The queue outside the Office of Postmortal Affairs stretched down the corridor and curled around a brass-plated statue of Sir Percival, whose enchanted plaque politely reminded anyone dawdling too long to kindly keep moving. The soft hum of lantern-lit runes cast a flickering glow over the spirits waiting their turn, some of whom were idly chatting while others practiced their most aggrieved expressions in preparation for their appeals.

Inside, Barnaby Finn adjusted the stack of parchment on his desk and took a steadying sip of tea—Earl Grey, heavily sweetened. His office was like all the others in the department: walls lined with filing cabinets that occasionally shuffled their own contents, a brass nameplate that insisted on mispronouncing his name when addressed, and a single chair for the recently deceased. The chair had a slight wobble, though that hardly mattered when its occupants often hovered an inch or two above it.

A translucent gentleman in a neatly pressed waistcoat took the offered seat, though his spectral form flickered with nervous energy. He adjusted his cufflinks, cleared his throat (a force of habit, as he no longer had a physical throat), and clasped his hands together. “Good evening. I believe I have an unresolved issue.”

Barnaby nodded, dipping his quill into an inkwell. “Name?”

“Reginald P. Withersby.”

“Cause of death?”

“Old age, I presume. One moment I was savoring my evening brandy, and the next, I was here. Rather a disappointment, I must say. One would hope the transition would come with a bit more ceremony.”

Barnaby made a note. “Unresolved business?”

Reginald sighed and leaned forward. “It’s my pocket watch, you see. I was meant to be buried with it.”

Barnaby paused. “And you weren’t?”

“No! I cannot find it anywhere, and I simply cannot move on without it.”

Barnaby had handled all manner of unresolved issues before—misdelivered love letters, debts of honor, even a particularly stubborn issue with an unsettled bet over with an unfinished chess match. Was death considered a surrender? He had long since learned that what seemed trivial to the living could weigh heavily on the dead. “This pocket watch—why is it so important?”

Reginald straightened his spine with pride. “It has been in my family for generations! My grandfather wanted to be buried with it, as did my father. When my time came, I wanted to take it with me.”

Barnaby tapped his quill against his chin. “Why did your father have it if your grandfather wanted it, and how did you come to have it if should have gone with your father?”

“Well,” Reginald hesitated, then sighed. “It was supposed to go with my father, but it meant too much to me. So, I… I kept it.”

Barnaby raised a brow. “And he apparently could not part with it as well, despite his father’s wishes. Where do you think it is now?”

“That’s the issue, isn’t it?” Reginald threw up his hands in exasperation, causing a faint ripple in the air. “It’s gone! I searched everywhere in my coffin, but it’s simply vanished.”

Barnaby pursed his lips. “Tell me, Mr. Withersby. If the watch meant so much to you that you kept it from your father, and he from his, did you consider that perhaps someone else might have felt the same way?”

Reginald opened his mouth to protest, then faltered. His expression shifted from indignation to contemplation, then realization. “You mean… my son?”

Barnaby inclined his head. “If it was precious to you, perhaps it was just as precious to him, perhaps even more so.”

Reginald sat in stunned silence, his form flickering between transparency and solidity. Slowly, his shoulders relaxed, and a peaceful expression settled over his face. “That… that actually makes a great deal of sense. Perhaps I was being selfish after all.” He looked down at his hands as they began to fade, a warmth spreading through his features. “Thank you, Mr. Finn. I… I believe I can move on now.”

With a final nod, Reginald P. Withersby vanished, leaving behind only the faint scent of brandy and a small sigh of relief in the air.

Barnaby exhaled, took another sip of tea, and glanced at the queue still stretching out the door. He adjusted his papers, set his quill in place, and looked up at the next spirit in line.

“Next!”

Barnaby Finn had always been an unusual child.

While most boys his age were busy scuffing their boots in the mud, chasing frogs, or trying to nick sweets from the corner shop, Barnaby spent his days speaking to people no one else could see.

His first encounter with a ghost had been at the age of five, when he had wandered into the garden behind his house and found an old woman sitting primly on the stone bench, knitting something that did not quite exist.

"Hello," he'd said, tilting his head curiously.

The woman had looked up, surprised, and peered at him over her tiny spectacles. "Oh. You can see me?"

"Yes," Barnaby had replied. "You're very pale. Are you a ghost?"

She had pursed her lips, considering. "I suppose I am. Terribly inconvenient timing, but the pain in my fingers is completely gone, now, so I decided to take my knitting back up."

Barnaby had thought this was a very reasonable response and sat beside her, watching as her ghostly fingers worked at her invisible knitting. "What are you making?"

"A scarf, for my grandsons tenth birthday. I always wished I had been able to finish it, but it got too painful. I have the time and the dexterity now, though it doesn’t seem to be coming along properly. I have been at it for ages"

Barnaby had nodded sagely. "That must be because you're dead."

"Ah," she said, as if that had only just occurred to her. "I suppose that would do it."

She faded away slowly, her final words a whisper. “He did die 15 years ago, so I suppose he won’t be needing it anymore, anyway.”

From that moment on, it had become quite clear that Barnaby saw the world differently from other children. Ghosts were not mysterious, frightening entities to him. They were simply part of the landscape—like trees, birds, and the occasional nosy neighbor. His parents had assumed he had imaginary friends, until he began recounting conversations with great-uncle Silas, whom he had never met, but who had apparently been hanging about in the attic for the past thirty years.

When Barnaby's parents realized what was happening, they did what any sensible Victorian-era parents would do: they consulted an expert.

Thus, Barnaby was introduced to the Office of Postmortal Affairslong before he would ever set foot there as an employee. A certain Miss Harbinger, a stern-looking woman with ink-stained fingers and a monocle that gleamed ominously, had tested him with all manner of spiritual detection exercises. He had passed them all with an ease that startled even the most seasoned professionals.

"Well, boy," Miss Harbinger had said, tapping her quill against her notepad, "it seems you have a gift. You can commune with the most tenuous of spirits, even the ones most of our staff can’t even perceive."

Barnaby had shrugged. "It’s not very hard."

Miss Harbinger had arched a single, impressively judgmental brow. "Then we shall make it harder."

And so began his training.

Barnaby learned from the best of the best—or, rather, the best of the deceased. The Office of Postmortal Affairshad long employed spectral instructors, who were more than happy to share their centuries of accumulated wisdom. He studied under Professor Atherton, who had once been a renowned scholar of metaphysical bureaucracy before dying in the middle of filling out an application for an extended research grant. He was taught spirit negotiation by Lady Winthrope, who had spent the last hundred years arguing with anyone who would listen (and many who would not). He learned ghostly legalities from the Honorable Judge Pritchard, whose determination to uphold the law had not wavered even in death.

By the time Barnaby came of age, he had excelled in every area of spectral management. But it was not the handling of ghosts that fascinated him most. It was the structure of it all—the rules, the paperwork, the very framework that kept everything from descending into chaos. He liked forms, regulations, and well-organized ledgers. He enjoyed efficiency.

His career in the Office of Postmortal Affairsbegan as a humble field investigator, where he went into the field and helped restless spirits resolve their unfinished business. He was good at it—too good, in fact. He processed cases at an alarming rate, clearing backlogs that had been stagnant for decades. His efficiency did not go unnoticed, and soon, he was promoted to case manager—a role affectionately known among the staff as "casket manager”. He would interview the newly departed and find what still tethered them to the mortal world. He would then assign staff to assist them in finalizing their affairs. Scribes, Field Investigators, and other various spectral specialists to assist. Some of them even being former clients, who had unfinished business that could not be currently addressed, such as waiting for a grandchild to graduate, or waiting for a long-term project to be finished. Not every solution could be instant, and the departed often wished to feel useful while they waited.

His responsibilities grew, as did his reputation. Eventually, he found himself as the branch manager of his department, overseeing an entire team of postmortal management specialists for most of London. It was, by all accounts, a respectable position. He had an office, a staff, and a well-stocked tea supply.

But there was one problem.

Advancement beyond his current position was… unlikely.

His superior, Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw, had held his position for over two centuries. Grimshaw was one of the rare sanctioned undead—a person who had been permitted, through a rather bureaucratic process, to continue existing in both legal and managerial capacities long after his natural expiration. He was, at present, 238 years old and still going strong, with no signs of vacating his position anytime soon. He had been knighted 187 years ago, while still mortal, and was still a favorite of the crown.

Barnaby had long since accepted that he would likely remain a branch manager indefinitely. But he did not mind terribly. He enjoyed the work, even if the dead were sometimes exasperating. He liked routine, order, and predictability.

Still…

There were times, in the quiet moments between case files, when he found himself wishing for something unexpected. A little mystery. A puzzle to solve. Something to shake up the endless paperwork, lovely as it was, and give him a reason to feel excited again.

Of course, as the old saying went: be careful what you wish for.

He was about to get his wish—and much more.

Barnaby had just finished updating the department’s ledger—ensuring that the proper notations had been made for the day’s particularly chatty spirits—when the next case arrived.

A thin, nervous-looking gentleman drifted into the chair across from Barnaby’s desk, his translucent hands smoothing over his spectral coat as he sat down. His form was less stable than most, flickering slightly at the edges as though his mind had not quite settled into the reality of his situation.

Barnaby dipped his quill into the inkwell and gave the man a reassuring nod. "Name?"

The ghost straightened his posture and cleared his throat, his incorporeal fingers clasping together. "Geoffrey Langley."

Barnaby wrote the name in neat, practiced strokes on the standard intake form. "And how did you die?"

Geoffrey let out a breathy sigh, which, given his current lack of lungs, was more of a habit than a necessity. "Horribly, in great pain, and ever so embarrassed."

Barnaby arched a brow. "Embarrassed?"

"Oh, dreadfully so," Geoffrey lamented. "You see, I was at my usual café—the Montague Parlour, lovely place, excellent coffee—and I had just taken my seat by the window. Still on my first cup. I remember quite clearly that I was reviewing the final pages of my manuscript. A rather tense moment in the narrative, you understand. The hero was just about to uncover a long-buried secret when, suddenly—" He made an exaggerated gesture with his hands. "I felt a most distressing sensation in my stomach."

Barnaby made a note. "Poison?"

Geoffrey nodded. "Most certainly. It was a terribly dramatic affair. I clutched my throat, gasped, knocked over my coffee—it was a complete scene. The other patrons, understandably alarmed, began shouting. One woman screamed about murder, which seemed rather premature at the time, though I suppose she was ultimately correct. I then proceeded to stumble into a waiter, upsetting an entire tray of pastries, which, in retrospect, was a mortifying final act in the living world."

Barnaby tapped his quill against his chin. "And then?"

"Then," Geoffrey continued with a sigh, "I collapsed onto my manuscript, which was utterly ruined by my own coffee. Dreadfully inconvenient. I was quite literally one page away from completion, Mr. Finn. One page! Now no one can read what I had written"

Barnaby had seen all manner of ghosts pass through his office—some enraged, some sorrowful, some simply confused—but Geoffrey Langley’s overwhelming irritation at the inconvenience of his own demise was refreshingly unique.

"Do you have any idea who might have done this?" Barnaby asked, watching the ghost’s expression carefully.

Geoffrey gave a thoughtful frown. "I can’t say I had any known enemies. My work was well-regarded—"

Barnaby coughed pointedly.

"—Well, mostly well-regarded, as well as any writer could be." Geoffrey amended. "Admittedly, I have received some rather scathing reviews in my time. There was one critic in particular, dreadful fellow, who once called my prose 'a cure for those suffering from an excess of enthusiasm.' If anyone deserved to drink poisoned coffee, it was him."

Barnaby jotted down a note. "But no personal grudges?"

Geoffrey shook his head. "None that I know of. Though I suppose one never truly knows who might be harboring ill will. It’s rather troubling, isn’t it? To think that someone out there wanted me dead?"

Barnaby hummed in agreement but refrained from making any speculative comments. That was a matter for the authorities. His job was simply to help Geoffrey Langley settle his affairs—though, in this case, that meant something more literary than literal.

"I believe I can assist with at least one of your concerns," Barnaby said. He reached for a small brass bell and rang it twice, sending out a resonant chime that rippled through the air like a drop in water. Moments later, the office door swung open, and a spectral figure drifted inside.

The ghostly scribe—thin, bespectacled, and permanently ink-stained—gave Barnaby a polite nod before turning his attention to Geoffrey. "Ah, another dictation? Very well. I assume we are on a deadline?"

"Technically, no," Barnaby said. "But I imagine Mr. Langley would prefer not to linger longer than necessary."

"Indeed," Geoffrey agreed, adjusting his cuffs as though he still had sleeves to straighten. "I should very much like to finish my novel before any further misfortune befalls me. Also, this will do wonders for book sales. Tragic demise? Last work completed posthumously? My publisher will be thrilled."

Barnaby gestured to the side door. "You may use the dictation room. The scribe will transcribe your final pages, and arrangements can be made to deliver the manuscript to your literary agent. Take as long as you need".

Geoffrey beamed. "Oh, marvelous! May take me several days, I always have a few tweaks after I write something! Nothing is ever quite right the first time. I can’t leave anything to my editor, no real talent, just a spell checker, really. Wouldn’t recognize Chekhov’s Gun if it shot him in the foot. I do hope this causes a proper stir in the literary world. Nothing sells books quite like a good scandal, and now I am one."

With that, he followed the scribe into the adjoining room, already launching into a dramatic recounting of his final chapter.

Barnaby watched him go, then took another sip of tea. A murdered author, a mystery with no clear suspects, and a ghost who seemed more delighted than distressed about his circumstances. It was shaping up to be an interesting evening.

And, though he wouldn’t yet admit it to himself, exactly the kind of excitement he had been hoping for.

The Office of Postmortal Affairs had closed for the day, and Barnaby Finn was glad to leave the flickering lanterns and the soft murmurs of the afterlife behind him. He walked briskly through the dim-lit corridors, weaving past the waiting spirits who often looked more lost than they had in life. A faint smile played on his lips as he thought about the author he’d seen earlier, the one who’d died in such a spectacularly inconvenient manner. Poor soul. How the world never seemed to slow down, even after you passed on.

His thoughts drifted to home, to his family—his wonderfully ordinary, wonderfully alive family. He reached the front door of their house, a grand yet comfortable place just on the edge of town, a bit tucked away from the bustle of the city. He inserted the key into the door and stepped inside, greeted by the familiar scent of dinner wafting from the kitchen and the sound of children’s laughter echoing through the hall.

"Home!" Barnaby called as he dropped his coat over a chair in the hallway, his voice filled with a kind of warmth that only home could provide.

From the sitting room came the sound of footsteps, followed by his wife, Marian, stepping into view with a smile. She was a lovely woman, sharp-eyed, with a wry sense of humor that Barnaby adored. Her hair was dark, pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck, her eyes crinkling at the corners in the way they did when she was genuinely happy.

“Hello, darling,” she said, as she walked toward him, wiping her hands on an apron. “How was your day in the land of the dearly departed?”

“Unremarkable as always,” Barnaby replied with a chuckle, kissing her on the cheek. “Though I did have an author die at a café today, which was a bit dramatic. Poisoned, you know. Quite the spectacle.”

“Goodness,” Marian said, arching an eyebrow, her smile widening. “Well, I suppose that’s one way to go out.” She shook her head, her smile turning a bit more mischievous. “Was he anyone interesting?”

“Well, that depends on your definition of interesting. The man was an author, and apparently, he was in the middle of latest book,” Barnaby said, hanging his hat on the coat rack. “He was quite upset about that—more than his own death, in fact. He even joked about how this would probably drive up his book sales. His last book will surely be a bestseller now.”

Marian’s eyes lit up. “Which author was this?” She leaned in, her curiosity piqued.

“Geoffrey Langley,” Barnaby replied, heading toward the kitchen. “Do you know him?”

Her eyes went wide. “Langley? *The* Geoffrey Langley? He’s one of my favorites! I’ve read all his works.” She paused for a moment, as though trying to formulate an idea. “Wait, wait… are you telling me he’s dead, and you were *the one* who met him after he died?”

Barnaby smiled, a little amused by his wife’s sudden excitement. “Well, yes. He came in, told me his woes, and I promptly sent him off with a spectral scribe to finish his book.”

“That’s… incredible,” Marian said, wide-eyed. “But wait, Barnaby, surely there’s something we can do? Is there any way to get him to stick around longer? Just a little longer? I mean, he hasn’t finished his book! And imagine how many more *would* have been written if he hadn’t been cut off so tragically!”

