

GHOSTMAGE

By

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The thing inside the cage stirred as he approached.

It was naked except for the smallclothes worn to cover the groin, and it was filthier than the filthiest animal he had ever seen. The cage stank of urine and feces. He would have to wash it again soon. Hiran had set up a way to redirect the waterfall into the dungeon, and he could seal the cage, flood it and drain it to bring some semblance of hygiene to the monstrosity that resided inside.

Deep down, he knew that none of it was necessary. He could starve it, drown it (as he often did when he flooded the cage), stick it in a jar of wine, even nail to a wall, and it would still be what it was. Since the change, Hiran had read and researched extensively on its ilk, and they did not die easy. But he could not bring himself to mistreat it or to stop caring for it, for he still remembered what it was. Indeed, how could he forget?

It came closer, growling vaguely as it smelled food. While it had once been human, the word no longer applied to the face that twisted in an ever-present snarl. As usual, it bit and scratched at the bars, unable to stick its hands through (Hiran had built them at crossed right angles like a mesh, for exactly that purpose) as it tried to get at the source of the smell. Set at chest-height on the bars was a small window behind which was a metal tube that jutted downwards into the inside. He unlocked and opened it, tilting the plate and letting the contents fall in. The chunks of bread and meat fell through the tube to the floor, and the thing threw itself at them, gobbling it down. In the beginning he had tried easing plates of food into the cage, but getting the plate back each day had been a nightmare; in the end he had given up and decided to let it feed off the ground, which it was happy to do.

A scurrying sound caught his attention and he looked up to see a three-foot-long strange creature crawling along the wall. It looked like a cross between a small-sized human and a lizard. Black scales covered its body, and the elongated thick head had sharp teeth like an alligator with two overbite fangs. It had four arms and two legs, with three long fingers and thumb in each, and it was sticking to the vertical surface with ease with the limbs. Jerboa lizards were near-extinct these days, due to a mixture of the superstition that claimed them to be an ill omen, and the relentless poaching to claim their highly-valuable eyes (which were bright and beautiful as diamonds and had no irises – when plucked out, the eyeball crystallized, forming a clear, sparkling sphere that was used in jewelry and fetched exorbitant prices). So when he'd found one, of course he'd brought it home and raised it; his only true companion in the grotesque form of life he now led. Safar, as he had named it, made a thin clicking noise from its throat.

The reptile crawled lower, next to his hand, and Hiran scratched it behind the ears as he watched the cage. Inside, the body that had once been his in life – the thing that now lived in its own piss and shit – scratched and bit at the ground as it devoured its meal. He turned away, disgusted. It would not do dwell his mind on disturbing thoughts. Especially today.

"Master."

Bansal stood at the doorway, his eyes determinedly not gazing towards the cage as he spoke. His form was translucent blue, giving him away for the ghost that he was. The short man had been a mindless apparition when Hiran had found him, haunting an old ruin that he and his bandit gang had once used as a hideout until they were killed by Guardsmen, and his earthbound spirit, filled only with the same malice and hatred with which he had lived his life, had been killing anyone who wandered into the place in horrifying ways. Now, his consciousness returned, Bansal had sworn service to him in exchange for a true death that would allow him to move on – a reward that he would be getting quite soon.

"Everything is ready." He said.

"Hmmm." Hiran nodded. "Prepare the ritual. I will leave the vessel and join you."

The ghost bowed and walked away.

Safar followed Hiran as he left the cage room, through a different door that led into a tunnel. He had chosen to build his lair underneath the waterfall because the caverns were a natural three-dimensional maze, with several large rooms all connected in ways that would leave an outsider wandering for weeks, trapped with no way out. It had been his haunt for years now though, and his steps were sure as he moved through the passage, sporadically lit by what looked like glass spheres with light trapped inside them. They looked like dim, miniature suns in the dark.

