

The crate arrived at the Parrington on a Wednesday, but it was Friday before anyone mentioned it to me. Anything addressed from Miss Griselda Parrington, the younger of Samuel Mather Parrington's two daughters, was automatically routed to Dr. Starkweather's office, regardless of whose name she had written on it. I was, in truth, intensely grateful for this policy, for Miss Parrington most often addressed her parcels to me. She felt that we were "kindred spirits"; she considered me the only employee of the museum with the sensitivity and intelligence to appreciate her finds. Considering that she had inherited all of her father's magpie-like attraction to the outré and none of his discernment, her opinion was less flattering than one might think. I endured some teasing on the subject, though not nearly as much as I might have; in general, the curators' attitude was one of "there but for the grace of God." They were even, I think, rather grateful, if not to me precisely, then at least for my existence.

Miss Parrington's packages were inevitably accompanied by letters, sometimes quite lengthy, explaining what she persisted in referring to as the provenance, although it was no such thing. "I found this in a lovely antique shop in Belgravia that Mimi showed me," conveyed no useful information at all, since nine times out of ten she neglected to provide any further clues to Mimi's identity, and on the tenth time, when we managed to determine that "Mimi" was Sarah Brandon-Forbes, wife of the eminent diplomat, a polite letter would elicit the response that Lady Brandon-Forbes had never been in any antique shop in Belgravia in her life. The bulk of Miss Parrington's letters described, lavishly, what she believed the provenance to be, flights of fancy more suited to a romantic novelist than to even an amateur historian. But the letters had to be read and answered; Dr. Starkweather had been emphatic on the subject: they were addressed to me, therefore it was my responsibility to answer them.

It was perhaps the part of my job I hated most.

That Friday, when I found the letter in my pigeonhole, I recognized Miss Parrington's handwriting and flinched from it. My first instinct was to lose the letter by any means necessary, but no matter how tempting, it was not a viable solution. Dr. Starkweather saw through me as if I were a pane of glass; he would not be fooled by such an obvious lie. There was, therefore, neither sense nor benefit in putting off the task, unpleasant though it was. I opened the envelope then and there, and read the letter on the way back to my office.

It was a superbly representative specimen, running to three pages, close-written front and back, and containing absolutely no useful information of any kind. She had been at an estate sale—and of course she neglected to mention whose estate—she had recognized the name Carolus Albinus as someone in whom her father had been interested, and thus she had bid on and purchased a job lot of fire-damaged books, along with a picture she was quite sure would prove when cleaned to be an original Vermeer. She had not so much as opened the crate in which the books were packed, knowing—she said coyly—that I would prefer to make all the discoveries myself. But I would see that she was right about the Vermeer.

I propped my throbbing head on my hand and wrote back, thanking her for thinking of the museum and disclaiming all knowledge of seventeenth-century Dutch painters. I posted the letter, dry-swallowed an aspirin, and returned to the round of my usual duties. I gladly forgot about Miss Parrington's crate.

I should have known better.

On the next Tuesday, I was standing in Dr. Starkweather's office, helplessly watching him and Mr. Browne tear strips off each other over a casus belli they

had both already forgotten, when we were startled by a shriek from the direction of the mail room. Dr. Starkweather raced to investigate, Mr. Browne and myself close behind, and we found Mr. Ferrick, one of the junior-most of the junior curators, sitting on the floor beside an open crate, his spectacles askew and one hand pressed to his chest.

"What on Earth?" said Dr. Starkweather.

Mr. Ferrick yelped and shot to his feet in a welter of apologetic half-sentences.

"Are you all right?" said Mr. Browne. "What happened?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Ferrick. "I was opening the crate and something—it flew into my face—I thought—" He glanced at Dr. Starkweather's fulminating expression and sensibly did not explain what he had thought.

A closer look at the crate caused my heart to sink, in rather the same way that reading the Oedipus Tyrannos did. "Is that, er, the crate from Miss Parrington?"

"Yes," said Mr. Ferrick, puzzled.

"Oh good God," said Dr. Starkweather in tones of utmost loathing, probably prompted equally by Miss Parrington and me.

"She said she, er . . . that is, she didn't open the crate. So it probably—"

"A bit of straw," Dr. Starkweather said, seizing a piece from the floor and brandishing it at us. "You've heard of the boy who cried wolf, Mr. Ferrick?"

"Yes, Dr. Starkweather," Mr. Ferrick said, blushing.

"Good God," Dr. Starkweather said again, more generally, and stormed out, Mr Browne at his heels already girding himself to re-enter the fray.

I saw an opportunity to let Dr. Starkweather forget about me, and stayed where I was. Mr. Ferrick edged over to the crate as if he expected something else to leap out at him; it was with visible reluctance that he reached inside.

"What did you think it was?" I said.

"Beg pardon?"

"The, er, whatever it was that flew into your face. What did you think it was?"

"Oh. I've been spending too much time in Entomology," he said with a grimace. I waited while he lifted out a book so blackened with smoke that it was impossible to say what color the binding had originally been. "It looked like a spider," he said finally, tightly. "An enormous white spider. But Dr. Starkweather was right. It was just straw."