Barnaby chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I think it’s a little late to ask him to hang around, love. He's already off to finish his book. But yes, he certainly was keen to ensure his literary agent got the final chapter in good order. Very determined.”

Marian placed her hands on her hips, a playful frown creeping onto her face. “Oh, but I was hoping to read more of his work. I’ve been waiting to read his next novel, and now he’s gone…” She sighed dramatically, though her eyes were still sparkling with amusement. “Perhaps, you could find a way to—oh, I don’t know—get him to finish another novel or two before he moves on to his next great adventure?”

Barnaby smirked at the playful request. “Well, darling, I suppose it’s not out of the question. But it’s not something I typically deal with. After all, it’s not my job to make sure authors linger on for their fans.”

“Well, if you do happen to run into him again, maybe you could suggest it,” Marian said, her smile softening. She wrapped her arms around him in a warm embrace. “Who knows? You might be able to help him out with a little posthumous encouragement.”

Barnaby smiled down at his wife, amused at how she always seemed to find a way to turn the most peculiar situations into something lighthearted. “I’ll be sure to pass on the suggestion,” he promised, knowing full well that the chances of it actually happening were slim at best.

Before he could add anything more, a small voice interrupted them.

“Papa, is dinner ready?” one of their children asked, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. The eldest, Lily, was all of seven years old but had a knack for being the first to announce when food was about to be served.

Barnaby grinned and ruffled Lily’s hair. “Almost, sweetheart. Your mother is just about to finish setting the table.”

Lily bounced on her feet, eager to get to the meal, and Barnaby couldn’t help but marvel at how different his life was from those of the souls he dealt with at the office. While the dead were left with all their unfinished business, he had a family to return to, to share stories with, and to find joy in the little moments.

As Marian began to finish preparing dinner, Barnaby took a moment to glance out the window. The sky was beginning to darken, the sun dipping below the horizon. It was a peaceful evening, and despite the strange nature of his work, he felt an unusual sense of contentment. Things were steady. Predictable.

For now.

He could only hope that whatever excitement he was waiting for—whatever twist of fate—would come soon enough. He wasn’t sure he could stay content with the quiet for too long. Even in the world of the living, there was always something just beyond the horizon.

But for now, he had his family. And that was enough.

A few moments later, Marian returned to the kitchen, carrying a dish of roast chicken, the smell filling the room and making Barnaby’s stomach rumble. The children gathered around the table, and the evening passed in the usual flurry of conversation, laughter, and the occasional outburst of excitement as the youngest, Owen, tried to convince everyone that he’d seen a goblin hiding under the table earlier.

Barnaby exchanged a knowing glance with Marian. Their home was full of life, full of love, and for now, that was all he needed.

As the laughter from the dining table continued, Barnaby heard the soft click of the front door opening, followed by the unmistakable sound of footsteps entering the hallway. His mother-in-law, Margery, was home.

Barnaby glanced up from his plate, a slight smile curling at his lips as he saw her enter the room. Margery was a stately woman, with a sharp gaze and a commanding presence. She had never been one for excessive conversation, preferring the quiet of her own thoughts or the company of a good book, but there was no mistaking the deep affection she had for her family. Her hair, a silver-streaked blonde, was pulled back into a neat bun, and she wore her usual practical attire—a woolen cardigan over a simple dress—ready for whatever chores or errands she might take on next.

"Ah, Margery, you're home!" Barnaby said, his tone warm as he stood to greet her. "Any word from Archie?"

Margery gave him a brief, though fond smile as she settled into the chair at the head of the table. "Nothing today," she replied, her voice steady but tinged with the slightest hint of concern. "The last letter came a few weeks ago. He’s still working on the integration of supernatural elements into the provinces. The paperwork is interminable, he says."

Barnaby nodded sympathetically, his thoughts momentarily drifting to her husband, Archie, Lord Archibald Prangham, who had been posted overseas as a technical advisor to the newly-formed supernatural integration division in India. His work was both groundbreaking and perilous, as the Indian provinces were still adjusting to their status as part of the Commonwealth. It had been years since India joined, but the transition wasn’t without its challenges, especially when dealing with the mystical and the supernatural. Barnaby couldn’t imagine the strain of dealing with all that while being so far from home.

“Still,” Barnaby continued, “the work he’s doing is vital. And you must be proud, Margery. He’s making a real difference over there, helping the overseas provinces adapt, and finding how their successes might be used here. It must be quite the adventure.”

Margery gave a small nod, though her expression remained one of quiet concern. “Yes, it’s just… not the same without him. But you’re right. It’s important work, and I suppose there’s some comfort in knowing that.”

Barnaby smiled and took a sip of his tea, glancing over at Marian, who was now setting the last of the dishes on the table. “Well, it’s not all bad,” he said. “After all, the Commonwealth now stretches across the globe. Thanks to the marriage of Prince Raj and Queen Victoria, India is firmly integrated. It’s remarkable to think that the Commonwealth now encompasses every part of the Earth, isn’t it?”

Margery’s eyes glimmered with a mixture of pride and nostalgia. “I remember the days leading up to India’s joining. It seemed like an impossibility at the time—so many questioned whether it would work. But when Prince Raj dissolved the Indian Empire and abdicated in favor of his bride, everything shifted. There was an unexpected unity in that decision. His actions convinced so many that the Commonwealth could truly be a global entity.”

Barnaby nodded. “Exactly. Their marriage was one of those rare moments in history where the right people met at the right time. I can’t imagine how it could have been any different. Not only did it bring about the dissolution of the Empire, but it also made India a member of the Commonwealth. And in an almost unanimous vote—on both sides—India was welcomed into the fold.”

He paused for a moment, glancing out the window as the last light of the evening sun began to fade into twilight. The idea of a unified Earth under the Commonwealth was still something Barnaby found awe-inspiring. For years, the notion of a world so thoroughly connected seemed like a pipe dream. Yet now, with the American colonies having joined fifty years ago and India’s membership 25 years ago cementing the Commonwealth’s reach, it was no longer a dream—it was a reality.

“And with India now a full member,” Barnaby continued, “many were eager to see if the Commonwealth would continue to grow. Some even speculated that the union between young Prince Edward and the daughter of the Emperor of the ‘Holy Roman Empire, Reforged’ might lead to further expansion. It’s a fascinating time, isn’t it?”

Margery smiled, though the smile was tinged with an almost imperceptible sadness. “Yes, fascinating. But it also brings a certain weight to everything, doesn’t it? To think of it all, the expansion, the integration. It’s a lot for anyone to carry.”

Barnaby’s expression softened, understanding what his mother-in-law meant. The growth of the Commonwealth, while bringing about a grand unification, also meant immense responsibility for those who were charged with overseeing its far-flung territories. Archie had become a crucial part of this transition, and the work he was doing with supernatural integration was no small task. India was a land rich with magical history, and its transition into the Commonwealth meant reconciling both the mundane and the supernatural.

"Still," Barnaby said, bringing the conversation back to lighter territory, "it seems like Lord Prangham is making good progress. Perhaps it’s just the delay of paperwork keeping him from returning home. But I have to admit, the idea of magical integration on that scale does fascinate me."

Marian, who had been listening intently, spoke up, “I remember hearing a lot about how the supernatural is becoming more and more a part of daily life in India. There are even whispers of new kinds of magic, ones that have never been seen in the Commonwealth before.”

Margery gave a slow nod, her fingers idly tracing the edge of her teacup. “Yes, that’s right. The provinces are finding ways to merge their old practices with the newer ways of the Commonwealth. It’s a complicated process, especially with the supernatural elements. But Jonathan has a way with the local officials there, and his expertise in integrating new policies seems to be making things easier.”

“Sounds like he’s doing important work,” Barnaby remarked, his tone full of respect.

“Oh, he is,” Margery replied, the pride in her voice evident. “But it’s difficult for him, being away for so long. It’s not just the time difference or the language barriers; it’s the strain of being so far removed from the rest of us. I do wish he could come home sooner.”

Barnaby nodded again, feeling for her. “It must be hard. But he’s making a real difference over there, Margery. And we can be proud of that.”

There was a moment of silence as Margery took a sip of her tea, lost in thought. Barnaby knew that the work Jonathan was doing would be pivotal for the future of the Commonwealth. But he also knew how difficult it could be to maintain a sense of connection to the family when you were so far away, across an ocean, in a land so different from your own.

“So,” Barnaby said, shifting gears with a smile, “did you manage to catch up on your reading today, Margery? I remember you mentioning a new historical text you were looking forward to.”

Margery’s gaze brightened, and she nodded. “Yes, I’ve just started a new book on the early years of the Commonwealth’s expansion. It’s fascinating stuff. I’ve always been intrigued by the political and magical history that brought us to where we are now. It’s amazing how the marriage of Prince Raj and Queen Victoria set the course for a new global era.”

“It’s quite remarkable,” Barnaby agreed. “It’s a time of great change, and I do wonder what the future holds for the Commonwealth.”

As the conversation turned to lighter matters—books, current events, and family—the feeling of normalcy settled back into the room. Barnaby could hear the faint sounds of the children playing upstairs, and for a moment, everything felt perfectly ordinary. It was a strange thought, given his job, but perhaps that was exactly what made it so wonderful. After all, there was nothing quite like returning home to the people who mattered most.

The next morning the meeting room was filled with the usual murmurs of the department's middle management, a room where reports were discussed, statistics were read, and occasionally, a little gossip slipped through. Barnaby stood at the back, absentmindedly tapping his quill against his notebook while listening to the latest developments.

"Alright, that’s the monthly numbers, people. So far, we’ve had an uptick in the general number of souls passing through—expected, given the season change," intoned Eileen, the department’s statistics officer, a woman of precise diction and always impeccable posture. She adjusted her glasses as she spoke, her eyes scanning the rows of figures she was reading from the ledger. "There’s been a rise in elderly citizens passing, likely due to the recent bout of unseasonably cold weather. We’re seeing about a 20% increase in cases from last month. A bit higher than usual, but within expected limits."

"Good, good," muttered Barnaby, half-listening as his mind wandered. His role in these meetings usually consisted of presenting the more immediate cases to be resolved, but today, he was content to let the statistics wash over him. He liked being hands-on with the operational side of things, particularly when it came to managing the caseload. "What else?"

Eileen turned another page. "We’ve also noticed a slight increase in food-related deaths this month—mostly due to accidents, though a few from malnourishment and disease. We’ve got the usual number of spirit-guidance requests. And we’re seeing some odd results in the more recent 'horrible deaths' category."

Barnaby frowned. He hadn’t liked the sound of that. "Horrible?" he repeated.

"Yes. Some deaths have been described as ‘oddly untimely’ and a bit... complicated," Eileen continued, her voice softening. "More than usual, anyway. We’ve got a growing backlog of cases that may require deeper investigation, as the newly departed are reluctant to move on until they know why they died, but... I’m afraid we're running thin on resources."

Barnaby nodded absently, already contemplating the implications. He had noticed a few oddities in the cases he’d handled the past week. People dying in bizarre ways, out of the blue, often in public, food related, and it felt... off. He rubbed his temple, pushing the thought aside for the moment. "Right, right. And the usual cases? How are we handling them?"

Eileen flipped through her papers once more. "Standard fare, really. That Locket dispute I mentioned last week? Resolved. Old Mrs. Laughton, bless her, moved on peacefully. Everything in order for the standard hauntings and minor debts. But there’s one other thing..."

She paused dramatically, and the room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"Go on," Barnaby said, half-expecting the worst.

"Known Poisonings," she said, her voice low, almost a whisper. "A significant uptick in random poisonings. It’s not just the usual suspects. We’re seeing poisonings that seem to happen out of nowhere. People dying in cafes, restaurants, at parties. No clear connections, no discernible pattern—just... a surge in unexplained poisonings."

Barnaby’s brow furrowed. "How much of a surge?"

Eileen checked her notes, eyes widening as she found the number. "Over 500% increase from the previous month in unknown motive poisonings. It’s troubling."

Barnaby felt his stomach tighten. Poisonings were not something the department usually dealt with directly. The cases would often be flagged by the police, and investigations would proceed from there. But a 500% increase? That couldn’t be a coincidence. "Any leads?"

Eileen shook her head, her face grim. "None yet. There are no obvious suspects. Wales Yard hasn’t been much help either—they’re too bogged down with their own investigations to help us move these spirits along."

Barnaby shifted uncomfortably, his thoughts swirling. A rash of unexplained deaths was troubling enough, but the sheer volume of these poisonings made this an entirely different problem. It sounded like something—someone—was making a statement.

The meeting wrapped up shortly thereafter, though Barnaby’s mind stayed fixed on the poisonings. He quietly excused himself, stepping out of the conference room, the sound of murmuring colleagues fading behind him as he made his way down the long hallway toward his office.

Once there, Barnaby paused in front of his desk, pulling out a small ornate mirror from a drawer—one of the few pieces of magic-infused technology the office had adopted. The mirror shimmered slightly as he placed his hand on its surface, muttering a few words under his breath. A few moments later, the glass rippled, and the form of Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw appeared, as if stepping out from the depths of the mirror.

Lord Grimshaw was, to put it mildly, an intimidating figure. At nearly 238 years old, he was one of the very few sanctioned undead in the Commonwealth, having been preserved through a combination of alchemical processes and careful magical intervention. His pale skin was almost translucent, and his eyes were a faint, unsettling shade of silver. Despite his long life and unnerving appearance, Lord Grimshaw carried himself with the poise of a seasoned bureaucrat.

"Barnaby," the Director’s voice rumbled, smooth and composed. "How are things?"

"Busy, as always," Barnaby replied, pulling his chair closer to his desk. He adjusted his papers, glancing at the case files scattered across the surface. "The usual, plus some more... oddities. The backlog is increasing, and the numbers are up. But, as you know, we’re managing."

"Hm." Grimshaw’s gaze flickered to the pile of papers, then back at Barnaby through the mirror. "And the staff? Everything running smoothly there?"

Barnaby took a moment to reflect, rubbing his chin. "Mostly, yes. We're stretched thin, though. A few more hands would help, but we’ve made do. It’s just... the usual balancing act."

The Director nodded, a sharp glint of recognition in his eyes. "I’ve heard. You’ve always been good with operations, Barnaby. That’s why you’re where you are. We’re always a bit behind in the paperwork, but you never are."

Barnaby chuckled lightly, the familiar sense of satisfaction washing over him at the compliment. "It's my favorite part of the job, honestly. The paperwork. The logistics. I like the challenge of keeping everything in order. But I’ve noticed something lately—more odd deaths than usual. And... well, the poisonings. Over 500% increase in the last month."

Lord Grimshaw’s expression didn’t change, but there was a slight narrowing of his eyes. "Ah, yes. Poisonings. I’d heard that too." He paused, his fingers lightly tapping the desk in thought. "Well, Barnaby, that’s good for business, isn’t it? More work for us. More souls to process."

Barnaby’s brow furrowed. "That’s one way to look at it, but... there’s no pattern. No clear leads. People are dying in cafés, at parties. It’s too random. It’s troubling. And I’m not sure how we can keep up with it."

"Hm." Grimshaw’s voice was low now, almost thoughtful. "Well, it’s not our job to investigate the poisonings. That falls to the Metropolitan Police, in Wales Yard. They’re the ones who handle matters like that. We just move on the souls."

"Right," Barnaby said, but his voice carried a note of skepticism. "But they’re not exactly eager to let us poke into their business, and they refuse to share any part of the investigation to help us move the aggrieved spirits on”.

Grimshaw smiled faintly, the smile lacking any warmth. "No, they’re not likely to share an open investigation. And frankly, I don’t have the staff to deal with something like that. We’re already stretched thin as it is. Let Whales Yard handle the investigations. We’ll take care of the aftereffects."

Barnaby nodded, though his thoughts were still preoccupied with the growing number of poisonings. There was something off about it all—something that didn’t quite add up.

"I’ll keep an eye on it," he said finally. "But if it keeps up, we might need to reconsider our approach."

Grimshaw’s eyes gleamed with a knowing look. "You do what you need to, Barnaby. But remember, our focus is the dead, not the living. We collect the souls, we don’t chase down the killers."

"Understood, Director," Barnaby replied. The conversation had ended as it always did—somewhat coldly, but with a sense of finality that only Lord Grimshaw could bring.

With that, the magic mirror shimmered and went dark, leaving Barnaby alone in his office once more.

