

Bobby in Uniform

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Chapter 1

Ever since I was about five years old, about the time when most kids develop the tendency to show each other their God-given implement of peeing, their gender awareness a new and exciting thing to share with the world at large, I saw things. Strange, mysterious, butt-ugly and downright scary things that mostly lacked a body in any sense of the word. My mother insisted that there weren't such things as ghosts, except perhaps in fairy tales and pulp stories. Still, the apparitions wouldn't go away, and when shooed would blankly stare back in bewilderment.

I once told my second grade teacher Mrs. Resenbaum, God bless her Jewish soul that some scary looking ghost of a one-eyed person who might've been a pirate when alive

was ogling her in a distinctively inappropriate yet quite incorporeal way. Of course, I was only eight or so at the time so I just blurted, "Lookit! There's an old dead man with a beard full o' lice wants to grab your titties, Mrs. Resenbaum! He means bad, I tell ya!"

As the natural course of events ran through, I got spanked and she got raped by the ghost of a black (what they called a negro back then) miner. Or that's what the papers in Perry County Ohio reported that she insisted telling the good doctors at the Ridges asylum even while they fastened her straightjacket.

Call them what you will: ghosts, spirits, demons. Any name is just as good because it sometimes just doesn't do these creatures justice. Whatever you want to call them, I realised I had the dubious privilege of having some sort of affinity with the otherworld, the afterlife, the world of the spirits, if you will. Some would call it a gift, others would call it a curse. I certainly had no name for it. It was as natural to me as sight and the fact that old people smelled weird.

Around where I grew up though, Rendville, Ohio, seeing dead things meant

that I was just a boy with a wild imagination that needed some good ol' spanking with a wet plank, even if I were my parents' only child. That's what I mostly got every once so often when I couldn't keep my mouth shut 'cause "I just saw a mammoth's ghost burn down a zombie dinosaur with a blue slimy kind of fire, pops!". Saying things like that outside the family circles would evoke dismissive frowns and sometimes the sympathetic looks of neighbours and townfolk, and all in all it never failed to teach me the merits of silence.

My father was a miner, my uncle too; grandpa as well. Almost everyone in Rendville was a miner, except for the whores and the bartenders. And Mr. Calliburton, the grocer, who also owned the hardware store, the blacksmith's as well as the drug store and the butcher's: Mr. Calliburton called himself an entrepreneur, the good people of Rendville called him a bloodsucking demon to which I can attest, he verily wasn't so, at least in a literal fashion.

In a mining town, the thought of being a miner when I grew up felt just as natural as the ghosts and all the weird stuff that I alone

could see and talk to. There wasn't actually anything natural about talking to dead people or incorporeal creatures as most of them had pointed out on occasion, but still.

I began working in the mines before I had even finished high school, because as my father used to say, the times were hard and bread, lard and meat didn't just fall off the sky. It apparently had something to do about Roosevelt being such 'a god-damn two-nickel sunava-', which was as far as I had ever heard my father swear. God bless his soul, he did insist that I finished school, even if it meant working the evening shifts. Needless to say, in my spare time I did a lot of snoring and zero socializing. Which didn't matter much in a class of six students, half of them ridden with polio.

Once I got into the mining business, I got the hang of it really fast. All you had to do was keep digging and chipping stone and blowing up new tunnels all day long, six days a week, twelve hours a day. There was a lot of thin coal dust and sweat involved and most of the days I missed the sun, but it felt remarkably exciting for all the wrong reasons.

It wasn't just my hard-working, God-

fearing, swamp-mouthed colleagues in the coal extraction business that helped me ease into the job. It was the sheer number of dead things that would talk to me and try to claw and possess their way past me, the number of heads and assorted tails and life-threatening incorporeal body parts growing the deeper one delved into the bosom of the earth, that one being myself.

It was just as well though because I felt I had seen the shittiest, weirdest, most awful, God-forlorn things from the other side that I'd just become jaded. I became genuinely impervious to surprises, of any sort. I became imparted with a coolness that verged on stiff cold. It came handy, really.

When one of them creatures (a self-identified poltergeist) tried to possess a man, I gave it the stare and it just felt so bad about it the next day it got me candy (well, maggots, but that's kind of like candy for undead things and their ilk). When a group of banshees plotted about haunting the mines so they could turn them into a mini-golf club, I read them their rites, God bless my mother's soul, and that made them shrill and shriek and go back to playing poker with the undead dwarves re-

ally deep down in the crust (who, I might add, are a lot paler and a lot less hairy than when alive).

Yup. It was thanks to my mother that I could turn most evil spirits away with a prayer. Or a nod, a flick of the wrist and sometimes just breathing their way especially after having some of grandpa's beef jerky. It was my mother that took me to church on Sundays, insisted that I become an altar boy, and each and every time swear words came out of my mouth, it was her that made sure I had my share of pepper and read the Good Book aloud. And the Prayers. And the writings of Thomas Aquinas. And the latest *Opus Dei* journal. And generally every kind of book labeled Religion at the school library. She was adamant she'd raise a good boy even if it meant martyrdom. She used to say that "only God can save your soul, Robert Clovis Barhoe, you wicked devil's child!". I still can't believe how literally right she was without ever knowing it. I also miss her raspberry pie.

The whole reading books thing kind of grew on me little by little though; there were fascinating tales in every book about God. Floods, burning bushes, dead people coming

to life; I could relate to that easily. On Sundays, right after church, I would take my bike to New Lexington and get on the bus to Cambridge, which sadly wasn't a city with a lot of action, paranormally speaking. As a lonely poltergeist put it, 'Cambridge? Deader than a dodo, deader than me'. Once I realised it wasn't the prestigious site of knowledge and lore famous around the world that I had hoped for, I settled for the homely library of St. Benedict's School whose sole staff member at the time, a centenarian by the name of Mr. Galsworthy, was kind enough to leave at my disposal since the library was mostly empty on Sundays. The old man, God bless his soul, snored heavily. He died peacefully on the job too, having fallen asleep, much like every other day.

Life went on mostly uneventfully for some time. I worked in the mines and kept them from being haunted with very little effort. Sometimes I helped the occasional exorcist or vampire hunter that seemed to be at a loss around our parts (you won't believe how amateurish these kind of people are; they think vampires vampires, of all paranormal creatures! are nocturnal). In between, I discov-

ered old and exotic tomes at the library. Some contained surprisingly lewd pictures and others bored me to death with their Latin. I also picked up a couple of languages on the way: not only Latin, which seemed essential at first, but stuff that would nonetheless prove useful, like Tauric and Cimmeric. I generally had a blast back in those days, eating Sundaes on Sundays and exchanging thoughts and opinions on the medicinal and religious usage of hallucinogens from first-hand accounts of long-deceased native indians, i.e. their ghosts.

All that changed dramatically when we entered the war in '41. I know that the war started in '39, but nobody really gave a rat's ass about what happened in Europe (largely, nobody does even today except perhaps for the Normal Bureau). When the Japs hit us, the nation was shocked. Quite frankly, I wasn't: a leprechaun had invested heavily in rubber along with a Japanese cousin of his (in case you're wondering, they're called Kappa and they look like frogs or something equally slimy). It told me that the 'big fellas that talk funny' (the Japanese) were going to war and that 'pretty much anyone who reads a news-

paper can tell’.

Suffice it to say, from then on it’s history. The war and everything, the US having to pull out of the Philippines (which seemed like a pretty itneresting place without all the malaria people crucified themselves for fun), it made me feel kind of bad. What mostly got to me was that I wasn’t doing anything about it all. Nearly everyone else was caught up in this frenzy to get at the damn Japs; the girls loved the uniform and the government paid for everything, even the gun. It was the rad thing to do if you were a hot-blooded American; at least, I gathered as much. I had just finished school and me and the creatured in the mines had come to an understanding. I finally decided to enlist in the Army, because I always had a disdain about the sea, it being a big, salty, flat blue nothing that reeked of fish and people certainly always peed in if they had to.

I remember my mother was all teary-eyed when they waved me goodbye at the train station. My father looked rather thoughtful and reserved; I later learned he had been terribly constipated that day. He did warn me not to get killed or do anything equally stupid be-

cause I would have to make up for all the shifts I'd lose in the mines when the war was over. Grandpa was there too and surprisingly enough a long list of long ago deceased members of my family, going all the way back to the first Barhoe that set foot on American soil, the honourable Jedediah Pontifer Barhow Sr. (supposedly a judge at a time when the judiciary system consisted of a set of scales and a few coins). It struck me as heartening that they all looked very emotional as far as dead people went.

I'd never been farther than Cambridge, and I expected the whole trip would be sort of an adventure; I hadn't looked up the map though, wanting everything to be an exciting surprise. The train took us all the way to Camp Millard, Bucyrus. That took about a couple of hours, which wasn't much and it got me thinking why bother with the train at all. I guess it was because the U.S. Army was paying for a train ticket.

When I arrived at the boot camp, I was quickly disillusioned about what it meant to serve one's country: at first glance, it seemed that wars were fought in the latrines and the kitchens, while winning probably involved a

lot of yelling and cussin' for no particular reason. The army had failed to turn me into a man (whatever that saying implied I never got to five miles of a woman) and instead of shooting Japs or Krauts I was polishing boots and making sure I was clean-shaved, every damn morning. Boredom was a major issue; I rarely if ever saw dead or undead things during basic. A passing banshee had similar troubles; there was no point in trying to drive mentally unstable people crazy.

After a month of basic, I wasn't exactly itching for a fight, though a lot of my buddies were. The whole gun thing seemed to fit them nicely and many commented on how awesome the sound of the M1 Garand standard-issued rifle was. My personal opinion which was always a bad thing to share was that it was too loud and too heavy. A couple of Petersburg veterans' ghosts were always to be found at gun practice and insisted that I should be thanking God for that rifle; later on, I made similar statements. They were also very keen to admit that Lee was actually a nice guy and not at all uppity, especially for a dead Confederate General.

What started me on the very strange path

I would take in the war and later on, was my specialty training. I was picked practically at random for specialty training as a signal corpsman. My squad leader had remarked, on paper no less which made it sacrosanct for the Army, that "Pvt. Barhoe's a wiry fella". Someone in Personnel probably thought that he was referring to the wireless radio, so I was trained as a radio operator. Sadly, that involved polishing boots, shaving every single morning, cussin' and yelling just like basic training, the difference being that I was shown to a radio and told that "that thing with the dials and all, that's a reey-dee-o".

Through divine providence if nothing else, the radio came with a manual which was easy to familiarise myself with. I soon became an expert in communications, direction finding and signals intelligence, but no-one knew that because no-one had told me to use the radio, because we hadn't seen combat yet. Every NCO and officer always kept asking if I had any idea how much a radio cost, to which I promptly replied they had to ask battalion S4 for that; that earned me the nickname of 'Wireass', apparently a portmanteau of 'Wireless' and 'Wise Ass'. To this day, the reason

eludes me.

