

MISFIT'S MAGIC

THE LAST HALLOWEEN



FRED GRACELY

~ Sample ~

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Chapter List

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- The background of the page features two large, light gray silhouettes. On the left is a wizard in a suit, gesturing with his hands as if casting a spell. On the right is a witch in a dress, also with her hands raised in a magical gesture. The chapter list is centered between these two figures.
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misfit (noun)

- 1: something that fits badly
- 2: a person who is poorly adapted to a situation or environment
- 3: a person who doesn't fit in with the rest
- 4: something or someone no one wants

no light
to brighten the path
we walk unprepared
alone
scared...
misfit for the task
through the shadows we wade
hoping
that death
has other plans
for us made
-fg

floating in the dark ocean
buried under a wave of water
left with one last breath
to make it out alive.

- savage mind

CHAPTER 1



The Gargoyle

An icy breeze smelling of rotting leaves scratched Goff's cheeks as he studied the eerie statue hidden behind the Spraksville Library—four bronze men in hooded robes standing at the corners of a granite obelisk, unaware of a fanged gold gargoyle crouching on top, poised to attack. A dark feeling washed over Goff. It almost sounded as if the white noise of the tall swishing maples nearby whispered a warning—you should not be here. Goff shook it off, not the type to believe in whispering trees or any other sort of hocus pocus. He was here to do research, and that was just a statue, and the trees were just plants, big plants, very big plants, but nothing more.

Preparing to jot down some notes for his paper, Goff opened a tattered ring-bound notebook to an empty page and pulled a yellow No. 2 pencil from behind his ear. With cold fingers, he positioned the graphite's fine point just above one of the thin blue lines and looked up at the gargoyle. A sliver of fear raced up his spine—it had moved.

Or had it? Perhaps he'd just let himself get spooked by the chatty trees. Perhaps it was just wind-blown hair thrashing against his glasses like sea kelp. Perhaps it was the

shadows cast by the cascade of multicolored leaves fluttering through the air. But was that talon raised now when it hadn't been before? Had its eyes always been turned ever so slightly in his direction? His heart beat like a kettle drum as he tried to convince himself otherwise.

Statues don't move. That's crazy talk.

He resisted the urge to run. Leaving wasn't an option. Leaving meant failure, and in a way, a slow death. It would be an end to the hope of ever getting out of Spraksville, out of the cruel, moronic foster home here, and the end of his chance to win the Journalism Scholarship to Amworth Academy where he hoped to feel like he finally had a home. He couldn't write this paper, the centerpiece of his scholarship application, without discussing this statue. His submission had to be perfect, and this stupid statue was the most peculiar, spooky thing in the entire town.

Regretting his decision to write about the local history of witchcraft, Goff stared at the statue while shards of late autumn sun stretched across the cobblestones and puffy clouds blew past under a deep blue sky. Frayed flaps of his unbuttoned barn jacket beat against his legs. Dry leaves flowed in waves over his black and white canvas sneakers. Goff remained fixed, trying to understand what it meant that such a strange statue sat here behind the Spraksville Library

“What are you trying to say?” Goff muttered aloud to the statue. “Beware of evil approaching from an unwatched direction?”

He had hoped that coming here, standing before this peculiar artifact, would give him some insights into Spraksville's deep history with witchcraft, something interesting he could use for this paper. But being here only raised more questions. Who put this statue here and why? Where had it come from? The shiny brass plaque on the base only had “Unknown, 1775” etched on it, and research had turned up nothing.

“Freak!”

Goff flinched and spun. Tom Sweeney, a dim-witted rhino of a boy from his class, was clomping toward him. Goff suddenly regretted donning a pointy dime-store wizard's cap and cape—the cheap kind made of navy blue felt with gold stars hastily glued on. He'd just finished reading *Excellence in Reporting* by the late William Cranston about the importance of a writer fully immersing themselves in a story. Now, feeling idiotic, he regretted taking that advice. He yanked the wizard's cap off. "I'm doing an assignment for a class."

"A class about how to be a freak?" Tom asked.

Goff sighed. Tom was typical Spraksville. "It's a history class, Tom."

"History of freaks?"

"Regional history."

"Regional history of freaks?"

"That's just dumb."

"You're dumb."

Goff didn't reply. This was going nowhere.

Tom walked closer. "Freak."

"Will this be over soon?" Goff asked.

"Yup," Tom said, punching Goff hard in the stomach. "Done!"

Goff doubled over, unable to breathe, and dropped his notebook and pencil. He wanted to shout something at Tom, something clever and nasty, but shouting required breathing, and his lungs weren't working at the moment. He fought off the urge to puke, not wanting to give Tom that satisfaction.

Tom walked away. "See ya later, loser!"

Goff stared at his shoes, watching the ground spin. It spun and spun and then slowed and eventually became just the ground again. The danger of puking now over, he stood up.

Tom was nowhere to be seen, but Goff caught his own reflection in the brass plaque on the statue's base. There before him was a blurry picture of the poster child for "Most Likely to Be Bullied"—skin as pale as snow, wild blue eyes, a mass of brown hair clawing at his head, plastic glasses with thick frames covering half of his face, and of course, a goofy wizard's cape draped over his shoulders.

"It's a miracle I'm still alive."

Goff stared for a moment longer and then looked away, even more determined to win that scholarship. He stepped back and surveyed the statue. The sun had faded just a little, darkening the shadows, and it looked more evil now, more mysterious. Glancing around first to make sure he was alone, he jammed the wizard's cap back on his head.

"Screw you, Tom."

