetian blind. He beat his powerful wings and soared into the air until he was far above the rooftops and heading toward London's Big Ben. And as the famous tower's clock face mocked him with the second hand clicking on twenty-five to eight he beat his wings frantically pushing his avian body along Whitehall. And then he gained height as he approached the imposing statue of Lord Nelson one-hundred-and-seventy feet above Trafalgar Square. And sitting by the cold chiselled shoes of the famous sailor were two ghostly legs that dangled with a lazy swing and topped by a silver body that waved at Toby with the casualness of a day-tripper sitting on Brighton beach. He squawked and dipped a wing drawing his feathered body into a graceful dive before landing in Lord Nelson's stony shadow next to Charlie. A warm glow washed over his body returning him to his human form.

'You're late!' said the ghost gruffly, barely hiding her smile.

'I got here as quick as I could.'

'Anybody would think you hadn't seen it before,' said Charlie as her smile blossomed like a spring flower pushing through the last of the winter snow.

'Nothing beats night flying over London,' Toby said excitedly.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ said Charlie with a hint of jealousy.

‘Maybe one day I’ll be strong enough to carry you?’ said Toby nudging Charlie softly with his elbow.

‘So, how’s school?’ she said as if immediately forgetting any thought of free flight.

‘It’s boring and rubbish. And the teachers don’t like me. And I don’t have any friends,’ he said, mumbling in embarrassment. ‘Why can’t I tell anyone about my flying? I bet they’d think it was really cool.’

‘Because!’ she said, emphasising the point, ‘it’ll draw the wrong kind of attention. People can do some extraordinary things, but not one human, or creature for that matter, can do anything like your flying. It’s like, well, can you imagine someone of your age being prime minister?’

‘Don’t be silly – kids have more sense.’

Charlie chuckled. ‘Well, okay, bad example. Could you imagine any of the other kids at your school talking to me without peeing their pants? They would probably make a banshee die in shame.’

‘I would like to see Nasty Nick do that,’ mumbled Toby.

‘That can be arranged. I could appear in the toilets . . . hmm, on second thoughts, anyway,’ she said, shaking her head vigorously as if to rid herself of an unpleasant image. ‘You have a gift that could get you into more trouble than I think you realise – at least in this world.’ She paused, perhaps waiting for the point to sink in. As Toby felt his face slide into an expression of resignation Charlie continued. ‘Hold tight, Toby, things are about to change . . . just for you.’

Toby perked up. ‘Is the professor planning something?’

Charlie shook her head. ‘You’ll know soon enough.’

‘Oh, go on, tell me more,’ said Toby, bright eyed with excitement and hope.

‘I’ve said too much as it is. Besides, I should be concentrating on the meeting,’ said Charlie.

And with that she turned and faced the Admiralty Arch with a look so serious Toby knew instantly he had lost his friend to her job as lights inside the grand stone building burned bright and humans and ghosts appeared to berate each other across a large oak table.

‘You and me were supposed to be hanging out tonight,’ he snapped moodily.

Charlie shook her head. ‘The Ghost Council are getting jittery. They had a meeting last week and old grumpy Grenville was all doom and gloom . . . something about a shift of power.’

‘We get shifts of government power all the time. “And it makes no bleedin’ difference to train fares at all”,’ he said, mocking the professor’s tone.

‘This is different. I’ve never seen ghosts so worried,’ said Charlie appearing to struggle with what she knew.

‘But you’re dead!’ said Toby bluntly. ‘What have you got to be worried about?’

‘Death provides no protection, Toby,’ she said with silver tears that trickled down her cheeks. ‘It’ll affect everybody. Not just us ghosts but you too, and anything and everything that lives. It’s deadly serious.’ Charlie wiped her grey cheeks. ‘I’m going to tell you something that you must promise never repeat to anyone alive. In fact, don’t tell anyone dead, either. You promise?’ Toby nodded frantically feeling the excitement of an unfolding secret soon to be revealed. ‘Have you heard of the Merlin Prophecy?’ said Charlie.

‘That old wife’s tale,’ he said as the tension gushed out of his legs and cascaded down toward Trafalgar Square.

‘Don’t tell me you find Merlin hard to believe – the same boy who can turn into a bird and fly,’ said Charlie sounding exasperated.

‘Well, if you put it like that, I suppose.’

‘Suppose nothing,’ she said, pointing at Admiralty Arch. ‘I don’t know all the details exactly but they’re all in there, your people and mine.’

‘Ghosts and normal people?’ said Toby.