It had been nearly three months since I had left home and joined up and a look at the news made me realise that we were losing the war without a lot of effort. I wasn't all that crazed about guns and explosions (or radios for that matter) but people getting killed for nothing felt wrong. It made think that the sooner the war ended, we'd all go home. I was surprised to learn the whole strategy of the war was based on the same premise; it was as if noone really wanted to do it, but doing it was the only way to make it stop. It sounded a bit crazy but everyone, even the dead people I asked said it made perfect sense if you looked past that.

All in all, I was itching to actually get in a fight and show them Japs what men were made of (war always provided opportunities to do that literally) as did most of the boys, although I really felt bad for them and wished there was some other way other than blowing each other up. The concensus among the veterans' ghosts was that it'd be pretty useful to talk about these things while one was still alive. On the upside, they suggested there was no language barrier in the afterworld so

I thought maybe I could ask a Jap about his thoughts on the subject. It'd prove somewhat difficult talking to the dead while trying not to become one yourself.

My feelings of expectation turned into excitement after the news about the battles at Coral Sea and Midway. It had been six months since the war had started and all I could think of was that the Navy was getting all the action (even though the sailor's outfit is actually rather overrated in terms of manliness it includes wearing a sort of towel and a scarf). I was beginning to think that I had had just about enough of sending fake radio signals for practice to the room next door, when the higher-ups deemed that our time had come. We were being deployed in the Pacific and every man in the unit was properly ecstatic that we were about to get shot at.

I was shipped along with the rest of the 79th Signals Battalion to Hawaii, in preparation for some kind of operation against the Japs, codenamed Winter River (which to my resentment, did not involve snowmen, snowballs, or any form of snow other than the unfrozen variety: sea water).

Now, I know that most people think that

the Marine Corps lifted most of the weight in the battles in the Pacific and while that might be true, the Army saw its good share of fighting too. The Aussies were in a real bind at that time: if one looked past the fact that they inhabited a dry prison island, they weren't all that bad and we certainly had to stop the Japs from turning the Australians into a fish-eating people. Their beer already had all the drinkable qualities of urine; raw fish would only make it worse. So we were going to help them defend their sand, and that somehow involved Papua New Guinea. I know it sounds like some kind of Japanese brand of bad whisky, but it's an island. Well, half of the island of New Guinea, which has nothing to do with Guinea which is in Africa and things like that always got me curious. Geography, just like dead people and paranormal incorporeal creatures in general, usually makes little or no sense at all.

Of all the men in the 79th Signals Battalion, I was the only one with any knowledge of Papuan. In fact, there were just three men in the whole U.S. Army that knew the language and seven who had heard of the island (including General MacArthur, of course). My

commanding officer told me right off the bat he thought I was lying and I was just 'trying to get some half-ass station somewhere off the grid, idly boning topless natives, eating mangoes and sunbathing drunk as a skunk'. He told me that even though he was a God-fearing man, God wouldn't be able to save me when he'd come looking for me when I'd be found wanting. For lack of a better word, it seemed to me he was jealous out of his mind, but without good reason. According to weather reports and brochure photos, the tropics seemed quite inviting.

I was sent to Milf's Bay on Papua New Guinea, attached to a company of Sea Bee engineers. For a couple of weeks, it felt again as if the war was just something we read about on the papers. The fact that we were all wearing army green, working in shifts, doing sentry duty and sleeping in tents seemed like a huge, funny coincidence.

When the bombs and the artillery shells started dropping right on top of us, whatever the fun remained in the soldiering affair started to leak like an old man's bladder. The amount of men praying in an otherwise awfully scenic beach somewhere in the South

Pacific rose sharply while being shelled by the Japanese Imperial Navy (and I'm not talking about seashells). The whole debacle had me frozen stiff like a rabbit in front of a pair of headlights; I had a moment of revelation at that time, while we mostly sat around, dugged in deep waiting for our ears to stop buzzing, our heads still attached if we could help it.

I decided I would not idly sit around and wait to get blown up. I had to do something but what I was good at was talking with dead things, magical beasts, creatures from other planes of existence; that wasn't normal stuff, like shooting guns. I had no idea how this could prove helpful, but then I overheard my Captain on the wire with HQ: a relief force was on the way, but they had to know the exact location and disposition of the enemy forces to have any chance at being successful. They were looking for some people crazy enough to do some scouting and a radio operator to pass on the intelligence as it was being gathered time was of the essence.

That was me. I volunteered screaming over the top of my lungs to be heard; my Captain's initial thought was I'd gone native and insane. In a way, that was to be expected

from someone who knew Papuan, which in fact are about eight hundred different languages. The same night, during a lull from the naval bombardment, our make-shift scout platoon moved out into the jungles of Papua. Everyone complained about pulling the short straw, and how things could not be any more FUBAR. It was understandable; no-one liked to volunteer involuntarily.

Green like the jungle we were staggering through, watching out for mines, poisonous snakes and the occasional group of jackanapes in heat, I got lucky and happened onto an ancient spirit of the jungle forest by the name of Jack, named by a castaway a long time ago. Jack manifested himself in all his glory, amidst swirling swaths of light and a host of entranced animals; he'd taken on the form a ghostly pale half-man, half-goat, wearing one of those exotic wooden masks but nothing like underpants. The sight was kind of spooky to the unwary.

Half the guys started shooting blindly and running off into random directions, setting off tripwires and mines and getting shot at, while the rest pretty much passed out. I introduced myself and told him he'd want to tone it down

a bit in the future. I explained the precarious position we were in and how we didn't stand a chance if left to our own devices. I asked him if he could make the rounds on my behalf, just a look-see without showing off. He was happy to give me a hand; he kept complaining about the terrible noise the Japs' guns were making and how he missed the good old days when he did practical jokes to half-mad scurvy-ridden pirates, mostly involving illusions of loot and pointy, sharp bamboo sticks in deep holes.

Jack proved to be a treasure in hiding; with one sweep of his, in less than an hour, he'd seen everything there was to see on the island and off the shore. He'd also overheard invaluable enemy communications, including sake warming instructions and navy codes of the latest, Nazi-enabled Japanese encryption technology.

I hurriedly transmitted the most essential stuff to HQ, and then roused the rest of the platoon. I assured them it was safe and I tried to sound convincing enough in that we had been gassed by the Japs with some hallucinogen. I also tried to explain that myself and the rest of the MIAs had managed

to get a fairly good picture of the surrounding Japanese forces and all the intel we could ask for, before everyone else tripped on a mine, and blew up to smithereens, all at the same time.

It was an explanation noone dared to challenge; most thought that the MIAs probably went AWOL and that I made everything up, which was a good thing since that was a fine way to pretend we did everything they asked us to do. When we got back early in daybreak, I compiled everything Jack had told me into an intelligence report which I simply dumped on the command headquarter's payroll officer's desk, the one desk where nothing goes unnoticed for long. Somehow, someone, was that desperate that blindly believed everything in that report was true. And that heppened to turn the whole battle in our favor.

A couple of days later the Japs had eased on the pressure after the Army Air Force struck key troop concentrations and the Navy finally got us some cover, urging the Japanese fleet components to turn tail and run. Jack had left me a 'miss you' note in the form of an obscenely shaped mango and a anthropo-

morphic coconut; even for an ancient spirit, he seemed a bit disturbed and a lot more disturbing for my taste. It was with that particular mango in hand that I received an order to fly out immediately back to Brisbane for a debriefing. The order was signed by General MacArthur himself who stated in his postscriptum that he'd personally flay me to the bone if I failed to explain how I managed to compile that particular report that was key to winning that battle.

It was just then that I really wished with all my might that I were safely back home in Rendville and forced to eat lots of pepper for all the bad words that spewed forth from my mouth. I was in deep, deep trouble and that was opinion was only reinforced when I saw that a Colonel from General MacArthur's staff had been sent to escort me. It felt more like a pretty pissed off guard for most of the way, though I caught the Colonel looking at me from time to time with mixed feelings of compassion and awe. He never spoke a word to me. Perhaps, he was feeling constipated for the whole flight.

A few hours later I set foot in Australia; my initial reaction was a profound surprise

and joy at the fact that civilisation seemed to continue to exist. I immediately experienced a new sense of wonder seeing that not everything in the world was painted or tinted green (though I must admit, Brisbane on a war footing did look greener than usual). The third surprise came after we had landed. The Colonel handed me over to a person of dubious character whose exact manner of affiliation with the Army and the world at large eludes me to this day.

I was standing on the tarmac, dressed in my best pressed khaki battle dress, squinting at the blistering sun. A short fellow with an abnormally pale complexion approached me, wearing aviation sunglasses and a thin smile on a crooked face underneath a brylcreem hairdo.

“G’day mate,” he said casually looking the other way, at the planes circling above. He was dressed in a loose shirt and pants, the most notable thing on him a cork hat featuring a ridiculous number of corks.

“It’s actually five in the afternoon, but good day to you too,” I replied, feeling unusually awkward for no apparent reason. Something felt really odd about him. I only hoped

it was just because he was Australian.

“Lookit mate, I know it’s arvo, but she’ll be apples. Let’s get some amber fluid in ye first, eh?”

I didn’t have the faintest of ideas what he was talking about. He just smiled congenially and led the way. I felt instantly compelled, even magnetised to follow him, though something kept telling me things were off by quite a bit. We kept on walking towards the exit in silence, and he kept on throwing weird looks at me. His sunglasses made the uncanny feeling uncannier.

“What’s that amber fluid you need?” I asked somehow lamely.

“Oh, that’s for you, mate. I dunneed any of that. Though I’ve heard Annie’s is a bit bodgy, full of bogans and bitzers,” he said and waved our way right past the airfield’s gate guard and onto a waiting Dodge sporting a large set of bars in addition to the usual bumper. I followed right behind as if in trance. I managed to ask him, with a befuddled, wavering voice:

“Just who are you? I’m supposed to meet with General MacArthur.”

He smiled and only answered half of the

question:

"I know mate, we're just stopping by a boozer."

"What for?"

"There's no sprung in givin' the Big Smoke a Captain Cook now, eh?" he said and started the car.

"I can't understand half of what you're saying," I said and it was the God's honest truth.

"Say, that's right! You're a seppo, ye bastard! Well, it's a spiffy you're not driving then or we might've gotten ourselves a bluey or even a bingle!"

"Could you please speak English?"

"Right-o, don't get mad as a cut snake cobber, HQ's within cooee of Ekka."

"Do you understand me, at all? Nod if you do. I need to see General MacArthur."

"You're all so true blue about yakka, aren't you? I'll just do a yewy over there then and we'll rock up," he said and pointed at a U-turn section of the road.

"I've never felt so lonely in my life. How do you people do it?"

"Oh, you know, just give them flies the Aussie salute, grab a tallie, have some tea,

root the cook, have a blue. The usual.”

