

## CHAPTER THREE

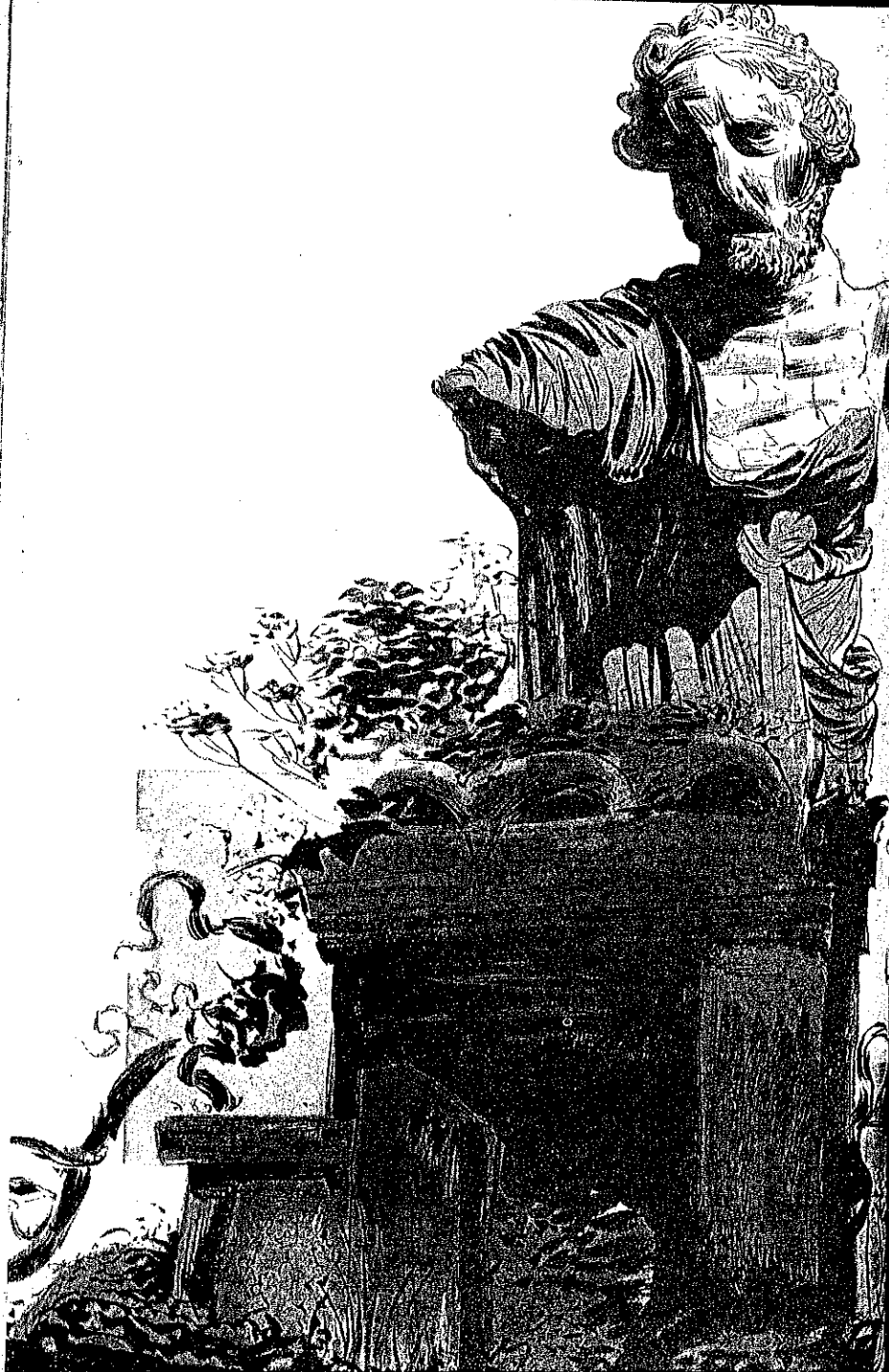
### *The Hounds of God*

**O**NE GRAVE IN EVERY graveyard belongs to the ghouls. Wander any graveyard long enough and you will find it—waterstained and bulging, with cracked or broken stone, scraggly grass or rank weeds about it, and a feeling, when you reach it, of abandonment. It may be colder than the other gravestones, too, and the name on the stone is all too often impossible to read. If there is a statue on the grave it will be headless or so scabbed with fungus and lichens as to look like a fungus itself. If one grave in a graveyard looks like a target for petty vandals, that is the ghoul-gate. If the grave makes you want to be somewhere else, that is the ghoul-gate.

There was one in Bod's graveyard.

There is one in every graveyard.







Silas was leaving.

Bod had been upset by this when he had first learned about it. He was no longer upset. He was furious.

"But *why?*" said Bod.

"I told you. I need to obtain some information. In order to do that, I have to travel. To travel, I must leave here. We have already been over all this."

"What's so important that you have to go away?" Bod's six-year-old mind tried to imagine something that could make Silas want to leave him, and failed. "It's not fair."

His guardian was unperturbed. "It is neither fair nor unfair, Nobody Owens. It simply is."

Bod was not impressed. "You're meant to look after me. You *said*."

"As your guardian I have responsibility for you, yes. Fortunately, I am not the only individual in the world willing to take on this responsibility."

"Where are you going anyway?"

"Out. Away. There are things I need to uncover that I cannot uncover here."

Bod snorted and walked off, kicking at imaginary stones. On the northwestern side of the graveyard things had become very overgrown and tangled, far beyond the ability of the groundskeeper or the Friends of the Graveyard to tame, and he ambled over there, and woke a family of Victorian children who had all died before their tenth birthdays, and they played at hide-and-go-seek in the moonlight in the ivy-twined jungle. Bod tried to pretend

that Silas was not leaving, that nothing was going to change, but when the game was done and he ran back to the old chapel, he saw two things that changed his mind.