Goff retrieved his pencil and notebook from the ground and opened it to a blank page. After thinking for a moment, he wrote:

Behind the Spraksville library stands a statue of four men, worried and serious, watching, guarding against something unexpected, something evil, something that will attack without warning. I ask myself: Are we all in danger here? Perhaps the little town of Spraksville harbors secrets only the oldest townsfolk know, secrets that may one day haunt us—or maybe even kill us—in our sleep.

He reread it and smiled. It was a good start he could refine later at home. But before he left, he wanted to add an illustration to give the paper more pizzazz. He wasn't great at drawing but could manage the basics. With broad strokes, he captured the pillar and roughed out the four men. He rendered the gargoyle by pressing hard and making dark lines for its wings, bulging muscles, and eyes.

A stiff breeze kicked up and fluttered the corner of the page. Goff pressed it down and kept drawing. The wind kicked up another notch, lifting a pile of red, orange, and brown leaves nearby. Goff watched them swirl and dance and then returned to his

work. He added a few lines of description about the ugly creature on top before looking back up.

The gargoyle was no longer staring straight ahead as it had only a moment ago. It had turned its head and was staring right at Goff with beady little eyes.

Goff's blood turned to ice. He pressed the pencil too hard against the paper and snapped off the tip. With shaking hands, he pulled his glasses off and cleaned them with the sleeve of his jacket, muttering, "It's just a smudge or something. Has to be."

He slid his glasses back on, blinked hard three times, and then looked again at the gargoyle. The great stone creature was as before—gazing straight ahead toward the distant horizon. Goff let out a sigh of relief.

I think that's enough for one day...

His heart still pounding, Goff put away his broken pencil and notebook. He backed up toward the stone pillars marking the park entrance, watching the gargoyle closely with each step. When he reached the threshold, the gargoyle's head swiveled toward him.

Goff's legs started running before he had a chance to think about it. He didn't stop running until he rounded the corner of the library and threw himself up against the cold bricks, goosebumps covering his arms, rapid breaths blowing silver clouds.

That did NOT just happen!

Maybe Tom had punched him harder than he'd realized? Perhaps lack of oxygen had messed with his brain? Or maybe his imagination was too good to write about witchcraft? He should probably write about something boring instead, like sports or town meetings.

Goff remained pressed against the wall, waiting for his heart and breathing to settle so he could walk home. As he breathed, a familiar smell started mixing with the cold air. Pizza! He peeled himself off the wall enough to see down to Main Street. A glowing neon sign for Pongo's Pizza confirmed that his sense of smell was accurate.

How perfect would it be to eat pizza at home while he worked on this paper, maybe all night? He could have an outline or a first draft done by morning!

Goff made his way quickly down the path by the side of the library and crossed Main Street. At the entrance to Pongo's, a statue of a smiling Italian chef with a bulbous red nose greeted him. The bells on the door clanged as he pushed it open, and the unmistakable yeasty, cheesy smell of fresh pizza washed over him. He rushed between the red upholstered booths toward the chrome and glass counter. Inside a glass case, rows of big round steaming pies waited for him. Thoughts of glaring gargoyles melted away.

When he reached the next-to-last booth, a group of older kids spilled out and blocked his way. Goff's heart sank. He had forgotten a cardinal rule in his excitement about Pizza. Always check who was inside first. Bullies went into a feeding frenzy whenever they smelled his dorky essence in the water.

The two kids at the front of the pack were the worst bullies in town: a pair of nearly identical, moronic twins with chiseled jaws and mean little eyes: Goff's new foster siblings, Ben and Pam.

From some angles, Goff found it even hard to tell them apart. Both were the same height, had athletic builds, and knew no other clothes than white t-shirts and jeans. Their hair was nearly the only way to tell them apart. Ben had a flat-topped buzz cut, but Pam pinched her shoulder-length hair into a super-tight ponytail.

"My new brother," Ben said as he snatched Goff's cap and punched it inside out. "You're such an embarrassment!"

Goff's cheeks flushed with anger, but he knew better than to grab for it.

"Give it!" Pam said. She took the cap from Ben and jammed it on her head down around her ears. "Look at me! I'm the wacko of the west!"

Laughter ran around the circle of morons ringing Goff. He felt like screaming. All he'd wanted was to buy pizza and work on his paper at home. That was it. Now, who knew where this was going to go?

"You gonna turn us all into toads?" one of the kids asked.

Another kid flapped Goff's cape. "Can you fly?"

"Where's your broom, little witch?"

Goff didn't reply. His brain had turned off. Being bullied did this to him—he lost his wits and became an awkward turtle staring out of a shell formed by big plastic glasses. He sank even deeper when he saw two strange kids he had classes with—Lydia Garcia and Halstrom Flint—sitting in a booth on the other side of the restaurant, looking over his way. They were both outcasts like him, but Goff hated that they were watching him get bullied anyway. It made him feel even more like a loser.

"I know what's missing!" Ben pulled off Goff's glasses and handed them to Pam.

Pam put them on and scrunched up her face. "Now I'm a perfect Goff!"

Of all the things bullies could do to him, Goff couldn't stand having his glasses taken the most. They were his last line of defense, his shell. He felt words rising through the numbness, and he mumbled, "Give them back."

"You squeak something, mouse?" Pam asked.

"Give me my glasses."

"Is somebody talking?"

"Give them to me. Now."

"I hear crickets."

Goff's anger brought his wits back. "That's not even how you use that phrase."

Pam tossed her head back. "You an English teacher now, Goff?"

"So, you *can* hear me?"

"I hear crickets."

“I want my glasses back!” Goff demanded.