"Make out an inventory," I said, "and, er, bring it to me when you're done." And I left him to his straw.

Mr. Ferrick's inventory included several works by Carolus Albinus, one by the alchemist Johann de Winter, three by the pseudonymous and frequently untruthful Rose Mundy, and a leather-bound commonplace book evidently compiled by the owner of the library—a deduction which would have been more satisfying

if he had signed his name to it anywhere. One of the Carolus Albinus books was rare enough to be valuable even in its damaged condition: the 1588 Prague edition of the De Spiritu et Morte with the Vermeulen woodcuts said to have driven the printer mad. The rest of them were merely good practice for the junior archivists. I heard from Mr. Lucent, who was friends with Mr. Browne's second in command Mr. Etheredge, that the "Vermeer" was no such thing and was sadly unsurprised. The crate and straw were both reused—I believe in packing a set of canopic jars to be shipped to San Francisco—and that was that. Another of Miss Parrington's well-meaning disasters dealt with.

Except that the night watchmen, a pair of stalwarts named Fiske and Hobden, began to complain of rats.

"Rats?" said Dr. Starkweather. "What nonsense!"

The rest of us could not afford to be so cavalier, and even Dr. Starkweather had to rethink his position when Miss Chatteris came to him on behalf of the docents and announced that the first time one of them saw so much as a whisker of a rat, they were all quitting.

"But there have never been rats!" protested Mr. Tilley, the oldest of the curators. "Never!"

Hobden and Fiske, stolid and walrus-mustached and as identical as twins, said they could not speak to that, but Mr. Tilley was welcome to tell them what else the scuttling noises might be.

Mr. Lucent rather wistfully suggested getting a museum cat and was promptly shouted down.

Dr. Starkweather grudgingly authorized the purchase of rat-traps, which were baited and set and caught no rats.

Mr. Browne was denied permission to purchase a quantity of arsenic sufficient—said Miss Coburn, who did the calculations—to poison the entire staff.

Frantic and paranoid inventory-taking revealed no damage that could be ascribed to rats, although Decorative Arts suffered a species of palace coup over an infestation of moths in one of their storerooms and our Orientalist, Mr. Denton, pitched a public and monumental temper tantrum over what he claimed was water damage to a suit of bamboo armor. Mr. Browne took advantage of the opportunity to start a campaign to have the main building re-roofed. Dr. Starkweather chose, with some justification, to take this as fomenting insurrection, and the rats were forgotten entirely in the resultant carnage.

Except by Hobden and Fiske—and by me, although that was my own fault for staying in the museum after dark. I was writing an article which required the consultation of (it seemed in my more despondent moods) no less than half the contents of my office. Thus working on it at home was futile, and working on it during the day was proving impossible, as the inventories were bringing to light unidentifiables overlooked in the last inventory, and everyone was bringing them to me. The puzzles and mysteries were welcome, but I had promised this article to the editor of American Antiquities nearly six months ago, and I was beginning to despair of finishing it. Being insomniac by nature, I found the practice of working at night more congenial than otherwise, and the Parrington was blessedly quiet. Fiske and Hobden's rounds were metronomically regular, and they did not disturb me.

And then there was the scuttling.

It was a ghastly noise, dry and rasping and somehow slithery, and it was weirdly omnidirectional, so that while I was sure it was not in the office with me, I could never tell where in fact it was. It was horribly intermittent, too, the sound of something scrabbling, and stopping, and then scrabbling again. As if it were searching for the best vantage point from which to observe me, and the night I had that thought, I went out to the front entrance and asked the watchman if they had had any luck at ridding the museum of rats.

He gave me a long, steady look and then said, "No, sir. Have some tea."

I accepted the mug he offered; the tea was hot and sweet and very strong. He watched, and when I had met whatever his criteria were, he said, "Me and Hob, we reckon maybe it ain't rats."

This was Fiske, then; I was relieved not to have to ask. "No?"

"No, sir. Y'see, Hob has a dog what is a champion ratter. Very well known, is Mingus. And me and Hob brought Mingus in, sir, quiet-like, feeling that what His Nibs don't know, he won't lose sleep over . . ."

"Quite," I said, perceiving that Fiske would not continue until he had been reassured on that point.

"Thank you, sir. So Hob brought Mingus in, and the dog, sir, did not rat."

"He didn't?"

"No, sir. We took him all over the museum, and not a peep out of him. And before you ask, sir, that dratted scratching noise seemed like it was following us about. Mingus heard it, sure enough, but he wouldn't go after it. Just whined and kind of cringed when Hob tried him. So we figured, Hob and myself, that it ain't rats."

"What do, er, you and Mr. Hobden think it is?"

Mr. Fiske looked at me solemnly and said, "As to that, sir, we ain't got the least idea."

Two nights later, I saw it, entirely by accident—and not "accident" meaning happenstance or coincidence, but "accident" quite literally: I fell on the stairs from the mail room to the west storage rooms. The stairs were of the sort that consist only of treads—no risers—and when I opened my eyes from my involuntary flinch, I was staring down into the triangular space beneath the stairs and watching something scuttling out of sight. I saw it for less than a second, but I saw that it was white, and it was not a rat. And I all too easily recognized the sound.