The poisonings were troubling, yes. But there was something else, something nagging at the back of his mind. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this was more than just a spike in random events. Something darker was brewing—and it was only a matter of time before it reached their doorstep.

Barnaby leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples as the mirror’s surface faded back to a dull, reflective sheen. His conversation with Director Grimshaw had been as productive as it ever was—full of useful advice and the occasional cryptic remark, but ultimately leaving the problem of the poisonings in someone else’s jurisdiction. He sighed and reached for his tea, which, despite being poured mere moments ago, had already cooled to an unsatisfactory temperature.

“Need a warmer?” came a gravelly voice from the doorway.

Barnaby glanced up to see the department’s spectral janitor, Mervin, floating in with a mop slung over one shoulder and a battered tin of ghostly polish tucked under one arm. He had been around for about eight years. He just appeared one day, and soon became a fixture of the department, as essential as the filing cabinets that rearranged themselves and the tea that refused to stay at an ideal drinking temperature.

“Morning, Mervin,” Barnaby said, lifting his cup in greeting. “Busy night?”

Mervin floated toward a cabinet and began scrubbing at an invisible stain on its brass handle. “You wouldn’t believe the ectoplasmic residue some of these newly departed leave behind. Tracked it all the way down the corridor, they did. Do they think I enjoy cleaning up the remnants of their unresolved existential crises? Back in my day, ghosts had the decency to dissipate properly, none of this lingering about, dripping regrets all over the place.”

Barnaby nodded absently, taking the opportunity to organize the paperwork from the morning meeting. “Speaking of lingering, poisonings are on the rise—over five hundred percent increase. We will have to keep a few more clients in the long term waiting areas than normal til we can move them along.”

Mervin let out a sharp sniff, not pausing in his polishing. “Disgraceful, that is. Back when I was alive, if you got poisoned, it was a respectable affair—an inheritance dispute, a political scandal, something you could put on a family crest. Not this slapdash nonsense. If you were poisoned, you knew who dun’ it, and why. None of this anonymous stuff! Where’s the pride in craftsmanship?”

Barnaby tapped his quill against his desk. “It’s not just criminals, though. People are dying in restaurants, cafés, and no one’s certain why. Wales Yard doesn’t want us poking into it, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

Mervin switched to dusting the top of a bookcase, muttering about spectral dust bunnies. “Could be cursed ingredients. Had that happen at the Ministry of Agricultural Sorcery once—fella enchanted a whole shipment of saffron to scream whenever it was used in paella. Gave a lot of chefs a nasty shock.”

Barnaby made a note to check on cursed food imports. “Possible, though these deaths seem random. No political ties, no criminal background, just unlucky diners.”

Mervin grunted. “If you ask me, it’s the mushrooms. Never trusted them. Too many secrets. Popping up overnight, changing colors, pretending to be one thing when they’re another entirely.”

Barnaby smirked. “A suspicious lot, fungi.”

Before Mervin could launch into another tirade about deceitful produce, Barnaby took the opportunity to call in his next case. He adjusted his papers and called them in. A few moments later, the office door creaked open, and a pale, transparent gentleman drifted in.

“Come in, have a seat,” Barnaby said, gesturing to the slightly wobbly chair.

The ghost sat, his form flickering as he tried to smooth down his spectral cravat. “Thank you. My name is Dr. Alistair Wentworth. I… well, I believe I was just murdered.”

Barnaby dipped his quill into ink. “And how did you die?”

“Horribly,” Dr. Wentworth said with a dramatic shudder. “In great pain. And ever so embarrassed.”

Barnaby raised a brow. “Embarrassed?”

Dr. Wetherby sighed, folding his translucent hands. “I was at *Le Champignon Doré*, a rather reputable establishment—or so I thought. I had just taken my first bite of their ‘Chef’s Special Wild Mushroom Medley’ when I felt it—an overwhelming, unmistakable wrongness. My throat burned, my vision swam, and I collapsed right there in the middle of my table.” He huffed. “Do you know what it’s like to perish in a fine dining establishment, in full view of your peers? The indignity of it all! I had hoped for a more… dignified exit.”

Barnaby glanced at his notes. “A rather dramatic way to go, certainly. And you’re sure it was poison?”

“Oh, quite. You see, I’m a mycologist. I study fungi. I knew what was happening the moment the taste hit my tongue.”

Barnaby frowned. “You mean you *recognized* the poison? But you still ate it?”

Dr. Wetherby threw up his hands. “It was already too late! The moment it hit my palate, I could tell I was dead—it wasn’t the chanterelles the menu claimed, but *Amanita phalloides*! Death caps, Mr. Finn! A single bite is enough to seal one’s fate.”

Barnaby scribbled a note. “Curious. And you said *Le Champignon Doré* served it as a special?”

“They did. And I wasn’t the only one to suffer.” Dr. Wentworth gestured toward the open door, where several other ghosts were hovering, their expressions ranging from mournful to deeply annoyed. “A whole room of us, felled by the same dish. And here’s the strangest part—the chef and the owner both ate it as well.”

Barnaby blinked. “They ate their own poisoned dish?”

Dr. Wentworth nodded. “They insisted the mushrooms were properly sourced. They were certain of it. Which means either *they* were deceived, or—”

“Someone tampered with the ingredients,” Barnaby finished.

Dr. Wentworth nodded gravely.

Barnaby rubbed his chin. A restaurant full of victims, the chef and owner included, and a mycologist who had the misfortune of knowing exactly how he’d been poisoned as it happened. This was getting more interesting by the moment.

Mervin floated by again, absently wiping down a filing cabinet as he muttered to himself.

Barnaby called out to Mervin ”How did you know about the mushrooms?”

“I have to clean up after this lot, don’t I? Spectral vomit everywhere in this hall, there is! And little bits of chewed up haunted fungus. That’s the problem with food poisoning cases—gets *everywhere*. You think you’ve cleaned it all up, but no, there’s always a bit more lingering about, clinging to the upholstery.”

Barnaby watched as the janitor made his way past the door, still talking about stains and spectral contaminants as he floated down the hall.

Dr. Wentworth followed Barnaby’s gaze. “Does he always do that?”

Barnaby sipped his tea. “Always.”

With a sigh, Barnaby adjusted his paperwork and worked on helping this soul. He had a feeling this case was only going to get stranger.

Barnaby Finn had a deep and abiding love for meetings. Some might find them dull, but to Barnaby, they were the very pinnacle of civilized work—structured, orderly, and brimming with opportunities to document, categorize, and administrate. He strode into the Central Office’s grand conference chamber with a spring in his step, briefcase in hand, and a fresh stack of notetaking parchment at the ready.

The room was a marvel of bureaucratic efficiency, a high-ceilinged chamber filled with long oak tables arranged in a semi-circle, each chair equipped with an enchanted quill that would transcribe the minutes in real time. A chandelier of softly glowing wisp-lights hung overhead, and the walls bore the department’s motto: **Post Mortem, Pro Bono, Perpetuum**—"For the Dead, For the Good, Forever."

Barnaby took his seat among his fellow branch managers, setting out his materials with practiced precision. He glanced fondly at the quills—he much preferred these to the newer self-inking ones that tended to smudge. His own personal quill, *Reginald*, was a fine raven-feather model that never leaked and wrote with the perfect balance of flourish and efficiency.

As the other managers settled in, Barnaby took the opportunity to engage in one of his favorite pastimes—discussing office supplies.

“I do wish they’d standardize requisition forms across all branches,” he lamented to the manager on his left, a sharp-nosed woman named Miss Hargrove. “There’s nothing more satisfying than a well-structured form. Take the *R-17/A Request for Spectral Reclassification*—clean margins, properly spaced checkboxes, and a clear, concise flow from section to section. A joy to fill out.”

Miss Hargrove nodded solemnly. “Absolutely. The *P-42 Death Certificate Amendment* is quite good as well—though I do wish they’d update the font. That serif choice is simply archaic.”

A murmur of agreement swept through the managers.

“I still say the *F-91 Ghost Relocation Permit* is the gold standard,” interjected Mr. Atwood, a heavyset man from the Bristol office. “Simple, elegant, and with the perfect amount of white space.”

Barnaby sighed wistfully. “Imagine how pleasant our days would be without all those pesky souls getting in the way of the real work.”

The room collectively nodded in agreement, savoring the thought of uninterrupted paperwork.

Before the discussion could continue, the doors at the far end of the room swung open, and Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw swept inside. Despite being over two centuries old, Grimshaw looked as impeccable as ever—tall and stately, his frock coat pristine, his gloves immaculate. He took his seat at the head of the room and adjusted his monocle before tapping a silver cane against the floor.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let us begin.”

The meeting was everything Barnaby had hoped for. Grimshaw covered the quarterly budget, the expected reallocation of funds, and the need for additional staffing—*when the budget allowed, of course*. The increase in cases was noted, but without any sense of urgency. It was, after all, the natural flow of things—more people died, and their office handled them.

Barnaby diligently took notes, enjoying every second of it. He relished discussions of proper paperwork routing, listened with interest as a minor procedural adjustment for case filings was announced, and was positively delighted when a new initiative for uniformed filing cabinets was proposed. By the time the meeting concluded, he felt thoroughly satisfied.

As the managers dispersed, Barnaby tucked his notes into his briefcase and made his way home, whistling a cheerful tune.

That evening, Barnaby arrived home to find his wife, Marian, sitting in the parlor with their children. His mother-in-law, Lady Prangham, was knitting something vaguely resembling a shawl but with occasional bouts of shimmering that suggested it might have some minor enchantment woven into it.

“Ah, you’re home,” Marian greeted him. “A letter arrived from Father today.”

Barnaby’s eyebrows rose with interest. “From India? What did he say?”

Marian nodded, passing him the envelope. It was thick parchment, sealed with the insignia of the Commonwealth Office of Supernatural Integration.

“We waited for you. We love when you read them out to us. Your voices are so similar it is almost like he was here with us.”

Barnaby settled into his chair and unfolded the letter, clearing his throat before reading aloud:

*My dearest family,*

*I trust this letter finds you well. India continues to be a marvel beyond even my considerable expectations. The integration of supernatural elements here is unlike anything in the Commonwealth. Where we have spectral bureaucracy and haunted civil service buildings, they have ancestral spirits that actively advise their descendants in daily affairs. It is remarkable—imagine a ghost not just lingering about aimlessly but having an actual role in governance!*

*Magic here is woven into life itself. The enchantments are unlike what we are used to in Albion. Instead of formalized spellwork, magic exists as an extension of tradition—woven into textiles, sung into being, infused into food and festivals. There are markets where one can buy bottled moonlight, and temples where prayers take physical form as floating script.*

*And, of course, the supernatural beings! The rakshasas and nagas have been particularly interesting to study, and the local department has been incredibly accommodating in explaining their systems of post-mortal affairs. I must say, they handle bureaucracy with an efficiency that rivals our own.*

*I shall write more soon. Give my love to Marian and the children. And to Barnaby—make sure he isn’t working himself to death. Ha!*

*Yours, in perpetual curiosity,*

Lord Archibald Pangham

Barnaby lowered the letter, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Bottled moonlight? Now that’s something I’d like to requisition.”

Marian smiled. “It does sound wonderful, doesn’t it? I imagine Father is having the time of his life out there.”

Margaret wrinkled her nose. “Does he get to meet any ghosts?”

“Oh, plenty,” Barnaby said. “It sounds like they take a much more active role over there.”

Lady Pangham clicked her tongue. “If only your father had been sent somewhere closer. But no, the Commonwealth *had* to send him to India. It was all very political, of course.”

Barnaby nodded. India’s integration into the Commonwealth had been nothing short of historic. When Prince Raj had dissolved the Indian Empire and abdicated to marry the newly crowned Queen Victoria, it had changed the political landscape forever. What had once seemed an impossibly vast Commonwealth had become truly global, stretching across continents in ways no one had anticipated.

And now, there were rumors that the young Prince Edward’s courtship of the Holy Roman Emperor’s daughter could lead to yet another expansion. The world was growing smaller, and bigger at the same time, and Barnaby found it all rather fascinating.

As the conversation wound down, Marian stretched and glanced toward the kitchen. “You know, I was thinking—why don’t we go out for dinner tomorrow night? It’s been ages since we had a proper meal out.”

Barnaby hesitated, rubbing his chin. “Under normal circumstances, I’d agree. But given the recent café and restaurant poisonings, I’d rather not take the risk of becoming a client of my own office.”

Marian sighed. “Fair point. I suppose I’ll have to cook, then.”

Barnaby smiled. “And that, my dear, is a fate I’m happy to accept.”

As laughter filled the room, Barnaby leaned back, feeling content. Of course, trouble was brewing—he could sense it. But for now, he would enjoy the simple pleasures of home.

The steady hum of the afterlife administration office was, as always, a blend of quiet efficiency and the occasional outburst of ghostly dissatisfaction. The waiting area outside Barnaby’s office was already bustling with newly departed souls, all eager (or not so eager) to resolve whatever was keeping them from moving on.

Barnaby rolled up his sleeves, adjusted the stack of forms on his desk to a perfectly perpendicular angle, and called for the first client.

The door swung open, revealing a rather cheerful-looking elderly man in a spectral dressing gown, his wispy form flickering faintly in the daylight streaming through the window. He floated in and took a seat with the contented sigh of someone sinking into a particularly plush armchair.

“Well now, you seem rather pleased with your predicament,” Barnaby observed as he retrieved a fresh form.

“Oh, absolutely,” the old man said with a delighted chuckle. “Always wanted to be a spirit, you know.”

Barnaby arched an eyebrow. “Have you now? And yet, you lived to what appears to be a very respectable old age. If you wanted to be a spirit so badly, why wait?”

The man waved a translucent hand. “Oh, I was *terrified* of dying. Didn’t want to risk it. What if I didn’t get to be a ghost? What if it was all just... over?”

Barnaby nodded. “A reasonable concern.”

The old man beamed. “But now that I *am* a ghost, it’s simply marvelous! No more arthritis, no more losing my spectacles—though I do wish I’d worn something a little more dignified to bed.” He glanced down at his dressing gown with mild regret. “Anyway, I just wanted to let my family know I’m alright before I move on.”

Barnaby’s eyes lit up as he reached for a particular stack of parchment. “Ah! The *‘Post-Mortal Family Reassurance Notification and Acknowledgment Form 27-B’*! What a delight. Such a wonderfully complex piece of paperwork—takes ages to fill out.”

The old man blinked. “How long are we talking?”

Barnaby flicked his wrist, producing his favorite quill with a dramatic flourish. “Oh, a good hour at least. There’s the personal statement section, the formal verification of spectral stability, three witness signatures required, and the ever-so-finicky ‘Proof of Contentment’ clause.”

The ghost tilted his head. “Well... I don’t exactly have anywhere to be, but that does seem excessive.”

Barnaby gave him a sympathetic nod. “Bureaucracy is a cruel mistress, my friend.”

The ghost sighed. “Oh well. I suppose I’ll just enjoy the process.”

After the old man, the next client shuffled in—a rather grumpy woman in a formal dress, holding an incorporeal handbag as if she still had weight to throw around.

“I demand to file a grievance,” she announced.

Barnaby steepled his fingers. “Ah, of course. And what is preventing you from moving on?”

“My husband never put fresh flowers on my grave.”

Barnaby blinked. “That’s it?”

“That’s *it*? Sir, I spent forty-two years tending to his needs, and he cannot even be bothered to keep a decent hydrangea arrangement at my resting place?”

Barnaby sighed and retrieved the **‘Post-Mortem Unfulfilled Expectation Petition’** form. “Well, that’s what we’re here for.”

The next visitor was a nervous-looking young man who fidgeted even in spectral form. “I—I don’t want to be dead.”

“Understandable,” Barnaby replied. “That does happen a lot in this office. And what is keeping you here?”

The young man looked sheepish. “I was in the middle of writing a letter when I died. I feel... incomplete.”

Barnaby nodded. “And was this letter particularly important?”

“Well... no. It was a thank-you note for a pair of socks my aunt sent me.”

“Ah. An *‘Unfinished Business of Moderate to Low Importance’* case.” Barnaby pulled out another form, this one mercifully short. “Let’s get this sorted, shall we?”

Another client, a portly middle-aged man in a tweed jacket, stomped in with a frown.

“This is unacceptable!” he declared.

Barnaby braced himself. “What is?”

“I was promised I’d see a light. You know, *The Light*? I’ve been waiting, and all I got was a slightly brighter patch of ceiling.”