Pam looked down at him dramatically, pretending to be surprised he was there. “Oh, it’s Goff.” She took off the glasses and held them out. “You want these? Go ahead, take them.”

Goff knew this game would not end well, but he had to try. He reached out and grabbed one arm of his glasses just as Pam jerked her hand back. The arm snapped off.

The circle of kids cackled and hooted. Blood rushing to his face, Goff stared blankly at the stick of brown plastic in his hand. It felt like his own arm had been broken off.

Anger exploded up from his core. He charged at Pam, swinging his fists and screaming. Nothing mattered more than hurting her for breaking his glasses, but his fists didn’t make contact. Pam held him back with a hand on his forehead. The laughter increased as he swung harder and faster to no effect.

A pair of giant arms wrapped around him and pulled him back.

“No fighting!” a man shouted in his ear.

Goff stopped trying to punch Pam and looked back into the giant face of a man he immediately realized was none other than Pongo himself.

“Bad kid!” Pongo said with breath smelling like pepperoni.

“I wasn’t—”

“He attacked me!” Pam cried. “I don’t know what his problem is!”

“She broke my glasses!” Goff stammered, pointing at Pam, still feeling the heat of anger on his cheeks. He hated that he’d let his anger get the best of him and wasn’t proud that he’d tried to hit her, but she had pushed him too far, and he’d simply lost control.

Pam softened her eyes like a kitten. “I was handing them back to him, and I guess because he couldn’t see, he grabbed them the wrong way and, sadly, they broke.” She

handed the other half back to Goff. “I would never break a little boy’s glasses on purpose.”

“That’s a lie!” Goff said.

“I don’t care.” Pongo released Goff and pushed him toward the door. “Boys don’t fight the girls, and nobody fights in Pongo’s. Now you get out and never come back!”

Goff shook his head, unable to believe how unfair all of this was. “But—”

“Go!” Pongo shouted.

“She—”

“Go!” Pongo gave him a push toward the door. “No fighting in Pongo’s!”

Pam smiled ear to ear.

Ben tossed the wizard’s hat, still inside out, at Goff. “You forgot your hat, little boy.”

Goff tried to catch it but missed. Pongo pointed a sausage-sized finger at the door as Goff reached down to get it. The kids fell over themselves with glee.

“Sit down and be quiet,” Pongo hollered, turning and clapping his giant hands.

“Or you go too!”

As Pam, Ben, and the others ran back to their booth, Goff jerked the door open, jingling the bells angrily, and headed out. His cheeks burning with embarrassment and frustration, he scrunched up the wizard’s cap under his left arm, held his broken glasses on his face with his hand, and strode off down Main Street, determined to get home as soon as possible.

I HAVE to win that scholarship.

He grabbed the Amworth Academy brochure from his backpack with his free hand and let the glossy panels unfold. The austere brick buildings and sprawling landscape of Amworth filled all three. Not only was it beautiful, but he’d nearly melted when he learned that it was a school with a legacy of producing great writers, thinkers, artists, and scientists. Even better, they had a program for foster kids like

him. They would find him a Teaching Family who would support him and house him during holidays and breaks. He'd never have to bounce from house to house, situation to situation, ever again. He'd already started the application process, and with his outstanding academic record, his counselor said he had a good chance. So it all came down to this paper. His favorite teacher, Mrs. Wicket, had promised to submit it with a strong recommendation...if it was good enough.

Goff returned the brochure to his backpack for safekeeping and walked a little faster. The sun glowed deep red along the horizon, illuminating trees sporting vast plumes of leaves in brilliant autumn shades—red, orange, yellow, and coffee brown. The air smelled of rotting apples and wet earth. The store windows glowed with Halloween colors, and each displayed some blend of hairy spiders, black cats, dangling skeletons, green witches, and glowing jack-o-lanterns. Town Hall passed by at his side, a red brick building with imposing doors and a tall bell tower. The bell rang out the quarter-hour, sounding sick, like a dying whale. Decades ago, it had cracked for no discernible reason.

Spraksville was such a strange Northern town. The local population ranged from old money living in mansions to hardscrabble sorts living in cracked stucco bungalows and rusty trailers. The town's history of witchcraft trials had inspired some well-meaning souls long ago, probably the same ones who put that statue behind the library, to install gargoyles on many of its buildings. It all added up to Spraksville exuding a unique blend of quaint and spooky. Visitors soaked it up this time of year, posing for pictures in front of everything.

Near the edge of downtown, Goff noticed a row of gargoyles jutting out from the cornice atop the Spraksville Post Office. Shadows deepened the lines on their faces, and their gazes seemed to follow Goff as he walked. His skin went cold, and he looked back down at the ground.

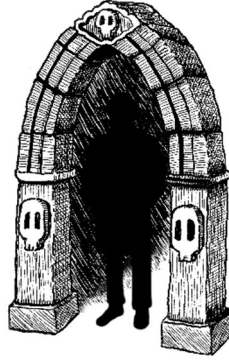
What is wrong with me today?

Anxious to get home where there were no gargoyles and he could lose himself in writing his paper, he picked up the pace. He turned onto Hayden Avenue from Main Street and passed house after house decorated for Halloween with pumpkins, corn stalks, half-buried zombies, gravestones, and strings of orange lights. As fast as he could, he made his way along the crisscross of streets to his foster house, a dark little gray ranch with green moss covering the roof. Not even a single pumpkin had been placed out on the front step. Frank, his foster father, wasn't the type to decorate for a holiday.