“Right, tea. Can’t do it without tea. Are we having any of that?” I asked him with a mounting sense of disquiet.

“Too early for that, digger. Hope you haven’t gone troppo, have you?”

“Of course not,” I said and I still had no idea what he was talking about other than that we weren’t having tea.

He smiled widely and the feeling of terror was intensified. I was beginning to think I was about to get violently murdered somewhere behind a bush, when we arrived at a non-descript building without any guardposts or the like. It seemed innocuous enough to believe the man when he said:

“Let’s get inside, shall we?”

I almost felt like kissing him, but a sense of manliness made me refrain. That, as well as the assorted skulls, sigils, statuettes and icons that lined up the entrance corridor. There was a rich tapestry that looked very familiar and old adorning the walls; something about Norsemen and ships. A waft of air smelled like candlewax and goat’s cheese.

I followed the weird Australian as if enthralled by the austentious decor. I was cer-

tain I could smell incense. After a couple of inexplicable turns I swear I could also hear the sound of chanting, perhaps even some kind of opera. I was surprised - I mean, it was Australia after all. Before long, we reached the elevator and things became a bit more than simply weird when what looked like to be the definitive version of an Australian weirdo turned into a paranormal weirdo in the blink of an eye.

The Australian fellow smiled with a very prominent set of fangs, a deathly-pale complexion and a very crisp, sharp and slick hairdo in a V-shape. Apart from the fact that the guy now looked pretty dead and going bald at the same time, there was an inescapable amount of worry that came with the realisation that he was a vampire.

I think I freaked out mildly and pointed a finger of warning to him:

“I’m very low on iron. My blood will make you real sick. Plus, I’m sure I had some garlic sometime in my life. Pretty sure about that, so you better watch it.”

The vampire smiled congenially as he pressed the call button for the elevator and replied in a courteous manner that seemed

to postpone the bloodsucking until after the proper introductions had been made.

“Fret not, Bob. I’m on your side.”

His voice had a mildly sticky, nasal quality and a European crispiness about it. He was definitely not Australian at least until he was again.

“Which side is that? The Allies?”

“Oh? Ah, humans. Looks like you could use some briefing,” he said and the elevator doors slid open in cue. I followed him inside with some level of apprehension. He pushed a button labeled “DO NOT PUSH” and the elevator doors closed. We started going down.

“What was that Australian act for? You aren’t really Australian. I mean, you’re not even human; you’re a vampire.”

“No, that’s true. The act is for the locals mostly, as well as everyone else who is not used to vampires. Unlike yourself,” he said and nodded approvingly.

“Well I haven’t really met one up close - I’m mostly used to the incorporeal undead,” I said and licked my lips nervously. “I’m surprised we’re actually having this sort of civilized conversation. I’d expect something more.. Well, gory,” I said and shrugged.

“I suppose it’s time I introduced myself properly. I’m The Vampire. Count Vlad, at your service,” he said bowing slightly even as some light Vivaldi started playing.

“Vlad? Vlad Tepes, the Count Dracula?” I said with a frown of disbelief. The first hints of a smirk formed on my lip.

“The same,” he said, obviously enjoying the effect his name had on people, though I wasn’t sure he was able to socialise much especially with that awfully oily hair.

“Why am I so calm about all this?” I asked, the question welling up from deep inside me, a slight tremor in my hands.

“Oh, it must be the aura. Can’t turn it off,” he said and shook his head, pushing the last button on the panel.

“That’s right, that’s how you captivate your victims.. You’re a living legend you know,” I said with an awestruck expression. I’d met ghosts and spirits and their likes before, but not someone famous.

“That’s not entirely true,” he said as the elevator wailed and grinded its way down.

“You’re just being modest,” I said grinning like an idiot, to which the Count replied:

“I mean, I am undead. Not living, otherwise I’d be dead by now. Does that make sense to you?”

“Curiously enough, it does,” as I said as I nodded to myself furiously. I cleared my throat before asking what really bugged me. The Count’s aura would not simply cancel that question:

“Are you going to suck me dry or not?”

The Count looked at me like I had said something extremely distasteful and borderline incoherent. He simply shook his head with a frown and while he tried not to make much of a fuss about it, he put an extra couple of steps between us, however unlikely that could be possible inside the confines of an elevator.

“I have this thing about personal space,” he explained which at the time seemed quite reasonable for someone who purportedly slept in a coffin. It turned out later he had considered filing for sexual harassment and that he actually never slept at all since he had no need for it being undead and all that.

“I meant my blood, suck me dry of my blood, like vampires are supposed do.”

“Oh, that!” he said with a sudden feeling

of relief before he added:

“That’s just a common misconception. You see, it dates back to when I tortured and brutally murdered people for a living. It’s just a myth, really.”

“Really? Vampires don’t drink blood?”

“Good grief, no! All that iron makes it tangy. We’re not vermin you know,” he said, looking mildly annoyed.

“I see,” I replied and the next moment the elevator stopped. The doors opened lazily and I saw a large round hall, brightly lit and spacious. There was a large seal on the marble floor that depicted an owl with a skull in its claws, weird symbols I’d never seen before drawn around in a circle and the words “Occidere eam igni”, which simply put said “Kill it with fire”. The next thing that caught my attention was all the spirits and ghosts zip-ping about, dutifully pushing carts filled with stacks of what seemed to be paper reports. They barely spared a look my way and looked like in need of a long vacation, preferably not in the realm of the living. There were regular, living people of flesh and blood as well, but they were wearing army uniforms. The striking thing was they all looked exactly the

same. Before I had a chance to ask who all these things and people were, Vlad took me gently by the arm and told me:

“Walk with me please. Just be careful not to step on the sigils on the floor,” said Vlad pointing a finger to the weird symbols.

“Why is that?” I asked him as I walked right behind him, taking in the surroundings, otherwise dull except for a large poster of a voluptuous pinup girl on the far wall.

“They might be trapped,” he said smiling nonchalantly.

“Might be?” I asked incredulously even while my eyes traced the floor with unerring precision.

“Could be? Is could be the right conditional?” he asked seemingly unphased by my bewilderment.

“You’re joking, right?”

“No, we simply don’t know. We build this place around the sigils. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find volunteers when demonic artifacts come into play?”

“Demonic? As in, pertaining to demons? Evil demons?”

“Most certainly. Just look at how ugly these scribbles are.”

A growling voice suddenly boomed around the large hall as if from a set of unseen speakers or some godly power. The voice had all the qualities one would expect by bears trained in classical theater. It brought to mind benevolent giants, living waterfalls and most of the portrayals of Almighty God.

“Stop messing with the boy’s head Tepes and walk into my office. Don’t fly like last time. Nobody likes a showoff.”

“Yes,” replied Vlad with some effort.

“Yes, what?” asked the voice with authority. Vlad looked visibly uncomfortable, his lips twitching.

“Yes, sir,” said Vlad and led me down the hall, in front of a door with a strange name written across it: Maj. Gen. A. Pendragon.

“Is that who I think it says he is?”

“I’m afraid so,” said Vlad and knocked on the door perfunctorily.

“Enter!” came the answer vibrantly to a less than full-bodied knock and we promptly did so and stepped inside. Seeing the stars on the burly General’s uniform made me salute briskly out of habit. He looked up from a file he was signing momentarily and returned the salute crisply. I couldn’t help noticing

the General's bushy, red beard; it was like a bush was sitting on the man's face. Even though beards had been against regulations since the Civil War, it somehow seemed completely, perhaps even fatally wrong to point that out.

"Sir, Private Robbert Barhoe, reporting," I said flatly and stood at attention. The General did not bother with me; instead his vehement stare was squarely aimed at Vlad. He afforded him less than half an eye. Vlad did not bother to salute, report or otherwise acknowledge the General's seniority, if not his existence at all. He was instead looking at a rather green and otherwise unassuming office plant as if it contained the Universe's biggest secret (which oddly, wasn't very far from the truth since that pot plant turned out to be a seedling from the Tree of Life).

"Tepes, when you enter this office I expect you to salute and report, just like any other enlisted man and officer," said the General with a calm that his gleaming eyes belied.

"At ease," he said and flicked a wrist at me. Still addressing the vampire, he told him:

"Pick up Excalibur and my laundry on your way out. Be careful, I hate stains and

smudges. I just had it polished.”

Vlad had kept his quiet, as well as his eyes shut. He breathed deeply through flaring nostrils and seemed to consider a proper response. Before he could do so, the General said briskly:

“Very well, that will be all. Now buzz off.”

Vlad nodded, made some kind of hand gesture towards the General’s vicinity, covered himself with his cape and disappeared in a puff of smoke as suddenly and sharply as in a bad, silent horror film. The General muttered something under his breath that sounded more like a gripy cat with a furball in its throat and turned to me with a somewhat forced smile.

“Now then,” he said and examined me with his stare for barely a moment. It was a very uncomfortable and indeed unpleasant moment. He then motioned me to sit down in a chair in front of his desk. I complied without a second’s hesitation.

“Vlad’s a bit weird. He has a penchant for theatrics and drama. I hear he likes to go to barbers’ shops just to freak them out.”

“Why?” I asked furrowing my brow and snapped my fingers a moment later. “Oh, be-

cause of the reflection,” I said and the General nodded before asking me without further ado in a dead pan voice:

“How did you decode the Japanese transmissions?”

I was at a loss; I tried to stall by breathing, pouting my lips and looking deathly pale and ill, all to no avail. I was still thinking there was no easy way to explain to a US Army Major General that a spirit told me everything; most would assume I was drunk. Then again I had somehow forgotten all about the vampire, the underground headquarters filled with incorporeal creatures and a bearded King Arthur in uniform.

“I’ll tell you how: magic. There’s no other way. And I know, because that’s how we’ve been doing it,” said the General, replying to his question that had proven to be a rhetorical one.

“Well.. I’m not sure, sir. I mean, I seem to have this natural ability,” I said with somewhat of a shameful look. The General nodded and replied with a broad smile:

“Oh, we know.”

I couldn’t help but ask rather lamely:

“You do sir?”

“Ever since you showed up for basic.”

He pulled out a file from his desk and showed me: There were pictures of me in the mess hall, operating a radio, even in the can. There were reports, psych evaluations. I even glimpsed a papal seal somewhere in there, which kind of freaked me out.

“But how, sir?” I asked him, already flipping through a report in hand that read “PENUMBRA/SCI”. I had no idea what that meant but it sounded ominous and very hush-hush.

“That banshee you spoke to? She works for us, screening sensitives,” said General Pen-dragon while stroking his beard pensively.

“Sensitives?” I queried and pouted my lips confused.

“Mad folk,” replied the General briskly.

“Excuse me?”

“Witches,” he said and looked irritated at the mere sound of the word.

“I’ve lost you, sir.”

It was the truth. I still had a very vague idea about what he was saying and what was happening. Perhaps it had something to do with the non-regulation beard. Or maybe it was just what Australia was like.

