

The Nightmare Birds

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Chapter 1

Maneuvering my thermos of hot chocolate underneath my arm, I jangled the skeleton key in the usual technique necessary to open the finicky seventeenth-century lock: twist to the right, pull down, twist to the left, and pull up.

Whishbb. A cool breeze caught the door, sending it crashing into the cluster of rusty bells hanging over the threshold.

The scent of taxidermy and stale air flooded my nostrils, a scent I had come to accept *after* spending hundreds of dollars on deodorizers and expensive scented candles to no avail. I wondered what the customer behind me must have thought.

“Give me just two minutes to open up and I’ll look at your things. In the meantime, feel free to set them on the counter up front.”

The woman hardly seemed to listen as she gaped at the shelves brimming with oddities. The cockatiel on her shoulder sidled across her neck and gave a mighty squawk when it reached the other side. First-timers always got lost in the front, even though the rare and obscure items lived near the register.

After carefully examining a collection of vintage magnifying glasses said to reveal one’s true IQ if held up to their head on their birthday, she sauntered over to an alcove of alchemical books full of love and beauty spells before heading to the front. The woman briefly studied the medical tools, haunted pirate gold, cursed broaches, and the unsolvable puzzle box beneath the glass before setting her box of oddities so gently upon the counter you would’ve thought it was a newborn baby.

Flicking on the rest of the lights, I rushed to the back room to retrieve the enormous ledger.

“Mighty unusual job you have here,” she called. “Especially at your age.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot. Most twenty-one-year-olds don’t work at an antique shop, let alone own one.”

“So I read.”

I lumbered towards her. “Okay,” I huffed, placing the heavy ledger on the counter. “I’m ready.”

“Knock yourself out. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Rubbing my palms together—something my father used to do before getting his hands on a new

item when the shop was his—I peeled back the tape on the box and pulled an old record off the top of a stack of bubble-wrapped items. The worn label read:

Animalis Transmutatio

“It means Animal’s Transformation.”

The record felt heavy in my hands, heavier than any record I’d ever held. “What do you know about it?”

“If I told anyone else but you, and Eddy here, what I’m about to tell you, I’d be locked up in the looney bin for sure,” she snickered, petting the cockatiel’s yellow mohawk. “But I trust you, given everything I’ve read about you...and the fact that you have red hair—a very trustworthy trait.”

The parrot bounced up and down on her shoulder in agreement, then began to lovingly nibble on the woman’s ear.

“Now I’m really curious,” I admitted.

“This here is an old opera record. When played, it summons the formidable spirit, Turnni, who appears with one mission—to change you into any animal of your choosing. But once you choose, that’s it! You can’t go back to your human form for any reason.”

“And what if you don’t want to be turned into an animal?”

“Turnni isn’t forgiving.” Her bug eyes widened. “If you summon Turnni and decline to answer an animal’s name or change your mind about being turned into an animal, he will turn you into the worst thing of all just for disturbing him—a cockroach.”

“A cockroach?”

Sensing my doubt, she gestured to the parrot and thrust her shoulder forward. “Since it obviously wouldn’t be wise for us to play it, this here is my proof—my brother, Eddy. Oh, and my name’s Jan, by the way. Jan Darsy.”

Having been exposed to many outlandish and odd claims working at the shop, I was still somehow surprised by her revelation. “Your brother?”

“Yes, he told Turnni that he wanted to be a parrot because he wanted to fly.” She glanced at the bird peripherally and grinned. “He seems happy with his decision and knows lots of words so he can still communicate. Eddy was a recluse before he turned, so no one even noticed he changed.”

I stared inquisitively at her and then the bird.

The parrot squawked, “Turnni turned me. Yes, he did...Turnni turned me.” He bounced happily.

Jan petted his little head. “There, you see?”

I had encountered my fair share of scammers over the years, and the woman could’ve easily trained her parrot to say that, but there was a certain thickness and quality of the record, even if the serial number was absent.

“Well, this is the first time anyone’s brought anything living into the shop as a testament to a haunted item,” I replied, not giving her my assessment yet. I drew the record to my nostrils and inhaled deeply. I knew the smell of something truly haunted anywhere—like midnight on Halloween—and the record did not disappoint.

Oddities like these—strange, rare, and haunted things—were my shop’s specialty, and I never tired of acquiring peculiar new items like this.

“It’ll be a perfect addition to Strange Luck.”

She beamed. “Oh, you won’t be sorry. My only request is that the person who buys it knows what they’re getting into. It worked out well for Eddy and all, but who knows what might happen if it got into the wrong hands.”

“You have my word.” Turning my attention back to the box of oddities, a prick of excitement shot through me when the next item surfaced beneath the bubble wrap. I carefully placed it upon the glass countertop.