For a moment, I was petrified, my body as heavy and cold and unresponsive as marble, and then I scrambled frantically up the stairs, banging my already bruised knees, smacking my raw palms as I fumbled with the door. It was more luck than anything else that I got the door open, and I locked it behind me with shaking fingers, then slumped against it, panting painfully for breath. And then I heard that dry, rasping, scuttling sound from somewhere ahead of me in the storage room, and with the dreadful epiphantic clarity of a lightning bolt, I knew and whispered aloud because it was too terrible a thing to have pent and unvoiced in my skull, "It's in the walls." Even that was not the truth of my horror, for in fact that was no more than a banality. What made my chest seem too small for the panicked beating of my heart was not that it was

in the walls, but that it was using the walls, as a subway train uses its tunnels.

Subway trains, unlike rats, have drivers.

And then I was running, my mind full of a dry, rustling panic. Later, I would reason with myself, would point out that it had not harmed anyone, or even anything, that there was not the slightest shred of proof that its intentions were malicious, or indeed that it had any intentions at all. But nothing I came up with, no reasoned argument, no rational observation, could withstand the instinctive visceral loathing I had felt for that white scuttling shape. I remembered that Hobden's dog, a champion ratter, would not go after this thing. I remembered Mr. Ferrick, shaken and embarrassed, describing the "enormous white spider" that had flung itself in his face. And I wondered that night, pacing from room to sleepless room of my apartment, just what else Miss Parrington had bought in that job lot of worthless books.

Was it a sign of insanity that I assumed from the moment I saw it that it was not natural? I do not know. I do know that discovering it to be a gigantic albino tarantula would have been an overpowering relief, and by the very magnitude of that imagined relief, I knew it was no such thing.

The next morning, I prevailed on Mr. Lucent to ask a favor of one of his friends in Entomology, and the two of them met me in the mail room. I brought a flash-light. Mr. Lucent's friend was Mr. Vanderhoef, a shy young man who wore thick horn-rimmed spectacles and was an expert on African termites. Everyone in the museum, of course, knew about Mr. Ferrick's spider, and I explained that I thought I had seen it the night before. Mr. Vanderhoef looked dubious, but not reluctant, and contorted himself quite cheerfully into the awkward space beneath the stairs. I passed him the flash-light.

"A big piece of plaster is missing," he reported after a moment. "That must be how—oh! There is . . . something has been nesting here."

"Nesting?" Mr. Lucent said unhappily. "You mean it is rats?"

"No," said Mr. Vanderhoef, rather absently. "There aren't droppings, and it doesn't look . . . In truth, I'm not sure what it does look like."

"What do you mean?" I said. Mr. Lucent and I were now both peering between the treads of the stairs, but all we could see was Mr. Vanderhoef's shock of blond hair.

"There are no droppings, no caches of food, no eggs—nor viviparous offspring for that matter . . ."

"It couldn't be a, er, trap?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, er, like a . . . like a spider's web."

"Ah. No."

"So, what is it using to nest in?" Mr. Lucent asked before I could find a way to get Mr. Vanderhoef to expand. "It isn't as if we've got a lot of twigs and whatnot in the museum."

"No, no," said Mr. Vanderhoef. "Paper. Newspaper, mostly, although I think I see the remains of one of Dr. Starkweather's memoranda."

"Paper," I said.

"Mr. Booth?" said Mr. Lucent, apparently not liking the sound of my voice.

"You're quite sure it couldn't be a spider?"

"That isn't what I said. This is not a web. There are spiders that don't build webs, but arachnids are not my specialty, and I cannot say for certain—"

"Is there anyone in the museum who would know?"

"Dr. Phillips is our arachnid expert, but he's on an expedition in Brazil until Christmas."

"Thank you," I said, because it was important to remember to be courteous, "you've been very kind."

"Mr. Booth!"

I stopped at the top of the stairs. "Yes, Mr. Lucent?"

"Did you . . . what were you . . . where are you going?"

"Paper," I said. "Will you ask Major Galbraith to get the plaster repaired?"

Mr. Lucent sputtered; I made good my escape and went to do what I should have done weeks ago and examine the commonplace book from Mr. Ferrick's inventory.

Mr. Ferrick was not happy to see me, though I could not tell if it was a guilty conscience—an affliction which seemed to be frequently visited on the junior curators in my presence—or simply that I irritated him. In either case, he stared at me as blankly as if I had asked about the second book of Aristotle's Poetics.

"The commonplace book," I said. "From, er, Miss Parrington's crate."

I noted that he had not been at the Parrington long enough for her name to have its full effect; we all winced reflexively, even Dr. Starkweather, but Mr. Ferrick merely frowned and said, "Is that the crate with the damaged books?"

"And the enormous white spider," I said before I could stop myself.

He gave me a look of mingled shock and reproach and said, "Oh! That commonplace book. I gave it to Mr. Lucent because it was holograph. Was that wrong?"

