

Ghouls and Glamours

“Ghoul.”

Jimmy didn't shout, cool under pressure. I didn't turn as I raised the shotgun. The ghoul launched itself from beside an oversized headstone.

Artie, The Adorably Amazing Pit Bull, growled deep in her prodigious chest, prepared to leap: the shotgun boomed.

At close range a shotgun is mostly useful for its stopping power; at least the first shot.

I had thought the ghouls' trail would lead deeper in, but Jimmy skirted the edge. I deferred to him, as did Artie. She would watch Jimmy, then me, then bury her nose in the grass as she trotted along.

“This place bring back memories?”

“Different town. Different cemetery.” Jimmy looked me in the eye: “I'm good.”

I really shouldn't have expected anything less from Patrick O'Connor's grandson. But lineage isn't everything. Jimmy's father, son of the greatest magical law enforcer of a generation, had been born without a hint of magical talent.

At the edge of the graveyard we faced a six foot tall wrought iron fence in a small copse of trees.

“Other side,” Jimmy said.

“Artie,” I said.

She looked at me, looked at the fence; then turned and trotted back a few yards before taking off at a run and clearing the fence in a single leap.

“Great,” Jimmy said. “And us?”

I looked at him and nodded towards the nearest tree with limbs that overhung the fence.

“Climb a tree? You don't have a spell or something?”

“Always use the right tool for the job, apprentice mine.”

If Jimmy was going to become an Eye of Horus like his grandfather he was going to have to learn to use every tool in his arsenal and not always leap to magic.

We crossed Shore Drive, our destination apparent: an abandoned house stood amidst the trees on the shore of Harris Pond.

I reached out and stopped Jimmy.

“First, if I ever use the phrase ‘teaching moment’, you have my permission to withdraw your apprenticeship.”

“And second?”

“What do you hear?”

Jimmy closed his eyes for half a breath: “The wind, the water in the pond...nothing else. We’re in the presence of a predator.”

“What does that amazing sense of smell tell you?”

Jimmy’s sense of smell wasn’t quite as acute as Artie’s, but then Artie couldn’t smell magic.

“Someone cast an illusion nearby, recently.”

“Let’s be very careful, shall we?”

There was no question the house was abandoned, from its general state of disrepair to the overgrown front yard and boarded up windows on the first floor, it oozed an air of neglect.

Jimmy led us through the backyard, around to the far side of the house where a set of worn, bulkhead doors crouched in a tangle of weeds.

I motioned for Jimmy to stand back and approached the doors carefully, my eyes drifting out of focus as I searched with my Second Sight. I found nothing but a rusted and broken padlock cast into the weeds.

The door let out an angry squeal as I opened it. I saw Jimmy flinch at the sound, or maybe it was the cloying stench of decay that sprang from the cellar below.

“Artie, stay,” I said, pointing at the ground just outside the doors.

She looked at me, as if poised to argue, then dipped her head just once and sat.

“Ready?” I asked Jimmy.

“Sure, you go first.”

“Of course, I have the gun.”

We made our way down the stairs into darkness, but there was a light shining dimly at the far side of the cellar. I stopped at the foot of the stairs, held out my right hand, concentrated, whispered a quick incantation and three balls of dim red light appeared. I casually tossed them aloft and they took up position around us, giving us just enough light to see.

Crossing the cellar quietly, we found the source of the light: a single camp lantern casting a weak glow over the decayed and half devoured remains of a female corpse.

“I’m starting to get the feeling...” Jimmy whispered.

“That this might be a trap,” I finished for him.

Artie started barking outside and the bulkhead door slammed shut.

“No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die,” Jimmy dead-panned.

“Good one.”

And the ghouls let out a howl as they shredded the glamour that had hid them from us.

One of them lunged for me and grabbed the shotgun barrel, wrestling for control. My right whipped around in a quick circle and one of my lights leapt to my palm. I hurled it at the ghoul’s face and it grew to the size of basketball as it flew, before shattering against its head like a giant Christmas ornament.

It let go of the shotgun and I used it.

I spun towards Jimmy..

Two ghouls had closed with him; he’s brought up his staff defensively. The staff was a powerful artifact, left to him by his grandfather; it was coated in an octarine glow where the ghouls grabbed it, and though it burned their flesh they were unable to let go.

Jimmy’s eyes slipped half closed and a tremor shook him as he drew in a deep breath and held it. I could see tendrils of foul vapor starting to seep from between his closed lips.

Jimmy exhaled.

He'd taken in their rot, carried on the air, charged it with his gift of pneuma and spat it back at them.

They couldn't let go of the staff as cloud enveloped them, couldn't escape as it literally ate the flesh from their bones.

It was over in about fifteen seconds.

Jimmy lowered his staff and kicked a fingerbone off the toe of his boot.

The kid wasn't just cool: he was forged from cold iron. You can't teach that.

I heard Artie crash through the bulkhead doors and give out a deafening roar as she chased down whatever had closed it.

"Should we see if she needs a hand?" Jimmy asked.

"Sure," I replied. "You go first."

The End