The first thing he saw was a bag. It was, Bod knew the moment he laid eyes on it, Silas's bag. It was at least a hundred and fifty years old, a thing of beauty, black leather with brass fittings and a black handle, the kind of bag a Victorian doctor or undertaker might have carried, containing every implement that might have been needed. Bod had never seen Silas's bag before, he had not even known that Silas had a bag, but it was the sort of bag that could only have belonged to Silas. Bod tried to peek inside it, but it was closed with a large brass padlock. It was too heavy for him to lift.

That was the first thing.

The second thing was sitting on the bench by the chapel.

"Bod," said Silas. "This is Miss Lupescu."

Miss Lupescu was not pretty. Her face was pinched and her expression was disapproving. Her hair was grey, although her face seemed too young for grey hair. Her front teeth were slightly crooked. She wore a bulky mackintosh and a man's tie around her neck.

"How do you do, Miss Lupescu?" said Bod.

Miss Lupescu said nothing. She sniffed. Then she looked at Silas and said, "So. This is the boy." She got up from her seat and walked all around Bod, nostrils flared, as if she were sniffing him. When she had made a complete circuit, she said, "You will report to me on waking, and before you

go to sleep. I have rented a room in a house over there." She pointed to a roof just visible from where they stood. "However, I shall spend my time in this graveyard. I am here as a historian, researching the history of old graves. You understand, boy? *Da?*"

"Bod," said Bod. "It's Bod. Not boy."

"Short for Nobody," she said. "A foolish name. Also, Bod is a pet name. A nickname. I do not approve. I will call you 'boy.' You will call me 'Miss Lupescu.'"

Bod looked up at Silas, pleadingly, but there was no sympathy on Silas's face. He picked up his bag and said, "You will be in good hands with Miss Lupescu, Bod. I am sure that the two of you will get on."

"We won't!" said Bod. "She's horrible!"

"That," said Silas, "was a very rude thing to say. I think you should apologize, don't you?"

Bod didn't, but Silas was looking at him and Silas was carrying his black bag, and about to leave for no one knew how long, so he said, "I'm sorry, Miss Lupescu."

At first she said nothing in reply. She merely sniffed. Then she said, "I have come a long way to look after you, boy. I hope you are worth it."

Bod could not imagine hugging Silas, so he held out his hand and Silas bent over and gently shook it, engulfing Bod's small, grubby hand with his huge, pale one. Then, lifting his black leather bag as if it were weightless, he walked down the path and out of the graveyard.

Bod told his parents about it.

"Silas has gone," he said.

"He'll be back," said Mr. Owens, cheerfully. "Don't you worry your head about that, Bod. Like a bad penny, as they say."

Mrs. Owens said, "Back when you were born he promised us that if he had to leave, he would find someone else to bring you food and keep an eye on you, and he has. He's so reliable."

Silas had brought Bod food, true, and left it in the crypt each night for him to eat, but this was, as far as Bod was concerned, the least of the things that Silas did for him. He gave advice, cool, sensible, and unfailingly correct; he knew more than the graveyard folk did, for his nightly excursions into the world outside meant that he was able to describe a world that was current, not hundreds of years out of date; he was unflappable and dependable, had been there every night of Bod's life, so the idea of the little chapel without its only inhabitant was one that Bod found difficult to conceive of; most of all, he made Bod feel safe.

Miss Lupescu also saw her job as more than bringing Bod food. She did that too, though.

"What is that?" asked Bod, horrified.

"Good food," said Miss Lupescu. They were in the crypt. She had put two plastic containers on the tabletop, and opened the lids. She pointed to the first: "Is beetroot-barley-stew-soup." She pointed to the second. "Is salad. Now, you eat both. I make them for you."

Bod stared up at her to see if this was a joke. Food from

Silas mostly came in packets, purchased from the kind of places that sold food late at night and asked no questions. No one had ever brought him food in a plastic container with a lid before. "It smells horrible," he said.

"If you do not eat the stew-soup soon," she said, "it will be more horrible. It will be cold. Now eat."

Bod was hungry. He took a plastic spoon, dipped it into the purple-red stew, and he ate. The food was slimy and unfamiliar, but he kept it down.

"Now the salad!" said Miss Lupescu, and she unpoped the top of the second container. It consisted of large lumps of raw onion, beetroot, and tomato, all in a thick vinegary dressing. Bod put a lump of beetroot into his mouth and started to chew. He could feel the saliva gathering, and realized that if he swallowed it, he would throw it back up. He said, "I can't eat this."

"Is good for you."

"I'll be sick."

They stared at each other, the small boy with tousled, mousy hair, the pinched pale woman with not a silver hair out of place. Miss Lupescu said, "You eat one more piece."

"I can't."

"You eat one more piece now, or you stay here until you have eaten it all."

Bod picked out a piece of vinegary tomato, chewed it, and choked it down. Miss Lupescu put the tops back on the containers and replaced them in the plastic shopping bag. She said, "Now, lessons."

It was high summer. It would not get fully dark until almost midnight. There were no lessons in high summer—the time that Bod spent awake he spent in an endless warm twilight in which he would play or explore or climb.

"Lessons?" he said.

"Your guardian felt it would be good for me to teach you things."

"I have teachers. Letitia Borrowes teaches me writing and words, and Mr. Pennyworth teaches me his Compleat Educational System for Younger Gentlemen with Additional Material for Those Post Mortem. I do geography and everything. I don't *need* more lessons."