Barnaby tapped his quill against his ledger. “Ah, yes, that can happen sometimes. The Department of Spectral Transportation occasionally has delays. Shall I put in a request for a *Priority Ascension Voucher*?”

“Please do. I have places to be.”

And so it went—one soul after another, each with their own peculiar yet entirely bureaucratically solvable concerns. By the time Barnaby finished processing the last case, the stack of completed forms was taller than his teapot, and he felt thoroughly fulfilled.

As he leaned back with a satisfied sigh, the spectral janitor drifted past his office door, muttering to himself about the state of the office’s ethereal dust accumulation.

Barnaby smiled. Just another normal day.

**The tea shop bustled with the usual midday chatter, a symphony of porcelain clinking against saucers, laughter bubbling over steaming cups, and the rhythmic shuffle of waitstaff balancing trays of delicate pastries. Jack watched from his corner seat, the brim of his bowler hat casting a shadow over his eyes. A ledge of papers sat before him—official documents, mundane forms that spoke of tax credits and funding allocations. To anyone passing by, he was simply another weary civil servant lost in the tedium of bureaucratic life.**

**But his mind was elsewhere.**

**His gloved hand rested on the rim of his cup, a perfectly ordinary gesture. Just an unassuming fellow enjoying an afternoon tea. No one noticed the small vial he emptied into the sugar bowl, nor the way he stirred it gently, ensuring every grain absorbed its dose of inevitability. The poison was not one of the dramatic ones—no foaming at the mouth or agonizing convulsions. That would be crude. He did not want crude anymore. This would be subtle. A delayed onset. By the time symptoms appeared, the tea shop would be closed, its tables wiped clean, its staff at home.**

**He took a sip of his own tea—untampered, of course. The first customers after him would be the ones to stir the sugar into their drinks. They would smile, unaware, as they lifted their cups. And in a few hours, they would be dead.**

**Jack folded his papers neatly, returning them to his satchel. He stood, adjusted his cuffs, and left a few coins on the table. As he stepped outside into the cool autumn air, he inhaled deeply, feeling the satisfaction of a job well done.**

**"We are doing good work, aren't we, Jack?" he mused to himself.**

**He did not kill for pleasure. He killed for necessity.**

**And there was always more work to do.**

Barnaby Finn was not a man prone to stress. His life—both personal and professional—revolved around routine, efficiency, and the satisfaction of a well-filed document. But even he had to admit that the current situation was becoming unmanageable. The poisonings had accelerated at an alarming rate, and the backlog of unresolved spirits was growing faster than his department could process them.

At his desk, he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose before turning to the enchanted mirror mounted on the wall. He straightened his waistcoat, smoothed his sleeves, and tapped the mirror’s frame twice.

The glass rippled like disturbed water, then settled into the sharp, unsmiling reflection of Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw. The director’s translucent visage carried its usual air of mild disinterest, as if he had been interrupted during something vastly more important. Given that Grimshaw had been running the Office of Postmortal Affairs for over two centuries, this was likely true.

"Barnaby," Grimshaw greeted, his voice crisp and refined. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Barnaby adjusted his papers, purely out of habit. "Director, I know you're aware of the situation, but I must formally request additional staff. The poisonings have reached unprecedented levels. My team is working overtime, but we’re still drowning in unresolved cases. The queue outside my office is stretching past Sir Percival’s statue and nearly out the front door."

Grimshaw exhaled slowly, the sound more like a hollow breeze than a true breath. "Yes, yes, I know. It’s the same across the entire area, Barnaby. Every branch is experiencing an influx. We’re stretched thin as it is."

Barnaby, undeterred, pressed on. "Surely there’s something you can do? Even temporary clerks? Interns? Ghosts with particularly neat handwriting?"

The director steepled his spectral fingers and tilted his head in thought. "I will see what I can manage. No promises, but if I can pull a few hands from lesser-priority cases, I will send them your way."

Barnaby exhaled in relief. "Thank you, Director."

Aldous Grimshaw waved a transparent hand dismissively. "Bah. You should have been here for the plague of 1728. Now that was a backlog! Spirits everywhere, bodies left unattended for weeks. It was so bad, I swear some ghosts had to haunt in shifts just to get any space. If I hadn't already been dead, I would have perished from the workload alone. Or from the smell."

Barnaby decided not to imagine the scent of decomposing paperwork—let alone decomposing bodies. Instead, he nodded. "Yes, well, let’s hope we don’t reach that level of inefficiency again."

Grimshaw's ghostly face flickered with what might have been a smirk. "One can only hope. Keep me informed."

With that, the mirror rippled again, fading back to an ordinary reflection.

Barnaby sighed and reached for his tea. Before he could take a sip, however, the spectral janitor drifted in, carrying an old-fashioned mop with the wear of several lifetimes.

"Morning, Mr. Finn," the janitor greeted, already starting to scrub at an invisible stain on the floor.

"Morning, Mervin," Barnaby replied, rubbing his temples.

"Busy day, eh?" Mervin remarked, scrubbing vigorously. "Might want to get these carpets replaced, by the way. Some stains never come out. Poison, for example."

Barnaby lowered his teacup. "Excuse me?"

Mervin gestured vaguely toward the latest batch of spirits lingering in the waiting area. "That last lot? Poisoned tea. Nasty stuff. You can always tell by the glow—dark, sickly green. Stains like nothing else. Even worse than ectoplasm, and let me tell you, sir, ectoplasm is a nightmare for upholstery."

Barnaby squinted at the spirits in question, but saw no such glow. "I don't see anything."

Mervin let out a chuckle, still scrubbing. "Well, of course you don't, sir. You’re not a spirit, are you?"

Barnaby considered this, then decided that debating the issue with a dead janitor was likely a fruitless endeavor. Instead, he made a note on his ever-growing stack of reports.

As Mervin mumbled about spectral mildew and ectoplasmic rust, he worked his way out of the office, mop swishing across the floor, still muttering about stains that Barnaby would never see.

Barnaby sighed. Another day, another mystery, wrapped in an enigma, wrapped in bureaucracy, with a lovely bow on top.

Barnaby Finn was not one for fieldwork. That had been fine when he was a field investigator, but these days, his work was all about the fine art of paperwork. However, with the poisonings accelerating and no additional staff materializing from the Director’s promises, he decided it was time to take matters into his own hands.

That was how he found himself standing outside Wales Yard, the ever-imposing headquarters of the Metropolitan Police.

The building itself was a grand thing—gothic spires, looming gargoyles, and the occasional watchful ghost peering down from the upper windows. A sign near the entrance read: *No unauthorized necromancy beyond this point*. Beneath it, in smaller letters: *This includes, but is not limited to, raising the dead, speaking with the dead, borrowing spectral evidence, or attempting to haunt an officer*.

Barnaby ignored the sign and marched inside, approaching the front desk, where a harried-looking officer was stamping forms with the enthusiasm of a man who had long given up hope.

"Good afternoon," Barnaby greeted, producing his identification. "Barnaby Finn, Office of Departed Affairs. I need to speak to the detective in charge of the recent poisonings."

The officer barely looked up. "Detective Inspector James Hargrave? Not in, sir."

Barnaby frowned. "Any idea when he’ll be back?"

The officer gave a dry chuckle and finally met Barnaby’s gaze. "He's over at your office, sir. Said he was following up a lead."

Barnaby blinked. "My office?"

"Yes, sir."

"That’s—" Barnaby groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I should go back there, then."

"Probably, sir."

Without another word, Barnaby turned on his heel and marched out, flagging down a cab.

By the time Barnaby returned to the Office of Departed Affairs, Hargrave was gone.

"He just left, sir," one of his clerks informed him.

"Where to?" Barnaby asked.

"Back to Wales Yard, I believe."

Barnaby clenched his jaw, turned around, and caught another cab back.

Upon arriving, he was once again greeted by the same desk officer, who barely suppressed a smirk.

"Let me guess," Barnaby said, deadpan. "He's not here."

"Back at your office, sir."

Barnaby closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. Then he turned and left without another word.

This ridiculous back-and-forth happened twice more. By the third time, he was considering filing a request for spectral mail couriers to prevent this sort of nonsense.

As fate (or bureaucratic inefficiency) would have it, Barnaby finally found himself storming back toward his office just as Detective Inspector James Hargrave was exiting it. Neither was paying much attention to where they were going.

They collided with the force of two overworked civil servants moving at full bureaucratic speed.

"Pardon me," Barnaby said, stepping back and dusting off his coat.

"Apologies, sir," Hargrave replied, adjusting his hat. Then they both froze.

"You," Barnaby said.

"You," Hargrave echoed.

There was a brief silence. Then, in unison, they both said, "We've been looking for each other all day!"

Having learned their lesson, neither suggested returning to the other’s office. Instead, they settled on a neutral location: a small café just down the street.

When the server arrived, both men hesitated, then exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Tea?" the server offered.

Barnaby cleared his throat. "Yes. A cup of tea, please."

Hargrave nodded. "Same for me."

The server left, but was back in seconds, and both men stared at their untouched cups when they arrived. Neither made a move to drink.

"Right," Hargrave said, leaning back in his chair. "Let’s get to it, then. You first, Finn."

Barnaby steepled his fingers. "From our end, the number of poisoned spirits appearing in our office has increased exponentially. They're all connected to restaurants, cafés, and other public eateries, which suggests a pattern rather than random contamination."

Hargrave nodded. "From our side, we've confirmed that the majority of the cases were deliberate. Someone is poisoning food and drink at multiple establishments across the city. The problem is, we don’t know who, how, or why."

Barnaby frowned. "So, you're saying there’s a serial poisoner at large?"

"Exactly."

Barnaby sighed, rubbing his temples. "Fantastic. And what do you need from us?"

Hargrave folded his arms. "I want to speak to the recently poisoned before they move on. Get their last meals, where they ate, what they noticed before they fell ill. Ghosts make excellent witnesses, provided you can get them to focus."

Barnaby tilted his head. "And I assume you would prefer them *not* to move on before you get your interviews?"

"That would be ideal," Hargrave admitted.

Barnaby tapped his fingers against the table. "I suppose we can hold them a bit longer before processing, but my department is already overworked as it is. Keeping ghosts tethered unnecessarily causes… *logistical complications*."

"And what do *you* need from me?" Hargrave asked.

Barnaby smiled. "Data. If we’re going to handle this influx, I need numbers. If I can justify the workload increase, I *might* be able to request more staff."

Hargrave raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Your concern in all this is budget proposals?"

"Well, what else would it be?" Barnaby asked. "It’s all well and good to solve murders, but someone has to handle the paperwork."

Hargrave shook his head, amused. "Bureaucrats."

Barnaby smirked. "Detectives."

A silent understanding passed between them.

They weren’t thrilled about working together, but they were both smart enough to know that neither could handle this alone. And so, an uneasy alliance was formed—over untouched cups of tea neither man dared to drink.

Barnaby Finn returned to his office with the sort of excitement most men reserved for holidays or fine dining. He was setting up an off-site facility. The sheer volume of paperwork required for such an endeavor was positively intoxicating.

First, there were the requisition forms—he would need furniture, seating suitable for both the corporeal and incorporeal, and a selection of diversions to keep the recently deceased entertained. He briefly considered a ghostly billiards table but remembered the last time someone tried that—the balls had developed an unfortunate habit of phasing through the floorboards at unpredictable moments, startling the clerks below. Instead, he settled on enchanted books that would read themselves aloud, a spectral chessboard that moved the pieces automatically, and a few scrying mirrors tuned to popular theatre performances.

Then there were the logistics. Security details, containment wards, comfort spells—all of it needed careful documentation. He drafted a memo regarding the enchantments needed to ensure spirits did not simply wander off before their interviews. Another memorandum requested spectral liaisons trained in managing large groups of the deceased. A third outlined the catering requirements—ethereal refreshments, of course, since the dead did not need food, but it was always nice to have something to hold.

By the time he was finished, his desk was a fortress of paper. It was beautiful.

With a deep, satisfied sigh, he picked up his enchanted quill and began signing off on the forms.

Once the bureaucratic ecstasy subsided, Barnaby picked up his magic mirror and activated the connection to Wales Yard. The cloudy surface swirled before resolving into the familiar, slightly irritated face of Detective Inspector Hargrave.

“Finn,” Hargrave greeted, eyeing him warily. “I assume you’ve sorted out my request?”

“Of course,” Barnaby said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice. “I’ve arranged for an off-site holding area at the Harrowby Annex. Plenty of space, proper wards, and I’ve ensured there are… diversions… for the newly deceased while they wait for your interviews.”

Hargrave blinked. “Diversions?”

“Well, we can’t have them getting restless, can we?” Barnaby said. “You want focused ghosts, not irritated ones. I’ve arranged for a selection of entertainments suited to the recently departed.”

Hargrave exhaled. “You truly do live for this, don’t you?”

Barnaby smiled. “Without question.”

The detective shook his head. “Well, I appreciate it. I’ll send a few men over to handle questioning, though I expect it will take time to process them all. Which brings me to my next bit of news.”

Barnaby’s smile faltered. “I don’t like your tone.”

“There was another poisoning last night,” Hargrave said grimly. “Nine confirmed victims. All from the same establishment.”

Barnaby closed his eyes and took a steadying breath. “Wonderful. Just wonderful.”

“I thought you’d want to know before they start showing up at your office.”

“I do appreciate the warning,” Barnaby admitted. “But my staff is already drowning under the current workload. If this keeps up, I may have to requisition additional office space again.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” Hargrave said. “But you might want to start preparing now.”

Barnaby pinched the bridge of his nose. “Lovely. Just lovely.”

As Barnaby set down the mirror, he heard the familiar sound of a mop swishing against the stone floor.

"Mark my words," the spectral janitor muttered as he drifted past the office doorway, his mop floating effortlessly in his translucent hands. "They better not expect me to clean that off-site facility. I’ve always been partial to haunting one location at a time, and the last time this department moved, it took me near a decade to feel at home again. A decade! You start learning the scuff marks, the little nooks where the dust settles just so, and then poof, new building, new haunt, everything’s all wrong. Just disrespectful to a spirit’s sense of place, that’s what it is..."

Barnaby let the grumbling wash over him, idly making a note to send a memo requesting additional cleaning staff for the annex. The janitor would, of course, never read it. But the balance of bureaucracy must be maintained

Jack moved through the marketplace with careful deliberation, the crisp evening air carrying the scent of fresh produce and earth. The green grocer’s stall was busy enough to avoid scrutiny but not so crowded that he couldn’t work. Perfect.

He had already chosen his target. The parsnips.

Jack had never liked parsnips. Something about their texture, that odd, mealy resistance, had always unsettled him. And the taste—cloyingly sweet but pretending to be respectable. No, he had never cared for them. Perhaps this was his way of evening the score. A quiet, personal satisfaction.

Still, that was secondary. The work came first. The work was always first.

He moved with the ease of long practice, palming the fine powder hidden within his glove. It took only a second—a practiced sweep of his fingers as he feigned inspecting the produce. The powder was subtle, nearly undetectable. It would not act immediately, and that was the beauty of it. Delayed symptoms meant no clear pattern, no immediate alarm. Just an unfortunate set of coincidences, tragic but disconnected.

Up until now, he had been thinking too small. Cafés and restaurants were useful, but they were controlled environments. Contained. He needed expansion.

Grocers. Bakeries. Markets.

It was time to move beyond individual establishments. If he could lace the ingredients themselves, then his reach would extend far beyond any single kitchen. His efforts would ripple outward, spreading through homes, businesses, the entire supply chain.

A true bureaucratic nightmare.

Jack nearly smiled at the thought.

Satisfied with his work, he stepped away, melting back into the crowd as he brushed imaginary dust from his gloves. There would be consequences, of course.

But all this was necessary.

He had an important meeting tomorrow. He hoped his boss would be pleased with the results of all the overtime he had been putting in.

“…What do you mean you don’t care that you’re dead?”

Sergeant Geoffrey Thackeray squinted at the spirit slouching comfortably in his chair, translucent arms crossed over his chest. The ghost—a portly fellow with an impressive mustache that fluttered despite the lack of wind—shrugged.

“I didn’t say I didn’t care,” the ghost replied. “I just said it’s not so bad. I mean, sure, I’d have liked to keep living, but I didn’t have much planned for this week anyway. And here? There’s books, people to talk to, and I don’t even get tired. It’s better than going to work, I’ll tell you that.”