It was now obvious that he did not like me. I was glad he was a naturalist by training; once he had finished his probationary period, I was unlikely to have to deal with him again.

"No," I said. "That's fine." I was as pleased to leave as he was to have me go.

I spent the rest of the morning in a treasure hunt that was simultaneously ridiculous and nightmarish, pursuing the trail of the commonplace book from Mr. Ferrick to Mr. Lucent; from Mr. Lucent—who was miffed at me, he said, for rushing away in the middle of things and leaving him "holding the baby," although whether he meant by that the hole in the plaster, or Mr. Vanderhoef,

or possibly Major Galbraith, I could not determine and did not like to ask—to Mr. Roxham; from Mr. Roxham, after a protracted and egregiously dusty search, to Miss Atterbury; from Miss Atterbury to Mr. Vine; and finally from Mr. Vine to Mr. Horton, who said, "Oh, I haven't gotten to it yet," and reached unerringly into the middle of one of the stacks of books waiting to be catalogued that surrounded his desk.

I retreated to my office with my prize and locked the door. The first few pages of the commonplace book told me that its owner was strongly antiquarian in his tastes, largely self-educated, and with an unhealthy penchant for the occult. Judging by the authors he quoted, he must have had quite the collection; the coup of the 1588 Albinus paled in comparison.

I flipped steadily through the pages, trying not to inhale too deeply, for the book reeked of smoke and secondarily of tobacco, and there was another scent, too faint for me to identify but sharply unpleasant. I was looking for quotes from Carolus Albinus or one of the other books that had been in the crate, and I found them starting about three-quarters of the way through. Albinus; Mundy; a lengthy passage from de Winter on golems; a passage from an even more unpleasant author on the abomination called a Hand of Glory, although I had never seen these particular virtues ascribed to it before; and then the quotes began to be interspersed with dated entries such as one might find in a diary. These were written in a highly elliptical style, using an idiosyncratic set of abbreviations, and I could make neither heads nor tails of them, except for repeated references to "cllg"—"calling"—someone or something called White Charles—the literal translation, of course, of Carolus Albinus, but the referent was decidedly not a book. And I did recognize the diagram drawn painstakingly on one verso page.

He had summoned something he called White Charles—presumably because he was using Carolus Albinus as his principal text, which ought to mean I could use my own knowledge of Carolus Albinus at least to make a guess at what he had been trying to do and what that white scuttling thing was.

So. He had summoned something, following—or improvising on—the rites of Carolus Albinus. Albinus had been a necromancer who dabbled in alchemy; White Charles was probably a revenant of some kind. The passage about the Hand of Glory suggested several further hypotheses; I was selfishly, squeamishly grateful that he had not discussed that matter in any greater detail. He had wanted power, no doubt, imagining it was something one could acquire like a new umbrella.

Whatever he had summoned, its actions indicated clearly that it had self-volition, unlike what very little I knew of golems. It had preserved itself from the fire, stowed away with the books—its books? I wondered. Did it know that those particular books were relevant to its existence, or was it mere coincidence? On reaching the museum, it had acted to preserve itself again, scavenged paper, made a nest. It had not, so far as I knew, harmed anyone, although it had greatly perturbed Fiske and Hobden—and Mingus—and had scared the lights and liver out of me. I certainly did not like the idea of a necromantic spider scuttling around the museum, but I could not immediately see any way of either catching or destroying it, and I quailed from the thought of explaining my theory to Dr. Starkweather—or even Mr. Lucent.

I would watch, I told myself. Probably before long, the thing would die or de-animate or whatever the correct term was, and it would not be necessary to take any action at all.

But over the next week, it became apparent that if I had decided to watch White Charles, White Charles had also decided to watch me. Any time I was in

the museum after dark, the scuttling dogged my footsteps, and I could sit in my office and track the thing's loathsome progress from wall to ceiling and back to wall. The plaster under the mail room stairs had been patched, but that clearly hadn't caused White Charles more than a momentary inconvenience.

It unnerved me, but it still was not doing any harm, and surely it would disintegrate soon. Surely I would not have to . . . to hunt it down, or any of the other melodramatic imaginings that plagued me when I tried to sleep. I wanted desperately to avoid seeing it again, and most especially to avoid seeing it more clearly. This way, at least I could pretend I believed it was some sort of albino spider.

I was very carefully not thinking about Hands of Glory.

It was a Wednesday night when I finally finished my article for American Antiquities. I tidied the manuscript into an envelope and started for the mail room to leave it in the box for Miss Rivers the typist, but as I turned into the hallway leading to the mail room, I stopped so abruptly I nearly stumbled over my own feet. There was someone standing in the middle of the hall, a strange slouched figure who was certainly neither Hobden nor Fiske.

I had thought I was the only person left in the building save the watchmen. "Wh . . . who's there?" I said, my voice wobbling and squeaking embarrassingly, and groped toward the light switch.

"Noli facere."