"You know everything, then, boy? Six years old, and already you know everything."

"I didn't say that."

Miss Lupescu folded her arms. "Tell me about ghouls," she said.

Bod tried to remember what Silas had told him about ghouls over the years. "Keep away from them," he said.

"And that is all you know? *Da?* Why do you keep away from them? Where do they come from? Where do they go? Why do you not stand near a ghoulish-gate? Eh, boy?"

Bod shrugged and shook his head.

"Name the different kinds of people," said Miss Lupescu. "Now."

Bod thought for a moment. "The living," he said. "Er. The dead." He stopped. Then, ". . . Cats?" he offered, uncertainly.

"You are ignorant, boy," said Miss Lupescu. "This is bad. And you are content to be ignorant, which is worse. Repeat after me, there are the living and the dead, there are day-folk and night-folk, there are ghouls and mist-walkers, there are the high hunters and the Hounds of God. Also, there are solitary types."

"What are you?" asked Bod.

"I," she said sternly, "am Miss Lupescu."

"And what's Silas?"

She hesitated. Then she said, "He is a solitary type."

Bod endured the lesson. When Silas taught him things it was interesting. Much of the time Bod didn't realize he had been taught anything at all. Miss Lupescu taught in lists, and Bod could not see the point to it. He sat in the crypt, aching to be out in the summer's twilight, under the ghost moon.

When the lesson was done, in the foulest of moods, he fled. He looked for playmates, but found no one and saw nothing but a large grey dog, which prowled the grave-stones, always keeping its distance from him, slipping between gravestones and through shadows.

The week got worse.

Miss Lupescu continued to bring Bod things she had cooked for him: dumplings swimming in lard; thick reddish-purple soup with a lump of sour cream in it; small, cold boiled potatoes; cold garlic-heavy sausages; hardboiled eggs in a grey unappetizing liquid. He ate as little as he could get away with. The lessons continued: for two days she

taught him nothing but ways to call for help in every language in the world, and she would rap his knuckles with her pen if he slipped up, or forgot. By the third day she was firing them at him,

"French?"

"*Au secours.*"

"Morse Code?"

"S-O-S. Three short dots, three long ones, three short ones again."

"Night-Gaunt?"

"This is stupid. I don't remember what a night-gaunt is."

"They have hairless wings, and they fly low and fast. They do not visit this world, but they fly the red skies above the road to Ghûlheim."

"I'm never going to need to know this."

Her mouth pinched in tighter. All she said was, "Night-Gaunt?"

Bod made the noise in the back of his throat that she had taught him—a guttural cry, like an eagle's call. She sniffed. "Adequate," she said.

Bod could not wait until the day that Silas returned.

He said, "There's a big grey dog in the graveyard sometimes. It came when you did. Is it your dog?"

Miss Lupescu straightened her tie. "No," she said.

"Are we done?"

"For today. You will read the list I give you tonight and remember it for tomorrow."

Miss Lupescu's lists were printed in pale purple ink on

white paper, and they smelled odd. Bod took the new list up onto the side of the hill and tried to read the words, but his attention kept sliding off it. Eventually he folded it up and placed it beneath a stone.

No one would play with him that night. No one wanted to play or to talk, to run and climb beneath the huge summer moon.

He went down to the Owens' tomb to complain to his parents, but Mrs. Owens would not hear a word said against Miss Lupescu, on, as far as Bod was concerned, the unfair grounds that Silas had chosen her, while Mr. Owens simply shrugged and started telling Bod about his days as a young apprentice cabinetmaker, and how much he would have loved to have learned about all the useful things that Bod was learning, which was, as far as Bod was concerned, even worse.

"Aren't you meant to be studying, anyway?" asked Mrs. Owens, and Bod squeezed his fists together and said nothing.

He stomped off into the graveyard, feeling unloved and underappreciated.

Bod brooded on the injustice of it all, and wandered through the graveyard kicking at stones. He spotted the dark grey dog, and called to it to see if it would come over and play with him, but it kept its distance, and Bod, frustrated, threw a clump of mud towards it, which broke on a nearby gravestone, and scattered earth everywhere. The big dog gazed at Bod reproachfully, then stepped away

into the shadows, and was gone.

The boy walked back down the southwest side of the hill, avoiding the old chapel: he did not want to see the place that Silas wasn't. Bod stopped beside a grave that looked the way he felt: it was beneath an oak that had once been struck by lightning, and now was just a black trunk, like a sharp talon coming out of the hill; the grave itself was waterstained and cracked, and above it was a memorial stone on which a headless angel hung, its robes looking like a huge and ugly tree-fungus.

Bod sat down on a clump of grass, and felt sorry for himself, and hated everybody. He even hated Silas, for going away and leaving him. Then he closed his eyes, and curled into a ball on the grass, and drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Down the street and up the hill came the Duke of Westminster, the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh, and the Bishop of Bath and Wells, slipping and bounding from shadow to shadow, lean and leathery, all sinews and cartilage, wearing raggedy clothes all a-tatter, and they bounded and loped and skulked, leapfrogging over dustbins, keeping to the dark side of hedges.

They were small, like full-size people who had shrunk in the sun; they spoke to each other in undertones, saying things like, "If Your Grace has any more blooming idea of where we is than us do, I'd be grateful if he'd say so. Otherwise, he should keep his big offal-hole shut," and "All I'm saying, Your Worship, is that I knows there's a

graveyard near to here, I can smell it," and "If you could smell it then I should be able to smell it, 'cos I've got a better nose than you have, Your Grace."