Thackeray pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. We’ll come back to your existential crisis later. Let’s talk about the restaurant. Name?”

“Le Petit Chou.”

“What did you eat?”

“Lamb stew with dumplings. Bit of bread. And a glass of wine, of course.”

“Did you see anyone suspicious?”

The ghost scratched his chin. “Dunno. I was mostly focused on my stew. It was very good. Rich, hearty. A bit over-salted, but that’s just me being picky. Would’ve ordered it again if, you know, it hadn’t killed me.”

Thackeray tapped his quill against his notepad. “Nothing odd at all? No one lingering? No one acting out of place?”

“No more than usual. You always get one or two strange people in a place like that, don’t you? Fellow at the next table was telling his date about his theories on cheese conspiracies. Said cheddar was an instrument of mind control. But I don’t think that’s what you’re looking for.”

Thackeray sighed. “What did you do for work?”

The ghost brightened. “Spectral sanitation! Sewer management division. Kept the residue clear, made sure no wayward spirits took up residence in the pipes. You’d be amazed how many lost souls end up floating down the drains.”

Thackeray looked at him, then at his notes, then back at the ghost. “…You know, I think I understand why you’re content to be dead.”

“Exactly,” the ghost said, pleased.

Across the room, Detective Inspector Meredith Gable was having a similar conversation with a much more impatient spirit.

“No, I don’t know what the mushrooms were,” snapped a lanky, transparent man in an ill-fitting suit. “I’m not a mycologist. I just ate them.”

Gable, unfazed, flipped her notebook shut. “Actually, there was a mycologist among the victims.”

The ghost blinked. “Was there? And he didn’t notice the mushrooms were poisonous?”

“Apparently, he noticed a little too late.”

The ghost let out a low whistle. “Well. That’s embarrassing.”

Gable sighed. “Alright, one more time. The restaurant was called—?”

“Matilda’s Table.”

“And you ate—?”

“The mushroom risotto. It was delicious, right up until it killed me.”

“See anyone odd?”

“The waiter had a third eye.”

“That’s not very odd.”

“Well, then no, I didn’t.”

 For nearly an hour, Thackeray, Gable, and the rest of their team worked their way through the spectral holding area, questioning spirits, taking notes, cross-referencing details.

By the end, they reconvened near the center of the room, Gable rubbing her temples while Thackeray flipped through his notes.

“So,” he said, “we have at least six different restaurants.”

“At least twelve different victims,” Gable added.

“No consistent locations.”

“No consistent backgrounds.”

“No repeated food items.”

“No suspicious figures seen by multiple people.”

They exchanged a look.

“This is random,” Thackeray muttered.

“Utterly,” Gable agreed.

Thackeray shut his notebook with a snap. “Which means this isn’t about any one person, place, or establishment.”

Gable nodded grimly. “Which means we’re dealing with someone who just… wants people to die.”

They both fell silent.

Then Thackeray sighed. “Right. You want to go get some tea and pretend it’s not laced with poison?”

“Absolutely,” Gable said.

“It Wasn’t a Restaurant.”

Barnaby sat across from Detective Gable in a dimly lit office, the only illumination coming from a few enchanted globes hovering near the ceiling, shedding a soft, flickering light. The air smelled of ink, old paper, and strong tea. The detective looked particularly grim this morning, her fingers drumming on the surface of the wooden desk.

“There were thirty-seven deaths last night,” she said without preamble.

Barnaby, who had just taken a sip of tea, nearly choked on it. “Thirty-seven? That’s—”

“Almost double the previous night, yes.”

Barnaby swallowed hard. “What restaurant?”

Gable shook her head. “It wasn’t a restaurant.”

Barnaby frowned. “What do you mean? It had to come from somewhere.”

“It did,” she said, her voice heavy. “Their own kitchens. These were all home-cooked meals.”

Barnaby stared at her. “Are you sure?”

Gable gave him a tired look. “Unfortunately. Deadly sure.”

Barnaby exhaled slowly and rubbed his temples. “Alright. What was the poisoned food?”

“That,” Gable said, leaning forward, “is the problem. We don’t know. That’s why I need the spirits held for questioning. The only thing they all had in common was that they shopped around the same time in the same market square. Beyond that, no clue what food they all shared.”

Barnaby’s quill scratched hurriedly over a form as he took notes. “Alright, so it could be anything.”

“Pretty much. Though at least three of the victims were vegetarian.”

Barnaby perked up. “So we can take meat off the table, then?”

Gable tilted her head. “More like it pretty much leaves meat on the table. Or, well, the dinner table. Not poisoned, at any rate.”

Barnaby groaned and rubbed his face. “As if this wasn’t complicated enough.”

They fell into silence for a moment before Gable straightened in her chair. “What I really need is space. And time. If I can keep these spirits longer, I can get proper statements, maybe narrow it down before another wave of deaths. Can you facilitate that?”

Barnaby sighed. “I’ll see what I can do about releasing them from confinement at least. I can’t promise I can move them on, but if they’re not trapped somewhere, they might be more cooperative.”

Gable nodded. “Do what you can. Meanwhile, I’ll be trying to track down exactly what the common ingredient was.”

Barnaby stood, adjusting his coat. “I’ll make the arrangements and send over another memo—”

“No more memos, Barnaby.”

“—as well as an official notice.”

Gable groaned, but Barnaby was already halfway out the door, quill at the ready.

That night, Barnaby sat at the dinner table, staring at his plate as if it might betray him at any moment. The meal before him smelled delicious—roast potatoes, a lovely golden-brown pie, fresh greens drizzled with vinaigrette—but suddenly, he had no appetite at all.

He cleared his throat. “Darling, where did this food come from?”

His wife, Marian, looked up from cutting into her pie. “The market, of course. Fresh as can be.”

Barnaby pushed his plate away, his expression grim. “Do we have anything canned?”

She frowned. “Canned?”

“Yes. You know. Tinned. Bottled. Something that’s been safely stored in a box for a very, very long time.”

Marian set down her knife. “Why?”

Barnaby sighed, rubbing his temples. “Let’s just say that the past few days at work have turned me off fresh food. I think, for the foreseeable future, it would be best if we all eat nothing but preserved goods.”

Marian looked aghast. “Barnaby, an entire meal of nothing but tinned food? That sounds positively ghastly.”

Barnaby gestured toward the spread on the table. “Not as ghastly as what I’m dealing with. If we don’t eat food that’s been boxed for a while, we might end up in a box of our own.”

Marian paled. She set her fork down.

From across the table, his son poked at his peas. “Does this mean we can have tinned peaches with every meal?”

Barnaby sighed. “Yes, Owen. It does.”

His son cheered. Marian, however, looked like she was already regretting her marriage.

**“A Little Dab Will Do You.”**

**Jack knew exactly how many people he’d killed.**

**He wasn’t guessing. He wasn’t estimating. He knew the precise number, down to the very last unfortunate soul who had taken their final, fateful bite.**

**And he was glad of it.**

**The bodies were stacking up, and the souls? The souls were coming out of the bureaucracies’ ears. Good. That was the entire point.**

**It was all about the pressure.**

**He laced his fingers together and leaned back in his chair, surveying the tidy little notebook before him. His work, so far, had been a masterclass in efficiency. The restaurants had been a solid starting point—contained environments, repeat customers, easy to track. The green grocer had been his first real step into escalation, a test to see if he could spread his reach further, push the limits of chaos just a bit more.**

**And now? Now, it was time to refine the process.**

**Too much focus on one location meant quicker detection. If he was going to keep this going, he needed variety.**

**A little poison here.**

**A little poison there.**

**A little dab will do you. Or rather—do you in.**

**Jack tapped the end of his pen against his notebook, considering his options. A bakery, perhaps? A few bad loaves, easy enough to blame on mold. A butcher? Something tainting the seasoning blends, just enough to slip past unnoticed until it was too late. A tea shop? Well, the irony of that one was almost too delicious to resist.**

**Yes, tonight would be a busy one.**

**He allowed himself a small smile, then turned his thoughts toward tomorrow. He had an important meeting coming up.**

**His boss was expecting great things.**

**And Jack?**

**Jack had every intention of delivering.**

London was many things—great, grand, industrious, and the very beating heart of the Commonwealth. But above all, London was a city that dined. The sheer density of tea shops, bakeries, cafés, and grand dining halls rivaled even the great libraries in number. Meals were not merely sustenance but social occasions, opportunities to discuss politics, business, romance, and scandal over a fine cup of Assam or a slice of treacle tart. And yet, almost overnight, this grand tradition had collapsed into chaos.

The first signs of crisis were economic. Canned and preserved goods, long regarded as the staple of expeditionary forces and those of an eccentric nature, suddenly became a necessity. Prices skyrocketed. Tin upon tin of pickled onions, sardines in brine, and treacle pudding were hoarded away like dragon’s gold. Even the hardiest ration biscuits, once loathed by soldiers and sailors alike, now vanished from shelves faster than they could be produced. Smoked and salted meats, dried fruits, and cheeses aged to perfection were locked away under close supervision.

For those who could not afford such luxuries, desperate measures were taken. Private gardens, once ornamental displays of rosebushes and neatly trimmed hedges, were turned over to cabbages, carrots, and potatoes. The gentry, typically unaccustomed to manual labor, now found themselves hunched over the earth, cursing as they attempted to grow their own food. Communal vegetable patches sprang up across the city, protected by fences, locks, and—on more than one occasion—hired guards.

The restaurant industry collapsed almost entirely. At first, only a handful of cautious diners stayed away, but as more establishments fell victim to the wave of poisonings, the exodus became absolute. Café doors, once propped open to welcome guests with the scent of fresh bread and coffee, were now firmly shut, their windows covered with hastily scrawled signs:

CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

OUT OF BUSINESS.

NO FOOD, NO TEA, NO SERVICE.

It was the last note that truly stung the British spirit. No tea? No tea! An entire nation brought to its knees, not by war, not by famine, but by the cruel and calculated deprivation of the most sacred of beverages. Imports of dried tea leaves were abundant, but there were few willing to risk fresh milk, sugar, or honey. As a result, tea was taken plain, without the ceremony it so rightly deserved, and it simply wasn’t the same.

At first, some brave souls attempted to make do with alternative methods. Bottled milk, long considered the domain of invalids and infants, was mixed in as a poor substitute. Other powdered sweeteners were employed, and the results were decried as an abomination against civilization itself. A desperate few tried brewing tea with dried fruit rinds and exotic spices, but the taste simply did not hold up. These so-called herbal teas were positively unbrittish! By the second week, reports emerged of individuals collapsing in the streets, not from poison, but from sheer exhaustion caused by the inability to start their day with a proper cuppa.

And all the while, the police remained stumped. The initial theory had been that a single supplier or distributor was compromised, but there was no consistency in where the poisoned food originated. The randomness of it all was its most terrifying aspect. No class, no profession, no neighborhood was safe. The well-to-do and the working class alike suffered. The fishmonger’s wife, the bank clerk, the carriage driver, the professor—none were spared.

For the people, panic set in. The city, which prided itself on order, began to fray at the edges. Markets became fortresses, food distribution centers more closely guarded than the royal treasury. The underground trade of verified, “safe” food began to thrive, with smugglers charging exorbitant fees for so much as a single untainted loaf of bread.

**And yet, in the midst of it all, Barnaby Wetherby had never been happier.**

As the city teetered between panic and preservation, Barnaby had found a peculiar paradise in paperwork. While others wailed over wilted lettuces and bewailed the disappearance of their preferred pâtisseries, Barnaby had volunteered—no, insisted—on heading up the municipal efforts to manage the movement of food into and throughout the city. It was, in his estimation, the pinnacle of public service: **the joyful juggernaut of logistics.**

He had called it Operation Orderly Orchards and Canned Comestibles, and while no one else seemed quite as delighted with the name, none could deny that the man had a gift for government procedures. The food crisis, born of poisonous pandemonium, had become the mother of all mandates—and Barnaby Finn was its most devoted disciple.

historical shipping routes and weather anomalies—his “Tempest and Trade Room,” as he’d called it—had undergone a glorious transformation. Gone were the nautical charts and climate calculations; in their place rose regimented rows of ring-binders and rigid regulations, resolutely color-coded and meticulously labeled.

Manuals on municipal rationing, memorandums from the Ministry of Magical Agriculture, public pantry policy packets, and folios full of fantastically finicky food-forms now lined the shelves from floor to ceiling. **He had filed them by classification, then sub-filed by content, category, and culinary classification.**

He had a full drawer dedicated to **"Emergency Edible Egg Exemptions."-**wild birds thathad eggs that could be safely eaten. Another, marked in lovely looping cursive, held **"Nonstandard Storage Structures for Nonperishables – Forms 4B through 42X."** There was, of course, a dedicated shelf to tinned trout. And another to turmeric.

 So many manuals and memorandums, policies and procedures, and files, folders and folios full of fabulous finicky forms!

And the red tape. Oh, the red tape!

Barnaby had gone so far as to acquire a genuine Victorian tape press from the Royal Archives of Bureaucratic History. Each time he prepared a file for delivery, he would press the scarlet ribbon between the brass jaws of the ancient contraption with a satisfying clunk, sealing documents with the same ceremonial glee a knight might feel donning armor. He even had wax stamps for the more formal forms—he had eight, each for a different department, and rotated them on a strict schedule.

“I know it's not required,” he told his wife one morning, still in his dressing gown, sealing yet another order form for lentil shipments from Leicester. “But if a form’s worth doing, it’s worth doing with wax.”

Marian, used to these pronouncements, had simply patted his shoulder and muttered something about needing more tea.

It was hard to explain, really. To others, this was a crisis. A catastrophe. A catastrophe wrapped in a scandal, garnished with suspicion, and served cold with a side of tinned carrots. But to Barnaby, it was a dream. A **rare opportunity to erect a shining cathedral of order in the chaos of consumption.**

He had created, and color-coded, a flow chart he called the Edible Entry and Exit Efficiency Evaluator. It had seventeen stages, nine sub-stages, and two emergency override conditions, one of which was only to be used in the event of pickled fish riots.

There was, as far as he knew, no imminent threat of pickled fish riots.

Still, one could never be too careful.

The best part, of course, was the **interdepartmental correspondence**. Barnaby received a *veritable flood* of it—scrolls, enchanted envelopes, folded forms folded *inside* folded forms. Each morning he would sort through the magical mail with glee, placing urgent communiqués into the “Immediate Intake” tray, moderately urgent ones into “Secondary Consideration,” and anything from Lord Grimshaw marked “Just a Thought” into the “Evening Enjoyment” folder.

There were letters from the Commonwealth’s Outland Agricultural Assemblies: spice reports from the Bengali Bureau of Bounty, apple apportionment spreadsheets from Avalon, cassava cargo confirmations from the Colonies of Cornwallia. Each one brought fresh delight, a new opportunity to tinker, tally, or tabulate.

And when shipments arrived—oh, the sheer delight of documenting them!

He’d draw up delivery logs in triplicate, create receipt acknowledgments, process provisional placement permits, and notify neighborhood nourishment networks. All before breakfast.

Of course, being a professional, he never accepted bribes. Never. But he would admit—if pressed, and only with the promise of discretion—that he had occasionally used his access to expedite certain forms for regional canneries in exchange for access to wholesale prices.

“I mean, really,” he mused one afternoon, as he unboxed a fresh shipment of long-life lima beans from Yorkshire, “it would be positively wasteful not to take advantage of the existing logistics.”

As he sorted through the inventory list, ticking off each item with his signature flourish of the quill, he paused on one peculiar entry:

*Eight hundred tins—fermented kelp and blackberry pudding (experimental batch)*

He arched an eyebrow.

“Well,” he said aloud, to no one in particular. “It’ll be *fun* to see how anyone works that one into their weekly menu.”

While the common folk lamented their emptying pantries, he reveled in the flood of bureaucracy required to manage the crisis. Forms had to be drafted, permits issued, memorandums circulated. The emergency food storage plan alone required an entire binder’s worth of new regulations, and Barnaby had personally, and joyfully, overseen the creation of each one.

Application for Access to Secured Provisions Storage? Approved.

Form 78-B: Emergency Rationing Guidelines for Government Offices? Distributed.

Memo on Sanitation Protocols for Long-Term Food Preservation? Revised, updated, and sent to every branch office.

While others saw crisis, he saw structure, a system that could be managed, regulated, and contained.