Goff headed to the back door, hoping to slip in without encountering Frank. As he stepped around the corner, the acrid smell of cigarette smoke and sweet aroma of citronella wafted over him. A large tattooed man with a flattop military haircut was leaning up against the porch's railing in the light of a yellow bug bulb and a candle in an orange glass holder. A cheap cigarette hung between two thick tattooed fingers.

“Get over here,” Frank said. “You’re in trouble, boy!”

CHAPTER 2



Death's Gate Traversal

Goff thought about running, but escaping Frank was simply not possible. The man was moronic but fast...and apparently, really angry. He raced down the stairs and grabbed Goff's shirt collar, leaning in close and releasing a puff of smoke from a cigarette glued to his lower lip. Goff waved the stink away, expecting Frank to start yelling, but he stared at Goff's face with a raised eyebrow. Goff pushed his broken glasses up as far as they would go, leaving Frank a little distorted through the skewed lenses.

"Somebody break your glasses, kid?" Frank asked.

"Pam."

Frank screwed up his face in disgust. "You didn't lose no fight to no girl, did you?"

"Have you met Pam?"

"I ain't paying for no new glasses."

Another double negative. Goff couldn't resist. He didn't usually talk back to adults, but he'd dealt with so many bad foster parents that they had become like cartoon characters to him, especially Frank. "I don't want no new glasses."

“Good. And what are you wearing?” Frank flipped the hem of Goff’s cape with his free hand. “You some kind of superhero?”

“Yup. You caught me. I’m Superman. Don’t blow my cover?”

“Don’t be smart with me.” Frank flicked his cigarette out into the yard. He tightened his grip on Goff’s shirt and leaned in. “Ain’t I never told you not to borrow my tools?”

Goff remembered now that he’d borrowed Frank’s drill the day before and forgotten to return it. He got lost in what he was doing sometimes...too lost.

“The drill? Sorry about that.”

“I spent half an hour of my own time looking for it,” Frank said. “You have a half-hour of my time in your pocket?”

“That’s not possible.”

“Well, I’m taking it, regardless. You’re on dish and laundry duty for a whole week.”

“But that’s way more than half an hour,” Goff said, thinking about the volume of dirty clothes and dishes Frank, Ben, and Pam generated. “I have schoolwork!”

“Should’ve thought of that before you borrowed my drill. Borrow it again, and you’ll sleep in the garage for a month.”

“Might be an improvement over the attic.”

“It’s a bedroom, ain’t it?”

“You wanna sleep there?”

Frank’s nostrils flared, and a tiny remnant of smoke blew out. “Listen, kid—you better start showing more respect! And you need to shape up a bunch, too. Pam and Ben tell me they think you’re weird, that you sit alone at lunch and don’t got no friends. I wish social services had mentioned that in the report.”

“That I don’t got no friends?”

“Yup, and the teasing. Are you letting kids tease you?”

Goff's stomach tightened with anger. "Well, I don't ask them to."

"Better not be! I tell you, I never let no kids tease me when I was your age. Cracked Chuck Smith in the nose when he told me my shirt were on backward—and it were! Never bothered me no more. See what I mean? You got to let them know who's boss. You act like a wimp, let them walk all over you, and they'll do it every chance they get!"

"I don't let them walk all over me."

"Sure, you do." Frank wrapped his big fingers around Goff's upper arm. "You call this an arm? Barely more than a toothpick. It's no wonder they tease you. Be a good thing if you put down that pencil and picked up some weights like Ben and Pam do."

Goff wriggled free of Frank's grip and stepped back. "And maybe they should pick up a pencil and put down the weights, so they don't flunk every class. Sorry, but I have bigger plans than bulking up. I'm going to do big things and go places. You watch!"

"You ain't going nowhere." Frank stood up, his face red. "Just remember, you've got nobody in this world, not without me, and I don't even like you. I took you in out of the goodness of my heart. You're a nothing, kid."

"I'm not a nothing!" Goff stomped his foot. A sudden breeze fluttered and then blew out the citronella candle on the porch, leaving it producing only a thin snake of black smoke. Frank glanced at it and then turned back with the single yellow bug bulb casting deep shadows on his face. Goff was all but certain he hadn't caused the stupid, smelly candle to go out, but the timing felt satisfying regardless. "Besides, I'm here because of money, not kindness. You don't have a heart."

"Watch it, kid!" Frank choked out through a raspy cough. "I could return you like a broken toaster, and I should—you embarrass the whole family! You'd end up at the orphanage, and you wouldn't survive a day there! Shape up, or you're gone, hear me?"

Goff didn't reply. What was the point? He turned and walked around to the front of the house, wondering if he wouldn't have been better off in the orphanage. Nothing could be worse than stupid Spraksville and ridiculous Frank.

He pulled open the rusty metal front door and entered the living room. As usual, the place was a biohazard: it stank like an ashtray, and piles of trash, stacks of beer cans, and mountains of cigarette butts lay everywhere. Spiders hung in dusty webs in the corners, and mice scurried back to their homes along the edges of the walls.

On the coffee table littered with old Commando magazines sat a little clear box-shaped mousetrap. It was supposed to be humane since it didn't kill the mouse, but Ben and Pam thought it was fun to catch a mouse in them and watch it die slowly. A tiny brown mouse with big black eyes sat inside this one, shivering, wide-eyed, and drenched in pee.

Goff felt his heart melt for the poor little creature.

"I'm sorry, little guy."

As much as Goff wanted to run upstairs and work on his paper, he had to free this mouse first. He took the trap outside, where he sat down on the front steps, tilted the box forward, and opened the flap. The little creature slid out and landed like a wet turd. It didn't move.