‘We’re normal too. Just a different normal. Anyway, I’m on duty,’ she said, tapping the ghostly identity card on her chest.

‘Special Grey Operative,’ said Toby squinting at the identity card. ‘You’re telling the truth, aren’t you?’

Charlie dipped her head in sorrow. ‘And we’re having some difficulty in convincing them. The last time we called one of these meetings was way back when this fella was around.’ Charlie cocked her thumb at Lord Nelson, and then said, ‘The entire Westminster division of the *specials* are on high alert.’

Toby followed Charlie’s ghostly finger as it swept round the tops of the buildings that faced Admiralty Arch. And then he shook his head in wonder at the grey figures that appeared to be in extreme states of lounging like lizards in the sun. ‘Are they playing cards?’

‘We don’t need to rely on vision, Toby – ghosts feel changes. For instance, I sense anger and frustration, mostly from the Ghost Council. I think this is going to be a long—’

Charlie shot to the edge of the plinth thrusting her hands over the side and stared at the meeting room with the glaring intensity of a tracking beam, and then threw herself into the grey void. Half flying and half falling she hit the ground with her legs rotating like a Olympic sprinter and crossed the street with the speed of a silver bullet as grey streaks snaked across the buildings and whisked along the sides of the walls until they converged with such mass it seemed the delegates had been smothered by a grey storm. And as Charlie appeared alongside her colleagues a white staccato flash consumed the famous square with blinding light. Toby slammed himself flat onto the stone and gripped Nelson’s feet, anchoring himself to the plinth with a terrified cry as his eyes glazed white. The bright veil pulsed three times and then fizzled like a spent flashbulb leaving bright spots that danced like crazed fairies in front of his eyes. With one shaking hand he rubbed his face vigorously and then repeatedly blinked until the sparkles seemed to crumble to an orange fuzz before the outlines of buildings sharpened with clarity. His ears cracked and then screeched like nails being dragged down a blackboard followed by an excruciating blend of whistles, blaring sirens, terrified screams and furious shouting.

With fear for Charlie’s safety he scanned the building’s black windows and then shook his head with disbelief as the flashing lights from the emergency vehicles blinked like harmless Christmas tree decorations off the perfectly intact windows that fronted the meeting room. But his ragged confusion was interrupted by muffled grunts that stroked his ears like underwater music. He tracked the noise and reached for the two grey legs that desperately wriggled out of Lord Nelson’s stony stomach and tugged hard. Charlie slithered away from the stone with a sickening slurp and flopped onto the plinth. She stared at Toby with eyes so wide the young lad swore he could see her brains through the dark pupils.

‘Oh my! Oh dear!’ she said shaking her head with shock and bewilderment before brushing Toby’s hands aside and jumped off the ledge. Toby dived after her and glided on his falcon wings before landing on a broad stone balcony in front of the big windows as the lights returned with shocking brightness. The delegates were furious with each other as they threw insults, writing pads and emptied the fruit bowl with unchecked fury not that the ghosts seemed to mind as the missiles past through them harmlessly. The ghost security team mingled amongst the living and the dead sniffing at clothes and hovering as if looking for clues or new danger. And then Toby’s eyes settled on a portly ghost with shiny medals hanging off its chest as if immune to the chaos, as if it was invisible to every being present, including the ghosts as they drifted past him with the kind of blindness often witnessed around street beggars. The young lad shivered, wrapping his wings closer around his feathered body as the portly creature stood its ground untouched by the dread and panic that saturated ghosts and government people alike. And it seemed that the ghost’s interest remained entirely with the falcon that stood by the window with its cold, grey-blue eyes pinning Toby to the stone with laser control until Charlie’s face broke the mesmeric hold as she walked straight through the creature without a hint of awareness. Toby shuddered and his lungs heaved as if deprived of oxygen. He thrashed his wings, releasing the fearful tension in his muscles and closed his eyes. And when he opened them the portly ghost was clawing its way across the table with its body trailing like a sail until it reached the end of the large furniture. And with one final heave it jettisoned itself across the small gap, pierced the window that separated it and Toby, and reached out with

clawing fingers. Toby squawked and beat his wings frantically racing for the sky. Big Ben passed in a blur as he charged across the Thames and headed south towards Richmond.

Home could not arrive soon enough.

2

The Arc Light

THE PORTLY GHOST had penetrated Toby's dreams and ripped his feathers out until there were so few left the young lad looked like a plucked chicken ready for the oven. And then as if to ensure its authority was stamped in place the ghost stood over Toby's cowering falcon body, lifted one large booted foot and extinguished all life with a crushing heel.