Yes, he supposed it was unfortunate that people were dying—troubling, even, in a broad civic-minded sense—but it was rather nice, all things considered, that his department was finally being recognized for the vital and often underappreciated work it did. For years, the Office of Afterlife Administration had operated in polite obscurity, quietly ushering souls along and sorting spectral paperwork with all the efficiency of a well-oiled postal system, minus the stamps and with significantly more ectoplasm. But now? Now, there were memorandums to file, special committees to sit on, and emergency sub-committees of those committees to chair.

No one thought it too odd—at least not publicly—that the department tasked with handling freshly minted ghosts would find itself at the very tip of the bureaucratic spear on matters of food rationing, supply chain oversight, and crisis logistics. After all, death had a way of touching everything, and so did paperwork. With the ghostly population on the rise and the living growing ever more skittish about their soup, someone had to track who was expiring and why, and who better than Barnaby’s team?

The gears of government always kept turning, clanking and wheezing their way through the centuries regardless of plague, pestilence, or parliamentary reshuffling, and the majority of the population hadn’t the faintest idea how or why. It was all a mysterious blur of stamp pads, signatories, and strange titles on brass plaques. And those few rare souls who *did* understand the hidden workings—those blessed, bespectacled few—well, they were all rather like Barnaby. They knew the rhythm of the machinery, could smell an improperly filed form from three corridors away, and they cherished the thrill of a new procedural appendix like a child might a fresh snow.

Truth be told, Barnaby often felt a quiet superiority when he passed others in the hallway, those less-initiated clerks and aides floundering in the wake of changing protocols. He had been born for this moment, or at least trained for it so thoroughly he might as well have been. It was in his marrow, like tea and self-satisfaction. He didn’t need glory, or medals, or knighthoods. Recognition in the form of color-coded files and cascading memoranda was more than enough.

And if he was being *entirely* honest, he had always suspected—deep down in his regulation-starched soul—that his department was destined for more than just spectral guidance and grief counseling. This... this was the beginning of something grand.

If only they had more funding, imagine what could be accomplished! The sheer number of memorandums he could write on this subject was staggering, and he intended to get through every last one of them.

Later that evening, the Finn family sat around the dinner table. The lamps were low, the cutlery gleamed, and the air carried the distinct and rather salty aroma of something maritime in origin.

“This,” said Marian with a mixture of triumph and trepidation, “is a kelp-and-berry tartlet. I’ve added a splash of elderflower cordial and a hint of nutmeg.”

Barnaby’s son, Owen took a bite with wide eyes and declared, “It’s weird. I love it!”

His mother-in-law prodded it suspiciously with her fork, muttering something about “wartime flavors” and “the things we never should have brought back from rationing.”

Barnaby, ever the supportive husband, smiled and complimented Marian’s creativity—while very gently rearranging the tartlet around his plate without actually consuming more than a nibble.

“Delightful,” he said. “Truly inventive. Perhaps next week we might… rotate the rotation.”

Marian gave him a look.

Barnaby gave her an innocent smile.

He made a mental note to mark the kelp as **Low Priority for Further Acquisition**.

Still, even with seaweed for supper, Barnaby Wetherby felt as buoyant as the bubbles in a bottle of Bureaucrat’s Brew (non-alcoholic, slightly fizzy, dispensed only at official Ministry events). The world may have been fretting, fuming, and floundering—but he? He was flourishing.

After all, it was the ink that oiled the machinery of bureaucracy.

And Barnaby had **barrels** of the stuff.

Of course, the janitor had his own opinions on the matter.

“I tell ya, Mr. Finn,” he muttered as he floated past Barnaby’s desk, idly scrubbing a spectral stain on the floor that no one else could see. “It’s the worst mess I’ve seen since the Great Fire. And that one was a doozy, what with all the burnt ghosts wandering about, complainin’ about their houses bein’ gone.”

Barnaby adjusted his spectacles, dipping his quill into an ink bottle. “You were around for the Great Fire?”

“’Course I was,” the janitor huffed. “Had to scrub soot off half the city’s spirit populace. And let me tell you, spectral soot don’t come out easy. Gets into the cracks, clings to the ectoplasm, real nasty business. This here’s worse, though. The stains from all this poisoned food? Dark, sickly green glow, that. Never comes out of the carpets. You’d think someone would make a cleaning charm for it, but no. No respect for the sanitation arts, there isn’t.”

Barnaby barely looked up from his paperwork. “Well, I imagine I’d have noticed any glowing stains if they were present.”

The janitor snorted. “You ain’t a spirit, yet, are ya?”

Barnaby had no retort for that, so he merely waved the janitor along as he continued to tidy up the otherwise spotless room.

Despite the growing crisis outside, despite the public panic, Barnaby felt, for the first time in years, truly in his element. The city might be unraveling, but as long as there were forms to be filled, reports to be written, and bureaucracy to be upheld, all was right in his little corner of the world.

The ballroom had been transformed—or perhaps transfigured was the better word—into a marvel of bureaucratic organization. Where once there had been a modest buffet and a wall-hung painting of a seaside picnic from a century prior, there were now steel shelving units and reinforced mahogany cabinets, all clearly labeled with magical chalk that refused to smudge and rearranged itself alphabetically at dusk, courtesy of a helpful enchantment from the Ministry of Domestic Harmony.

Barnaby stood proudly before his shelves, quill in hand, parchment rolled out across the tabletop like a military general surveying a battlefield map. But instead of artillery placements or troop movements, the scrolls and lists before him read:

* Tinned Mackerel (brine) – 37 tins
* Tinned Mackerel (oil) – 22 tins
* Pickled Partridge (bone-in) – 12 jars
* Rhubarb in Aspic – 4 tins (untested)
* Peach Pulp (preserved in honeyed treacle) – 18 tins
* Curdled Fog (a specialty from the Isle of Wight) – 60 vials (do *not* refrigerate)

And, the pièce de résistance:

* Jellied Eel & Licorice Medallions – 9 tins

Barnaby looked at that last entry and smiled the way a chess master might upon trapping a queen. “It’ll be fun to see how Marian works *that* into a Sunday roast.”

Of course, he had procured the Jellied Eel & Licorice Medallions not out of some great culinary affection, but because they were a rare item found only in surplus warehouses outside of Sussex that serviced magical food novelty shops. He had filled out seventeen forms, cross-referenced their serial numbers, and even brokered a trade agreement with the Northern Bureau of Forgotten Foodstuffs to obtain them. It had been glorious.

He would never—*never*, mind you—accept a bribe. But should someone wish to *expedite* a request for canned gooseberries or powdered pheasant eggs, and Barnaby just happened to have signed off on their delivery forms in triplicate before they reached the sorting ward, and just *happened* to have access to the same supplier’s wholesale catalog, well, it would only be practical to take advantage of the opportunity for his family’s benefit. With the paperwork *perfectly* in order, of course.

He clicked his tongue and dipped his quill once more. A new column was needed: “Items to Monitor for Shortages.” He listed the obvious: corned beef, condensed milk, marmalade, and magically stabilized custard pouches (unopened shelf life: forty-two years). But he also included more unusual items—elf-cured radishes, squidberry jam, and phantasmal vinegar, the last of which only appeared on shelves during full moons and tended to float away if not secured.

He sighed happily, ticked off a few more entries, and turned to the secondary list of suppliers he was vetting for regional consistency. The amount of red tape! The magical notarizations! The inter-office mail charms that had to be precisely cast or else would turn the paperwork into a shower of confetti! He was in *heaven*.

It was then that Marian called from the kitchen.

“Dinner’s on the table, dear!”

Barnaby gave his quill a longing glance, smoothed his shirt, and swept into the dining room, where his family was already gathered.

The table had been transformed as well. No more fresh-baked loaves or leafy greens. Instead, it was a mosaic of embossed tin, gleaming silverware, and conjured plates that stayed warm for exactly twenty-two minutes before politely cooling themselves.

Tonight’s entrée was an ambitious attempt at something Marian was calling “Bangers and Mash Surprise.” The surprise, Barnaby knew, was the addition of the Jellied Eel & Licorice Medallions, finely minced and blended into the mashed parsnips. A rather bold fusion of the traditional and the inexplicable.

“I must say,” he said, attempting to sound enthusiastic while surreptitiously nudging the greyish mash to the edge of his plate, “this smells positively... intriguing.”

His son, bright-eyed and always enthusiastic, dug in with gusto.

“Mum! This is brilliant! It’s like dessert and dinner had a duel and no one won!”

Barnaby smiled at the boy. “That’s the spirit.”

His mother-in-law, seated at her customary place near the head of the table, regarded the mash with the wary eye of someone who had once fended off an enchanted haggis in the Scottish Wars of Culinary Independence.

“I’m sure it’s perfectly edible,” she said, nudging it with her fork but not taking a bite. “In the same way owl pellets are technically food.”

Edith, ever the optimist, tried a mouthful and nodded thoughtfully. “It’s… complex. I think it needs something sweet on top. Perhaps clotted cream?”

Barnaby pretended to savor a bit of the sausage, which thankfully had come from a tin labeled simply “Meat, cylindrical.” It was best not to inquire further.

He mentally noted to exclude Jellied Eel & Licorice Medallions from the next requisition. Still, he’d tick it off the testing list with satisfaction. It was important to rotate the stock.

After dinner, Barnaby retired to his study, stacked with parchment, inkpots, glowing filing runes, and self-shuffling stacks of requisition slips. He lit a soft-glowing lamp enchanted to repel paperwork-munching gremlins, and unfurled the next scroll for review. Tomorrow, he thought, he would begin planning the winter pantry, just in case this food crisis extended beyond the current season. If nothing else, he would draft a memorandum on the acceptable magical storage thresholds for preserved trout gelatin.

And he would do so with immense pleasure.

**He moved through the market square with the same casual grace he had used to navigate crowded government corridors for years—anonymity born from utter normalcy. No one looked twice at a man in a tidy coat carrying a battered old briefcase. Even if they had, they would not have guessed what was inside. It wasn’t money. It wasn’t tools. It was far more potent than either: a selection of precisely prepared, near-undetectable poisons and a folded list of locations he’d already memorized.**

**One type of food, multiple locations. Make it look like the supplier’s fault. Let the bureaucrats sort that mess out.**

**The idea had come to him in the bath last night—most of the truly elegant ones did. He’d realized he had been thinking too linearly. Restaurants, cafés, grocers—they had all been fun, of course, and effective—but now that everyone was panicked and clutching their tins of tomato and tongue, it was time to shift again. Time to adapt. Time to escalate.**

**The remaining fresh food stalls were few, their patrons wary. Guards were posted here and there, mostly part-time civil servants in pressed uniforms who looked like they'd rather be elsewhere. But no one searched him. No one ever did. He smiled at the irony. People trusted a man who looked like he worked for the government. They never thought to fear him.**

**He passed the fruit and vegetables first. Too many hands. Too much washing. But there—three stalls down—was the perfect target. A modest little vendor of lentils, barley, and a particularly fragrant rice imported from somewhere east of the Commonwealth’s edge.**

**Rice. Yes. Dry. Uniform. Easy to contaminate in bulk. Easy to trace back to a distributor. Let them chase the phantom all the way to Bombay.**

**He paused at the stall, asked about prices, complimented the merchant on the quality of his grains. He bought a half-kilo and asked if he might examine the sacks himself—always preferred to make his own choice, he said. The vendor, flattered by his interest and manner, nodded.**

**It took five seconds. A flick of his wrist, a soft shuffle of fingers. A pinch of poison scattered deep into the upper layers of three separate sacks. Enough to spread when stirred. Not enough to smell or see. He made light conversation as he finished, joked about how long the lines were these days, handed over his coins.**

**There. Done. On to the next one.**

**Two more stalls. Same tactic. Same rice. Different districts. It would take days, perhaps a week, for the pattern to emerge. And by then? It would already be too late.**

**He strolled away from the last market with his briefcase swinging lightly in his hand and a gentle whistle on his lips.**

**We're doing a good job, aren't we, Jack? We're getting more efficient. Smarter. Faster.**

**He had an important meeting in the morning, after all.**

**Best to make sure the numbers were up.**

​The morning sun cast its pale light over the city, but its warmth did little to dispel the growing unease that clung to the streets like a miasma. News of the recent poisonings had spread rapidly, igniting a maelstrom of fear and speculation among the populace.​

In the heart of the city, the Office of Postmortal Affairs was abuzz with activity. Barnaby Finn sat at his desk, the usual tranquility of his workspace disrupted by the urgency of the situation. Reports of the poisonings lay scattered before him, each detailing the grim aftermath of the tainted rice that had found its way into unsuspecting households.

The door to Barnaby’s office swung open with the soft groan of overburdened hinges—an affectation the building insisted upon despite having no hinges at all, only spell-bound thresholds. Through it drifted the janitor, his mop floating beside him like a loyal, damp hound. He wore his usual spectral overalls, complete with an oil-smudged cap, even though neither oil nor grime had touched him since the year he’d ceased having fingerprints.

“You’re lookin’ peaky, Mr. Finn,” he said without preamble, eyeing Barnaby with that particular brand of concern that only sounded half-genuine. “Like someone’s been chewing on you and spitting you back into the inbox.”

Barnaby looked up from his mountain of reports, eyes bleary behind his pince-nez. “It’s the rice this time. Poisoned. Mass cases. Markets targeted directly.”

The janitor let out a low whistle, or something like it—more a wheeze that turned the air a shade cooler. “Rice, eh? Cheap, common, versatile. Clever sod. Nasty, too. You know what rice does to a ghost’s ectoplasm? Sticks to everything. Never comes out of the carpets.”

“You don’t clean carpets,” Barnaby said absently, flipping through one of the field assessments.

“Course I don’t,” the janitor sniffed, insulted. “But I *know* people who used to before they joined the ether. And trust me, it’s a mess. A very particular kind of haunting mess.”

Barnaby gave him a sidelong glance. “I’ll be sure to add that to the official report.”

“See that you do.” The janitor began floating backward toward the door, mop trailing like a mournful jellyfish. “Just don’t expect me to mop up your second new holding facility. Too big, too cold. I don’t float well on cobblestones, and the last time your lot moved offices, it took me a decade to stop phasing through the walls by accident.”

“I thought you liked the new office?”

“I liked the view,” the janitor said, drifting into the corridor. “But I *loathe* the plumbing. Everything drips and nothing dies.”

He paused mid-float, turning slightly to fix Barnaby with a look that somehow managed to be both spectral and deadpan. “Anyway, good luck with your poisonous paperwork parade. I’ll be in the archives if anything starts glowing that shouldn’t.”

And with a faint whoosh and a glimmer of ethereal dust, he disappeared through the far wall, mop and all.

As the janitor departed, Barnaby's thoughts turned to the impending meeting with the director. The gravity of the situation necessitated a focused discussion, and Barnaby was keenly aware of the challenges that lay ahead.​

Later that afternoon, Barnaby found himself seated in the director's office alongside a select group of colleagues. The director, a man of imposing stature and a reputation for unwavering resolve, addressed the assembly.​

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, his voice measured and authoritative, "the recent poisonings have escalated into a crisis that demands our immediate and undivided attention. I have conferred with my counterpart at Wales Yard, and we are in agreement that a coordinated response is imperative. They want to stop the killings, but, more importantly, we need to get these number under control. The backlog has exceeded all precedent. We have opened an additional holding facility, and it has stretched our budget to it’s limit. We must do all we can to stop this unparalleled drain on our department resources. "​

Barnaby couldn't help but feel a twinge. Not at the loss of life, as tragic as it was, but rather of envy at the mention of the meeting with Wales Yard. The thought of two bureaucratic titans strategizing in tandem was, to him, a fascinating prospect: clashing not with swords but with regulation binders, brandishing budget breakdowns and flowcharts like arcane grimoires. Oh, to be a fly on that very wall…

The director continued, "Our primary objectives are to identify the perpetrator, ensure the safety of our food supplies, and restore public confidence. To this end, I am establishing a task force dedicated solely to this crisis. Finn, given your exemplary service and attention to detail, I am appointing you as its head."​

Barnaby's eyes widened slightly, the weight of the responsibility settling upon him. "I am honored, sir, and will dedicate myself fully to the task."​

"I have no doubt," the director affirmed. "Keep me apprised of your progress. Let my assistant Jonathan know if you need anything expedited."​

As the meeting adjourned, Barnaby returned to his office, the magnitude of his new role pressing heavily upon him. He knew that the path ahead would be fraught with challenges, but his resolve was steadfast. The safety and well-being of the city's inhabitants depended on the swift and decisive actions of his team.​

Determined, Barnaby began outlining a plan, cognizant of the delicate balance between thorough investigation and the urgent need for results. The city's trust had been shaken, and it was upon his shoulders to help restore it.