He reached a door, which opened by itself at a thought. Hiran had imbued a part of himself – a small part, but a part of him, nonetheless – into the caves themselves, and everything that could be powered one way or another obeyed his commands. He walked into the small room, which was basically a part of the tunnel which had been widened and set up into something like an alchemist's shop. Shelves of ingredients and potions lined the walls, in jars and urns and bottles. Without stopping, he kept going through the door on the other side of it, which opened into the much larger and more spacious laboratory, with tables full of glass tubes, flasks, vials, cauldron and other, much more specialized equipment. The most complex potions that had been discovered could be brewed here, and the emissions were filtered upwards through two chimneys protected by powerful enchantments that turned them into steam which joined the roaring waterfall outside.

The place was a veritable marvel, but it was not his destination for the moment. He opened one of the three doors leading out from it, walking into another tunnel. This one led to another door, made of steel and carved with wards. It opened by itself as well when he approached.

There were five sarcophagi inside the otherwise empty space. They were all open – he could not close the lids for obvious reasons – and all five had white, thick mists swirling inside. In three of them were bodies, barely visible through the white blur: two men and a woman, all dressed in azure robes identical to the one he wore, hands placed on their stomachs and eyes closed, breathing slowly and peacefully asleep. Hiran walked to one of the empty ones and climbed in. As he lay back in it the mist covered his face, and he closed his eyes, took a deep, slow breath as if preparing to sleep – and left the body behind.

His senses disappeared. Without a body there was no noise, no sight, nothing to touch. Smell and taste went away, and ironically he had always found the last two the most disturbing. The living constantly breathed and tasted air without knowing it, and it was the absence of this that made it clear that he was not one of them.

In place of his bodily sensations he felt a strange awareness around himself. Not touch, not hearing. He just *knew*. He focused, and felt himself materialize.

Slowly, he transitioned into a translucent spectral human form. His was much more solid than Bansal's, with a shadow of his old senses returned, and he knew he could maintain it for hours with barely an effort. It was also not tied any location, (unlike his minion, whose semblance of physical self would dissipate if he wandered too far away from the magical power sources in the temple) and was dependent solely on his own power. Hiran preferred a body to move around in – if only because it felt more familiar to the life he once had – if there were no human ones to inhabit he used animals, and Safar, who had been watching all this without fear, was used to being his vessel. But he would have to be himself and no one else today, for the ritual to be completed properly.

He took yet another door out of the room and moved swiftly through the passage, the near-weightless feet of his spirit form making no footsteps on the hard stone floor.

The jerboa scurried ahead as they walked, and he followed it into the main "hall" of the cavern. The large space was illuminated with several magical lights that hung in the air, and in their glow could be seen the throne at the centre of the far wall. Seated on it in regal pose was a mummified body, dressed in the faded dark blue-and-brown robes of a master mage. It held a staff in one hand, the body still and the face staring into nothingness. A glass-like bubble surrounded the throne, shimmering in translucent blue. With the majestic chair as the centerpiece, the room gave the sense of being a royal court, a feeling exacerbated by the stone chairs in front of it lined on two sides, arranged as if for a ruler's council to sit and advise the dead man on the throne.

Behind each row of seats were weapon racks, shelves of books, glass cases of artifacts and other items that were placed around it, as though an offering to accompany the spirit into the afterlife like it was done with great lords and kings.

In between the two rows of stone chairs, just in front of the two steps leading up to throne, runes had been painted on the ground in a circle. In the middle of the circle were six human hearts, arranged in a smaller circle, and in their exact center was a box-like device from which tubes snaked out and connected to the blood vessels of the hearts, which were still pumping quietly. Above the box was a crystal orb, inside which a human brain floated in a colorless liquid that looked like water but was in fact a potion which had taken literally *years* to brew up and perfect. The potion moved through the hearts and the orb in rhythm with their perfectly synced beating.

Bansal stood a few feet back from the rune circle, a curved silver knife with an engraved blade in one hand and in the other a three-foot long staff with a snarling dragon head. As his master approached the ghost went on one knee and touched the circle with the staff's head, making the runes glow red, emitting sparks continuously. Hiran stepped up to the circle as Safar crawled onto one of the chairs and watched with a curious tilt of the head.

"Knife." He said, and Bansal slipped the blade on to his hand.

Hiran walked up to the throne. He placed a hand on the bubble, which he had maintained unbroken through the years, and it dimmed and vanished. The mummified body remained still as he approached it, moving in reverence and respect. Then, speaking a soft note of apology, he plunged the weapon into his dead master's decaying head.