'Argh!' Toby cried as he clumsily rolled out of bed and cradled his throbbing arm before gingerly walking down the stairs, wincing with every jarring movement.

'Hello, sleepy. Cup of tea?' said the professor as if a leafy brew was the cure for all known diseases.

The old man stood at the entrance to his laboratory wearing a green velvet jacket and red moleskin trousers that fitted his tall and gangly frame like a droopy windsock on a windless day. He had huge bushy eyebrows that resembled a large butterfly stuck to his forehead, long roguish hair that reached below his shoulders and a musketeer-type beard that was the colour of purple. Toby had been told it was permanent from an experiment that had backfired although the young lad had his doubts having seen a pot of hair colour in the bathroom. Whenever the professor smiled his teeth glinted bright yellow and when he spoke his cheeks wobbled like freshly made jelly.

'What is it?' he said with the gruffness of someone used to having one-way conversations with bacteria in a petri dish. Toby repeated the story about the invisible ghost through stuttering breaths as the pain bit hard like a million red ants sinking their pincers into his skin. 'Robert! Get some of that special lime green ointment. It heals in a jiffy. Stings a bit though.'

Robert glided back into the room in a stiff butler waltz, skilfully balancing a tray on his fingertips until he slid it onto the side table. Toby gulped so hard his Adam's apple was in danger of getting stuck behind his tongue as a large syringe fitted with a needle bigger than his arm rocked teasingly back and forth on the shiny silver tray.

'Robert's small joke,' said the professor tutting as he picked up the syringe and beckoned Toby to open his mouth. Four drops of lime green fluid squeezed out of the needle's end and dripped onto his tongue. 'That should do it . . . so long as you swallow, Toby. Breathing would be good, too.'

As the warmth of the fluid trickled down his throat the sharp jabbing pain in his arm eased like a soothing yoghurt following a spicy curry. He stretched his arm out with growing confidence, and said, 'Wow!'

'And now to more pressing matters. This ghost with the medals . . .' The professor quizzed Toby with the intensity of an interrogator prizing every last speck of detail from the young lad with growing anguish until he had turned almost as grey as the portly ghost despite the fact he was very much alive.

'It's not good is it?' said Toby feeling the anguish bite.

The professor looked deeply worried as lines indented across his forehead like furrows ploughed in a field. 'I want to show you something.' The old man turned for the stairs and beckoned Toby to follow until they arrived in a darkened attic. A small, dense click was rapidly followed by a perfect column of daylight that rested on a shiny plate that looked like a polished radar dish.

'Have you ever seen one of these?' And as Toby shook his head the professor continued, saying, 'Some call it the All Seeing Eye but to me it will always be the Arc Light.' The old man then looked thoughtful for a moment before tapping the large disc on the edge with a finger and said, 'Its a fabulous piece of elven technology that immerses you in the past.'

‘Time travel?’ said Toby with his interest pricked.

The professor shook his head as if he wasn’t sure. ‘Okay, a single creature whether alive or dead leaves a trace of their movements in history just like footprints in the sand. The Arc Light tracks those marks so you can watch their lives from the shadows.’

‘But it’s a silver disc,’ said Toby knocking the metal with a knuckle.

‘Then the best way to show you is with a demonstration. All you need is a name. Just one. Any will do . . . go on!’

It seemed that the professor was losing himself in another one of his experiments and Toby didn’t want a history lesson – he needed answers. He shook his head feeling the rejection grate harshly and backed away toward the door. The concave mirror burst into a kaleidoscope of colours that folded like a mist of clown powder before it swept over the edge and consumed every inch of the attic. Toby blustered and fought with flailing arms as he batted at the thick dust and his uncle’s blind indifference with frustration. And as the bright colours faded to greys and blacks it reflected Toby’s sour mood to perfection until the first swishes of silver sliced through the foggy mass and was chased by an equine shriek that shattered the young lad’s belief that he was alone with his uncle. A gigantic horse with hooves large enough to crush his head vaulted what had been the Arc Light and landed to one side with a wet thud and a spray of mud. It turned with a sharp dip of its thrashing head as foaming saliva splashed from its bridle and its black eyes bored into Toby’s being like a lobotomy drill. Its rider kicked its flanks harshly and swung a double headed axe that sung with the scream of death as it scythed through the air and sliced off the arm of a sword wielding warrior. The grey mist swirled like an evil vortex sucking at Toby’s hair as chainmail clad soldiers joined the fray with bellowing roars filled with the blood thirst of battle and clashed with metal and body as cries of pain competed with the shrill terror of mercy pleas. Toby slammed his shaking hands over his ears as the last of the mist cleared to reveal the black muddy fields filled with thrashing soldiers, galloping horses and a black cloud of arrows that thumped into bodies with a wet thud. He gawped in silence barely realising his hands had released their suffocating hold from his head until every nuance of sound bathed his ears with a sense of growing relish as he stood like a sanctified island of flesh and life. It was as if all the rules of parental guidance had been beaten to a pulp by a war hammer as Toby watched two armies murder each other with the kind of protection afforded a child at the end of a computer console until the first threads of rancid smells clung to his nostril hair like faeces on a woollen jumper.