Without warming, the janitor floated into the office. Not through the door, mind you, but right through the wall, file cabinets, which rustled slightly at the disturbance, and then through the desk.

“Bigwig coming in.” he said. “His carriage just pulled up. Big fancy thing. Four horsepower. Not like the ones we had back in my day. That thing kicks up so much dust. Gonna be cleaning up after…”

Barnaby watched the ghostly janitor disappear through the wall, still muttering about carpets and "some poor spirit having to scrub spectral parsnip pulp out of the moulding" when the next knock came. He blinked, shook off the fog of administrative pleasure, and called out, "Enter!"

It was Percival Holbrook, the Assistant Director of Special Case Management—a pale, tightly-wound man who always looked like he’d just stepped into a puddle in new shoes. He held a leather folder like it might explode.

“The Director has summoned you,” Holbrook said without preamble. “Urgently. A private meeting. Select staff only.”

Barnaby perked up immediately. “Oh, how delightfully classified,” he said, standing so quickly his inkwell nearly tipped. “I do love a good clandestine committee.”

Holbrook gave a tight-lipped smile that indicated he neither understood nor cared for the joke, then turned crisply and headed out, expecting Barnaby to follow without further ado.

The meeting took place not in the grand, echoing halls of the main office building but in a small, well-appointed chamber three floors below it—a room Barnaby had only seen referenced in obscure routing instructions and internal transfer forms with security designations he usually needed at least a red stamp to even file. The other attendees were few: the Director himself, naturally, seated in a throne-like chair far too old and ostentatious for comfort; a senior officer from Wales Yard, wearing a stiff blue uniform and a face like thunder; and a member of the Ministry of Agriculture who kept checking his hands for signs of contamination.

Barnaby slipped into a seat with the contained delight of a boy sneaking into the grown-ups’ parlour.

The Director wasted no time. “We are dealing with coordinated attacks on our food supply,” he said flatly. “I have met with my counterpart at Wales Yard—an encounter I hope never to repeat, given the volume of spittle and charts involved—and it is clear now that the problem has outgrown departmental borders.”

“We are instituting a new cross-departmental task force,” the Director continued. “The goal is simple: identify, isolate, and eliminate the threat—without collapsing public morale or turning the city into a fortress of canned beans and suspicion. Mister Finn, your role in spirit processing and interim containment has proven… unorthodox, but effective. Aside from your previous duties, we’ll need you to coordinate all uninterred victim spirits from this point forward.”

Barnaby beamed. “It would be my honor, sir.”

The officer from Wales Yard gave a small, skeptical grunt, but the Director raised a hand. “You’ll also be granted a special liaison status with their team. Expect to share findings. Discreetly.”

The man from Agriculture raised a finger. “I must insist that we keep all public-facing responses tightly controlled. We cannot afford panic. Canned goods are already fetching thrice their price in some districts, and I’ve had reports of people trying to make stew from boot polish.”

“An act of desperation,” Barnaby murmured, “or perhaps just exceptionally bad culinary judgement.”

The Director cleared his throat. “That is all. Barnaby, Mr. Holbrook would like a word, please.”

The others filtered out. Barnaby remained, spine straight, hands clasped behind his back.

“I’ve heard whispers,” Holbrook said slowly. “The janitor. The floating one. What’s his name again?”

“I don’t believe he ever gave one,” Barnaby replied. “He prefers to remain delightfully anonymous. We just call him Mervin”

“Well, he’s not on any personnel list, living or dead,” the Director said. “And yet he’s filed three maintenance requests in the last week and his handwriting is exquisite.”

Barnaby tilted his head. “He is… very thorough, if a bit…singleminded.”

“Keep an eye on him.”

“I always do.”

The next morning was a blur. Barnaby returned to the holding facility to find that a new wave of spirits had arrived—some cooperative, others confused, a few completely oblivious. The logistics team had done their best to maintain order, but the sheer volume was overwhelming. Spectral queues snaked through hallways and into side rooms, each soul bearing their own tragic tale and dietary regret.

“Dandelion root salad,” muttered one ghost. “I told Agnes I didn’t trust root vegetables.”

“Are you my grandson?” asked another, staring directly at Barnaby with unsettling intensity.

“Not unless you are the shade of a Mrs. Finn from Leeds,” Barnaby said gently, redirecting them to an open consultation area.

Detectives came and went, slipping in and out with notepads and tired eyes. They were interviewing spirits as fast as they could manage, but the information was still inconsistent. Some victims remembered tasting something strange, others were sure everything was normal. A few couldn’t even recall what they’d eaten.

Barnaby supervised the daily intake and triage process, cataloguing each new arrival into a rotating log that he’d linked with Wales Yard via a highly complex form-sharing system. He had named it “SPIT”: the Spirit Processing and Interdepartmental Tracking framework. It came with its own logo, drafted by Barnaby himself, and featured an ink bottle crossed with a spectral quill.

Morale was low but stabilizing. The staff had been issued additional ration tokens and Barnaby had drafted a new morale-boosting memorandum entitled “Form and Function: Finding Purpose in Paperwork,” which he had personally read aloud over the intercom at 10 AM sharp.

It was in the middle of checking the alignment of the ghost containment runes that he felt it—that telltale cold ripple in the air.

“Oh, hello again,” Barnaby said without turning around. “Come to criticize my penmanship?”

“No, just your lack of broom closets,” came the dry response as the janitor floated in backwards through the wall. “Honestly, who designed this place? I’ve seen fewer wasted corners in a haunted hedge maze.”

“You’ll be pleased to know I’ve submitted a requisition for additional utility spaces,” Barnaby replied, not missing a beat. “In triplicate.”

“Triplicate? Oh joy, it’ll be lost in the shuffle by week’s end.”

“I took the liberty of enchanting the paper so it screams if ignored too long.”

The janitor paused mid-float, visibly impressed. “You’re learning.”

He gave a half-hearted swipe at an already pristine corner of the hallway with his incorporeal mop, which promptly passed through the floor and into the room below. There was a faint, distant shriek, followed by a muffled “My soup!”

“Oops,” said the janitor blandly.

Barnaby shook his head. “You’re a menace.”

“A tidy menace. One with standards.” He floated beside Barnaby and surveyed the slow churn of administrative chaos. “Lot more ghosts than yesterday.”

“The rate of death has nearly tripled since last week.”

“Lovely for business. Not so much for upholstery.”

“Any chance you saw anything… odd?” Barnaby asked. “Since the spirits arrived? Signs of tainted food? A glow? A chill? Anything?”

The janitor tapped his chin. “One of the spirits smelled like turnips dipped in funeral water. Another had a glow about them—greenish, murky. Less ‘spoiled food,’ more ‘curse that can’t be scrubbed out.’ But nothing definitive.”

“Of course not,” Barnaby sighed.

“You’ll figure it out,” the janitor said. “You’re annoyingly diligent.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You shouldn’t.”

With a swirl of his translucent duster and a sniff that echoed faintly across dimensions, the janitor turned and floated away, disappearing through the ceiling with all the snark and flair of a particularly fussy butler.

As the day wore on, Barnaby found himself buried beneath the mountain of requisitions, releases, intake forms, cross-checks, and interdepartmental queries that had become his life’s delight. The death toll had reached seventy-eight from this latest poisoning. The effect across the city was worsening—markets shuttered, fresh goods burned or quarantined, and whispers of rationing riots coming in from the northern districts.

When the Director’s next mirror call came, it was merely a formal notification that another department had ceded temporary oversight to Barnaby’s team to streamline response protocols.

He hadn’t cheered aloud, but he had done a celebratory ink blot in his blotting journal.

The poisonings were escalating. The pattern—if it could be called that—was confounding. And the pressure from above was mounting.

But Barnaby was resolute.

Let the city shudder.

Let the streets empty.

Let the food go foul and the public tremble.

For every soul, every form, every folder—they passed across *his* desk.

And there was no desk in all of London better prepared.

The evening post arrived with its usual mix of bills, bureaucratic notices, and a single envelope bearing the distinctive, bold handwriting of Barnaby’s father-in-law. He recognized it immediately and felt a small swell of anticipation in his chest.

"Ah! A letter from your father," he declared, holding it aloft like a prize before carefully slicing it open with his letter opener.

The family gathered as he unfolded the thick parchment and cleared his throat. His wife straightened in her chair, the children leaned in with curiosity, and his mother-in-law pursed her lips, ever skeptical of her absent son-in-law's correspondence.

Barnaby began to read aloud:

*"My dear family,"*

*"Word has reached me, even here in India, of the disturbing events transpiring back home. The poisoning of the food supply is nothing short of an act of cowardice, and yet I find solace in knowing that my own son-in-law is at the very heart of the effort to root out the villain responsible. It does not surprise me in the least. From the moment I met you, Barnaby, I saw in you the steady hand of a man suited for great responsibility. I have no doubt that your diligence and meticulous nature are indispensable in this crisis. If anyone is to bring order to the chaos, it is you."*

Barnaby beamed as he read, his chest puffing out slightly.

*"It only affirms the faith I placed in you when I allowed you to marry my daughter and take my place as head of the household in my absence. I know that with you at the helm, my family is in good hands."*

A barely audible scoff escaped his mother-in-law’s lips. She muttered under her breath, just loud enough for her daughter to hear, *"Who runs this house?"*

Barnaby did not notice. His wife, however, shot her mother a sharp glare, her jaw tightening. But she said nothing, allowing Barnaby to bask in the words of praise that so clearly meant the world to him.

The letter continued in the same proud and dignified tone, shifting to tales of his father-in-law’s work in India, the challenges of administering British rule, and the peculiarities of the local cuisine. He concluded with a carefully measured farewell:

*"You all remain in my thoughts, and though my work here is crucial, I look forward to the day I may return and see you all once more. Give my love to the children, my regards to your dear mother, and my deepest affection to my beloved daughter. And to you, Barnaby, I extend my respect, my confidence, and my expectation that you will continue to uphold the dignity and duty of our household."*

Barnaby folded the letter with great care, sighing with deep satisfaction.

"Well," he said, smiling broadly. "That was rather affirming, wasn't it?"

His wife murmured her agreement. His son, already looking ahead to the next part of the evening, tugged at his sleeve. "Can we eat now?"

"Yes, yes," Barnaby said, patting the boy’s head. "Let us see what delightful meal awaits us this evening."

The family gathered around the dinner table, where another meal of dubious canned goods was presented.

Tonight’s offering was something... unexpected.

His son, ever enthusiastic, clapped his hands. "Oh! What is it this time?"

His daughter, peering at the meal with wide, fearful eyes, looked as though she might cry.

His wife, with quiet dignity, placed the dishes before them. There was pride in her bearing, despite the oddity of the fare. She had worked miracles with what little she had, and she knew it.

His mother-in-law, however, did not even attempt to feign interest. She reached into her own private stash, pulling out a tin of hardtack. She placed the dry, dense biscuit before her and picked at it with a distinct air of superiority.

Barnaby, ever dutiful, took his fork and speared a piece of the odd, gelatinous substance that had come from a tin marked *Preserved Jellied Eel with Aspic and Grapefruit and Aubergine puree*.

"It’s… certainly a creative choice," he said, smiling at his wife.

"You ordered it," she reminded him with a knowing look.

"Did I? How delightful," he murmured, subtly eating around it while ensuring his children ate enough to appear well-fed.

The son, to everyone’s surprise, devoured it with glee. "It’s weird and wobbly! I love it!"

The daughter pushed hers around on the plate, despair in her eyes.

Barnaby’s wife sighed and turned to her mother. "You could at least try it."

"I am quite content," the older woman said primly, taking a bite of her rock-hard biscuit.

Barnaby, lost in thought and already flipping through a memorandum at the table, had no time to notice any of this. His mind was elsewhere—on charts, figures, and the latest reports.

After dinner, Barnaby retired to his study, where he found solace in what others might consider a maddening pile of bureaucracy. With ink-stained fingers and a satisfied sigh, he spread out the latest compiled reports and began to chart patterns.

His work was methodical, rhythmic. He plotted every known poisoning, cross-referencing locations, times, and food sources.

For a long while, nothing stood out.

Then, as he stared at the carefully drawn lines, an unsettling realization formed in his mind.

Every single poisoning had occurred *outside of standard government business hours*.

A chill crept up his spine.

He sat back in his chair, tapping his fingers against the desk. What did that mean?

It meant that whoever was responsible wasn’t doing their horrible work during normal hours.

It meant that they weren’t operating as a full-time vendor, a rogue chef, or an external agent.

It meant they had another job.

And it meant that they may very well be a government employee.

Barnaby’s fingers tightened around his quill.

This changed everything.

**Jack knew the tally by heart. He didn't need to jot it in the margins of his meticulous little ledgers, though he had, of course—several times, in fact, in increasingly beautiful penmanship, as if neatness somehow sanctified the mess he’d made of the world.**

**Three hundred and sixty-eight.
That was the number. And he was *glad* of it.**

**The city was swollen with souls, stuffed like a bureaucrat’s briefcase, bursting with restless, whining spirits who had no idea that they were now doing their part for the greater good. The departments couldn't process them fast enough. Ghosts cluttered the corners of every office like dust bunnies. Clerks tripped over translucent feet. Mediums were booked solid. Wards were breaking. Wills were backed up. And in all that spiritual congestion, the system groaned under the pressure.**

**Good.**

**That was the point, wasn’t it? That was the *proof*. That things had gone too long without proper oversight, that death could not be left to the dead. No one cared until everything came undone—until systems cracked, institutions wept, and the masses screamed for more structure, more funding, more power for the people behind the parchment.**

**Behind *his* parchment.**

**He stood in the shadowed back corner of a crumbling market stall, surrounded by overturned crates and the scent of too-ripe produce. His eyes glinted in the low light as he watched a tired vendor sweep up crumbs with a twitching broom and a vacant stare. Only two markets remained open now, both limping along under strict regulations and armed supervision. But even with guards posted, the chaos always found a way in. It was, after all, very hard to test for poison when the ingredients looked so ordinary.**

**His last three acts had been elegant in their precision. A dash of arsenic in three stalls, all of them hawking cabbages. Not enough to kill a soul on its own—just a whisper, just enough to make people sick, and then *bam*—a larger batch, identical in look, different in dosage. And when the illnesses mounted, all signs pointed not to Jack, but to the hapless supplier who’d shipped that week’s vegetables from Norfolk.**

**The supplier had been cleared, of course. But not before three more vendors had shuttered their stalls, terrified of being next.**

**It was all working. The newsboys screeched headlines about food safety failures and systemic neglect. Parliament was in an uproar. Letters from abroad fluttered into officials’ hands like moths drawn to flame, each demanding answers. And the Office of Afterlife Administration —dear, sweet, clunky OAA—was right in the middle of it all.**

**Jack’s smile twisted into something unpleasant. He could see it so clearly. Soon, people would beg for more oversight, more structure, more rules and red tape to keep them safe. They would need someone—some *thing*—to guide the process. And he would be there, not in the spotlight (never the spotlight), but behind it, whispering policy into the ears of those who thought they ruled.**

**It was almost time. Just *one* more.**

**One last, glorious act of tragedy. One final push to knock down the tottering house of cards so that a sturdier one might be built in its place. A black swan. A singular, awful moment that would be burned into the consciousness of the city for decades to come. Something unforgettable. Something *undeniable*.**

**He’d already drawn up the preliminary charts. He had the data. He knew the weak points. A single, massive event—widespread, fast, and utterly catastrophic. That was all it would take. And then the floodgates would open.**

**This time, he wouldn't disguise it through subtleties. This time, it would be public. Terrifying. Immediate. No ticking clock. No slow spread. No ambiguity.**

**It would be tragic. And it would be necessary.**

**And when it was done, and the city was weeping and the bureaucrats were scrambling and the living had turned to the dead for answers they never wanted to know—then, *then*—he could rest. Not in peace, never in peace. But in *purpose*. His ledger closed. His work complete. His masterpiece hung high in the gallery of officialdom, its signature stamped not in ink, but in consequence.**

**He turned from the shadows and melted into the crowd like smoke, a whisper drifting past weary faces and fearful glances. No one noticed him. No one *ever* did.**

**But they would. Oh, they would.**

**Just once more.**

**Just one more day of death.**

**And then, Jack would be done.**

**Or—nearly done.**

**Because for all his careful work, for all the beauty in the chaos he had conjured, Jack knew something more was needed. He didn’t crave fame, not in the traditional sense. No statues. No fanfare. No name etched into the wall of history.**

**But *recognition*? Yes.**

**Not of who he was—his true name must never be spoken aloud, not yet, not now—but of what he had done. Of *why* he had done it.**

**The public needed to *know*. Not everything. Not the careful measures and the subtle substitutions and the precise, lethal logistics. But the broad strokes. The idea. The truth behind the terror.**

**He was a cog in a machine. A simple piece of something larger. And all he had done was show how fragile it really was. How a tiny push, a little pressure, could topple the entire edifice.**

**The real danger, he thought, wasn’t him. It was what came *next*. The thing they wouldn’t see until it was too late. And when it came—and it *would* come—they had to be ready. The structures he was forcing into place now would be the only thing that could hold when the truly uncontrollable broke through.**

**He would have to send a letter. Yes. To the papers. A short one. Just enough.**

**Not a confession. Not a manifesto.**

**Just… a message.**

**They would print it. They *had* to. This was important. Vital.**

**People needed to understand the lesson.**

**And once they did, he could finally rest.**

**Not in peace.**

**But in purpose.**

Barnaby had just sat down at his desk with a very promising packet of ghost census corrections—twenty-seven forms from Tower Hamlet’s east quadrant that had somehow all been signed by the same shade named "Mrs. Eels"—when a peculiar shimmer passed through the surface of his desk mirror. It pulsed faintly violet, then vibrated with the distinct ring of Departmental Tier-One urgency.