It was not a human voice; it crackled and shirred like paper. And it spoke in Latin. I think I knew then, although I did not want to.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"In a box," it said, in Latin. It understood English, even if it would not, or could not, speak it. "Full of smoke and straw and lies." It took a step toward me, rustling and crackling. I took a step back.

"What are you?" I said, although I did not expect an answer. I only wanted to distract it while I gathered myself to run for the front entrance and Fiske and Hobden.

But even as I began to turn, shifting my weight, it said, "I am the ghost of a Hand of Glory." This time I did fall, sprawling my full ungainly length on the marble; before I could pick myself up, before I could even roll over, it was on top of me, paper scratching and scuffling, pinning me flat, holding my wrists in the small of my back. It should not have been able to hold me—even at the time I knew that, but I could not move, could not free myself.

"He called me White Charles," it said, the English words gratingly incongruous, and though it spoke in my ear, there was no breath, only the rustling and sighing of paper. "But he did not know me to name me truly. You do."

"No, I don't!" I said vehemently.

"You lie," it said, and I shuddered and cringed into the floor, because it should not have known that, no matter how closely it had observed me.

And what served it for eyes? Had it fashioned those out of paper, too?

"What do you want?" I asked.



It pressed even closer. I had often wondered morbidly what it would be like to be buried under one of the teetering stacks of paper that rose in my office like the topless towers of Ilium; now I knew that I did not want to know. It said, in the soft susurrations of paper, "I want freedom."

I tried to scream, but there was paper blocking my mouth. I heaved desperately against the—truly, almost negligible—weight on my back, bucking like a wild horse in a dime novel. I could not dislodge it; it seemed to have molded itself to me and merely waited until I was lying still again.

"It must be you," it said. "No one else knows what I am."

No one else was a threat to it, it meant, but dear God, neither was I! I had no idea how to banish it or to bind it—I did not even know how that foolish antiquarian had managed to summon it. Carolus Albinus alone could never have given him the idea of making a golem from a Hand of Glory, and I could not begin to imagine what mishmash of experiment and tradition and insanity he must ultimately have used.

The paper crinkled as the thing settled lower. I strained away from the paper covering my mouth and now also my nose, and realized that I did know one thing. The antiquarian had tried to fight his creature by burning his books; he had failed, but he had hurt it. It had taken White Charles several weeks in the museum to reach the point where it could be a danger to anyone. Moreover, it had stayed with the books when that was surely the most inconvenient and dangerous course of action. And although it said he had not known it, perhaps there was nevertheless a reason he had called it White Charles.

It was the ghost of a Hand of Glory, it said, yet it clothed itself first in paper.

Perhaps it was merely panic and lack of oxygen that made me so certain I was correct, but I twisted my head, freeing my mouth, and said, "White Charles," as loudly and clearly as I could. I felt the thing flinch.

"That is your name," I said. "Your name and your nature, and you cannot escape it."

Its hold on me loosened; I lunged free, crawled a few awkward paces, then got my feet under me and ran. I did not look back. The single sheets of paper that flew around me and slid under my feet were evidence enough. I had hurt it; worse than that, I had guessed its secret. It would not confront me directly again if it could help it.

I was not foolish enough to believe that that meant I was safe.

In the front entrance, behind the long curving counter that separated the coat check from the rotunda with its Foucault's Pendulum ceaselessly swinging, Mr. Fiske and Mr. Hobden came to their feet in alarm as I burst through the doors.

"I need your help," I said between heaving, panting breaths.

"All right, sir," said one, after exchanging an unfathomable look with the other. "What is it you need?"

"The furnace is going, isn't it?"

A stupid question, but they took it in good part. "Yes, sir," one of them said, taking a step forward. "First of October, just like clockwork. Takes a

powerful amount of heating, the museum does."

"And you have the, er, the keys? To the boiler room?"

"I do."

"Then please, if you'd, er . . . That is, there's something I need to burn."

"All right," he said equitably, as if he had received stranger requests. Given how long the two of them had worked for the museum, I supposed it was possible that he had.

"What is it you're wanting to burn, Mr. Booth?" said the other, and I was appalled by my own inability to remember which of them was Fiske and which was Hobden.

"Ah," I said. "As to that, I, um . . ."

"Fiske, sir," he said, without any trace of surprise or resentment. I wondered in miserable distracted panic how many times he had faced that blank look from men who saw him every day.

"Fiske, yes. I, er, I'm going to need your help. I need to get into Dr. Starkweather's office."

"Oh," said Fiske. "Oh dear."

Most of the books from Miss Parrington's crate were readily accessible to me. The commonplace book was still in my office; the others were languishing in the communal office of the junior archivists. But the valuable one, Carolus Albinus' *De Spiritu et Morte*, Prague 1588, was immured in Dr. Starkweather's office against the alleged depredations of Mr. Browne and the Department of Restoration and Repairs.

Mr. Fiske had the key to Dr. Starkweather's office, of course, but he balked at letting me in to appropriate something I had already confessed I intended to burn. His position was entirely reasonable and understandable, and it made me so frustrated that I wanted to sit down and howl at the ceiling. Finally, in desperation, I said, "This will get rid of the, er, the rats that aren't rats."