All this as they dodged and wove their way through suburban gardens. They avoided one garden ("Psst!" hissed the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh. "Dogs!") and ran along the top of the garden wall, scampering over it like rats the size of children. Down into the high street, and up the road to the top of the hill. And then they were at the graveyard wall, and they went up it like squirrels up a tree, and they sniffed the air.

"Ware dog," said the Duke of Westminster.

"Where? I dunno. Somewhere around here. Doesn't smell like a proper dog anyway," said the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

"Somebody couldn't smell this graveyard neither," said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh. "Remember? It's just a dog."

The three of them leapt down from the wall to the ground, and they ran, using their arms as much as their legs to propel themselves through the graveyard, to the ghoulgate by the lightning tree.

And beside the gate, in the moonlight, they paused.

"What's this when it's at home, then?" asked the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

"Lumme," said the Duke of Westminster.

Bod woke then.

The three faces staring into his could have been those of



mummified humans, fleshless and dried, but their features were mobile and interested—mouths that grinned to reveal sharp, stained teeth; bright beady eyes; clawed fingers that moved and tapped.

“Who are you?” Bod asked.

“*We*,” said one of the creatures—they were, Bod realized, only a little bigger than he was—“is most important folk, we is. This here is the Duke of Westminster.”

The biggest of the creatures gave a bow, saying, “Charmed, I’m sure.”

“. . . and this is the Bishop of Bath and Wells—”

The creature, which grinned sharp teeth and let a pointed tongue of improbable length waggle between them, did not look like Bod’s idea of a bishop: its skin was piebald and it had a large spot across one eye, making it look almost piratical. “. . . and I ’ave the honor to be ther ’onorable Harchibald Fitzhugh. Hat your service.”

The three creatures bowed as one. The Bishop of Bath and Wells said, “Now me lad, what’s your story, eh? And don’t tell any porkies, remember as how you’re talkin’ to a bishop.”

“You tell him, Your Worship,” said the other two.

So Bod told them. He told them how no one liked him or wanted to play with him, how no one appreciated him or cared, and how even his guardian had abandoned him.

“Blow me down,” said the Duke of Westminster, scratching his nose (a little dried-up thing that was mostly nostrils). “What you need is to go somewhere the people

would appreciate you.”

“There isn’t anywhere,” said Bod. “And I’m not allowed out of the graveyard.”

“You needs an ’ole world of friends and playfellows,” said the Bishop of Bath and Wells, wiggling his long tongue. “A city of delights, of fun and magic, where you would be appreciated, not ignored.”

Bod said, “The lady who’s looking after me. She makes horrible food. Hard-boiled egg soup and things.”

“Food!” said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh. “Where *we’re* going the food’s the best in the whole world. Makes me tum rumble and me mouf water just thinking about it.”

“Can I come with you?” asked Bod.

“Come with us?” said the Duke of Westminster. He sounded shocked.

“Don’t be like that, Yer Grace,” said the Bishop of Bath and Wells. “’Ave a blinking ’eart. Look at the little mite. ’Asn’t ’ad a decent meal in ’e don’t know ’ow long.”

“I vote to take him,” said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh. “There’s good grub back at our place.” He patted his stomach to show just how good the food was.

“So. You game for adventure?” asked the Duke of Westminster, won over by the novel idea. “Or do you want to waste the rest of your life *here*?” and with bony fingers he indicated the graveyard and the night.

Bod thought of Miss Lupescu and her awful food and her lists and her pinched mouth.

“I’m game,” he said.

His three new friends might have been his size, but they were far stronger than any child, and Bod found himself picked up by the Bishop of Bath and Wells and held high above the creature's head, while the Duke of Westminster grabbed a handful of mangy-looking grass, shouted what sounded like "*Skagh! Thegh! Khavagah!*" and pulled. The stone slab that covered the grave swung open like a trapdoor, revealing a darkness beneath.

"Quick now," said the duke, and the Bishop of Bath and Wells tossed Bod into the dark opening, then leapt in after him, followed by the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh and then, with one agile bound, by the Duke of Westminster, who, as soon as he was inside, called out, "*Wegh Khârados!*" to close the ghoul-gate, and the stone crashed down above them.

Bod fell, tumbling through the darkness like a lump of marble, too startled to be scared, wondering how deep the hole beneath that grave could possibly be, when two strong hands caught him beneath the armpits and he found himself swinging forward through the pitch-blackness.

Bod had not experienced total darkness for many years. In the graveyard, he saw as the dead see, and no tomb or grave or crypt was truly dark to him. Now he was in utter darkness, feeling himself being pitched forward in a sequence of jerks and rushes, the wind rushing past him. It was frightening, but it was also exhilarating.

And then there was light, and everything changed.

The sky was red, but not the warm red of a sunset. This

was an angry, glowering red, the color of an infected wound. The sun was small and seemed like it was old and distant. The air was cold and they were descending a wall. Tombstones and statues jutted out of the side of the wall, as if a huge graveyard had been upended, and, like three wizened chimpanzees in tattered black suits that did up in the back, the Duke of Westminster, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh were swinging from statue to stone, dangling Bod between them as they went, tossing him from one to another, never missing him, always catching him with ease, without even looking.

Bod tried to look up, to see the grave through which they had entered this strange world, but he could see nothing but headstones.

He wondered if each of the graves they were swinging past was a door for the kind of people who were carrying him. . . .

"Where are we going?" he asked, but his voice was whipped away by the wind.

They went faster and faster. Up ahead of them Bod saw a statue swing up, and another two creatures came catapulting out into this crimson-skied world, just like the ones that carried Bod. One wore a raggedy silken gown that looked like it had once been white, the other wore a stained grey suit too large for it, the sleeves of which were shredded into shadowy tatters. They spotted Bod and his three new friends and made for them, dropping twenty feet with ease.