The mummy breathed as it came alive.

It screamed an inhuman scream, the note of pain and horror stretching for a long time, and slowly, the head turned and the empty eyes looked at him.

Hiran took several steps back as the dead hand reached out, but it was not fear that made him recoil. He walked back behind the circle, and heard a click as Bansal waved the staff, and the device hummed.

Streams of white light left the body on the throne and amassed in the circle as the spirit that had been summoned was violently pulled into the device and contained by the runic enchantment, and the hearts began to beat fast. The scream ended and a third ghost manifested in the room – the man that the mummy had once been, half-collapsed on his hands and knees and heaving as if gasping for breath. Hiran knew this could not literally be the case, and sure enough, the ghost seemed to realize this, and unsteadily rose to its feet, looking around. He could guess the emotions that were rushing through the face, from confusion, realization, denial, and finally, anger. Several moments passed in silence before the mastermage Ishwar spoke.

"Hiran," He said, "What have you done?"

"I am sorry."

"Where – where am I?"

"A place I built in secret. A temple. A tomb. A dungeon. Take your pick."

Ishwar turned to take in the surroundings, and paused as he looked at the mummy.

"I brought you here." Hiran confirmed. "After we were betrayed."

The great wizard, as if knowing exactly what to look for, turned to fix his gaze on the device in the middle of the circle he was standing in. The hearts, which had begun to slow down, now beat faster.

"What have you done?" He repeated.

"What I had to do. I need your help."

"Where – how long has it been?"

"Years."

"The palace – "

"Gone. King Virendr is dead. Prince Harish is dead. Queen Aria is dead. The members of the Ruling Council are dead. And you and I were – "

"Killed. We – we were killed."

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I had a gem of Duamori hidden away."

The wizard shook his head. In life he had been the face that represented magic, the most well-known of all of them and respected even by his enemies. He had been a man full of energy, tireless even in his advancing age. Now, in this pale imitation of what he had been, only disappointment and sadness were left.

"You *chose* to become this? You created a Duamori stone in secret? There is a reason such things were forbidden."

"The reasons seemed illogical to me. When I learnt that there was a way to beat death, I thought, *why not?* Of course, I had no idea what awaited both of us, or that it would have to be used so soon."

"And now? Where are you now, Hiran? Show me. Let me see the body that is kept alive with your treasured gem inside!"

The growl of the thing inside the cage seemed to echo in his ears.

"Is the body content? Is it happy? Tell me, apprentice, have you truly cheated death? Are you *alive?*" He looked disgusted. "You have no answer? Fool. And now here you stand, having torn me away from what I was – "

"What were you?" Hiran could not help himself. "What was there? On the other side?"

There was another long silence.

"Knowledge of death is only for the dead. And you are not dead. Neither am I now; thanks to you, I do not remember much, and I would not tell you its secrets even if I could recall them."

He had not really expected a different answer. He had unraveled many mysteries during his existence without life, but some answers still eluded him. What happened after death? And why were there not more ghosts in the world? For that matter, why was not *everyone* a ghost? He had sought the answer for long – visited many haunted places, fought many spirits, but the knowledge was nowhere to be found. Even normal spirits that haunted places – such as Bansal – were little more than fractured consciousnesses and could not tell him anything new even when he had managed to communicate properly with them. A *true* spirit, like the one he had just summoned, could not exist for long in this world.

"I will not be held here long," Ishwar seemed to be thinking the same thing. "The void claims its own. Small comfort, but I will take it, and if you summoned me for help, I deny it."

"Even if it could save the nation? Do you realize how bad things are out there?"

"Some costs must never be paid. What you've done, what you've become, nothing is worth this. You've made an abomination of yourself."

"You sound like the bigots who peddle hatred against magic. Like some village fool who'd kill all who used the Power. 'Magic is a violation of the natural order! Burn the witches and the warlocks!' Which, by the way, is something that is coming back into popularity once again. All practice of magic is now forbidden by penalty of death by immolation. All our comrades are dead or gone."

Something like anger passed over his master's face for an instant, but it was gone almost before Hiran had registered it.