Fiske's eyebrows rose. But he said, "Well, nothing else has, true enough. All right. But when he asks, I don't know anything about it."

"Absolutely. I'll tell him I picked the lock."

"Can you?"

"No, but I doubt Dr. Starkweather will, er, ask for a demonstration."

"Fair enough," Fiske said, and he escorted me—and my increasingly unwieldy stack of books—to Dr. Starkweather's office. It took me only a moment to find the *De Spiritu et Morte*, for unlike my own, Dr. Starkweather's office was immaculately tidy and oppressively well-organized. Fiske watched from the doorway, and he locked the door again when I came out.

"That it?" he said.

"Yes. This is all of them." I thought it likely that the only book it was necessary to destroy was the *De Spiritu et Morte*, but I was not prepared to

gamble.

Hobden was waiting in the doorway of the boiler room, and he was not alone. For a moment, in bad light and panic, I thought the other person was White Charles, but then he shifted a little, and I realized it was Achitophel Bates, the colored man who maintained the boilers and other machinery of the museum's infrastructure. I had thought--assumed--hoped--that he had already gone home.

"Good evening, Mr. Booth," he said. He was Southern by birth, and spoke with a slow unhurriable dignity even to Dr. Starkweather.

"Er . . . good evening. I . . . that is . . ." I looked at Hobden, who merely shook his head.

"Mr. Hobden says you're wanting to burn some books." Achitophel Bates was a tall, thin man, as tall as I, and when he looked into my eyes, he did not have to crane to do so. "Seems like a funny thing for an archivist like yourself to want, Mr. Booth."

I was unaccustomed to have anyone identify my profession correctly, much less a colored mechanic, and my surprise must have shown, for he said, "Not all colored men are ignoramuses, Mr. Booth. Some of us can even read."

"I . . . I didn't mean . . ." But I could not take back words I had not said, words I would never have said aloud.

Achitophel Bates waved the matter aside with one long hand. "But tell me, why are you burning books at this time of night?"

I did think of lying, but it was hopeless. Even if I had had any gift for deception, I had no story I could tell. I had nothing but the truth, and so that was what I told Achitophel Bates and the listening Hobden and Fiske. Achitophel Bates' eyebrows climbed higher and higher as I spoke, and when I had finished--or, at least, had run out of words--there was a long silence. In it I could see Achitophel Bates trying to decide if this was some sort of elaborate and cruel hoax. Certainly, it was a more plausible explanation than my lame and faltering truth.

"You remember the trouble we had with Mingus," said Hobden or Fiske.

"I do," said Achitophel Bates, and he looked thoughtfully from me to the watchmen and back again. "You think this is part of that same trouble, Hob?"

"Mr. Booth thinks so," said the watchman, and therefore he was Hobden and surely I could remember that if I tried. "And he's a learned man."

Achitophel Bates snorted. "Learned men. Haven't you been working here long enough to know about learned men, Hob?"

"Mr. Booth ain't like Dr. Starkweather," said Fiske mildly. "Or like that crazy man--what was his name?--who came down here and tried to get you to sabotage the boilers."

"Mr. Clarence Clyde Blessington," Achitophel Bates said, rolling the name out with a certain degree of relish.

"Oh dear," I said involuntarily. "Mr. Blessington is, er . . ."

"A committed Marxist and a card-carrying member of the Communist Party," Achitophel Bates finished. "Yes, I know. He told me. He showed me the card,

even, when he was trying to persuade me that he knew what being oppressed by the bourgeoisie was like better than I did. Tell you the truth, I prefer Mr. Vanderhoef. He won't admit I exist, but at least he doesn't try to improve me." His sigh was a mixture of exasperation and contempt. "So just because he's a learned man, Fiske, doesn't mean a goddamn thing."

"I . . . I wouldn't . . ." But what was it, exactly, that I would not do? I settled on, "I wouldn't tell a lie like that," even though that was not, exactly, the point at issue.

"I admit," said Achitophel Bates, "that I would expect a liar to have a better story—and to tell it better, too. And I do remember the trouble you had with your dog, Hob, and that's not behavior I've ever seen out of a ratter. So, all right. Let's say it's true. Let's say there's some sort of monster wandering around the museum. I still don't see why you need to burn those books."

"I told you," I said despairingly. Had he not understood? "It's the only way I can think of to destroy it."

"And destroying it has to be the answer?"

"It tried to kill me!"

"Well, what choice did it have?" Achitophel Bates said reasonably, and I stared at him, abruptly and utterly bereft of words. "It doesn't want to be your slave."

"I don't want—"

"I know. And I believe you. For one thing, I figure if that's what you wanted, you could manage it for yourself, you being a learned man and all." And I winced at the derision in his voice. "But how is White Charles supposed to know that?"

And when I floundered, he pressed his point: "You'll forgive me if I have some sympathy for a slave who wants to be free."

He was not old enough to have been a slave—but of course, I realized, flushing hot with my own failure to think the matter through, his parents would have been.