The professor was laughing as the gloomy light of the attic returned and death was banished to Toby’s memory. He patted himself down, checking for wounds and missing limbs as his lungs threatened to crack his ribs with their rapid inflation. He stared at the grinning cheeks of his uncle and chuckled nervously feeling the exhilaration drive his pounding heart with excited expectation, and said with glee, ‘Elizabeth the First!’

The dark attic’s gloominess merged into a grey sheet that then folded to reveal dirty cream pillars spaced evenly either side of a large hall with small columns of grubby light that stretched down from tiny square windows high above. An eeriness akin to a funeral parlour saturated the murky looking room as shadows grew from the pillars before standing independently like people huddled in whispering groups.

‘This is the queen’s court!’ said the professor. Toby cringed as the austere silence seemed to exaggerate his uncle’s voice like a booming speaker. ‘They can’t hear us or see us. Come on!’ he said walking past the fierce-looking guards and straight through the solid stone wall.

Toby stuttered to a halt and padded the wall with his hand feeling the cold barrier resist his advance until a wrinkled white hand thrust past the dirty plaster and gripped his wrist. He yelped as his face was forced against the wall and then fell through feeling nothing but a light blast of grit that peppered his skin. The adjacent room was a pinch of the size of the hall and was occupied by a plinth and a throne like chair with an old haggard looking lady with black teeth and wearing a grizzled expression. A flamboyantly decorated man knelt in front of her and appeared to be listening intently as she whispered in his ear. And as if he needed a

reminder of the Arc Light's full immersion properties a smell similar to pig muck charged up Toby's nose and burrowed so deeply it seemed to try and dislodge his stomach lining.

'Oh, that's disgusting,' said Toby with a nasal squeak and a desire to vomit.

'Queen Elizabeth the First,' said the professor wistfully. 'Personal hygiene had a different meaning in those days. And she was warned about the sugar.'

The queen's man looked over his shoulder with a sharp trimmed goatee beard and pearl earrings that dangled loosely from his ears. And as a sense of familiarity drummed on the door of Toby's memory the room and the mysterious man's face faded to a featureless grey before the professor's floppy cheeks emerged through the bland façade and then parted to reveal his yellow teeth.

'You can let go of your nose now,' he said with a grin.

'So disgusting, but really cool,' said Toby, screwing his face up in a mixture of delight and revulsion.

'You can hear, see and smell but you cannot touch or talk to anyone in the past – it's impossible. Now for present-day London. Normal, busy and completely oblivious to what's really going on.'

The bird's eye view over London remained within the confines of the concave disc like a large TV screen as the attic's surrounds descended into darkness with the professor's face illuminated by the city's night light. The Thames flowed interminably toward the east past the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge, but not past . . .

'The London Eye,' said Toby curiously. 'It's gone!'

The large Ferris wheel that sat on the south bank of the great river had disappeared with small wooden rowing boats and pontoons bobbing on the river in its place. It was as if it had never been built. The professor smiled as if holding a great secret and turned a handle guiding the view along Whitehall. Toby spread his hands along the disc's edge and leant forward studying the image with deep fascination and a hint of confusion as the vehicles appeared to be towed along the grand thoroughfare.

'Is there a horse parade on?' said Toby staring at his uncle with eyebrows that flexed in question.

'Do you remember our conversation when you realised you could fly?' said the professor. Toby recalled Charlie had laughed hysterically to the point of uselessness after watching him strike a large tree on his first flight. And yet, the professor had listened absorbing every detail as if he had fallen off a pushbike for the first time. And it was as if his uncle had been expecting the news. 'It takes a lateral mind to absorb something that extraordinary. Approach this in the same way,' said the professor prodding a finger at the Arc Light. 'This is not a parade but how people live in *this* London.'

'Victorian London?' queried Toby.

The professor shook his head. 'Have you heard of *parallel universes*?'