"And you are strengthening their argument." Ishwar said, gesturing to the device with the brain and hearts. "Or am I to believe that you just found fresh human body parts lying around on the streets to perform this ritual? Or that those are the first lives you've taken in pursuit of maintaining whatever this is that you call an existence?"

"Some sacrifices have to be made."

"And now *you* sound like an extremist."

"Extreme measures are sometimes necessary. I know it is difficult to understand. As you once told me of those who persecute magic users, the learned must always fear the ignorant."

Ishwar laughed.

"Is that what this is? You are the learned one in this analogy, of course? You think yourself wiser than me?"

"Is that so impossible? You have been gone for a long time; I have learned much in the years."

"Knowledge and wisdom are not one and the same. You may have much of the first, but none of the latter. Or you would not have done this. Enough. I have nothing more to say, let me await oblivion in peace."

"Master," He said tentatively, "Have you not noticed that your aura is not dimming?"

A third, most uncomfortable silence stretched in the hall. When Ishwar spoke, his voice was a whisper, the last vestige of hope for his student lost.

"You did not summon me to ask for help."

"No. Not voluntary help, at least. I remember the lessons that I was taught: life is energy. Magic is the ability to channel energy from the Beyond to affect our world. A mage's spirit is the conduit for magic, and the stronger the conduit, the more magic can be channelled. And when one dies, the energy of life leaves the body, the spirit passes on."

The six hearts were now hammering away in a race; Hiran could see the grief on his master's face, the hope against hope that perhaps he would not speak the next words that were inevitably coming. *He had known*. Of course he had known. What had taken him years to discover on his own, Ishwar had likely learned decades prior and hidden away as more "forbidden" knowledge.

"What I eventually found out," Hiran went on, "was that someone like me – *something* like me – since I can now manipulate the energies of life, if I encountered a spirit, I could absorb the part of it that acted as the conduit for magic, adding that to myself and increasing the power of my own spirit. A more powerful conduit, capable of channelling even more powerful magic. And I thought to myself: who's the mage with the most powerful spirit that I know?"

"You're making a mistake."

"I knew you'd say that."

"You would really do this? Violate the natural order of life and death?"

"*Spare* me, master. We violate the natural order of life and death every day. *People* violate it every day, and I do not even speak of magic. We have uncovered the secrets of restoring life even without spells and potions. Drowned men and women are administered the breath of life kiss that the Orkan islanders developed, a technique which doesn't even need a mage. Tumors are cut out, gangrenous limbs are amputated. Deflated lungs are massaged and filled with air, stilled hearts are forced to beat again. There hasn't been a natural order of life and death in a long time. Instead what we *do* have is a tyranny that has the whole nation living in fear. And now there is talk of expanding the army to invade and conquer our neighbours. To bring 'order and stability' to them, of course. Half the country is unemployed and half the unemployed are scrambling over each other to sign up for this new army, in dreams of pay and loot. I have long prepared, I have laid plans and made subtle moves. But it is necessary to do more, and I will not stand by and remain idle while I have the power to help liberate my people."

"You forget something." The ghost's eyes flashed in anger, "*I* am master, and you are apprentice. There are things even you do not know. Things I have learned. Even a summoned spirit, for example, is capable of magic if it is a strong enough conduit."

Ishwar spoke a word of power, and Hiran felt a shockwave even in his spirit form. Everything around him trembled; and the lights hanging in the air went out, leaving only the faint glows from the ghosts' spectral forms, the rune circle and the device inside it. Ishwar seemed to be becoming more solid, his body covered in a thin line of frosty ice.

"Actually," Hiran spoke conversationally, "I knew that."

There was a *crack* like thunder, and the spirit was pulled down and immobilized by lines of flaming red sparks from the runes. Ishwar looked at him, horrified.

"I am sorry." Hiran said.

"I am as well. I am sorry for you, and you will remember that when you are the tyrant, and they come for you next."

"Perhaps. I will take the chance. Goodbye, master."

Ishwar screamed. He seemed to transition into a cloud of white smoke, which joined Hiran's spectral form until only a dim glow was left where the mastermage had been. Then it, too, vanished.

He felt his new power surging through him, and smiled.