Thick, uneven, multicolored pages burst forth from the heavy and tattered leather-bound book, pages just waiting to be explored. The gold embossed calligraphy read:

An Evening at the Theater of Secrets

My fingers tingled as they glided over the faded words, and I pulled back slightly. Inching open the exceptionally delicate caramel-colored book, I thumbed through several blank pages at the front.

“There’s only two in the world and they are handwritten, so there’s no publication information if that’s what you’re looking for, but given the binding and paper, I think your expertise will attest to the fact that this book is exceptionally old and rare.”

So stunned to be in the presence of such a magnificent book, I couldn’t find the words to reply, nor could I pry my eyes away from its splendor.

My eyes devoured the first passage:

*Only those who possess wild eyes,
an impulsive heart, and a wandering spirit*

hunt for the Theater of Secrets.
If fate leads you to its forbidden doors,
and you are not true,
may a terrible eternal curse
be cast miserably on you.

The words shot a line of goose bumps clear up my leg.

“Are you aware of the legends of the Theater of Secrets?”

“No, not really.”

Her hazel eyes darkened as she immediately launched into a history lesson. “Well, the legends and mystery about this theater go back a hundred years—maybe more. You can see evidence of the theater throughout history in popular literature and even famous paintings.”

“Like?”

“*Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh for starters. Van Gogh created the masterpiece right after he saw one of their performances—the stars and glowing orbs symbolize madness, magic. What he witnessed forever changed him and he never recovered. Took his life the following year.”

“What do you mean that the theater forever *changed* him?”

“Legends say that the theater uses a magic so dark that if you see just one performance, you will be forever changed—never truly satisfied with reality after you’ve seen such remarkable things.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“Their acts are magnificent, impossible, death-defying. The theater only travels by night and they could pop up anywhere. One night they could be in Peru, the next Antarctica. If you really want to see a performance, you must hunt the theater like prey. It puts up a good fight though,” she added, making a fist. “I’ve been looking for thirteen years and now I’ve lost patience. The last I heard, they were in Monaco and headed to San Francisco.”

“San Francisco? That’s not too far from here. Always wanted to go.”

“Well, if you’re lucky enough to find the Theater of Secrets, the next obstacle is the price. A ticket for one performance costs upwards of a luxury car.”

“People would pay that much to see some magic tricks?” I scoffed.

Jan shook her head. “It’s not just magic tricks. It’s a different form of magic altogether. Seeing one of their performances is the *ultimate* coveted experience.”

I pursed my lips together, trying to visualize what one of these performances would even look like as I continued to delicately thumb through the book, landing on a hand-drawn diagram of something

called a *Frozen Limb Escape*.

“Of course, there’s always been people who don’t believe in the existence of the Theater of Secrets,” Jan said. “Since the theater moves around so much and there are so many mysteries surrounding them, some argue there’s no real way to prove their existence...that is, unless you take a ruby.”

“A ruby?” My eyes widened.

“Yes. Each seat is beautifully ornate and hand-crafted by the ringleader who runs the theater—The Exact Mr. Black. Each red velvet seat is lined with rubies that pre-date the Paleolithic era. They are quite possibly the rarest gem around.”

“Has anyone managed to take home a ruby as proof?”

She held up her index finger. “One man. In Egypt. A couple of years ago.”

I found myself hanging on her every word like an impatient child during story time, waiting to hear the ending. The air grew thick. “What happened to him?”

“He managed to sell the ruby for an obscene amount of money before he was found dead in the desert the next day. They never determined a cause of death. And the ruby was never recovered. The man was greedy, so the theater took it back.”

“Took it back?”

She sighed. “It’s an unspoken rule that if you are ever granted the privilege of seeing a performance, you mustn’t ever speak of it, let alone flash your proof all over town.” Jan paused. “Well, Daisy, what do you think?” she inquired. “Are you a believer in the existence of the theater?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but I can definitely tell you that I’m purchasing the book. Might even keep it for my personal collection.”

“Splendid! It’s a very powerful book, and I don’t trust it to just anyone...except you.” Jan paused a moment and took a deep, slow breath through her tiny red nose. “Which brings me to my next order of business. I have something *very* important to request of you,” she said in such a serious tone that it made my hair stand on end. “What would you say if I asked you to authenticate the existence of the theater for me?”

“What?” I gasped, taking a step back from the book.

“I saw the way the book responded to you when you first touched it. You’re young and knowledgeable about magic and supernatural things, so you’d be the perfect candidate! Besides, you said yourself that San Francisco isn’t too far away and you’ve always wanted to go.”