"I . . . I don't want to enslave anyone. But I also don't want to be killed so that White Charles can be free of the slavery I'm not trying to . . . that is . . ." I became hopelessly muddled in my own syntax and fell silent.

"That's a reasonable position," Achitophel Bates said, so gravely that I suspected he was mocking me. "So what you need isn't to burn it. You need to talk to it."

"You, er, you are assuming that it is an entity with whom one can have a reasoned conversation."

"You said it had self-volition. And that it spoke to you. So what other conclusion should I draw?"

"And if you're wrong?" I said and hated how near to sullen I sounded.

"Then I'll throw the damn books in the furnace myself. But I'm not wrong. The only question is, how do you convince it to talk to you?"

"It is not necessary," said a new voice, and even if it had not spoken in Latin, I would have known it to be White Charles, for it was a new voice in the most fundamental sense of the word, harsh and dull and not in the slightest human. It had spoken from inside the boiler room; Achitophel Bates turned and pushed the door all the way open and I saw why.

White Charles had abandoned its first body and built itself a second one out of newspaper and scrap lumber and an assortment of Achitophel Bates' tools. Where I had gathered only impressions of that first body, I saw this one all too clearly, slumped and strange, as if it could not quite remember what a human body felt like. Its hands were enormous, with screwdrivers and socket wrenches for fingers, its head no more than a suggestion, a lump between the hulking shoulders.

I thought, distantly and quite calmly, that if it did intend evil, we were all doomed.

But, "Audiivi," it said. I heard. "You do not wish to command me?"

"No," I said. And then I realized that by speaking in English, the language in which White Charles had been given the name it hated, I was belying myself. I groped after my Latin; I read it fluently, but had not had to attempt composition since I graduated from Brockstone School. "I do not," I said finally, haltingly—although at least in these circumstances I had an excuse for my habitual hesitations and stammers. "I want no one to be hurt." Clumsy, but my meaning should be clear.

There was a silence long enough that I began to believe that self-assessment had been rankest hubris, but then White Charles said, "I do not want to hurt."

I thought, suddenly and painfully, of the creature in Mary Shelley's novel, which had not done evil until it was taught that evil was all it could expect, and which had yet been so horrible of aspect and origin that it was never offered anything else. Certainly, White Charles was horrible—the ghost of a Hand of Glory—but that horribleness was not the fault of the intelligence which animated its scavenged bodies. Like Frankenstein's creature, it had not asked for the parody of life it had been given, and although, whatever my sins, I was not Victor Frankenstein, I had an obligation not to perpetuate evil for its own sake.

"What do you want?" I asked it, as I had asked it before, but this time I asked in awkward Latin, and this time White Charles stood and answered me, if not face to face—for indeed it did not exactly have a face—openly. "I want freedom." It made a strange gesture with the massive armatures of its hands and said, "I want freedom from this." Iste. This itself, and very emphatically.

"The body?" I said, guessing both at its meaning and at the right word.

"It is not correct," said White Charles.

"I don't understand."

"That a ghost of a Hand of Glory should exist. It is not correct. It is not right. I do not want to be this thing."

"What is it saying?" Achitophel Bates said in an undertone.

"It says it wants to be free of being what it is," I said, which was a syntactic nightmare but—I thought—substantially accurate.

"It wants you to kill it? That's awfully convenient."

The irony and skepticism in his voice made me flinch, but I swallowed hard and said, "It understands English. If I were lying, it would know." And I looked, rather desperately, to White Charles.

"Verax," it said. And then slowly, and as if it were actually painful to it, "Truthful."

"But how can you want that?" Achitophel Bates demanded, almost angrily. "How can you want to die?"

"I was not meant to live," White Charles said in Latin, and I translated. "I am not a living thing enslaved, but a dead thing . . ." Another of its strange gestures, which I thought perhaps meant it could not find a word to express its meaning. "A dead thing called into life to be a slave. It is not the same."

"Frankenstein's creature was a new life created out of death," I said, half to myself, "but that's a poet's conceit."

"Sum mors vetus," said White Charles. I am old death. "I am death that was never alive."

"The ghost of a Hand of Glory," I said. "Not even the ghost of the man whose hand was cut off."

"You understand," said White Charles.

"The ghost of a book," I said, and only then realized that I was still carrying the entire unwieldy stack of books from Miss Parrington's crate.

"So that means we're burning the books after all?" Fiske said doubtfully.

"No," I said, purely on instinct, and was echoed by White Charles' clamorous voice. There was silence for a moment, as Fiske and Hobden carefully did not ask the next obvious question, and Achitophel Bates stood with his arms folded, waiting to see what I would do.

"He brought you out of the book," I said, thinking of that paper body, of the name the creature bore and hated. Then I remembered something else and fell into English because I could not think of the Latin words quickly enough. "No. He called you out of the book. Called you and bound you and feared you so greatly that no binding could ever be enough."

"He bound me to murder at his command," said White Charles, "and he was not wrong to fear what I would do if the binding failed."

I did not, I decided, want to know anything more about the antiquarian or his death. I found my Latin again and said, "If you were called out of the book, you must go back into the book."