“People like you, Bobby,” he said in a quiet, fatherly voice.

“Radio operators?”

“You know what I’m talking about. It’ll be alright. Have you seen our motto, Bobby?” he asked, his bulging arms crossed on his desk.

“Yes sir. Hard to miss.”

He instantly became agitated, a red flush erupting across his face as if I had made a bad, raunchy joke.

“You didn’t step on any of those sigils, did you?”

“I thought that was a joke, sir,” I said with an awkward smile.

“No, it’s not. We really don’t know if they’re trapped or not,” he said before shaking his head, seemingly relaxing a bit. He went on and asked me:

“Anyway, do you know what ‘Occidere eam igni’ means, Bobby?”

“Kill it with fire?”

His face exploded with hearty laughter:

“Of course you do! I just read the report on that, actually. Fascinating stuff, Latin. Never got the hang of them.”

Then his face turned suddenly grim and dark, as if chiseled out of granite.

“Do you understand what that means? What we’re dealing with here, Bobby?”

“Not really, no sir.”

“Flammability and incorporeal creatures, my dear boy. Evil,” he intoned and his mouth twitched as if hair had been caught in his teeth.

“You mean the Japs, sir?” I asked, hoping things would be simple enough and quite normal to deal with. General Pendragon though answered stiffly:

“I mean Satan and his minions in all their forms.”

“You mean the Nazis, right?”

It was pretty common to call Hitler Satan. For all I knew at the time, he probably was. Hope, as I’ve seen myself since that time on numerous occasions, always dies last.

“They’re just pawns, lad. The war we fight with guns and bombs, that’s just a delaying action. Something to keep the men busy,” said the General as he rummaged about in a drawer without much success in finding what he was looking for.

“It’s doing pretty darn well, sir, if I may say so,” which a logical answer if one took into account that the war involved almost ev-

everyone; it was called World War II after all even though Sweden managed to stay out of it. It must have been something in the fjords, or perhaps the herds of moose that made the country unattractive for bloodletting.

"Death happens eventually, son. People die all the time," said the General as he found a pipe which he promptly began to clean.

"You're still alive though, sir," I said, without realising I was practically talking back to a Major General, not to mention the immortal, mythical King of the Britons in the flesh.

His gaze suddenly went out of focus. He looked distraught suddenly, sad even. His voice had a stentorian quality.

"I was chosen by the Lady of the Lake. Since that day, I've carried a great burden, an enormous responsibility. I've toiled, bled and suffered and seen the ages go past while all the same, we fought the good fight. Do you know how many times I've wished I was a mere mortal, son?"

"I couldn't dare guess," I said, which was a truism.

"None! Immortality is the second best thing that's happened to me," he said with a wild-eyed smile as he filled his pipe.

“Of course, sir,” I said while I did not dare ask what was the first best thing.

“I’ll tell it to you straight, laddie. I want you to join this fight against the real forces of evil. I know you have the capacity, the natural talent for it. I think you’ll grow the guts. But do you really have what it takes?” he said as he leaned forward, pipe in hand, his face completely obscuring my view.

“What’s that sir?” I asked hoping I wouldn’t really have to answer.

“Are you pure of heart?”

I did not know how to answer that question. I really didn’t and noone had actually asked me that, not even on church Sundays. Thankfully, General Pendragon answered it himself:

“Of course you are! It’s probably the reason you’re still sane,” he said before he paused for a moment to ask me again with a slightly worried look:

“You’re not insane, are you?”

“No, I don’t think so, sir. The doctors would have disqualified me when I volunteered.”

“You volunteered?” asked the General with a gravely voice full of disbelief and an

impossibly lopsided frown.

“Yes, sir.”

It was the first time I had seen a Major General and a legendary King unable to find the words. At length he managed to speak again with some reticence in his voice.

“Well, I’m sure it was a spur of the moment thing. A small matter,” he said and cleared his throat. “Do you want to fight evil in its deepest, darkest, purest form Bobby?”

“Honestly, sir? Are you asking me to volunteer for something?”

I suddenly felt very self-conscious about volunteering for stuff crazier than shooting people dead.

“No, you already did, so the joke’s on you if you think about it. Can’t have a say in the matter. You leave tomorrow for training. Vlad has your orders,” he said in typical army business fashion and lit a pipe.

“Sir, if I may be so bold: What will I be training for? I mean, I’m just a signals corpsman.”

“You’ll still be a signals corpsman. You’ll just be special,” he said with a wide grin and a puff of smoke.

“In what way, sir?” I asked fearing for the worst. And General Arthur Pendragon delivered it:

“In every inconceivable way.”

Chapter 2

I was looking outside the cockpit window, the red and brown sand of the Australian outback passing by without really doing so. No kangaroos in sight; just a lot of sand, the kind that grinded its way into everything, the kind of sand cheap pottery was made of. It was early September, which was springtime for Australia. That didn't mean much for most folks though; I'm pretty sure the man who invented calendars was a national hero. Australians only knew snow was a frozen form of water, and that was a vague notion in itself. If it wasn't for all the snow cones, the word would probably have been struck out of the dictionaries as something the British came up to scare people away from the Isles.

I was sitting inside a C-47 Skytrain, the

workhorse of the Allied Forces when it came to aerial transport. I'd flown in a plane before, and I knew they weren't supposed to buck and sway this way and that every once so often. I thought trains offered a bumpy ride, but the Dakota was a proper shaker. For the most part sitting down on a pair of ropes disguised as a chair wasn't inviting. So I spent my time in the cockpit, snug in the middle between the two pilots who were curiously smiling every inch of the way even though there was nothing to smile at except clear blue skies and red dirt all around.

We were flying to an undisclosed location. I hoped it wasn't disclosed to me alone and that the pilots actually knew what they were doing. I carried a sealed folder containing my orders; it was not to be opened under any circumstances until I arrived at my destination under pain of death and a whole set of curses on my soul. Real, original curses; the ones that really worked and stuck beyond death.

Having an idea about how blant the after-life really was - at least for most ordinary dead folk - (there's no beer, for one), I had no desire to step onto the other side just for curiosity's sake. But noone said anything about were I

was going to train, and quite frankly, I hoped it had nothing to do with Australia. Wherever we were going to land, I knew it was a military place because the cargo bay was filled with cases of spam and beer, the raw basics needed for survival of a soldier.

“Where exactly are we going?” I shouted to the pilots, hoping I’d make myself heard over the roaring, buzzing piston engines. They never answered or even really acknowledged me; they just kept flying and smiling as if they were lounging at the comfort of their home with a fine cigar in one hand and a glass of quality brandy in the other. I decided to ask them again, pretty sure they were simply somewhat absent-minded, absorbed by the great Australian outback.

“Fellas,” I said smiling myself, “Where do you drop me off? You do know you’re supposed to drop me off?”

Still, no answer came. Just the same sparkling smiles, on the same fair-haired, flush-red faces, their eyes hidden behind the opaque aviation glasses. Flying caps on, headphones lying about their necks. They were just flying, and it should’ve struck me as odd in the first place, but I figured that’s what Aus-

tralian pilots do. I must've guessed it was pretty hard to keep flying straight with no point of reference in the ground other than the occasional anthill.

I was beginning to think they really, genuinely, didn't know I was on board their plane.

I tapped the co-pilot lightly on the shoulder. He didn't look very responsive, and just kept on smiling. I nudged him a little and still nothing; I bent closer and then I saw he was actually just sitting there, his hands wobbling on the stick. "Are you okay?" I asked him and he kept on smiling uncannily. I turned around and saw the same kind of smile on the pilot. I touched their faces in a very creepy way, feeling their skin. It made all the right creases and wrinkles but I had a very strange feeling they weren't real; after all it had happened to me before.

Over the constant, monotone buzzing of the engines I heard a distinctive sound, something between a call, a whisper and a whistle. Cooee.

I've heard it in a bar I think, right before I left Melbourne. I was pretty sure everything it wasn't just my idea because that would have

meant I'd gone crazy a long time ago and being on a plane without being the pilot was bad timing for going haywire.

Then I heard it again. Cooee.

And then I turned around and saw this big, fat owl standing upside down from a cockpit railing, its head turned uncannily backwards as if someone had screwed it on wrong.

"Cooee ya bloody yank," the owl said and I must admit that had never happened to me before, even with the dead ones. I did not know how to properly address a talking owl so I opted for the usual Australian greeting. "G'day, owl mate!" I shouted trying to sound cheery but the owl made a funny face, lost its footing and wobbled in the air for a second or so as it fell on the cockpit floor, flapping its wings.

The next moment or so it was back up in the air, constantly flapping its wings and twitching its head in what appeared to be agony. When it firmly clasped the railing on the cockpit ceiling, it made sure that I saw how it turned its head around slowly and told me with a raspy voice:

"Don't yell. Ever again."

I simply nodded in bewilderment and before I even tried to say anything the owl spoke again:

“I’m not an owl. I’m a minka. Do you know what a minka is?”

“Some kind of bird?” I professed ungainly.

“You’re a bright lad, aren’t ya? I’ll have you know, whenever people do get to see us, which is a very rare occasion, certain death is about to follow.”

“Whose death?” I asked somewhat oblivious to the bizzare nature of the encounter.

“Now, that’s a good question that I’ve wondered about myself many times. What I do know is, people certainly die, and I can see it right before they do,” the weird, owl-like bird said sounding positively proud of the fact.

“Oh, that’s something we have in common them. I can see dead people after they die. Dead things in general, actually,” I countered, trying to sound rather professional about it.

“Like roadkill?” the bird said and fluttered its wings while its head twisted in an impossible angle to look at me directly.

“No, uhm, much more like ghosts. But, if you don’t mind me asking, who are you?”

“Kooee,” it said and perched itself smugly right behind the co-pilots chair.

“I can see you now, no need to call out for me.”

“Kooee, with a capital ‘K’. The name’s Kooee, ya billabong,” it retorted sounding somewhat miffed.

“Oh, right. Bobby Barhoe,” I replied and waved a hand, not knowing exactly which part of a talking bird I was supposed to shake.

“I know who you are,” the minka bird said and I almost thought it was sniggering.

“Oh, you do? I thought you might be just passing by,” I retorted, which was almost truthful at least at the start.

“A minka bird does not simply pass by. And then again, I can’t fly at this altitude. Bones are too heavy,” it said and sounded a bit morose.

“I see,” I said while below us the great outback sped at a constant, somewhat lame speed, without a distinguishing feature in sight. “And how is it that you know me, may I ask?” I said, my inquiry having all the tell-tale signs of a yet-to-be-opened can of worms.

“Do you think these blokes are flying the plane?” the bird asked and folded its wings

behind its back, uncannily like a person with his hands behind his back.

“Aren’t they the pilots? They’ve got flying caps and jackets and glasses and all that,” I said, while part of me wished one of them would be so kind to speak for themselves.