The Duke of Westminster gave a guttural squawk and pretended to be scared, and Bod and the three of them swung down the wall of graves with the two new creatures in pursuit. None of them seemed to get tired or out of breath, under that red sky, with the burnt-out sun gazing down at them like a dead eye, but eventually they fetched up on the side of a huge statue of a creature whose whole face seemed to have become a fungoid growth. Bod found himself being introduced to the 33rd President of the United States and the Emperor of China.

"This is Master Bod," said the Bishop of Bath and Wells. "He's going to become one of us."

"He's in search of a good meal," said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh.

"Well, you're guaranteed fine dining when you becomes one of us, young lad," said the Emperor of China.

"Yup," said the 33rd President of the United States.

Bod said, "I become one of you? You mean, I'll turn into you?"

"Smart as a whip, sharp as a tack, you'd have to get up pretty late at night to put anything past this lad," said the Bishop of Bath and Wells. "Indeed. One of us. As strong, as fast, as unconquerable."

"Teeth so strong they can crush any bones, and tongue sharp and long enough to lick the marrow from the deepest marrowbone or flay the flesh from a fat man's face," said the Emperor of China.

"Able to slip from shadow to shadow, never seen, never

suspected. Free as air, fast as thought, cold as frost, hard as nails, dangerous as, as *us*," said the Duke of Westminster.

Bod looked at the creatures. "But what if I don't *want* to be one of you?" he said.

"Don't *want* to? Of course you *wants* to! What could be finer? I don't think there's a soul in the universe doesn't want to be *just* like us."

"We've got the best city—"

"Ghûlheim," said the 33rd President of the United States.

"The best life, the best food—"

"Can you imagine," interrupted the Bishop of Bath and Wells, "how fine a drink the black ichor that collects in a leaden coffin can be? Or how it feels to be more important than kings and queens, than presidents or prime ministers or heroes, to be *sure* of it, in the same way that people are more important than brussels sprouts?"

Bod said, "What *are* you people?"

"Ghouls," said the Bishop of Bath and Wells. "Bless me, somebody wasn't paying attention, was he? We're ghouls."

"Look!"

Below them, a whole troupe of the little creatures were bouncing and running and leaping, heading for the path below them, and before he could say another word, he was snatched up by a pair of bony hands and was flying through the air in a series of jumps and lurches, as the creatures headed down to meet the others of their kind.

The wall of graves was ending, and now there was a

road, and nothing but a road, a much-trodden path across a barren plain, a desert of rocks and bones, that wound towards a city high on a huge red rock hill, many miles away.

Bod looked up at the city, and was horrified: an emotion engulfed him that mingled repulsion and fear, disgust and loathing, all tinged with shock.

Ghouls do not build. They are parasites and scavengers, eaters of carrion. The city they call Ghûlheim is something they found, long ago, but did not make. No one knows (if anyone human ever knew) what kind of creatures it was that made those buildings, who honeycombed the rock with tunnels and towers, but it is certain that no one but the ghoul-folk could have wanted to stay there, or even to approach that place.

Even from the path below Ghûlheim, even from miles away, Bod could see that all of the angles were wrong—that the walls sloped crazily, that it was every nightmare he had ever endured made into a place, like a huge mouth of jutting teeth. It was a city that had been built just to be abandoned, in which all the fears and madnesses and revulsions of the creatures who built it were made into stone. The ghoul-folk had found it and delighted in it and called it home.

Ghouls move fast. They swarmed along the path through the desert more swiftly than a vulture flies and Bod was carried along by them, held high overhead by a pair of strong ghoul arms, tossed from one to another,

feeling sick, feeling dread and dismay, feeling stupid.

Above them in the sour red skies, things were circling on huge black wings.

"Careful," said the Duke of Westminster. "Tuck him away. Don't want the night-gaunts stealing him. Bloody stealers."

"Yar! We hates stealers!" shouted the Emperor of China.

*Night-gaunts, in the red skies above Ghûlheim . . .* Bod took a deep breath, and shouted, just as Miss Lupescu had taught him. He made a call like an eagle's cry, in the back of his throat.

One of the winged beasts dropped towards them, circled lower, and Bod made the call again, until it was stifled by hard hands clamping over his mouth. "Good idea, calling 'em down," said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh, "but trust me, they aren't edible until they've been rotting for at least a couple of weeks, and they just causes trouble. No love lost between our side and theirs, eh?"

The night-gaunt rose again in the dry desert air, to rejoin its fellows, and Bod felt all hope vanish.

The ghouls sped on towards the city on the rocks, and Bod, now flung unceremoniously over the stinking shoulders of the Duke of Westminster, was carried with them.

The dead sun set, and two moons rose, one huge and pitted and white, which seemed, as it rose, to be taking up half the horizon, although it shrank as it ascended, and a smaller moon, the bluish-green color of the veins of mold in a cheese, and the arrival of this moon was an occasion of

celebration for the ghoulish folk. They stopped marching and made a camp beside the road.

One of the new members of the band—Bod thought it might have been the one he had been introduced to as “the famous writer Victor Hugo”—produced a sack which turned out to be filled with firewood, several pieces still with the hinges or brass handles attached, along with a metal cigarette lighter, and soon made a fire, around which all the ghoulish folk sat and rested. They stared up at the greenish-blue moon, and scuffled for the best places by the fire, insulting each other, sometimes clawing or biting.

“We’ll sleep soon, then set off for Ghûlheim at moonset,” said the Duke of Westminster. “It’s just another nine or ten hours’ run along the way. We should reach it by next moonrise. Then we’ll have a party, eh? Celebrate you being made into one of us!”

