





The Enchanted Deer and the Dreams of the Fool.



## The Enchanted Deer and the Dreams of the Fool

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## The Ghost chaser

It is not the spirits the folk truly fear, but what it means to believe that spirits truly be. For if spirits be real, then the folk no longer know what to believe, and if they know not what to believe, then they must think anew on all they are doing. And they would much rather carry on with what they are doing, than to think on how they might have to change.

And so, they gladly call for me, the Ghost Chaser, to drive out the spirits when they are troubled by them. But from the moment I have driven them out, they would sooner see my back than my face. For the sight of me reminds them of the spirits I banished, the very spirits they wish not to believe in, so they might carry on with what they are doing.

It is a lonesome life, but I do what I know to do, just as they do. I carry on as best I can; I drive out the spirits, and the folk are happy, at least for a spell. They thank me kindly when all is done, and it is that which gladdens my heart. At the end of the day, if a Ghost Chaser has his bread, however humble, a roof above, and a path to follow, then he is a fortunate man. For his is a life that has chosen him, and a lonesome one at that. And he is most pleased and content when he comes to realize that, as a banisher of spirits, he can rely only upon himself... and the spirits.

"And what tidings had you yet to bring my master? The spirit has been driven from the castle, has it not?"

I "I will tell you, squire, but I do not wish to frighten you, for fear draws spirits as the scent of fish draws cats."



"Speak, Ghost Chaser. It is your duty to your Count."

"As a Ghost Chaser, I have just fulfilled my duty. The spirit is banished; only, no one asked what the spirit had to say. But tell me first, squire, your golden gorget bears the same adornments, the same little birds and filigree vines, as the golden girdle of the Countess, who paid me without a glance by tossing the purse of silver upon the ground at my feet."

"It was the Count who summoned you, not she, to drive out the spirit that was plaguing the castle. She will not touch you for fear that something might linger, something spectral. And yes, she is my kin. Our mothers are sisters; she is my cousin."

"It is the fear itself she should be afraid of, if she wishes to avoid spirits in her life."

"Speak, Ghost Chaser, tell us what the spirit had to say."

"Very well. I already have my price, for which I thank you, gathered up from the ground. And so, here are the tidings the spirit had left to give."

"I am listening."

"The Emperor beyond this borderland has not spared the county because he knows it not, but because he let it swell, to be plucked like a ripe grape. The dark Emperor does not earn his name because he is cruel and heavy-handed in his rule, but because he gave no peace to the world of men, nor to the world of spirits. And now he has succeeded in binding the hellhounds to his will, and the spirit world is in an uproar. There are some who are glad of it, and some who are not. And in the world of men, it shall be just the same. He is coming now; he has set out for this borderland, ripe for the harvest, not only

with the horror of the sword and the fire of his armies, but with the darkness he will bring—a darkness that will take from you what you hold most dear."

"Which is?"

"The beauty of life, of course! When life is no longer beautiful, you have nothing left to live for. And when you have nothing to live for, you give everything away. Then you drift through life as a spirit—a living spirit. The dark Emperor means to turn the world of men into a world of spirits."

"What hope have we against the dark Emperor?"

"The spirit did not say. Only that she is glad she will be able to see you all again soon."

"Who?"

"Your grandmother."

## The Great Frost

I told her so. I told her so. I told her so! That evening, I see it now, that evening the sunset was so gray, so sickly, that I felt it in my bones a great frost was about to set in, but the season was long past for it, so my wife said, but I said to her, I said, I know what I feel, and I feel that a great frost is coming to set in and it will not be gentle on our apple trees. We have to set out the smudge burners or they will lose their fruit, but my wife said that for the whole orchard we would need at least ten men, but everyone was busy hiding their gold and silver pieces and swords and jewels and everything precious, burying it, stuffing it where it could no longer be found, before the dark Emperor and his hellhounds would come to take it all away when he arrived, so why ready our apples for the harvest, when we would have to give it all away to that dreadful army with those dreadful soldiers who are known for leaving nothing behind. And I said to her then, I said, what I said was that I am not doing it for that dark Emperor or for the harvest that we may or may not see with our own eyes, I said I am doing it for these apple trees that I have cared for all my life, and I will not forsake what I have learned about caring for apple trees over many long years just because I should spend more time being afraid of what may or may not be coming. I know nothing of that, but what I do know everything about is what to do when a great frost is about to set in, and that is to see that those smudge burners are out. And so I said to my wife, even if I have to set them out all by myself, I'll set them out, and my wife said: I will help you.

And that is what saved her life, for we inexplicably fell asleep in the fields next to one of the burners, exhausted from the lack of sleep, and the great frost that set in did not touch us. And how or what or when we fell asleep by the smudge burners I do not know, but when we woke, the two of us saw a great, great stag leap away from us and disappear between the trees. But we had little time to think on it, for we looked around and saw that everything, everything, everything was frozen to pieces by that great frost, even the plants, the bushes. And when we returned to our little house, the door had been forced from its hinges by the cold, all the glass in the windows and everywhere in our house, all the glass had shattered, all our animals, our pets, our cats and dogs but also our chickens and our turkeys, they were all frozen to death. And my wife had already begun to weep even before she went up the stairs to the bedrooms to look upon our children. But I was already in the street, and I saw in the church tower in the distance that the bell no longer hung there but lay shattered in pieces on the street, and I saw through the windows of the houses the people frozen to their chairs, to their plates, and to their books and statuettes and to their chests and to their beds. And it was then that I felt a pounding in the ground, and it grew into a trembling, and it was the dark army coming to empty the houses and take everything with them.

I ran back inside my house and said we had to hide, that the dark Emperor was there, but she could do nothing but weep, and I nearly had to drag her back down the stairs. And all that terrible commotion made enough noise for the dreadful soldiers to know that there were still people who had not frozen to death. And so, when my wife looked through the window and saw that procession moving through the street, she began to run with me, and we ran through the back door as quietly but as quickly as we could. We ran outside across our land and up to where we had set out the smudge burners and beyond, and when we looked back, we saw the street already black with soldiers, and they had started running after us. And when we saw that, we fell down in fright, and we had stumbled and lay there, and it was at that moment that I saw those antlers above me again, and they hung like a roof above us, and it was the same stag, and the sun shone and glittered through his antlers, and the dark soldiers turned back, afraid. And we held each other and looked at those enormous legs and that enormous snout like a house above us, and he remained standing, and meanwhile, we heard the clinking of gold and silver pieces and jewels and everything precious through the streets, and the stag just stood there, even as the slavering bark of those hellhounds passed by. They did not come into the orchard, for there was nothing to gather in an orchard full of unripe apples, or was it the giant of a stag that stood there that chased them away? I will never know.