“No, they’re homunculi. For appearances’ sake only. Just so we can blend in with the rest.”

It all made some sense, eventually. At least the mute part could’ve been answered in a more common fashion.

“Ah, homunculi. Fake people then,” I said in what the bird probably thought was too comfortable a voice. It gauged with its marble-like eyes as if I were prey and it was deciding whether or not I was poisonous enough to avoid.

“Well you still got a lot to learn,” it said somewhat derisively and added, “I’ll be your escort. Someone thought it’d be a good idea to have something that could fly along. I don’t really see why it couldn’t have been something equally unsuited to the task. Like an aardvark. Or an armadillo,” the minka added with a sense of displeasure in its voice.

“I see. Do you know what I’ll be training

on?" I asked, trying to veer the discussion to whatever point could at least provide some meaningful answers.

"Everything. I'm sure it will involve a lot of guns and swearing, yelling, bad breath, that kind of thing. You army types love that, don't you?"

"I'm not exactly the army type," I countered.

"How's that?" the bird said, followed by a single flap of its wings. The homonculi bobbed up and down slowly, much like cardboard figures on a spring.

"I volunteered," I said brightly and smiled thinly.

"I see. A nut," the bird said and decided to sit upright-down, its legs clutching a piece of metal on a roof filled with switches and levers.

"Where?" I said, looking around the cockpit confused.

"You. I meant you," the bird said and almost extended a wing.

"I thought that you might.. Never mind."

"Right. Now we're up in the air, I'm allowed, I guess that's the proper verb, to brief

you. Of course, if something unruly happens along the way, I'd be forced to kill you."

"Kill me? Why is it that there's so much killing and death involved in this business? And I thought the Japs were out to get me," I replied and was really beginning to get down by all the implied death without a even a single shot ever being heard.

"Well, there's a war going on and I'm a minka bird. Death is only natural, isn't it? Now," the bird said with some finality.

"Now what?"

"Our itinerary is as follows: Townsville, Tontouta, Plaine des Gaiacs, Nandi, Canton Island, Christmas Island and then Hickam Field, Hawaii."

"I'm going to Hawaii?" I said positively beaming, imagining all the cocktails and beachy sands I'd seen on the Navy brochures.

"I'm going to Hawaii. You're going to the Aleutians."

That stopped me in my tracks for a while.

"You mean Alaska?"

"I mean the Aleutians," the bird insisted.

"The tiny islands?" I said, trying to clear up things.

“How would I know? I’ve never left Brisbane in my life,” the minka bird said somewhat apologetically.

“Why am I going there? I mean, it’s too cold for comfort.”

“There’s a battle going on,” the bird explained as if there were no other battles going on in World War.

“What about my training?” I ventured, as if training could go on for years.

“Think of it as on the job training,” the bird replied after a moment’s pause.

“Will it be dangerous?” I asked and instantly thought I could’ve asked something less obvious.

“Do I have to answer that?” the bird retorted as if it really was confused.

“I guess it will be. Any real advice?”

The bird looked at me as if I had asked about a minka recipe. After it seemingly deliberated with itself for a few moments, it finally gave its honest opinion:

“Yeah. Stick a fork in your hair and put some toothpaste on the back of your ears.”

“How’s that going to help in a battle?”

“I’m not sure it will,” the bird said and I could somehow tell it was being perfectly

honest, though rather disconnected from reality.

“Why should I do that? That sounds something completely silly.”

“For the drop bears, mate,” the minka told me in all seriousness.

“The what?”

“They’re these little bears that hang on trees and play coy, eating leaves and that sort of thing. But when you least expect it they drop on you en masse, cutting you up with their shiny claws and leave your skin hanging out for the dingos.”

“You mean koala’s?” I asked it, trying to deform paranoia into something remotely sensible.

“No. Drop bears,” it insisted.

“There’s no such thing as drop bears. What you just described sounds a lot like koalas but all they do is munch on eucalyptus trees. They’re herbivores,” I said and the homunculi seemed to nod, as if trying to break free of their spell, against the minka bird’s will.

“So now you’re the expert? It’s drop bears, mate. Killer drop bears. Nothing to do with herbivores at all.”

“I think you’re confused,” I told the bird and seemed genuinely upset.

“Am I lad? Well just go on ahead and don’t put that vegemite behind your ears. See what happens.”

“I thought you said toothpaste.”

“Vegemite will do fine! It’s a wholesome product, vegemite!” it said and croaked feverishly.

“You’re just making this up, aren’t you?”

“Look it here now, there’s loads of miles between here and Hawaii and since I’ll be doing all the flying I suggest you put on some vegemite behind your ears. For the drop bears. And remember to remind folks you meet that Australia’s outback is a dangerous countryside, with them drop bears. And how vegemite can keep them at bay, should they choose to visit.”

“Alright, alright. Do I have to put the fork in my hair?” I asked, hoping somehow the trip would be shortened.

“It’s not compulsory, no,” Kooee said and I thought I saw him scratch his nose.

“Thank God for small favors,” I said and one of the homunculi seemingly smiled right at me as the plane banked gently on the right.

Hopping about the tiny exotic islands scattered in the Pacific was an entirely loathesome affair. Kooee was sleeping for the most part, while the homunculi kept on flying tirelessly, exactly like one would expect from inanimate pieces of flesh. They never spoke and simply grinned uncannily for the entire duration. All they could do apart from flying was to give the thumbs up to the ground crews as well as the middle finger to any fighter pilots that happened to share the same airfield; I even had to handle the radio during approach and take-off.

Whenever we landed, I'd show ground crews the plane's manifest and orders and ask them to hurry up. Curiously no-one wondered about the pilots' well-being; it looked like they were used to pilots flying for impossible hours on end, rotating constantly. Vegemite and beer, most importantly beer, seemed like the only real currency of any value used in these remote, God-forsaken places which themselves consisted mostly of an airstrip and a few hundred coconut trees sitting atop a huge coral reef or even worse, basalt bedrock from old, sleeping volcanos.

Vegemite, the wondrous stuff that the Aussie's were so proud of, was used as an engine lubricant, among other things that needed slippery traction, which I personally found somewhat distasteful. But the beer, however piss-poor Australian beer was, it always got us some preferential treatment: We were always the first to get refueled and up in the air before long. Someone had really done their research in the true logistics of the Pacific theater.

Nearly three days of constant flying had made my head feel like a marmalade soup, thick and sweet, yet gross and not something one would order with excitement. I managed very little sleep in the rocking, swaying Skytrain and when I did, I usually woke up feeling another bump in my head. I asked Kooee at some point, "How do you manage to sleep upside-down?" to which he replied with a snide remark: "At least I'm not sleeping while awake."

Badmouthing and ire manners aside, for a bird that was preternaturally linked to death, the flight was uneventful, boring and tiring, exactly the opposite of what people generally think flying is like. When we finally landed at Hawaii, Kooee insisted that he'd picked up the

habit of sleeping upside-down from spending a lot of his spare time around flying wombats. When I pointed out wombats weren't really a species of bat and they quite possibly resembled his definition of drop bears, he insisted that I "put some more effin' vegemite behind the ears" and hoped we'd "never meet again" unless I were dead. All things considered, I was under the impression it all went rather well, on account of me still being alive and all.

At the Naval base I reported to some Navy Captain who as is usually the case had no idea who I was or what I was doing there. All he knew was that if my orders said I was shipping out to the Aleutians, I had to ship out with Task Force 88. That translated to having more or less half an hour to get my act straight, board the USS Unalaska and report straight to the ship's botswain for some proper punishment. As he put it, "Son, you're so God-damn late I swear you must be pregnant."

I was dead tired by the time I got on-board the USS Unalaska, thankfully I travelled really light with just a satchel of towels, a brush and some light reading material. I felt fuzzy

and weak; I remember I saw the ship's ladder being raised and the ship slowly sailing away from its berth, right before the ship's botswain started yelling at me in completely uncomprehensible Navy-speak lingo. Right before I passed out, I believe he called me "a filthy dirt-rat unfit to mop up the sweat off a mule's ass."

When I woke up later the next day, I was lying down in a hammock with an empty bucket by my side, the usual precaution for land-rats, I was told. I looked outside a tiny porthole and saw the horizon was acting kind of funny, going up and down all the time. I soon realized it was the ship trying to weather the sea. I felt dizzy once again and pretty soon I found out there was wisdom in the placing of the bucket, but not in the bucket per se. It pretty soon contained a hefty amount of churned-out stomach contents, most of which had for the most part been vegemite sandwiches at some point in the past.

The ship simply wouldn't stop rocking, but thankfully the feeling of seasickness subsided gradually. I figured that throwing up was all a matter of bad timing and how exhausted I

must've been from all the flying. Pretty soon I felt ravenous and completely dried out. I got up and sidestepped the bucket full of vomit when a sudden lurch of the ship made the bucket shift and spill its contents on my boots. It wasn't pleasant, but before anything else, I just had to drink some water and grab a bite.

I took a look around my cabin; I had expected I'd be bunking with some of the crew. Alas, I was my cabin's sole occupant; it was spartan but spacious. Nothing like the huge pile-up of sweaty bodies like on the ship to Australia on my first deployment. It looked like it could have been an officers' cabin. It was the first pleasant change ever since I'd kind of volunteered for this weird training (and I still wasn't sure about the volunteering bit).

I got outside my cabin and guiltily scraped most of the vomit on my boots against a bulkhead, pretending it wasn't even mine. There was some ambient red lighting scattered in the restrictive corridors of the ship. I could hear hushed voices and the occasional laughter echoing faintly. Someone at least seemed to be enjoying being aboard.

I passed through lots of rooms and corri-

dors and I saw lots of faces. But whenever I smiled in my most friendly manner, trying to make sure that no-one took notice of the boots, all I got was angry stares and a vengeful silence. I know I wasn't exactly a poster boy for some toothpaste brand, but I wasn't that repulsive, or at least no-one had told me so straight in my face.

It was odd; I felt instantly alienated. At first I thought it was perhaps I was the only Army on-board. Pretty soon I ran onto some marines; I asked them where the mess hall was and one of them spat on my boots while the rest simply ignored me the best way they could. So it wasn't a service issue; everyone seemed to hate me equally, even the officers. Especially them. They wouldn't even yell at me like they were supposed to; they'd simply avoid me like the plague.

I found the mess hall by pure luck; I was wandering about the ship, getting the silent, angry-stare treatment and the occasional spit when I happened upon one of the cooks, hauling a crate of vegemite. It was empty at the time; the clock on the far wall read twenty two hundred twenty two hours, which in normal time is almost half past ten in the

evening. It was past the usual supper time, but my stomach wasn't tuned to any watch.