“It doesn’t hurt,” said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh, “not so as you’d notice. And after, think how happy you’ll be.”

They all started telling stories, then, of how fine and wonderful a thing it was to be a ghoul, of all the things they had crunched up and swallowed down with their powerful teeth. Impervious they were to disease or illness, said one of them. Why, it didn’t matter what their dinner had died of, they could just chomp it down. They told of the places they had been, which mostly seemed to be catacombs and plague-pits. (“Plague-pits is good eatin’,” said the Emperor of China, and everyone agreed.) They told Bod how they

had got their names and how he, in his turn, once he had become a nameless ghoul, would be named as they had been.

“But I don’t want to become one of you,” said Bod.

“One way or another,” said the Bishop of Bath and Wells, cheerily, “you’ll become one of us. The other way is messier, involves being digested, and you’re not really around very long to enjoy it.”

“But that’s not a good thing to talk about,” said the Emperor of China. “Best to be a ghoul. We’re afraid of nuffink!”

And all the ghouls around the coffin-wood fire howled at this statement, and growled and sang and exclaimed at how wise they were, and how mighty, and how fine it was to be scared of nothing.

There was a noise then, from the desert, from far away, a distant howl, and the ghouls gibbered and they huddled closer to the flames.

“What was that?” asked Bod.

The ghouls shook their heads. “Just something out there in the desert,” whispered one of them. “Quiet! It’ll hear us!”

And all the ghouls were quiet for a bit, until they forgot about the thing in the desert, and began to sing ghoul-song, filled with foul words and worse sentiments, the most popular of which were simply lists of which rotting body parts were to be eaten, and in what order.

“I want to go home,” said Bod, when the last of the bits in the song had been consumed. “I don’t want to be here.”

"Don't take on so," said the Duke of Westminster. "Why, you little coot, I promise you that as soon as you're one of us, you'll not ever remember as you even *had* a home."

"I don't remember anything about the days before I was a ghoul," said the famous writer Victor Hugo.

"Nor I," said the Emperor of China, proudly.

"Nope," said the 33rd President of the United States.

"You'll be one of a select band, of the cleverest, strongest, bravest creatures ever," bragged the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

Bod was unimpressed by the ghouls' bravery or their wisdom. They were strong, though, and inhumanly fast, and he was in the center of a troupe of them. Making a break for it would have been impossible. They would be able to catch up with him before he could cover a dozen yards.

Far off in the night something howled once more, and the ghouls moved closer to the fire. Bod could hear them sniffing and cursing. He closed his eyes, miserable and homesick: he did not want to become one of the ghouls. He wondered how he would ever be able to sleep when he was this worried and hopeless and then, almost to his surprise, for two or three hours, he slept.

A noise woke him—upset, loud, close. It was someone saying, "Well, where *is* they? Eh?" He opened his eyes to see the Bishop of Bath and Wells shouting at the Emperor of China. It seemed that a couple of the members of their group had disappeared in the night, just vanished, and no

one had an explanation. The rest of the ghouls were on edge. They packed up their camp quickly, and the 33rd President of the United States picked Bod up and bundled him over his shoulder.

The ghouls scabbled back down the rocky cliffs to the road, beneath a sky the color of bad blood, and they headed towards Ghûlheim. They seemed significantly less exuberant this morning. Now they seemed—at least to Bod, as he was bounced along—to be running away from something.

Around midday, with the dead-eyed sun high overhead, the ghouls stopped, and huddled. Ahead of them, high in the sky, circling on the hot air currents, were the night-gaunts, dozens of them, riding the thermals.

The ghouls divided into two factions: there were those who felt that the vanishing of their friends was meaningless, and those who believed that something, probably the night-gaunts, was out to get them. They came to no agreement, except for a general agreement to arm themselves with rocks to throw at the night-gaunts should they descend, and they filled the pockets of their suits and robes with pebbles from the desert floor.

Something howled, off in the desert to their left, and the ghouls eyed each other. It was louder than the night before, and closer, a deep, wolfish howl.

"Did you hear that?" asked the Lord Mayor of London.

"Nope," said the 33rd President of the United States.

"Me neither," said the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh.

The howl came again.

"We got to get home," said the Duke of Westminster, hefting a large stone.

The nightmare city of Ghûlheim sat on a high rocky outcrop ahead of them, and the creatures loped down the road towards it.

"Night-gaunts coming!" shouted the Bishop of Bath and Wells. "Throw stones at the bleeders!"

Bod's view of things was upside down at this point, bouncing up and down on the back of the 33rd President of the United States, gritty sand from the path blown up into his face. But he heard cries, like eagle cries, and once again Bod called for help in Night-Gaunt. No one tried to stop him this time, but he was not sure that anyone could have heard him over the cries of the night-gaunts, or the oaths and curses of the ghoulish folk as they pitched and flung their stones into the air.

Bod heard the howling again: now it came from their right.

"There's dozens of the blooming blinkers," said the Duke of Westminster, gloomily.

The 33rd President of the United States handed Bod over to the famous writer Victor Hugo, who threw the boy into his sack and put it over his shoulder. Bod was just glad the sack smelled of nothing worse than dusty wood.

"They're retreating!" shouted a ghoul. "Look at 'em go!"

"Don't you worry, boy," said a voice that sounded to Bod like the Bishop of Bath and Wells, near the sack. "There

won't be any of this nonsense when we get you to Ghûlheim. It's impenetrable, is Ghûlheim."

Bod could not tell if any of the ghouls had been killed or injured fighting the night-gaunts. He suspected, from the imprecations of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, that several more of the ghouls might have run off.