She was right. Up until three years ago, I had been skeptical of the supernatural—until I saw something horrifying that changed everything. He had been a nice old man named Farnsworth seeking

an ancient family heirloom—a map owned by the shop. But upon my repeated refusal to sell it to him, I watched in horror as the man morphed into a ghastly, otherworldly creature. To this day, I vividly remembered how his fingers lengthened into sharp black claws and how every inch of him sprouted throbbing, oozing boils moving along his skin like a swarm of angry bees. The most horrifying thing about his appearance, though, was his sunken animal eyes and the trapped human that seemed to lie beneath them. After that experience, a veil had been lifted and I began to see otherworldly things all the time.

Crossing my arms, I said, “Well, I appreciate the kind words, and to tell you the truth, I haven’t been on an authenticity trip for a while, but I have no idea how long something like this would even take, and I have to manage the shop.”

Jan leaned closer, resting her chubby elbows on the counter. “If you don’t mind me asking, when was the last time you took a break? You look very tired, my dear.”

Self-consciously, I touched my face and remained quiet, trying to remember when I had ever closed the shop for a day since I had taken it over three years ago.

“There, you see?” she exclaimed, slapping her hand on the counter. “You need to do this!”

My list of usual chores and responsibilities swirled in my head accompanied by several other immediate ones, like the new shipment of haunted stamps from Panama, preparing for my upcoming interview with *Starlight Antique Magazine*, and picking up my dad’s new heart medication.

“Well, I don’t know. The timing’s not exactly the best.”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! The theater could vanish at any moment—if it hasn’t already. At least you don’t have to travel all the way to India or someplace for such a unique experience.”

I bit my lip, remembering that I also had to fix one of the shop’s cupboards to position the new display of enchanted mirrors from Bavaria.

“Look.” Her tone deepened. “Finding the theater has been my life’s mission. Not knowing for sure about the existence of the theater has always haunted me, and since I’m much too old and fat to bother with finding it now, I would be forever in your debt if you went for me and reported back. If you showed me the ruby. I don’t want to keep it or anything, I just want to see it with my own eyes. Then you can do whatever you want with it. So what do you say?”

“I’m sorry, but even if I did go, I’d never be able to afford a ticket, let alone the hit I would take having to close the shop.”

Jan leaned closer. “Daisy, if you do me this favor I’ll pay for all of your expenses and include a generous daily stipend so you don’t lose any money on the shop.”

My breath left me all at once. “Are you serious?”

“I’ve never been so serious about anything in my entire life. Look, I’ll even put half the money up front to prove it.” Jan reached into her purse and slapped down a huge wad of money on the counter. “There. That should cover it.”

It felt so dangerous being around so much money that I couldn’t even bring myself to touch it or look at it directly. The tiny voice in my head jabbered that something like this was too good to be true.

“That’s very generous of you, but I couldn’t possibly do something like this. All of my other authenticity missions only took a day or two and consisted of easy verification. What if I don’t find anything? I couldn’t afford to ever pay you back.”

“No strings attached. You get half the money now and the rest after. If you don’t find anything, I’ll still pay you. You just have to tell me the details.”

“So you wouldn’t expect me to follow the theater if it moves? Just go to San Francisco, look around, and if I find it, report back to you, and if I don’t, just go back home?”

“Right.”

I giggled nervously, a stupid defense mechanism I used in the face of tough decisions. “I don’t—”

“I’ll throw in the book, too,” she interrupted. “I’m sure you’re well aware of how much that book would fetch at auction, and it would make a lovely addition to your collection, I’m sure.”

The leather felt cozy and warm in my hands, like it belonged there. “Jan, it’s really a remarkable offer, don’t get me wrong, it’s just that—”

“What?” she cried, smacking her palms on the counter again. “What more could you possibly want?”

I froze, searching for an answer under pressure.

“Don’t you see, Daisy? This is your calling. The book responded to you. I’ve never seen it do that to anyone before. And with everything I’ve researched about you, I know that you’re the one to go for me.”

“The one!” squawked the parrot.

“So what do you say?” she asked, batting her buggy eyes. “Do we have a deal?”

I inhaled deeply, cautiously choosing my words. “Being *changed* after seeing a performance is one thing, but the danger involved with taking a ruby is another. I’m not a thief and I’m not sure I can take that type of risk, especially after what you told me happened to that man in Egypt.”

“But doesn’t it just add to the excitement of things?”

I shrugged.

Jan glared at me for several silent moments, only adding to the increasing awkwardness of the situation. Then she unexpectedly shoved something right under my nose, something that seemed to have been hidden in her palm the entire time.

“Here. This is a detailed map of San Francisco. I’ve marked where I think the theater might pop up next. My number’s on the top. There’ll be a ticket waiting for you at the bus stop.”

The parrot trilled, bounced, and sidled from one shoulder to the other. “Bus stop...stop,” he repeated.

Taking it from her hand, my eyes looked out unheedingly across oddities and dead things to the pale, foggy sun beyond the redwood trees.

There were no more excuses to be made.