I stepped inside and saw a burly, scruffy looking man wearing a thick, fur-lined jacket hunched over a steamy cup, his face hidden from view. As I walked past him he didn't avoid me, which was a good thing; but the cooks did and simply disappeared, leaving me to my own devices when it came to filling my metal tray. That was also a good thing because I served myself a pile of brown goo with floating meat bits in it to my heart's delight.

I filled the rest of the tray's spots to the brim with some stucco-like substance that must've been mashed potatoes at some earlier point in time. Feeling reinvigorated at the mere prospect of having a full meal, even if it was mostly impossible to identify its true nature, I picked up a pitcher of water and wobbled my way towards the burly man; I felt adventurous, joyous and pretty curious. The ship wasn't rocking as much as it usually did, but still I had to put on a little bit of a balancing act, what with one hand holding the tray and the other holding the pitcher.

"No-one likes you," the man spurted, and sipped from his cup. I found his bluntness

somewhat unsettling.

"Except you, I hope," I replied after some hesitation and smiled awkwardly, setting the pitcher down on a corner of the thin metal table with a clang.

"I'm not decided on that. You're strange," he said and looked at me through a set of deep blue, glittering eyes. His face was weather-worn, leathery and taut. A craggy beard covered most of it. His mouth curved in a peculiar fashion and he seemed to be gnawing at his teeth.

"Are you grinning at me?" I asked him, because it did look like some sort of grin, and being alone in a room with a complete stranger grinning rarely went well, so I really had to know.

"Could be, could be," he mumbled and sipped another mouthful from his cup, eying me oddly, running his tongue over his lips. The old, burly man felt quite out of place in warship. I felt there were some strange answers to be had to some awkward questions, so I stayed even though I had an odd feeling this could be my ass on the line. The ship was starting to misbehave against the churning, foaming sea, at least as much as I could

tell through a starboard porthole.

“Did I ask you to sit, boy?” he told me with a gripe. He had a somewhat strange accent, but I couldn’t quite pin it down. It almost felt piraty, but I always wondered why pirates had to talk that way, at least in the movies.

“I thought you might appreciate the company. We are after all, alone,” I ventured nicely.

“You don’t know the meaning of the word alone, boy. I haven’t enjoyed the tenderness of a woman in oh, so many years,” he said with a sudden bitterness and a face that suddenly looked about ready to break down in tears. He rubbed his hands together slowly, softly, as if beseeching the warmth of his now emptied cup.

“I can understand that can be aggravating. I thought sailors are used to that sort of thing though. Part of the job, sort of,” I said as I tried to entrap a piece of meat in the brown sludge-pulp in front of me that probably the cook had listed as ‘gravy’ in the menu.

“Ya never can get used to it!” he said slamming a fist to the table that send the pitcher of water tumbling over, spilling water all over the floor. I could see the old-timer’s eyes shin-

ing brightly, his face now flush with anger. He seemed pissed, but thankfully, not literally at least as far as I could be sure about the smells in the mess hall.

“I guess you know better,” I said and dug reverently into my tray, deciding rather late that it was too late to keep calm and quiet. His voice was unsettlingly serene again all of a sudden, like riding a large wave, time and again.

“Well, I do know. But it’s nice to have some company for a change. Even you,” he said somewhat miserably. I took it as a compliment.

“Thanks. I guess,” I said and cringed after swallowing; the so-called gravy tasted sour as vinegar. The cook was either a gourmet or the meat was quite off.

“Don’t like the cuisine?” said the old sailor and smiled somewhat affectionately. I simply nodded and forewent the gravy all together. I dug in the small pile of mashed potatoes; its consistency was not unlike cement. It surely made me feel I had a wholesome foundation to go on for the rest of my day.

“I’m not much of a Navy person,” I said in-between shoveling the likeness of food in my

tray and trying to swallow it.

"I figured that the moment you stepped foot on this damned ship," he said and produced a corncob pipe from a pocket.

"I'm not much of an Army person either, to tell you the truth," I said, sneakily looking around, half-expecting the botswain or some drill instructor to start chewing me.

"You are special though," he said and put a generous amount of tobacco in his pipe, stuffed it nicely and lit it up with a cloud of smoke in the aftermath.

"What makes you say that?" I said awkwardly, half-conscious that I was on a mission so secret I barely knew anything about it. If an old, half-crazy sailor could see it written all over me, then maybe it wasn't that secret, and maybe that'd get me killed real quick. There was a war going on, after all.

"For one, you can see me," the old man said and shrugged with a furrowed brow.

"Why shouldn't I?" I asked with a furtive brow.

"Because I'm dead. Well, not alive. Undead? Is that the right word for it?"

That was a strange thing to say, because undead things usually shimmer and are blurry

and, well, have this blueish appearance. Not always, it seemed.

“Oh, that. That’s strange; I’m not sure what your condition is,” I said after thinking about it for a while. “You don’t look incorporeal to me,” which was also true. He did look all flesh and blood; I could tell, because the thin blue-grey transparency usually gave them away.

“Is that a fancy word for a ghost?” he asked scratching an ear frantically all of a sudden.

“You could say that, yes. Not all ghosts and spirits or creatures of the afterworld are one and the same, though,” I explained in earnest.

“What does that make me then?” he queried, huffing and puffing through the pipe.

“An apparition? I’m not sure. I’ll have to look it up, always more to learn about death and the afterlife,” I said while finishing up the rest of the mash potato slob.

“In any case. I’m...”

He hesitated for a moment, like an old man trying to figure out what was the name of his youngest son; a recurrent phenomenon even though the youngest son should be tech-

nically the easiest one to remember. It was one of those things I never managed to figure out and always seemed to happen in the strangest of situations. "John Baez!" he exclaimed, apparently feeling victorious, and smiled, offering his hand. "Captain of the Baychimo, at your service. Well, sort of," he said and nearly choked on his own pipe; smoke freely escaped his ears.

"Bobby Barhoe, signals corpsman, well, at least for a while yet. Glad to meet you," I said and tried to shake hands; my hand passed through his like what in the movie business is known as bad special effects. I pulled back my hand awkwardly. "So, a very lifelike apparition then. Drowned?" I asked him.

"No, never! Cursed, is what I am!" he shouted and coughed up some sort of unhealthy looking glob that writhed and moved on the floor as if it had an unlife of its own. "That's some hefty ectoplasm there, Mr. Baez," I heard myself say that and somehow it sounded out of turn. But it was indeed a nice, big blob of some sort of ectoplasm-like material. Which I wasn't sure what it was, but I'd seen it before, and in all honesty, it didn't look much different than phlegm, perhaps the

rusty kind.

"I hope that's not sweet-talk or anything like that, is it?" he asked with apprehension, looking at me sideways under thick, bushy eyebrows.

"No, no. One might perceive it as a compliment though; it's a ghost thing. It's what ghosts produce in lieu of bodily fluids," I explained and then he looked at me with a worried frown. Hearing back what I had just said, I did feel the wrong impression might have been given talking about bodily fluids with a dead person.

"So I'm a ghost?" he asked after giving the matter a bit of thought.

"Broadly speaking, yes."

"It's good to have that settled after all this time," he said and rapped his fingers on the table decidedly. I ventured a guess.

"After the Baychimo sank?"

"Who said anything about sinking? The damn thing's still floating somewhere up north," he said and pointed westward.

"The Aleutians?" I asked, since there wasn't really much in the way of geography around those parts.

“The Aleutians, the Bearing Straits, the North pole.. God-damn to hell with them all!” he shouted and threw my tray full of gravy against a wall, pieces of meat deciding to hang on as decorations since they had failed at passing for food.

His eyes glistened with that soft glow of remorse that was accompanied by old-age mewlings from senile persons that rarely made sense.

“Impressive. You’re basically incorporeal but can definitely affect the material realm. You’re a metarealm-positive ectoplasmic entity,” I told him, surprising even myself that I could come up with a new term that sounded like I knew what I was talking about, all in a heartbeat or two.

“You said I was a ghost,” he replied sounding somewhat confused.

“In a nutshell, that’s mostly true.”

“Are you trying to make fun of me?” he asked warily and suddenly showed me an arm ending in a large glistening hook. Somehow I did not feel like knowing whether or not the hook was made out of ectoplasm as well.

“Not at all Mr. Baez, just trying to make sense of it all. You’re a peculiar case, that’s

all,” I answered truthfully.

“Huh, you’re not the average type either,” he said and smirked like a madman would; slowly but surely, all the way up almost to his ears, as if he was enjoying this thoroughly.

“What about this curse of yours?” I asked him. “Any details on that? It could be a cyclorhythmic hex,” I said but this time I wasn’t making it up as I went along. He remained silent for a while, looking a bit distressed. I always wondered if angst was meaningful to the undead; after all, the worst had probably, already happened.

“I don’t like to talk about it,” he managed to say timidly.

“Why not? It’s not embarrassing. Lots of ghosts and spirits and generally dead people have been cursed at some point after their death or even in their regular lives,” I said, thinking back to all the things my grandmother would say about our neighbours.

“Really?” he said and sounded cautiously hopeful.

“It’s the first and foremost reason for haunting. That, and real-estate price fixing.”

“I loathe to speak about it. I once made a really stupid bet with someone I hardly

knew,” he said and shook his shoulders disarmingly.

Deals between the undead and unknown entities who they could converse with usually involved the Prince of Darkness. It was a well known fact, there were even songs written about it, so it must’ve been true at least at some point in time.

“Might that have been the devil?”

“Could you describe him for me? My memory’s not what it used to be,” he said, and shook his head. I dredged up a memory from a version of Dante’s *Inferno*, which was one of the few travel guides written without actually anyone visiting the place, so it was definitely unbiased.

“Well, really evil-looking. Ahm, pointy bat-like ears, usually. A goat’s head. Snake-like barbed tail. Forked tongue. Brick-red skin. Hooves. Mean disposition.”

The captain gave it some thought. He rubbed his chin a bit, some hair and glitter-dust or possibly dandruff fell freely about.

“Nah, that wasn’t him.”

“Did he make you sign a contract with your own blood?” I asked him, as there were certain well-known steps in devilish contracts.

“Now that you mention it, there was some bloodletting involved,” he said and looked trippy, as if being happily wading through the foggy mists of time in much better, maybe even living times.

“Was there a pentagram on that contract?”

“Is that like a phonogram?” he queried with an ear toward my mouth, as if hard of hearing even though he had no real ears to speak of.

“No, no. It’s a five-pointed star,” I said and drew one quickly in the air.

“Ah! There was indeed such a thing. All drawn up in blood of my own, mind you. Bastard was out of ink.”

“Did the man you signed this contract with appear very good and proper? Like a respected businessman? Like a lawyer perhaps?”

“It was indeed a lawyer! Something to do with high-seas trading law and a bunch of cockamaney no sane person could make heads or tails of!”

The sad part in his tale was the assumption of sanity where law was involved.

“I’m afraid that was the devil in disguise, Mr. Baez,” I told him and watched him as he

realized for the first time in so many years he had actually met someone really famous.