"Go on," Goff said. "You're free."

Slowly, the mouse lifted its head and looked up at him. Goff stared at those little black-ball eyes, feeling an odd sense of connection.

"Go on. Go home."

The pathetic creature held Goff's gaze for a few seconds, let out a tiny squeak, and took off. It ran down the front steps and across the yard like a grey streak. It ran and ran, traveling hundreds of feet, just barely visible in the soft light of the moon, and then disappeared into brambles wrapping around a wrought-iron cemetery gate.

Goff pushed his broken glasses into place with his finger and studied the rusty iron letters above the gate: Spraksville Cemetery. His eyes ran over the ornate serifs and twirls of the words while a breeze rustled the leaves dangling over the gravestones. An owl hooted in reply, serenading thin clouds sliding in front of a low, large moon like a flock of ghosts. Goff felt a chill run through his bones.

While researching his paper, he learned that witches were believed to have held coven meetings deep in the Spraksville Cemetery centuries ago. Reading about that had been nothing more than intellectually intriguing at the time. Now it felt too close to home. He felt sure he'd have nightmares about it, although he was pretty sure that any witches who had once lived in Spraksville, if there ever were any at all, were long gone.

Thinking about witches turned his mind to the paper. Having already scratched out the rough outline, he worried it would be too dull—nothing more than a pile of questions, details, facts, and an illustration. It just wasn't going to be good enough. To get into Amworth, he certainly couldn't bore the selection committee. He needed to surprise and awe them. He needed to show the committee that someday he'd be a reporter willing to stand in the middle of a warzone or on the edge of a volcano—whatever it took to write a good story.

Basically, this paper had to be *spellbinding*.

Amused by his word choice, he watched a triplet of bats flutter across the sky as an idea fluttered its way up from the back of his mind.

“I can't believe I'm considering this,” he said softly, “but think I need to do what the witches are known for—casting a spell.”

Goff sat in silence for a moment, digesting this idea. *Cast a Spell? Me?* Wind rattled leaves into waves of static. He looked up at the moonlit rows of stones poking up like rows of jagged teeth, and his heart tightened, realizing that to do it right, he had to go

out deep into that cemetery at midnight—the witching hour—and perform a spell, like the old witches of Spraksville.

“Being a great journalist,” he whispered, quoting Cranston, “means stepping out of comfort, standing at the edge, taking people places they’d be too terrified to go themselves.”

Cranston was right—this was just what the paper needed. He’d structure the entire thing as a blend of facts about Spraksville witchcraft and the story of his spellcasting adventure in Spraksville Cemetery. That would make it unique and fascinating. Definitely not a dull paper. The only problem was that the thought of going out into that cemetery at midnight, especially to cast a spell, sent chills running up his spine.

Even so, he found his mind already working out what he’d write. “Just as witches in Spraksville centuries before traveled secretly through farmers’ fields at midnight to perform pagan rituals in this cemetery, I crept through tall, dry grass at midnight, heading toward the cemetery gate, a spell book and a bag of ingredients clutched in my hand. My heart pounded heavily, knowing I was marching into the unknown, the supernatural, the dark side of midnight.”

Yes. This was going to be good. Goff pushed away his fear and headed up to his room. At the top of the stairs, he walked through the smelly plastic yellow curtain with salmon flowers and green vines that acted as a door for his room.

Entering this space always dropped his mood a few notches as if it contained a cloud of depression vapor. It had exposed beams stuck with rusty nails, flooring made of splintered wood planks, and only one dirty window at the very end. There was no closet and barely any furniture. His bed was a thin mattress on the floor, which he shared with a few mice. Frank calling this a bedroom was a joke, but apparently Social Services had agreed to let him live here out of desperation.

After replacing the arm of his glasses with one from an old pair, Goff walked to the window and pushed up the sash. He leaned against the crumbling frame and

stretched out into the cool night air to survey the landscape, considering his escape options.

Five feet below, the garage roof ran out a little way, and beyond that lay the cemetery a few hundred feet in the distance. As he stared down, light flooded the cemetery gates. He froze and remained transfixed as it grew brighter. A big old-fashioned hearse with red curtains darkening the coffin-compartment windows pulled up to the gates. A large man in a black suit jumped out to push them open, and as they swung wide with rusty complaints, he jumped back in and drove into the cemetery, casting bouncing white light over the tombstones.

A corpse delivery. Goff shuddered. He didn't like being reminded of what lay staring at the lids of coffins under the ground he'd be standing on to cast his spell.

Feeling queasy, he sat on a crate that served as a chair for his desk, careful not to get splinters from the jagged desktop. With shaky hands, he poured some water from a pitcher into a glass and raised it in a toast to a taxidermied black cat on his desk. "Cheers, Maxim."

Maxim didn't reply. Goff had found Maxim next to a trashcan the weekend before. At first, he thought he had found an abandoned cat in need of rescue, but when it turned out to be a taxidermied cat, he brought it home anyway. He wanted to create a witchy atmosphere in his writing space, although he regretted that decision now. Maxim creeped him out a little...well, a lot. The darn thing stood on a little black pedestal staring blankly with shiny green eyes. Its fanged claw was raised, and its mouth frozen open in a perpetual hiss.

Goff sipped his water and scratched Maxim between the ears. The hair felt stiff like the bristles of a brush. "So, being a black cat and probably having belonged to a witch at some point, what advice do you have about casting a spell?"

Maxim hissed silently.