'Oh, yeah,' said Toby matter-of-factly. 'A world in a mirror image like the opposite of you.'

The professor scratched his head. 'And you're okay with that?'

'Oh, yes,' said Toby brightly.

'You wouldn't believe the problems I've had explaining this to other people.'

'That's because they're adults. So how can you see it? Is this HD and where do you get the power from? There's no plug,' queried Toby.

'Oh! I really didn't expect that as a first question.'

'I'm a—' said Toby.

'Child, yes I know,' said the professor completing his sentence. 'I didn't take that into account. Its powered by Gold!'

'Gold?'

'Probably one of the most magical substances known to this world. And unfortunately, its very rare – Cornish pixie gold. I've almost run out of the stuff, more's the pity.'

'Talk to the Cornish pixies and get some!' said Toby flatly as if the answer to the professor's shortage was obvious.

‘Their last stocks were stolen many years ago and I’m down to my last few grains,’ said the professor shrugging his shoulders in resignation.

‘Who stole it?’

‘Pirates. Now that would make a very interesting story after the brandy; if you like brandy, of course,’ he said, cracking a grin at Toby.

‘So why don’t the Cornish pixies steal it back? Then you could have more goes with the Arc Light.’

‘The pirate ship sank in a battle with the Royal Navy, along with its captain. All lost at sea,’ said the professor.

But any further thoughts of lustrous gold sitting in Toby’s hands were dashed as the Admiralty Arch meeting room magnified with the Arc Light’s rapid advance until the view appeared to race through an open window and hovered like a drone in one corner. And it was all terrifyingly familiar forcing Toby into a shuffling retreat until his back collided with a wall and the attic’s shadows tunnelled his vision as ghostly men and women argued across a large wooden table in the room’s centre. His arm began to itch irritably and his mind closed off to the oppressive memory of a boot’s crushing silhouette. And then a flickering silvery glint seemed to claw at Toby’s defences and tugged his attention to the far side of the room, and into the ice-cold eyes of the portly ghost.

‘That’s him!’ he hissed.

‘No one can see us,’ said the professor with a reassuring calmness.

But it appeared that Toby’s astonishment at seeing his ghostly nemesis was mirrored as the portly ghost clawed at the backs of the chairs and flew across the table with the speed of a racing yacht in a storm as its lifeless eyes turned fiery red and its head grew with such alarming speed it seemed that nothing would stop it from crashing through the Arc Light and smothering Toby until his life was snubbed out.

The elven machine shone a blank white as a bright light cascaded down from above banishing the attic’s shadows to the deepest recesses as Toby continued to stare at the disc with blinkless eyes. A hand gripped the young lad’s elbow and steered him through the exit door and down the stairs until Toby stared at the soot covered bricks at the back of the empty fireplace barely hearing his uncle’s utterings.

‘That’s was not possible, Toby – impossible!’

‘What does it mean?’

‘You need to stay with Charlie – Robert, not that suitcase. The other one,’ he said in a rush. ‘And don’t forget my fresh stock of vials. I’m sorry, Toby, it’s for the best; you’ll understand.’

‘You’re going somewhere?’ said Toby as the sense of numbness was shattered by his uncle’s frantic mutterings and arms that waved wildly like a terrified baboon escaping the diggers that tore at its jungle home.

But it seemed the old man didn’t hear him as he briefly examined a leather carpet bag, nodded silently and then pointed blindly at a ghostly letter that shimmered on the mantelpiece. ‘Give that to Charlie, will you?’

Toby growled as a familiar sense of abandonment came flooding back with such overwhelming power he was at risk of drowning in his own silent tears. He stormed across the room, scooped the letter into his hand and shoved it into his pocket with a crumbling squeeze before stomping out of the door and into the garden. Within seconds the deep layers of falcon feathers rolled down his body and he beat his wings with strength driven by anger and soared into the air. He needed to find Charlie. And there was only one place to find his best ghost friend – the Greasy Witch Café.