“You don’t say?”

“What was the bet?” I had to ask, as matters of luck always fascinated me, even though the Devil was known to play the odds.

“Nothing too dramatic,” was all he would say at first, but he looked like he could use some goading.

“Such as?”

“That I’ll make round a certain point of geography even if it takes me till a certain vague time in the future. It’s not that time yet, is it?” he asked feeling suddenly the urge to drain his empty cup to put his mind at rest, even if for a while.

“Nope, It seems it’s not,” I replied, finding myself looking at the clock on the wall opposite me, trying to remember a piece of lore I’d come upon in the school library. I’d read that somewhere, indeed.

“That sounds a lot like the Flying Dutchman, actually.”

“What? Ridiculous! Nothing to do with the Flying Dutchman, at all! My name, in case you haven’t noticed, is John Baez! I’m of spanish descent, and not at all Dutch. Or

Germanic in any way,” he said with a heavy frown and a slightly cross face.

“No need to get uptight about it. It’s just what came to mind,” I said waving my hands in apology.

“Really. The nerve of young living people these days,” he said looking the other way, shuffling in his seat without making the least bit of noise.

“I’m pretty sure that your tale is strikingly similar to the Flying Dutchman,” I insisted, trying to sound impressed.

“Well the Flying Dutchman is a myth! If I had a coin for every time someone said they’d seen it... I’ve told you already, I was the Captain of the Baychimo.”

“Which didn’t sink, and you never drowned,” I said and munched on a nail. It was a bad habit and the apparition of the dead captain in front of me was starting to sound like a bad, dead liar.

“What’s wrong about that?”

“If you’re cursed to make round a certain point of geography, what are you doing out here? There’s no route through the North pole. Or is there?”

“I was trying for some variety, alright? I hadn’t worked a whaling boat before!”

“I guess that didn’t work out very well, did it?”

“No, It was God-awful right from the start till the very end. And then it became worse.”

I saw a bright flash and a fireball rose up from the churning sea, right across the porthole facing the ghost captain’s back. A ship was in flames and was beginning to list to port. A blaring cacophony of sirens and alarms filled every inch of the ship. It was as if a thousand souls sprang into life from all the bulkheads and walls. People started rushing through the mess hall like the ship was on fire.

“Attention all hands! Battle stations! Report to your battle stations!” blared the voice of some junior officer through the mess hall speakers.

I was pleasantly surprised amidst all the havoc to realise I wasn’t assigned to a particular battle station. I was more or less, a dumb passenger with no set of orders or instructions. The feeling only lasted for a few moments:

“Robert Barhoe, PFC Signal Corps, report

to the bridge - ASAP!"

There was something very fishy about the timing. It seemed pretty weird I was needed at the bridge, unless I was supposed to signal the enemy to the death. In any case I gathered my wits about me and hoped for the best. The message repeated once more through the speakers, the voice becoming more shrill with each passing second.

"That's you, ain't it?" Captain John Baez said with a bit of sadness.

"I'm afraid so," I replied, as I got up to leave, feeling the mashed potatoes settle down my stomach like a lead weight.

"It's been nice knowing you, lad," the captain said and nodded, as he reached for his empty cup again.

"You don't think it looks good, do you?"

"Well it depends, if it's a long-gun fight, they'd have to cross the T first, but if they've spotted airplanes, it's probably too late to launch fighters. You can always hope it's just a submarine attack, buggers can't hit nothing if you zig-zag and then turn their baffles around spot on time."

"Really?"

“Eh, what do I know? I thought this was a fishing boat when I came onboard.”

“How come?” I asked him raising an eyebrow.

“The smell, really.”

That was an odd thing to say; inspite of all the previous oddness this had me standing for a while before I tried to make sense of it aloud.

“It doesn’t smell a lot like fish, I mean the galley does but-”

Captain John Baez huffed on his pipe once more and had the wide-eyed look of old, blind men, trying to remember what they had for dinner last night.

“The smell of men. So many men on such a small ship. The rank smell of sweat, bodies grinding upon one another, glistening soft skin...”

“Got it, see you!” I said before the matter got out of hand and into the realm of wartime censorship. I think I heard some cursing or sobbing, or perhaps both, one right after the other, but I really had to get to the bridge. Everyone was up and about, running like hell, to get to their stations.

There was a lot of repetitive shouting and the kinds of sounds usually associated with a ship on full alert: the clangs of metal, the shouts of chiefs and botswains, boots stamping on floors and staircases, warning sirens blaring like the end of the world was neigh - a premise that wasn't out of touch with reality either, as I found out about later.

I ran past seamen, able seamen, mates, midshipmen, and all other sorts of sailors. Noone stopped me or got into my way, wearing my battle dress chaki was like a magic cloak of invisibility during times of crisis - to them, I probably looked like something mildly annoying to the eye that would go away without much hassle.

When I reached the bridge, I saw two guards posted outside, which was unusual, since I found guards on a ship quite surplus. Unless there was a mutiny or something similar going on.

"Halt!" shouted one of the guards, eyeing me as if he was trying to make out the proverbial fly in the ointment. "Stand and be counted!" he yelled and made the guard next to him squint and shoot him a puzzled look.

"Advance to be recognized," he corrected

his brother-in-arms, whose face took on an expression of sincere disbelief.

“What?” he added with a measure of naivety. His colleague went on while I quietly waited on them to reach an understanding.

“You should have said advanced to be recognized. Stand and be counted is what you say when you’d like a guy to speak for himself or something,” he said, the one slightly shorter than the other guard.

“Well, where would he advance? I mean, he’s just a couple of feet away anyway,” the tall guy proffered, making a show of the limited space outside the bulkhead of the bridge.

“Well he could take just a step forward,” the short fellow insisted and strictly technically speaking, he was right.

“But that’s not like how stuff like that goes, Mike. I mean, he’s standing too close now at any chance, isn’t he?” the tall guy said, and to make his point further stand out, he took out his service gun and wobbled it across the space between us, as if gun safety was only ever meant for children.

“Still, we should do this by the book. Issue the challenge, Fred,” said the short guy, Mike, and nodded over to where I stood, slightly

awkward-looking.

“What was it again?” asked the fellow named Fred while he holstered his gun with one hand and made for the crevice behind his back with the other one.

“That thing,” Mike said in a hushed fashion and made some kind of blinking sign - that or his eyes just twitched erratically for no reason.

“What thing?” asked Fred, peering intensively at his comrade’s forehead, as if the answer, any answer, should have been written right there, preferably in neon. It felt like I should have lit up a smoke by that time, as it did seem time to kill was an abundance in the Navy, but sadly, I didn’t smoke.

“The thing you always wondered what it meant,” Mike said and made a motion with his shoulders, as if almost ready to lunge forward. He blinked again, as if somehow that would stir up Fred’s mind. It didn’t.

“Was it a person, a thing, or an animal?” Fred asked, and I noticed for the first time there was something wrong with his helmet, his head, or probably both.

“What? No, none of the above. Have you been drinking again?” Mike asked raising his

voice and it looked as if this was a known, recurring issue.

“What? No! I just can’t remember! You know I have a piece of shrapnel in my head, makes my memory hazy, that’s all. Really Mike, in front of strangers too,” he said dejectedly and straightened out his helmet. He looked somewhat flustered and avoided making eye contact with anything other than his well-polished boots.

“Well, I’m not supposed to issue the challenge. I’m the hidden lookout,” Mike said and folded his arms across his chest.

“But you’re not hiding or anything. Where’s the sense in that? I mean, it doesn’t make sense Mike,” Fred said and sounded positively tired of life, logic and everything in between.

“It’s regulations,” Mike insisted and straightened his gun belt. “Besides, it’s the same thing as yesterday,” he added and looked at Fred slowly, expecting his face to change into one of understanding. Fred’s nose twitched for a moment and then he merely glanced sideways at Mike before adding a somewhat sly remark:

“Well you do it, if you remember what the

word is.”

“I would but I can’t, it’s against regulations,” Mike insisted and shrugged, almost as if he was enjoying the moment for the first time.

“Well then we’ll just sit here I’m afraid,” Fred said quietly and they both kept staring each other for a good time until a grating noise jarred them out of their reverie. The bulkhead door’s large handle swiveled and rotated behind them like a large, spiked metal spool, free of any cloth or wire.

“Numbnuts, both of you. Didn’t I tell you to show Barhoe in immediately upon arrival?”

The voice was gruff but not intimidating per se. It sounded rather tuned, as if woven over a wooden thatchet, dyed over with a mixture of bad coffee and cheap gin, smelling of cigars left to dry. There was a fairly burly, hairy hand holding the large door halfway open, orange warm lamplight flooding outside from within the bridge, blending with a soft afterglow on the guards faces. There was no face to put on the voice.

“We were trying to figure out how to best do this following the regulations, chief,” Mike said apologetically, half-heartedly raising a

hand salute that for all intends and purposes went largely unnoticed.

“That’s right,” Fred added and pointed at Mike while standing at attention, his back facing me while his face faced the ceiling.

“You’re relieved,” the gruff voice said and the hand holding the door pointed two fingers at Mike and Fred both. “And you’ve earned yourself a week of restriction and extra duty for being ingeniously stupid.”

“But chief, we were just trying to follow regs!” Fred said, sounding quite disheartened.

“Yeah, hard regs to follow those, chief,” Mike added nodding to himself.

“And another week for being stubborn bastards. Barhoe!” the chief said with a demanding tone and I couldn’t help but feel my throat dry as I swallowed.

“Sir?”

“Get in here,” he said and pointed with a finger at the floor of the bridge, while a cloud of smoke seemed to gently waft in the air.

“Yes, sir,” I said and made the last four or five steps towards the door, before the smell of incense assaulted my nostrils. I was expecting an oily mixture of spoilt rum and whiskey-

laden cigars, and the incense really threw me off. I can't remember how many steps I took exactly because once I stepped through that door and into what was supposedly the bridge, it felt as if I passed under a waterfall made out of bricks.

But other than the sudden overwhelming sensation, I was quite alive and well, and rather pain-free. I looked behind me instinctively, waiting for a waterfall full of bricks to keep thrashing away ; instead I saw the guards' morose faces fading away into a ghostly white skull, with all the greenish glow I had come to expect of skeletal ghosts and their ilk. They nodded, saluted and left, probably headed for the ship's brig. I realised I had been on a ghost ship all along, and somehow, I hadn't quite noticed.

I stood on a fine carpet, surrounded by wooden panels in a bridge that was completely devoid of any sailing instruments, apart perhaps from a nice-looking ivory globe with mahogany struts and railings. It didn't look ghost-like at all.

I turned around again and saw the chief in a US Navy beige battle dress, wearing a kind of smug grin alongside a well-suited cigar, red-

hot tip and smoke going up, all meat and flesh and probably bone under his face too, just like me.