"Quickly!" shouted someone who was probably the Duke of Westminster, and the ghouls set off at a run. Bod, in the sack, was uncomfortable, being painfully slammed against the famous writer Victor Hugo's back and occasionally banged on the ground. To make his time in the sack even more uncomfortable there were still several lumps of wood, not to mention sharp screws and nails, in there with him, the final remnants of the coffin-based firewood. A screw was just under his hand, digging into him.

Despite being jugged and jounced, jolted and jarred with every one of his captor's steps, Bod managed to grasp the screw in his right hand. He felt the tip of it, sharp to the touch. He hoped, deep inside. Then he pushed the screw into the fabric of the sack behind him, working the sharp end in, then pulling it back, and making another hole a little way below the first.

From behind, he could hear something howl once more and it occurred to him that anything that could terrify the ghoulish folk must itself be even more terrifying than he could imagine, and for a moment he stopped stabbing with the screw—what if he fell from the sack into the jaws of some evil beast? But at least if he died, thought Bod, he

would have died as himself, with all his memories, knowing who his parents were, who Silas was, even who Miss Lupescu was.

That was good.

He attacked the sacking with his brass screw again, jabbing and pushing until he'd made another hole in the fabric.

"Come on, lads," shouted the Bishop of Bath and Wells. "Up the steps and then we're home, all safe in Ghûlheim!"

"Hurrah, Your Worship!" called someone else, probably the Honorable Archibald Fitzhugh.

Now the motion of his captors had changed. It was no longer a forward motion: now it was a sequence of movements, up and along, up and along.

Bod pushed at the sacking with his hand to try and make an eye-hole. He looked out. Above, the drear red sky, below . . .

. . . he could see the desert floor, but it was now hundreds of feet below him. There were steps stretching out behind them, but steps made for giants, and the ochre rock wall to his right. Ghûlheim, which Bod could not see from where he was, had to be above them. To his left was a sheer drop. He was going to have to fall straight down, he decided, onto the steps, and he would just hope that the ghouls wouldn't notice that he was making his break for it in their desperation to be home and safe. He saw night-gaunts high in the red sky, hanging back, circling.

He was pleased to see there were no other ghouls

behind him: the famous writer Victor Hugo was bringing up the rear, and no one was behind him to alert the ghouls to the hole that was growing in the sack. Or to see Bod if he fell out.

But there was something else. . . .

Bod was bounced onto his side, away from the hole. But he had seen something huge and grey, on the steps beneath, pursuing them. He could hear an angry growling noise.

Mr. Owens had an expression for two things he found equally unpleasant: "I'm between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," he would say. Bod had wondered what this meant, having seen, in his life in the graveyard, neither the Devil nor the Deep Blue Sea.

*I'm between the ghouls and the monster*, he thought.

And as he thought it, sharp canine teeth caught at the sacking, pulled at it until the fabric tore along the rips Bod had made, and the boy tumbled down on the rock stairs, where a huge grey animal, like a dog but far larger, growled and drooled, and stood over him, an animal with flaming eyes and white fangs and huge paws. It panted and it stared at Bod.

Ahead of him the ghouls had stopped. "Bloody Nora!" said the Duke of Westminster. "That hellhound's got the blinking boy!"

"Let it have him," said the Emperor of China. "Run!"

"Yikes!" said the 33rd President of the United States.

The ghouls ran up the steps. Bod was now certain that



the steps had been carved by giants, for each step was higher than he was. As they fled, the ghouls paused only to turn and make rude gestures at the beast and possibly also at Bod.

The beast stayed where it was.

*It's going to eat me*, Bod thought bitterly. *Smart, Bod*. And he thought of his home in the graveyard, and now he could no longer remember why he had ever left. Monster dog or no monster dog, he had to get back home once more. There were people waiting for him.

He pushed past the beast, jumped down to the next step four feet below, fell his height, landed on his ankle, which twisted underneath him, painfully, and he dropped, heavily, onto the rock.

He could hear the beast running, jumping down towards him, and he tried to wriggle away, to pull himself up onto his feet, but his ankle was useless, now, numb and in pain, and before he could stop himself, he fell again. He fell off the step, away from the rock wall, out into space, off the cliff-side, where he dropped—a nightmarish tumble down distances that Bod could not even imagine. . . .

And as he fell, he was certain he heard a voice coming from the general direction of the grey beast. And it said, in Miss Lupescu's voice, "Oh, Bod!"

It was like every dream of falling he had ever had, a scared and frantic drop through space, as he headed towards the ground below. Bod felt as though his mind was only big enough for one huge thought, so, *That big dog was*

*actually Miss Lupescu*, and, *I'm going to hit the rock floor and splat*, competed in his head for occupation.

Something wrapped itself about him, falling at the same speed he was falling, and then there was the loud flapping of leathery wings and everything slowed. The ground no longer seemed to be heading towards him at the same speed.

The wings flapped harder. They lifted slightly and now the only thought in Bod's head was *I'm flying!* And he was. He turned his head. Above him was a dark brown head, perfectly bald, with deep eyes that looked as if they were polished slabs of black glass.

Bod made the screeching noise that means "Help," in Night-Gaunt, and the night-gaunt smiled and made a deep hooting noise in return. It seemed pleased.

A swoop and a slow, and they touched down on the desert floor with a thump. Bod tried to stand up, and his ankle betrayed him once again, sent him stumbling down into the sand. The wind was high, and the sharp desert sand blew hard, stinging Bod's skin.

The night-gaunt crouched beside him, its leathery wings folded on its back. Bod had grown up in a graveyard and was used to images of winged people, but the angels on the headstones looked nothing like this.

And now, bounding toward them across the desert floor in the shadow of Ghülheim, a huge grey beast, like an enormous dog.