3

A Witch's Death

TOBY LANDED behind an upturned dustbin in a deserted side road near London's Oxford Street. He folded his wings close to his body and stared as the highly magnified falcon eyes settled to a more rounded view as he stepped in front of a small grubby door in his positively normal human form. Two grubby windows flanked the entrance with grime that appeared so old it was probably Victorian, and so thick it was impossible to see through the glass. And it was as inviting as the open jaws of a dragon with severe toothache. A worn-out sign with faded writing dangled lopsided by one chain overhead and matched the door's unkempt appearance with peeling paint and layers of undisturbed cobwebs. Toby had arrived at the Greasy Witch Café: London's safe haven for ghosts, cackling witches and hissing black cats. And as always, the method of gaining access to the magically protected interior required sticking a hand inside the brass knocker that was sculpted in the shape of a lion's head that had been frozen mid roar. And as if its alarming hungry appearance wasn't enough to dissuade the occasional curious tourist the method of entry was without doubt the worst that Toby had ever encountered within his limited experience of the magical world. With one slow and stuttering breath he reached deep into the brass lion's mouth and tickled the dangly bit at the back of the throat and was immediately consumed in a grey cloud of garlic impregnated smoke that curdled his thoughts and churned his stomach.

'Toby, my lovely,' said Ash, racing forward like a billowing bed sheet in a strong wind before sweeping the disorientated young man into her ghostly arms for a big chilling hug.

'You'll suck away all his heat,' commanded Frosty.

Ghosts never suffered from the cold but an opportunity to hug a living person was like giving a dragon a pool of volcanic lava to bathe in – it would never be turned down. Frosty was a tough looking witch with scars across her ghostly forehead, a hairy mole that decorated a long-hooked nose, a worn-out eye patch and tattoos that snaked up her arms. But despite the pretence of authority she was the most charming of the ghost witches with an infectious smile and a raucous laugh that would make your ears bleed if you stood within five streets of her.

And as Ash let go with glowing cheeks, clearly cherishing the heat she had absorbed, an attractive ghost who had a soft spot for young Toby said, 'You looking for Charlie?'

'Hello, Witch Jenkins,' said Toby, blushing.

'She said you might be calling in. Come and sit with us,' she said patting the stool by her side.

And as Toby shuffled closer a new ghost with a smoking hat introduced herself with a firm shake of a hand. 'I'm Smokey. And my, you're so warm.'

'And they're going cold,' complained Toby.

Smokey released him with a sigh and cradled her hand close to her chest as if treasuring its warm glow. She then smiled as if apologetic and rolled her eyes toward her smoking hat. 'You're curious about this, aren't you? We were burnt at the stake,' she said gaily as if it was cause to celebrate.

'That must have been horrible!' said Toby feeling alarmed.

'Girls, do you think it hurt?' said Smokey chuckling.

'I'd stake my life on it,' said one, seemingly laughing at her own joke.

'My skull's so full of ashes, I don't remember,' said Ash slapping the side of her head spilling a small shower of grey sediment onto the floor.

But Smokey's humour soon died as tears welled in her eyes. 'Witchcraft!' she snapped. 'I was married to a lovely man and we had a beautiful baby girl, yet they burnt me alive because I gathered herbs from the hedgerow.'

Toby cringed at the tears as Ash leaned across and drew her ghost friend in close for a comforting hug. He rapidly scanned the table, and said clumsily, 'Did it hurt you too?'

Witch Jenkins offered Smokey a supportive smile, and then said to Toby, 'It was like standing in a warm bath for me. Fire can't kill a true witch. But for the others . . .'

Smokey sniffed back the tears with a wet snort and jabbed her finger at each witch in turn. 'Herbalist, bone setter, she loved cats and she loved pumpkin pie – she grew pumpkins, for crying out loud. Yet they trussed her up like a pig for the barbeque.' Smokey's growl softened to a weary sigh as she said, 'And that's Ember.' A ghost grinned and waved frantically like she was scrubbing mud off a broom. 'And there's Sooty and Hot-stuff – identical twins; and another reason to call them witches in the bad old days. And that's Chalky. There's Over-easy. And finally Lucky – the last to burn.'

'Lucky?' said Toby feeling confused.

Smokey grinned so brightly her wart was buried underneath her top lip. 'They tried to drown her, but she survived so they decided, in their wisdom, that she was a witch and burnt her instead. Special treatment, that is!'

'Teacher's pet!' shouted Chalky.

The Greasy Witch Café's coven of ghost witches cackled with delight much to the bemusement of Toby who eagerly searched the room for a new question to distract himself from the discomfort he felt. 'Who's that over there?'

'That's Misty – as in miserable,' said Ash. 'She was desperate to be burnt at the stake . . . real witch, you see. But burning witches had been outlawed so the villagers banished her.'

'She died of old age,' said Sooty. 'And has been miserable ever since. But then there's our dear old Doris . . .'

'Ahh!' chorused the witches in a sympathetic tone.

Lying on a table surrounded by wilted flowers was a barely visible body that shimmered as if it couldn't decide whether to disappear or remain a patron of the café.