White Charles said again, "You understand," and although its voice was not expressive, I thought the emotion in it was relief.

Achitophel Bates was still angry, although I could not tell whether his anger was directed at me or at White Charles or at something else entirely. But he came with us to the rotunda, as did Fiske and Hobden, and watched disapprovingly as I opened the antiquarian's books and used them to lay out a

rough circle, with the Carolus Albinus in the center. White Charles also watched, its low-slung head turning minutely to follow my progress.

My circle was somewhat cramped because of the Foucault's pendulum, but this was the largest open space in the museum that did not also contain a host of valuable objects. It would have to do.

Abruptly, Achitophel Bates blocked my path. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"More or less," I said. "Education is, er, not without value."

"I never said it was. But my experience has been that the value is in the man, not in what he knows."

I was assailed by examples confirming his contention. Learned men—learned persons, I corrected myself, thinking of my colleague Miss Coburn—were just as prone to be selfish, short-sighted, and stupid as anyone else. Or even more so, as the evidence of White Charles itself suggested. It took a learned man to make such a terrible and complicated mistake.

". . . I do know what I'm doing. And I, er . . . that is, it's the right thing to do."

"I want freedom," White Charles said thunderously from the other side of the circle, and Achitophel Bates raised his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"That word it keeps using. Libertas. Is that liberty?"

"Yes."

"All right," said Achitophel Bates. "I guess from where he's standing, liberty and death are the same thing. Not like Patrick Henry."

"It, er, is dead. The state it's in . . . there isn't a word for it, but it isn't alive. 'Awake' is closer. Maybe."

Achitophel Bates was frowning, but it seemed more concentration than anger. "Well, I can't argue a creature has free will and then argue it can't choose for itself. As long as you're sure what you're doing is going to do what it wants."

"As sure as I can be," I said.

He looked at me searchingly, but seemed to accept that I was telling the truth. "All right," he said and stepped aside.

I picked up the de Winter and closed it to create a door in the circle and said in Latin, "Step inside."

White Charles did not hesitate. Its groaning, grinding body shambled past me to stand over the book in the center of the circle. I stepped into the circle myself, then opened the de Winter again and put it back in its place. I knelt in front of White Charles and opened the Albinus at random. It fell open, as books will, to a page that had been often consulted, adorned in this instance with a Vermeulen woodcut of a grave-robber—not inappropriate in a ghoulish *Sortes Vergilianae* fashion. I reminded myself not to wonder how the antiquarian had come by his materials.

I looked up at White Charles. It was still horrific in aspect, a crude approximation of the human form built by something that did not wish to be

human, but I was no longer frightened of it. Achitophel Bates was right. When given the chance, it did not choose evil.

The longest part of my preparations had been working out the Latin; while awkwardness did not matter, imprecision might matter a great deal, and the consequences of using the wrong word could be rather worse than fatal. My words were inelegant, but I knew their meaning was correct.

"You were called from this book," I said in simple, careful Latin, "and now I call you back to it. Relinquish this unnatural existence. Rest." And, although even now I cringed from touching the creature, I reached out and guided one of its screwdriver-fingers to touch the page.

Around the circle, one by one, the books snapped shut.

The edifice that was White Charles was perfectly still for a moment; I saw—or thought I saw—something depart from it, and it went from being a constructed body to being simply an amalgamation of metal and wood. It swayed and sagged, and at the same time I realized what was going to happen, the entire thing came down on my head.

I regained consciousness on the sofa in the Curators' Lounge with the doubled bulldog visages of Hobden and Fiske staring down at me.

"You all right there, Mr. Booth?" said one. And I still could not tell one from the other.

"I, er . . . did it work?"

"As best any of us can tell," said the other.

Everything hurt. My right wrist was made of broken glass. My head was pounding; I felt that if I could observe it from the outside, I would see my temples pulsing like the gills of a fish. "Oh God, the books!"

I started to get up, but sagged and failed halfway.

"D'you reckon you ought to have a doctor, Mr. Booth? You've got a lump on your forehead like a goose-egg, and you're not a good color."

"I'm never a good color," I said. "But we can't leave the books in the rotunda—not to mention the, er, the tools and whatnot. It must be nearly dawn."

"Just past it," said one of them. "But don't worry. We took care of that part. Although Bates said he'd have a word with you later about his tools."

"I put the books back where you found them," said the other, who therefore had to be Fiske. "Including the fancy one in His Nibs' office. I may have got some of the others wrong."

"It doesn't matter," I said. I could not bear it any longer; I reached out with my left hand, caught the material of his sleeve. "Are you Fiske?"

"Yessir," he said, though he and Hobden exchanged alarmed glances.

I squinted to focus, first on his face, then on Hobden's. They were not identical lead soldiers, after all; they were men. And when finally, reluctantly, I met their eyes, first one and then the other, both frowning and worried, at last I saw. Fiske's eyes were brown. Hobden's eyes were blue. And



around those eyes, dark and pale, their faces resolved. Nothing changed, for indeed there was nothing in them that needed changing, but I saw them.

But I looked away quickly, before they could see me in return.