Goff pulled out his binder of notes and paged through it, hoping he had copied at least one complete spell from a book at the library. In the middle of the binder, he found a set of photocopies, and one of them was a clear image of a spell from a book called *Ways of Witches*. Horrifyingly enough, the spell was called “Death's Gate Traversal.” The description explained that it enabled someone to communicate across the boundary of death. At the top, an ugly pen and ink drawing depicted a decaying human walking through a gate made of bones toward a witch standing over a cauldron.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he sighed, leaning back and staring at the paper. “It certainly isn’t dull, right Maxim? All the same, I was hoping to do a safer spell, maybe one to turn an apple into a banana or something. Well, maybe dead people will ignore me as much as living ones? Besides, it’s all I have. So, Death’s Gate Traversal it is.”

What remained to be decided was who he would speak to. He scanned a row of books lined up on the floor against the wall. A famous philosopher? No, way too old, and what would he even say? Famous poet? No, that could be weird and sad. Then his eyes traveled to the bin beside his bed. There sat his copy of *Excellence in Reporting* by the late William Cranston. Perfect. He’d only passed away a few years back, and if by some crazy circumstance this spell worked, William Cranston would probably appreciate Goff dragging him through the gate for the sake of good reporting.

Goff placed the Death's Gate Traversal spell before him on his desk and studied it. It required a candle, a small bowl of pond water, a flower left on a grave, three living things, and a picture of the deceased person you wanted to speak with. At least it didn’t require anything disgusting, like human bones or eyes of newt. The instructions didn’t seem too hard, either. After lighting the candle, you said some words three times while placing the living things in the water. Easy. Plus, it would be over quickly. He read them out loud, sounding out the Old English.

“Helliioth, thou who watches the borders, tether thy hounds.”

Weird.

Then, to complete the spell, he was supposed to crumple the flower and say more words while looking at the picture of the deceased:

“I command thee, step aside and let William Cranston through!”

The curtain to his door flew open.

Goff jumped.

Frank’s dog Brak rushed in, panting and wagging his tail. Goff let his lungs breathe again. Not a dead person—just the dog.

Brak ran over to push his cold nose into Goff’s hand. Brak was the only good thing about living at Frank’s, although the poor creature deserved much better. Pam and Ben teased him about being a wimpy dog, and Frank yelled at him for doing anything but sleeping. Goff tussled Brak’s floppy ears, then leaned down and draped his skinny arms around Brak’s furry body.

“Hey, boy.” Goff pulled back and held Brak’s face. “So, what adventures did you have today? Meet a nice lady dog? Dig in some trash? I had the usual bad day, but things will get better. I figured out how to make my paper great, so I’ll probably be going somewhere really good soon.”

Brak walked over to Goff’s bed, turned three times, and lay down, staring up at Goff through sad eyes with his nose propped up on the pillow.

“Don’t get all sullen,” Goff said. “I’ll take you with me if I can. I promise.”

Brak yawned and turned his head to the side.

Goff returned to his desk and made a list of things he needed for the spell, which he’d have to do tomorrow night. The paper was due in just a few days, and he needed a day or two to write and then edit.

The three living things could be spiders from his room. There were certainly plenty of those. He’d use the back flap of Cranston’s book for the picture. The pond

water he would get after school from a pond up on Hallow Hill. So that left just the flower from a grave, and looking again, he noticed an asterisk next to this item. At the bottom of the page, there was a matching footnote:

“Must be fresh. A dried or wilted flower will not do.”

An old grave flower was easy to find, but a fresh one? He remembered having just seen that hearse enter the graveyard. That meant there were probably fresh flowers out there right now, but a frost overnight was likely. They would be wilted and dead by morning. A feeling of dread filled him as he realized what that meant.

He had to go into the cemetery to get one of those flowers—tonight.

CHAPTER 3



Grave Robbers

Thud.

The front door slammed shut, shaking the entire house.

Goff jumped and nearly fell off the crate. Thoughts of sneaking off into the cemetery to fetch a flower from a fresh grave disappeared behind a much less pleasant one: Pam and Ben.

No doubt it was them. They didn't open and close doors—they yanked them wide and slammed them hard. Goff's stomach tightened, knowing what was coming.

“Goff! Cook us food!” Ben roared up the stairs.

As mandated by Frank, meals in the house were Goff's responsibility, but he didn't mind so much. He enjoyed cooking. His last foster father had kept a crate full of old cookbooks in the basement, where Goff had often found himself locked. He'd studied them and had offered to start cooking meals. Goff soon became responsible for making culinary delights for his gluttonous foster father every night.

Comparatively, Frank, Pam, and Ben were culinary neanderthals, so cooking here was more chore than artistry, but he still enjoyed it.

Before he reached the entrance to the kitchen at the bottom of the stairs, Pam and Ben rushed up, huffing and puffing.

“You turd,” Pam said. “Did you open the mousetrap?”

“It was dying.”

“It was a freakin’ mouse!”

“It was a living thing. You had no right to torture it.”

“Might makes right, moron.” Ben punched Goff in the arm.

Goff winced. “That’s stupid.”

“It’s the way of the world, so you better get used to it.”

“I guess I live in a different world.”

“Well, this is our world, so leave our mice alone!”

Goff slipped between them and went into the kitchen to start cooking. While very tempted to dump a can of beans into a bowl and call it supper, he thought better of it. His butt was still sore from the last time he’d served Frank cold beans. In this house, meat was king. In the refrigerator, he found a one-pound slab of steak. He grabbed the family-size bottle of BBQ sauce, ready to slather the steak with it, but his inner chef was unhappy. BBQ sauce on steak was not the best he could do.