'She's our resident deader-than-dead ghost,' said Witch Jenkins. 'We had such a tough passage from life to death that when it's finally our time we fall into the *deep sleep* where our bodies fade to nothing but air. Lovely!'

'There's another way,' said Ember morosely. 'Zombie ghost!'

'Shhh! Toby doesn't need to know about that,' chided Ash.

'A toast!' said Sooty quickly and raising her steaming mug of ghostly tea. 'To our dear Doris: a beautiful death!'

And as if the tribute required a witchy melody the ghosts burst into a series of squeaks and squawks that jabbed at Toby's ears like ice needles.

*'Pink and blue and green 'n' white flashes,
With a lick of fire you can delay time
It's enough to choke old Hopkins
If you're in doubt . . .'*

'That's terrible!' shouted Witch Jenkins frantically waving her arms. 'Who wrote this?'

Silver fingers were thrust and ghostly buns tossed across the table. Smokey's grey cheeks lit up with a deep greyish tinge that would probably be bright pink if she was alive.

'Oh, thanks for the solidarity, girls,' she mumbled, shuffling her feet in embarrassment.

'You'll never win the Witch Hunt Ball,' spat Misty cruelly, as if she was trying to demonstrate how miserable she truly was.

'Can you write, Toby?' said Witch Jenkins apparently ignoring the barbed comment.

'Enough!' growled Bloody Mary. 'It sounds like you're drunk on Halloween juice. The poor lad hasn't had a drink yet and you're hounding him for warmth and words. Toby, what d'you want to drink?' Bloody Mary was neither a ghost nor a witch but simply known as the café's chief. She wore clothes that would have been fashionable in the seventeen hundreds but no one dared to make fun out of her. She was as tough as her muscle-bound tattooed arms suggested with a reputation for ejecting unruly patrons whilst the café door was still closed. And there was a rumour that she had married a Royal Navy sailor and settled in England for love, but all the ghost witches were too scared to ask. No one messed with Bloody Mary.

'Hello, Mary,' said Toby.

'Why can't you call me by my real name, Toby?'

'Because it's a little rude,' he said sheepishly.

'Ah, bless him!' clucked the witches.

Ash drew him in close with a ghostly arm. 'I'll look after you,' she said with a charming smile, as Toby blushed redder than a ripe tomato.

'I think he fancies you,' said Sooty mischievously.

Charlie arrived with a whoosh and a crack as she ran through the solid front door looking harassed. 'I'm glad I've caught up with you, Toby. Afternoon, ladies,' she said sternly and casting the girls with a suspicious look. They made an over-enthusiastic effort of drinking from their tea mugs and giggling far too loudly until Ash fumbled her drink, knocking the contents over the table.

The mocking cheers seemed to aggravate Charlie as she barked, 'This is not a solstice convention!' She tugged at Toby's arm and marched across the café to the worn-out bar and said sharply, 'Bloody Mary!'

'Is that a request or are you addressing me . . .? Please yourself. One vodka and tomato juice coming up,' said Bloody Mary whilst leaning on the bar and flexing her muscles so powerfully the mer-lady tattoo on her shoulder appeared to leap in and out of the etched sea like a playful dolphin. And in a provocative tone she then said to Toby with one eye on Charlie. 'Your usual, my dear?'

Charlie mumbled something indiscernible and chewed on her bottom lip that turned shadowy black as Toby said, 'I'd better stick with a dandelion and burdock – I'm flying.'

The two friends settled at a side table that may well have been as relaxing as a day spa if it wasn't for the stream of breathless questions Charlie vomited at Toby. 'What happened? Why didn't you stay? The professor said you were attacked. What did he look like? Did he hurt you? Toby, you're not saying anything.' The ghost groaned as if she had run out of air, took a pointless deep breath and then slowly deflated her lungs with a soothing whistle. 'Tell me what you saw last night . . . and take your time.'

'I saw you walk straight through a big fat ghost who then chased me.'

'That's why you fled?' queried Charlie.

'You didn't see him?' gasped Toby.

Charlie groaned as if a secret weighed heavily on her shoulders. 'There's something you need to know about the professor – he's centuries old.'

'I know,' said Toby, as if it was yesteryear's news. 'I once found a fancy letter in his desk drawer from Queen Elizabeth the First. And I saw him with her in the Arc Light.'

Charlie grunted and then said, 'The professor knows the ghost. And he's called the General.'

'They were friends?'

'Deadly enemies! And it all came to a head about four hundred years ago. The general hunted witches and burned them. And then one day the professor caught him and put him on trial but the evidence against him was so weak your uncle had to make it up,' said Charlie, with an unexpected hint of pride and looking a little uncomfortable.