“Talk about running a skeleton crew, eh?” he said and offered me a deep, almost blood-red glass of what smelled like excellent brandy.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a rather timid gentleman, grey beard and all, navy blue coat and a pipe hanging out of a wrinkled, gently smiling face, kind of like Santa Claus without all the red and white.

“Thank you for joining us, Mr. Barhoe,” the old man said with a voice full of hearty warmth and a tint of stony vibrations. His accent was slightly off, but he otherwise looked quite pleasant and charming.

“Bartholomew Roberts, at your service,” he added and offered his hand, which I shook rather lamely after a moment’s hesitation.

“He’s Welsh, not the devil you know,” the chief said with a smirk, while the Captain smiled and added to my brief, invisible dismay:

“Not much of a difference, some would beg to differ,” the captain said and smiled at me congenially even though the black flag

with the devilish figure and red heart hanging behind his desk quite unobtrusively made me think there was perhaps a fine point to be made in such a discussion.

“Just a memento. From my earlier occupation,” he added, ever-smiling, with an incredibly immaculate set of death one was not easily accustomed to when dealing with pirates, especially those who should’ve been dead hundreds of years ago.

“Flag designer?” I asked in perhaps vain hopes of sounding rather awkwardly funny.

“Pirate,” he mused as he rolled the word slowly in his mouth and it all somehow started to make sense when I was offered a slice of an apple on the tip of a shiny cutlass, which I felt I really shouldn’t refuse.

* * *

After a couple of hours of having some very fine rum and tasting even finer cigars, I had been filled in on the how and what of the ghost ship’s operations, which involved intelligence gathering, mapping, and dealing with whatever supernatural threats the Task Force might come across, without usually the Task Force even noticing them in the first place.

“And so, I believe you see, the task fell

upon us to ease you into the process,” Captain Roberts explained while I sat on a fine, heavy wooden chair bolted to the floor.

“Let’s skip the mundane, Captain, if you don’t mind,” the chief said, a rather heavy fellow named Kowalski, with a face that suggested there was probably not much to experience that would cause him alarm or disquiet, especially taking into account he was the acting command master chief of a ship that shouldn’t in any normal sense, even exist. He turned to me and eyed me with all the warmth and calmness of the Atlantic ocean.

“You see, Private Barhoe,” he said and stressed my rank, “the folks upstairs think you’re quite an asset. I myself think you’re more likely to catch a bullet than a fly is to sit on horseshit.”

That didn’t sound like a very attractive prospect, but as I had so far been conditioned to do in the Army, I nodded with somewhat less than great enthusiasm and replied in the most efficient way possible:

“Yes, sir,” I said and avoided making direct eye contact. The captain let out a hushed laughter and refilled his bottle of rum from a small oak barrel that seemed to be mysteri-

ously full all the time.

"I believe the master chief is simply stating the obvious fact here, mainly that you're green up to the gills, like the saying goes, me thinks," Captain Roberts said with a kind voice and continued his reasoning.

"There's no better substitute for training and experience than the horror of cannonballs zipping past your ears, the cries of the wounded echoing in your throbbing, bleeding head, the feeling of burning cinders flying against your face, and the movement of your bowels becoming rather energetic."

"You mean the fear of dying then?" I inquired perhaps a bit too fast for a private addressing a Navy Captain, which I had been told was more or less like an Army Colonel. The magnitude of his seniority rather escaped me as well, but I got an inkling I was out of line interrupting the Captain by the way the master chief looked at me with all the tension of a line toeing an air carrier.

"I mean the fear of failing, Bob. I'll call you Bob, I like the robustness of the name. It's fear of failing, the fear of letting down your comrades, of not living up to the moment, of not overcoming everything life and

death even can throw at you. That's the real fear. Dying is exaggerated - it's not like you cease to exist," he said and smiled, nodding to himself.

"Not everyone gets a second chance, Captain, don't mind me saying," the master chief added and turned his stare back at me, waiting for just one more mistake of mine to hoist me up the main mast and do what master chiefs did to sailors, which by most accounts and tales was worse than martyrdom.

"True enough, but still. One can't live unless death is taken for granted," the Captain replied and downed a mouthful of rum without even flinching.

"Permission to speak, sir," I said, gauging the master chief's mood to be favorably changed.

"Fine lad, just tell us what's on your mind. All this, after all, is your show."

That caught me a bit off-guard and while I was about to say I'm mostly fine on the subject of death intellectually speaking, I could not help asking what the Captain had just said really meant.

"What do you mean, it's my show, sir?"

"The Aleutian Islands Campaign. All this.

Thirty five thousand men strengthening the US military presence to counter-attack the Japanese on Kiska Island. Operation Cottage, I believe it's called. Well, the Japs started it first, but it's mostly an exercise. A live fire exercise, if you'd like. For you."

"With all due respect sir, don't you believe that's a bit of an overkill? Couldn't we just visit a firing range?"

"There's nothing like the weight of command and the burden of real blood and lives on a man's hand that truly shapes a fighting man, Bob."

"I was under the impression I was a Private. Still, on a somewhat unconventional mission, but a private nonetheless, sir. Not a General."

"Generals tend to bicker about provisions and staging operations and the weather and all that's meaningless in a fight. While soldiers on the other hand, do the real work."

"Like the latrines and all the paint jobs?"

"The dying, Bob. That's the real work. Sacrifice. Do you understand now?"

"Not much other than death is probably involved, but I was expecting that because of the war and all."

“There’s a demon in the Aleutian’s, Bob. A primordial, evil spirit from before man walked this earth, feeding on human souls. Lives that end, and their souls never live in the afterlife. A devastating whirlpool of malignancy, hate and evil that preys on humanity’s vanity. This whole shebang is more or less a huge bait. The men aboard the invasion ships are the cheese. The demon has awakened from a long slumber, but now it will surely manifest itself to gorge on the dead which are bound to multiply.”

There were certain implications being made which I didn’t like, and although the hints were there, my mind inadvertently chose to distance itself from where the discussion was leading. Before I could ask, my mouth laying half-open, the master chief filled in my thoughts exactly, though rather bluntly.

“You’re going to kill the damn thing, Barhoe. At least that’s why you’re here for, although I think you’ll just end up dead long before you get to even see it. Hell, if the Japs don’t sink half the fleet, and if you survive the landing, you’ll either die of the freezing cold, or end up skewered like shish-kebab by a Jap

with a bayonet or anything sharper than a golf ball.”

I think I swallowed hard and twiddled my thumbs for a few moments before the Captain tried to even my odds.

“You’ll have the choice of ground and management of operations, discreetly of course. There’s a plan laid out already for the conventional forces, but any changes you may need will be communicated directly to the commanders affected. There’s a large file for you to study on the demon, and an extensive library courtesy of the Intelligence Office of the Occult.”

“What’s that?”

“I wager you’ve spoken to Maj. Gen. Pen-dragon?”

“Well, yes.”

“Well that’s him mostly. And all the associated folk that work for him. Us included. I mean, we’re extraordinarily attached to the Office of the Occult. Which is itself extraordinarily attached to the President. Who doesn’t really know we exist but he signs out everything in a black budget. I’m told he’s rather cheerful and though he knows about everything we do, he’s forgotten all about it. It really works

and bypasses most of the paper-shuffling in DC. I thought you had been briefed.”

“Only vaguely, actually. Most of the people I’ve ran into lately weren’t exactly the military types. Or people, for that matter.”

“Well, you meet all sorts these days, I guess.”

“Get prepped. Learn about the enemy. Know him. If you live long enough to actually come across him and face him in combat or whatever you need to do, your only chance of surviving is somewhere in that file. Or so I’m told,” the master chief said, or rather, ordered.

“Haven’t any of you read this?” I asked while the master chief handed me the equivalent of a backpack full of paper.

“Can’t really say anyone has, lad. It’s in Gaya, or something like that, I’ve been told.”

“Kara, or Karak maybe?” I dared to ask as I believed I knew what they were talking about.

“Some ancient form of Japanese. Extinct they say.”

“Well, I have an uncanny knack for languages. I’ll just have to make some inquiries in the world of the dead. And it’s more like

Korean, basically. Well, it's kind of confusing, I know."

"Do what you must. We're landing in eighteen hours."

"That's a bit soon, isn't it? I mean, just to translate all this, much less digest it, it could take -"

"Seventeen hours and a half. You'll have half an hour to pack your combat gear and get on that landing craft," the master chief prompted severely.

"That's the spirit now Robert! I'm sure you'll manage. I have every confidence in you and your mission. After all, if it fails, we're probably all be consumed in the process."

"Consumed in the process? Surely not everyone's going to die. I mean, at the very least, someone will win out and the battle will end."

"But once the demon manifests itself, he will be able to kill and feast on flesh as well as souls. There will be no stopping him, and we certainly have no known means of countering him. Physical damage will do nothing. We'll be helpless. And once he devours everyone on that island, he'll move on, his thirst unquenched, his hunger unsated."

“You mean it’s all or nothing, a suicide mission for which we have no known, as of yet, working plan to actually make it happen?”

“We know he can be subdued, as has been done in the past, if not entirely excised from our world or made to cease to exist. We just don’t know how.”

“It’s somewhere in there, Private. Your job is to find out how, and make it happen.”

“I see. And what help can you provide, if I don’t mind asking, master chief sir?”

“We’ll try and keep you in one piece so you get a fair shot. But I really do think we’re just doomed,” he said and puffed on his cigar as if he had just said it’s probably going to rain on Sunday.

“Never say never, I say,” Captain Roberts added with a toast of his bottle of rum and chugged it down as if his unlife depended on it.

“You’re excused, Barhoe. Clock’s ticking.”

I nodded without crumpling and simply took things in my stride - which at that point was all I could do. The pragmatic approach was we’d all probably die one way or another, which had been a given from birth. I didn’t re-

ally fancy either the Japs blowing me up or a demon feeding on my soul, so I did what just about everyone could've done at that point: I drained my glass of rum, got up and saluted briskly, before I got up to go to my cabin where I would try not to shiver to the point of not being able to read anything at all.

The Captain and the master chief returned the salute, looking all professional. Kowalski showed me the open door. There were two new guards posted outside by that time, equally skeletal and ghost-like in appearance as I stood still within the Captain's quarters.

"And that's why the bloody master put them in the brig. Thick-headed bloody yank, can't make up his mind. I'm telling you, first off the boat, I'm putting in for a transfer. Had a cousin in Morgan's boat, said the rum's better and the flaying's toned down a lot. Plus it doesn't really hurt now we're dead, know what I mean?" said one to the other. While I stepped outside, I could hear the master chief trying to run the ship as any master chief should.

"Oy, you want to put in for a transfer? I'm glad I can help. Have you given any thought to what is worse than undeath?"

“No, master chief, sir!” the guard shouted in reply.

“Step into my office,” the master chief said, the undead sailor unwillingly obliged and I was thankful for how much soundproof ghost ships could be.