Feeling creative, Goff raided the fridge and hunted for interesting ingredients. While there was little to work with, twenty minutes later, he stood over a sizzling pan of broccoli, meat, onions, and carrots, ready to douse it all in his homemade stir-fry sauce he created using some ancient takeout soy sauce packets, ketchup, and ginger ale.

Brak, who’d sat in silent torture smelling sizzling meat for too long, finally came to Goff’s side and barked out his frustration. Goff put a scoop of dog food into his bowl. Brak sniffed it and then looked up at him reproachfully as if to say, “Really? You cook fancy steak for them, but I get this? You don’t even like them that much!”

“Hold on, boy.” Goff was defenseless against Brak’s big eyes. He got some peanut butter from the cupboard and doled it out on the dog food. Brak barked happily and began gulping his gourmet meal down.

Goff wiped his sweaty brow, then dished his stir-fry masterpiece on top of some rice on each plate. He fixed up Frank’s plate by removing all the vegetables and adding more meat from the other plates. For garnish, he placed a few carrot slivers on top of each. They looked pretty good. He felt satisfied.

“Dinner’s ready!” he called.

Pam and Ben thundered down the stairs toward the kitchen.

“Bring it!” Frank shouted from the living room.

Goff grabbed a fork and a napkin, picked up Frank’s plate, and carried it to where Frank sat in his recliner watching his favorite show about huge trucks.

“What’s that on top?”

“Carrots”

“Why’d you put it there?”

“It’s a garnish.”

“Garnish?”

“It’s like decorations made of food.”

“Take them off.”

Goff picked the carrots off the top and ate them.

“There’s more garnish under my meat.”

“That’s not garnish.”

“What is it then?”

“Rice. Most people think of it as food.”

“Get rid of it.”

“I can’t.”

“You’re a terrible cook, kid.”

“Thanks.” Goff turned away, ignoring Frank’s culinary review.

He arrived back in the kitchen as Pam and Ben raced back up the stairs, laughing. His plate had been cleaned bare except for a small pile of carrots sticks surrounded by stains of brown sauce. He sighed. Of course, they had taken his food. *Might makes right.*

Frustrated, he ate the rejected carrots and grabbed a box of Lucky Puffs from the pantry to carry up to his room. He didn’t have to worry about the plates tonight. Frank would fall asleep with his plate on his lap, and Pam and Ben would stack them with the rest of their dirty dishes on top of a pile of dirty underwear, socks, jeans, and t-shirts.

Goff snacked on the stale cereal in his room while he reviewed the ingredients list for the spell: candle, pond water, flower, three living things, and a picture. He put an old plastic water bottle into his backpack for the pond water he’d collect tomorrow. He found a candle in one of Frank’s moving boxes marked “stuf 2 keep” along with an old hammer, a Slim Jim wrapper, a stained pillowcase, and a jarful of rusty nails. Avoiding the dirty pillowcase, he removed the candle and the jar and poked holes in the lid with a nail and the hammer.

Now he just had to muster the nerve to catch three spiders. A thick, dusty web hung in one of the upper rafters of his room. He walked over and stood on a box to get closer. When he reached out to touch it, a brown hairy spider the size of a mouse scuttled onto the web from a crevice nearby. Goff’s stomach turned, and he stepped back—forgetting he was on the box. He tumbled off and hit the wood planks hard. Groaning, he got to his feet again. The creepy spider stared down at him.

“Hey!” Ben called from below. “What the hell?”

“I fell,” Goff replied.

“You break your neck?”

“I’m fine.”

“Maybe next time.”

Goff ignored Ben and looked back up at the spider crouching above, clicking its mandibles. It made his skin crawl, knowing he was sharing a room with that hairy little monster.

“You win,” he said up to it. He certainly wasn’t going back up there.

Still shaking but determined to complete his mission, he looked around for less terrifying spiders and found some smaller ones with black-ball bodies and wispy legs hiding in webs between two boxes. Moving quickly, fighting his disgust, he grabbed three of them and put them into the jar.

He held the jar up and looked at the three tiny monsters trying to get out and then shook them to the bottom so he could put the lid on the jar without hurting any of them. “I’m sorry, guys. You will be free soon. You’re just going to get a little wet first.”

A few minutes later, the crashing and hollering sounds of Frank’s favorite show—*Mega Battles*—thundered up through the floor. That meant it was seven o’clock. On cue, Brak trotted in through the curtain. He didn’t care for the loud, stupid show any more than Goff did. The two of them flopped down on the mattress. He couldn’t sneak out of the house until eleven, when everyone was asleep, so Goff had some time to kill. He planned on killing it by thinking about his paper, but he ended up killing it by falling asleep.

At eleven-thirty, he awoke to a horrible smell. Brak was staring at him with guilty eyes.

“You’re the world’s worst alarm clock, you know? No more peanut butter for you!”

He waved the odor away, got up, crossed the room, and opened the window. Just as he’d planned, he dropped to the garage roof, down to the shed roof, down to the ground. The moon was high in the sky now, illuminating the graveyard in a pale blue

glow. The cold air turned his anxious breath to silver smoke. Careful not to snap any sticks or trip over any trash, he stole across the yard. At the cemetery entrance, he steeled his nerves with a deep breath before pushing the left gate panel open, wincing as the rusty hinges let out an awful screech.

He stood on a threshold of looming trees and grim tombstones. A lonely path led the way between them. Some of the graves were crisp and new, but others were worn and obscured by lichen. An image of a skeletal hand clawing its way up through the dirt entered his mind, and his heart started pounding. *Maybe I should find another way to make my paper less dull?*

“Stop it,” he said out loud, softly but firmly. “This is the real world, not a horror movie. Stuff like that doesn’t happen. There’s no such thing as monsters, ghosts, or even magic. Cranston would do this. It’s just research, and I’m doing it for Amworth.”