‘You?’

‘No, I wasn’t around then.’ Charlie leant on her elbows and whispered, ‘It was Smokey. She had already died at the general’s hands so she plastered her face with mud and wore a grubby coat to give her evidence. And then the judge condemned the general and hanged him.’

‘That’s so naughty,’ Toby said muffling through his hands with a mirthful splutter. But then the laughter fell from his face quicker than the thud of the hangman’s trap door. ‘But he came after me!’

‘Err, two more drinks!’ said Charlie in a fluster as she raised two fingers toward the bar.

The babbling witches hushed and turned with delicious expectation as Bloody Mary raised an eyebrow as if offended by Charlie’s gesture before tucking a glass underneath the dandelion and burdock pump. And the silence hung over Charlie’s head like a dark cloud readying to dump a bucket load of goo as the café chief delivered the fresh drinks and seemingly ignored Charlie’s pleading eyes.

‘Enjoy,’ said Bloody Mary flatly, returning to the bar without a second glance.

Charlie looked at Toby, rolled her eyes and said, ‘Well, it’s kind of complicated. You see . . . when the professor, uhm . . . It’s adult stuff!’

‘Typical!’ snapped Toby. ‘I’m not a kid any more. If I’m in danger then I need to know.’

‘You tell her, Toby!’ shouted Smokey, grinning slyly.

‘Button it!’ barked Charlie. She returned her attention to Toby with teeth that chomped with suppressed anger. ‘You’d probably be in more danger if you did know.’

‘How can I protect myself if I don’t know what I’m up against?’ Toby slumped against the wall and crossed his arms with a growling huff feeling the isolation deepen like a sinking desert island in the middle of an empty ocean.

‘It’ll be alright, I promise!’ Charlie tried to smile but it looked more like regret as if she was waving Toby off to war.

4

The Silver Messenger

‘STEADY TOBY!’ Charlie was staring at the professor’s front door that hung at a fractured angle as if a party of drunken revellers had bundled their way into the house.

The ghost disappeared through the wall leaving a misty profile of her passing against the brickwork as Toby pushed nervously at the door. It splintered as its bulk strained at the remaining hinge before severing its connection with a crack and crashed onto the floor. The young lad winced at the boom before peering into the gloom to see the settees upturned with their bellies slashed and the stuffing spilling out like bloodless intestines. The table was on its side with a leg hanging limply along with soft furnishings that decorated the floor like dumped detritus from a storm. And it seemed that every painting had been ripped from the wall leaving gaping holes where the hanging pin had once been. Toby half expected the professor to appear at his laboratory door and laugh, explaining an experiment had gone wrong but it was Charlie who re-emerged from the kitchen like a ghostly sheet blowing in the wind before disappearing into the study.

‘It’s the same all over,’ she said checking her speed after a crashing return through the wall in an explosion of blue-silver mist.

It seemed the only item that had endured the brutal invasion was the grandfather clock with its hands stuck resolutely at three minutes to sixty-four. And Toby stared at it as if it was the most precious item he owned until a husky sound filtered from the kitchen as if Robert was sweeping the floor. Toby dashed into the adjacent room in four bounds with his lips clamped together as if breathing would slow him down to see a white-gloved hand disappear over the edge of the fridge door and pull it shut with a soft hiss.

‘Toby?’ said Charlie in a flurry as she followed him into the kitchen.

‘It’s Robert,’ he said grabbing the door handle and wrenching the fridge open. He stared inside the near-empty shelves and the interior’s solid confines before closing the door with a slam and kicking it out of frustration only to be disturbed by a soft flap.

Charlie snatched the folded piece of paper that spun freely over the fridge, looked at the writing, and said, ‘It’s addressed to you.’

Toby reached for the paper with shaking hands and unfolded the two halves.

Dear Toby

Events have shifted out of control and it is necessary for me to hide. I’ll be in touch.

Please pass this on to Charlie.

The Professor

Charlie read the words scrawled on the reverse side of Toby’s letter and then placed the paper inside the fridge.

‘What does it mean?’ said Toby.

She leant down, cupped his chin and said, ‘I don’t know but I promise to find out. I understand that you have a letter for me.’

Toby nodded solemnly, reached into his pocket, withdrew the stored letter and offered it to his friend barely registering the movement. As Charlie read it her fingers trembled and her eyes welled. She crumpled the letter in her fist and glanced around the kitchen as if looking for a threat before landing her grey eyes on Toby

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