The dog spoke, in Miss Lupescu's voice.

It said, "This is the third time the night-gaunts have saved your life, Bod. The first was when you called for help, and they heard. They got the message to me, telling me where you were. The second was around the fire last night, when you were asleep: they were circling in the darkness, and heard a couple of the ghouls saying that you were ill-luck for them and that they should beat your brains in with a rock and put you somewhere they could find you again, when you were properly rotted down, and then they would eat you. The night-gaunts dealt with the matter silently. And now this."

"Miss Lupescu?"

The great dog-like head lowered towards him, and for one mad, fear-filled moment, he thought she was going to take a bite out of him, but her tongue licked the side of his face, affectionately. "You hurt your ankle?"

"Yes. I can't stand on it."

"Let's get you onto my back," said the huge grey beast that was Miss Lupescu.

She said something in the night-gaunt's screeching tongue and it came over, held Bod up while he put his arms around Miss Lupescu's neck.

"Hold my fur," she said. "Hold tight. Now, before we go, say . . ." and she made a high screeching noise.

"What does it mean?"

"Thank you. Or good-bye. Both."

Bod screeched as best as he could, and the night-gaunt made an amused chuckle. Then it made a similar noise, and

it spread its great leathery wings, and it ran into the desert wind, flapping hard, and the wind caught it and carried it aloft, like a kite that had begun to fly.

"Now," said the beast that was Miss Lupescu, "hold on tightly." And she began to run.

"Are we going to the wall of graves?"

"To the ghoul-gates? No. Those are for ghouls. I am a Hound of God. I travel my own road, into Hell and out of it." And it seemed to Bod as if she ran even faster then.

The huge moon rose and the smaller mold-colored moon and they were joined by a ruby-red moon, and the grey wolf ran at a steady lope beneath them across the desert of bones. She stopped by a broken clay building like an enormous beehive, built beside a small rill of water that came bubbling out of the desert rock, splashed down into a tiny pool and was gone again. The grey wolf put her head down and drank, and Bod scooped water up in his hands, drinking the water in a dozen tiny gulps.

"This is the boundary," said the grey wolf that was Miss Lupescu, and Bod looked up. The three moons had gone. Now he could see the Milky Way, see it as he had never seen it before, a glimmering shroud across the arch of the sky. The sky was filled with stars.

"They're beautiful," said Bod.

"When we get you home," said Miss Lupescu, "I teach you the names of the stars and their constellations."

"I'd like that," admitted Bod.

Bod clambered onto her huge, grey back once more and

he buried his face in her fur and held on tightly, and it seemed only moments later that he was being carried—awkwardly, as a grown woman carries a six-year-old boy—across the graveyard, to the Owenses' tomb.

"He's hurt his ankle," Miss Lupescu was saying.

"Poor little soul," said Mistress Owens, taking the boy from her, and cradling him in her capable, if insubstantial arms. "I can't say I didn't worry, for I did. But he's back now, and that's all that matters."

And then he was perfectly comfortable, beneath the earth, in a good place, with his head on his own pillow, and a gentle, exhausted darkness took him.

Bod's left ankle was swollen and purple. Doctor Trefusis (1870–1936, *May He Wake to Glory*) inspected it and pronounced it merely sprained. Miss Lupescu returned from a journey to the chemist's with a tight ankle bandage, and Josiah Worthington, Bart., who had been buried with his ebony walking cane, insisted on lending it to Bod, who had too much fun leaning on the stick and pretending to be one hundred years old.

Bod limped up the hill and retrieved a folded piece of paper from beneath a stone.

#### *The Hounds of God*

he read. It was printed in a purple ink, and was the first item on a list.

*Those that men call Werewolves or Lycanthropes call themselves the Hounds of God, as they claim their transformation is a gift from their creator, and they repay the gift with their tenacity, for they will pursue an evildoer to the very gates of Hell.*

Bod nodded.

*Not just evildoers*, he thought.

He read the rest of the list, committing it to memory as best he could, then went down to the chapel, where Miss Lupescu was waiting for him with a small meat pie and a huge bag of chips she had bought from the fish-and-chips shop at the bottom of the hill, and another pile of purple-inked duplicated lists.

The two of them shared the chips, and once or twice, Miss Lupescu even smiled.

Silas came back at the the end of the month. He carried his black bag in his left hand and he held his right arm stiffly. But he was Silas, and Bod was happy to see him, and even happier when Silas gave him a present, a little model of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

It was almost midnight, and it was still not fully dark. The three of them sat at the top of the hill, with the lights of the city glimmering beneath them.

"I trust that all went well in my absence," said Silas.

"I learned a lot," said Bod, still holding his Bridge. He pointed up into the night sky. "That's the Big Bear and her son, the Little Bear. That's Draco the Dragon,

snaking between them."

"Very good," said Silas.

"And you?" asked Bod. "Did you learn anything, while you were away?"

"Oh yes," said Silas, but he declined to elaborate.

"I also," said Miss Lupescu, primly. "I also learned things."

"Good," said Silas. An owl hooted in the branches of an oak tree. "You know, I heard rumors, while I was away," said Silas, "that some weeks ago you both went somewhat further afield than I would have been able to follow. Normally, I would advise caution, but, unlike some, the ghouls have short memories."

Bod said, "It's okay. Miss Lupescu looked after me. I was never in any danger."

Miss Lupescu looked at Bod, and her eyes shone, then she looked at Silas.

"There are so many things to know," she said. "Perhaps I come back next year, in high summer also, to teach the boy again."

Silas looked at Miss Lupescu, and he raised an eyebrow a fraction. Then he looked at Bod.

"I'd like that," said Bod.