Goff took a deep breath to calm his nerves and stepped forward into the cemetery. A deep chill flooded his body as if he had just walked into a giant refrigerator. Ignoring it, he forced himself to take another step, trying to push images of Amworth ahead of thoughts of zombies and werewolves. He walked slowly, searching for a grave with flowers on it. The sooner he found one, the sooner he could leave this place. Row after row, he scanned for any spark of color, but all the graves seemed lonely and forgotten. Where was the fresh one from last night?

An odd scratching sound from behind filled him with dread. Braced to run, he turned to find Brak loping toward him, tongue flapping, breath coming out in bursts of white steam. He arrived in a flurry of fur and wagging tail.

“Good boy.” Goff leaned down to accept a few licks on the face. “How did you know I needed some company out here tonight?”

Feeling braver with Brak for company, he began walking more quickly. It wasn’t until he reached the far side, down a hill near some woods, that he found what he was

looking for. It was off the path by twenty feet, and the stone had not been placed yet, so he didn't know who was buried there. On top of the dirt lay several bouquets of flowers. He walked over, selected a long-stemmed white carnation, and tucked it into his jacket pocket. When he got home, he'd put it in water to keep it fresh. He looked up at the moon, feeling very pleased with himself. The hardest step was done.

Just as he turned to head back to the house, a spray of white light bounced over the tree trunks nearby. His heart raced. He dropped down to his knees as headlights crested the hill. The car drove slowly down the rocky path, heading his way. Goff kept low and led Brak up to a sarcophagus that looked like a little stone shack.

Pushing gently on his back, he got Brak to sit. "Stay, boy."

Carefully, he inched around the side for a look, hugging the wall. The car was parked off the path several feet from the mound. It wasn't the hearse he'd seen earlier, but a black limo. The doors opened, and three large men got out.

One of them wore a deep hood, exposing nothing but a strange black beard that came to a point on the sides, like little horns, and formed a ring at the bottom big enough to put a hand through. The other two men wore long robes. Their massive bald heads glistened in the moonlight as they carried shovels toward the mound of dirt.

"Be quick," the hooded man commanded.

"Just the eyes this time?"

"Or do you want fingers too, like last time?"

"Just the eyes," the hooded man said. "I've no need for fingers this time."

Fingers? Eyes? Goff went numb. These men were going to dig up the grave and steal body parts. But why? Were they black market organ dealers of some sort?

The two bald men knocked the flowers off the top with their shovels and set about digging into the earth, working quickly. Their shovels created a pulsing beat of crunching.

Fearful of being caught watching, Goff pulled away and started walking backward, holding Brak at his side. He made it ten feet before stepping on a twig and breaking it with a loud *Snap*. He flinched and dropped down on his knees. The pulse of shovels crunching through fresh dirt stopped.

Goff froze.

“Who’s there?” a deep voice called out.

CHAPTER 4



Black Magic

“Zig! Zag! Go see who it is.”

Goff’s blood turned to ice. Moving as silently and quickly as possible, he scuttled on hands and knees to get behind a large gravestone a few feet away. His breath was punching out tiny clouds of smoke. He tried to keep his breathing shallow, but fear racing through him made that hard. He wanted nothing more than to be far, far away, but he knew making a break for it would be stupid. They would see him and chase him down, perhaps even slit his throat and steal his eyes—*no need for fingers this time*.

A tremendous flapping sound arose—*what in the world?* Goff couldn’t resist peeking around the edge of the tombstone. Two gigantic birds rose into the moonlight and hovered above the sarcophagus, flapping wings as big as car doors. They had bald, wrinkled pink heads like turkeys and long sharp beaks like vultures. Goff’s stomach clenched. He retreated and clutched Brak tight.

The birds let out a shrill shriek. Brak growled and wriggled free to run out, barking and snarling.

Brak! No!

Goff sat frozen with his arms out, unsure what to do. Should he run out and defend Brak? Stay hidden?

He needed to see what was going on. Dropping as low as he could, he peeked back out from the base of the gravestone. The two giant birds flew forward and landed in front of Brak. They spread their wings and hissed. Brak bared his teeth, snarling and spitting, haunches up, prepared to attack.

From around the sarcophagus, the hooded man stepped into view. He had piercing black eyes and deep lines slicing across his brow. The lower half of his face was hidden behind that long beard with a circular hole at the bottom. Goff felt a bolt of fear crash through him, and he pulled back out of sight.

“It’s just a dog,” the man said. “Back off, you fools! You’ll wake some idiot up!”

Goff hugged his knees to his racing heart, hoping his presence hadn’t been detected. The birds stopped hissing. Wings beat the air. Brak’s growling softened to a simmer. Goff’s head reeled with confusion. Where did the birds come from? Had they been in the limo? Had they come out the window? Who kept birds like that as pets?

The wings beat again. Brak returned to Goff, shaking like crazy. A moment later, the crunch of shoveling resumed.

Goff rubbed Brak’s furry cheeks. “That was very dangerous!” he whispered. “But thank you!”

Brak wagged his tail proudly.

Goff checked carefully to see if they were in the clear. The men were out of sight. The idling limo, long and black with a prominent chrome grille, drew his curiosity—No sign of birds in the back. He squinted to bring the license plate into focus. It was a vanity plate with six letters: BLK MGK. Panic surged through him.

Black Magic? Time to get the hell out of here.

~ END OF SAMPLE ~

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