The mirror cleared, and the refined face of Jonathan, Lord Grimshaw’s personal assistant, appeared within the glass. Jonathan always looked as though he had been carved from clarity and clockwork: hair parted with near magical precision, tie at perfect angle, a pen clipped to his collar like a military decoration.

“Mr. Finn,” Jonathan said, with the formal tone of someone who did not forget to pronounce all his consonants. “Director-General Radcliffe requests your immediate presence. Please make your way to the Grand Administrative Tower, level seven, conference suite *Obsidian*. I trust you know the lift incantation?”

Barnaby blinked, halfway through opening a packet of sugar for his tea. “Director Radcliffe himself?”

Jonathan nodded, which somehow looked like a form of punctuation.

“May I ask the nature of the meeting?” Barnaby added, already starting to tidy his desk with the instincts of a man summoned to Mount Olympus.

“You may ask,” Jonathan replied. “Though I believe the Director will explain in full. Please do not delay; the schedule has been adjusted accordingly. Aetheric interference may affect the lift if you wait past the next quarter-hour chime.”

The mirror shimmered out before Barnaby could ask what on earth that meant.

He stood, heart already flitting about like a tax form caught in an open window. He wasn’t often summoned to meet anyone above his immediate superior, let alone Lord Reginald Radcliffe, the Director-General of the entire Department of Civil Affairs—the sort of person whose shadow got to wear cufflinks. And Jonathan, crisp and deliberate as a filing blade, didn’t issue vague invitations. This was a proper summons.

He made his way to the Grand Tower in a daze, barely registering the subtle shifts in magic around him—how the staircases retracted to allow the pneumatic walkways more space, how the enchanted sconces brightened politely as he passed. The interior lift to Level Seven greeted him with a polite “Good afternoon, Case Manager Finn,” in the voice of someone who had swallowed a library.

When he reached Conference Suite Obsidian, the door opened with a mechanical sigh. Jonathan stood just outside, consulting a sheaf of vellum that rearranged itself as he looked at it.

“Right on schedule,” Jonathan said without glancing up. “He’s ready for you now.”

Barnaby adjusted his tie, wiped his hands once more on his coat, and stepped towards the meeting he had been invited to.

Not politely invited. Not formally requested. No, this was a *summons*—the sort typically reserved for the deeply important or the deeply damned. He glanced at the note that had arrived soon after Jonathan’s call. The paper was thick enough to be weaponized, the script hand-inked in sharp, uncompromising calligraphy. It bore the wax seal of the Director’s office, pressed so deep that Barnaby half expected it to whisper secrets if held to the ear.

He straightened his cravat with a trembling hand, checked the alignment of his lapel pin—a small golden skull over a filing cabinet, the official badge of a Departmental Office Manager—and made his way up the winding brass stair to the topmost level of the Bureau tower.

The twin doors to the Director’s private meeting chamber opened before he even reached them, gliding inward with a whisper of enchantment and an ominous *click* of finality.

Inside, Barnaby stopped cold.

He had expected his Director, of course— Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw, ancient and inscrutable, was perched in his usual high-backed chair, a stack of parchments at one elbow and a teacup steaming gently at the other. But it wasn’t just him.

Standing directly beside him was High Lord Reginald Radcliffe, Director-General of Civil Affairs, a man whose very pocket watch could hush a room. His medals were understated, but the pin of the Crown’s inner circle glittered at his collar like a quiet threat.

Across from them stood two figures in the crisp, deep blue of Whale Yard command. Commander Lady Judith Flint, tall, gray-eyed, and infamously difficult to impress, was conferring in low tones with Chief Inspector Archie Murtaugh, whose sour expression suggested he had not smiled since the reign of George IV.

And finally—most astonishingly of all—seated with a measured poise near the hearth was a figure clad in subtle finery: Lady Honoria Archie Stewart McKernan August Trench, special liaison to the Crown and bearer of its voice in all matters deemed *delicate.* Her maroon sash and ivory cuffs bore the crest of her office: a lion, a griffin, and a stack of sealed documents.

Barnaby swallowed.

Director Lord Grimshaw looked up from his tea and gave a single, solemn nod. “Ah. Mr. Wetherby. Good of you to come on such short notice.”

“Please,” said Lady Honoria, with a thin, not-quite-smile, “do join us. We’ve much to discuss.”

Barnaby stepped inside, clutching his folio of notes, his heart hammering like a typewriter in overtime. The doors sighed shut behind him with a finality that felt…judicial.

He took the only open chair at the long blackwood table—polished to a fault, inlaid with gleaming silver filigree. He placed his notes before him and folded his hands as though they might stop trembling if made to behave.

Director Lord Aldous Grimshaw surveyed the room with his lichen-green eyes—dry, ancient, and barely human. “You are all aware,” he said at last, “of the events of this past fortnight. A number of civilians dead. A handful more hospitalized. All traced, with considerable effort, to disparate food vendors. All previously reputable.”

“A concerning pattern,” muttered Chief Inspector Murtaugh. His voice sounded like gravel in a vinegar bottle.

“Not a pattern,” corrected High Lord Reginald, his tone calm but sharpened like a letter opener. “A design.”

Commander Lady Judith Flint gave a small nod, arms crossed in her pressed uniform. “And now that design has added a flourish. A letter. Delivered to all major periodicals this morning. Multiple copies. Sealed in wax, with no return address and no fingerprints. Written in… well. That’s what we’re here to discuss.”

Lady Honoria Trench cleared her throat. “If one of you would be so kind as to fetch a basin, a cloth, and a small glass of brandy, I’ll begin.”

No one moved. She sighed, delicately withdrew a folded sheet of yellowing paper from her folio, and unfolded it with the theatrical disdain of a duchess presented with a leper’s résumé.

She held it between her gloved fingers as though its ink might bite.

“I shall read it aloud,” she declared, “as it appeared in the newspapers’ possession, errors and all. Please refrain from interrupting unless it is to hand me smelling salts.”

Then, with a grimace that twisted her noble features into something resembling peasant agony, she began.

*TO ALL THEM GOSSIP PAPERS & THE STIFF-SHOED SHITS WHAT READS ‘EM—*

*Right. So. Here it is.*

*D’yousee now?*

*What I done—what I been doin’—ain’t madness. Not madness, not murder, not mayhem for the sake of noise. It’s a message. A lesson, writ in bile and blood. It’s a bit o’ truth, scrawled out in the last breath of yer cook or yer clerk or yer fine dinner guest slumped over the pudding.*

*Cos this place—it’s rotten, inside and out. Has been for years, maybe centuries, I dunno. But I seen it. I lived in it. I worked in them halls and ate them scraps and filed them lovely, lovely forms that don’t stop a man from starving nor a child from dying of rotgut stew.*

*I were just a cog. A stupid little cog. But even a cog, see, even a bent and chipped one can jam up the works proper, if it knows when to turn.*

*That’s me. That’s what I done. I jammed it. I stopped the gears. I cracked the lovely little system you lot built, so tall and smug. I made it bleed.*

*Them what died? Pity, sure. But don’t come weepin’ in yer fancy lace for ‘em, not unless you’re weepin’ for all the others who gone nameless before. Cos the dead from me, they died for somethin’. Not for coin. Not for country. But for a bloody wake-up call.*

*I ain't the end. I’m the start. The first whisper of storm before the whole sky breaks loose.*

*Not much left now. Just one more meal. One more puff of poison. Then the smoke’ll clear, and maybe, just maybe, yer precious lords and ladies’ll see the rot for what it is. See what they let grow in the cracks, in the cupboards, in the kitchens.*

*Cos none of you are safe. You think you are—hidin’ behind yer rules and stamps and ration books, thinkin’ bureaucracy can keep the filth out. But the filth’s already in. Been in for years. Sittin’ at your table, pourin’ your tea.*

*An’ the next danger, well... it won’t stop itself like I done. You think I’m bad? You think I’m the worst of it? Wait till the next one comes knockin’. Wait till the system fails for real.*

*But don’t worry. I’ll be gone by then.*

*I said it plain before—I ain’t got a real name no more. Burnt that with the rest of who I used to be. But you can call me Jack. I like that one. Got a snap to it. Easy on the tongue. Makes the ears perk up.*

*I’m the worm in the grain. The crack in the bricks. The first whisper of sickness in a too-quiet house. I’m the cough behind the curtain.*

*I been playin’ this game for longer than you’d believe. Years, maybe. Doesn’t matter. A pinch here. A drop there. A slip of powder in the stew pot. A bad mushroom in the barrel. A suspicious cabbage in the shipment. Little things. Not enough to notice, not all at once. Just a trickle of death.*

*And now the flood’s comin’.*

*Every death I done, every one that came wheezin’ to the floor, eyes bulgin’ and foam at the lips—that was just a step. Just a tick on the great, ticking clock of your decay.*

*You think I’m some monster, do you? Some cutthroat with a thrill in his guts? Bollocks. I did this to prove a point. I did this to show you what happens when you trust a broken system with your very lives.*

*Now I got one last thing to do. One big feast. The final course. Not for the poor this time. No. This one’s got a seat for everyone. Nobles. Clerks. Bakers. Butchers. Priests. Paper-pushers. Anyone who thought they were safe cos they had a title or a kitchen door with a lock on it.*

*And when it happens? Oh, when the bodies start dropin’ and the breathin’ turns to gaggin’ and the fine halls fill with the stink of panic—what’ll you do?*

*You’ll scratch yer heads. Blame the butchers. The vendors. The street sellers. You’ll hold your meetings and shuffle yer paperwork and never once look where the rot really lives.*

*It’s in you. It’s in the system. It always was.*

*And yet, you’ll keep on. Like good little drones. Like this is all some terrible, unthinkable thing, and not the natural end of the path you chose.*

*I don’t want fame. Don’t want no bloody statue. But I will be remembered. Maybe not proper. Maybe just whispers, or headlines, or a warning on the lips of some kitchen boy who checks the stew twice now.*

*But you’ll know it were me.*

*You’ll know.*

*I’m sendin’ this to the papers. They love a bit o’ madness. They’ll print it, make no mistake. And once they do, the message’ll be out. Not all the details. Not the full how or why. Just enough. Just the broad strokes. Enough to shake your sleepin’ heads and make you see.*

*I ain’t the disease. I’m the diagnosis.*

*So go on. Arrest someone. Hang ‘em high. Call it justice. Call it closure. But know this—*

*I already won.*

*Now sit down.*

*And wait for the last course.*

*Cheers,*

*Yours Truly—*

*Jack.”*

Silence spread like damp across the room.

Lady Honoria let the paper fall to the table with a visible shudder. “Ghastly. And I do not mean the killings.”

“It’s madness,” muttered Flint, her brows furrowed. “Or a very precise imitation.”

“He believes himself a prophet,” Murtaugh said. “A herald of some great reckoning. Typical narcissism. They always think they’re just ‘warning the world.’” He said it with such deep-seated bitterness that Barnaby suspected a personal history.

Director Grimshaw tapped one long, ink-stained finger on the table. “Madness or no, he has killed many. He has threatened more. And worse—he has tied his actions to us. The bureaucracy. The systems.”

“It’s the Crown I’m concerned about,” Lady Honoria cut in, tone bristling. “A letter like this, broadcast to the press? It paints the picture of rot beneath the surface. We cannot allow the public to think that the government is to blame for these deaths.”

“But it may be,” Reginald said simply. His voice didn’t rise, didn’t tremble—but it cut cleaner than any blade. “That is precisely the problem, Lady Trench. He may be one of ours. He knows too much. Knows how to make it look like a supplier. How to send post through departmental couriers without a trace. Knows our hours, our gaps, our blind spots.”

Barnaby finally cleared his throat. “He only poisons outside of normal business hours. Weekends. Holidays. After midnight. Times when government oversight would be at its weakest.”

“Yes,” murmured Grimshaw. “You noted that in your latest report. Very astute.”

Murtaugh snorted. “Or very convenient. He may work with you lot. One of your clerks, perhaps. Or a field agent. Even a low-level paper-stamper could learn enough over time.”

Lady Flint shot him a warning glance. “We’ve ruled out Whale Yard. Our hours don’t align.”

“And he’s clever,” said Barnaby, eyes drifting toward the grimy letter. “He’s orchestrating this like theatre. Picking targets to implicate systems, not people. He’s making the bureaucracy look fallible. His letter sounds like a mad man, but his actions are too controlled. He wants to appear disorganized, unreliable.”

“It *is* unreliable,” Reginald said, folding his hands atop his lap. “All things are. That’s what he’s proving. And I fear he may not be wrong.”

Lady Honoria gasped. “You’re *agreeing* with this lunatic?”

“I’m understanding him,” Reginald corrected. “There’s a difference.”

“Intentions be damned,” snapped Grimshaw, voice low and dangerous. “He is a killer. Whatever point he thinks he’s making, it is written in blood. And unless he is stopped, more will follow.”

Murtaugh’s sour mouth twitched. “We’d very much like to be the ones who stop him. The arrest should fall to Whale Yard.”

“Naturally,” said Flint with a nod, “and we’ll need full access to all departmental archives, suspect interviews, and—”

“You shall have what is appropriate,” Grimshaw interrupted.

Barnaby glanced between the faces at the table, his heart still racing. He wanted to say more—to say that it wasn’t just about systems or symbols, but about the people whose lives had ended in agony—but he saw the way the conversation was turning. Everyone here had a priority. For some, it was optics. For others, power. Only Reginald Radcliffe seemed to mourn the dead.

And Barnaby? He wasn’t sure what he mourned yet.

But he *was* sure of one thing.

Jack—whoever he was—wasn’t finished.

And that last act? The “Last Course,” as the letter called it?

It was coming.

The kettle screamed. The toast burned. His daughter screamed louder.

Barnaby stood in the middle of his own kitchen wearing a waistcoat inside out and holding a pencil he did not remember picking up.

His wife set a cup of tea in front of him with military precision and a kiss to the side of his head. His daughter wept quietly over her porridge. His mother-in-law stared at him like he was personally responsible for the collapse of Western civilization.

His son, God bless him, asked if murderers had union pensions.

Barnaby blinked. “What?”

At the office, a pile of new death reports waited in his in-tray like a paper-borne plague.

Cause of death: *unknown toxin*. Victim status: *unresolved*. Status of soul: *drifting*. Preferred condiment: *not applicable*.

He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

The janitor passed the door precisely at ten, levitating an inch above the floor and smelling faintly of lemon spirits and grave moss.

“Whole building’s got a stench of dread, y’know,” the janitor muttered, flicking his mop through a potted fern. “You can mop panic, you know that? Doesn’t stay clean, though. Leaves a residue.”

“I’ll be sure to file a form,” Barnaby said.

“Don’t bother. This place already soaked through. This ain’t cleanable.”

The janitor drifted out, still muttering.

At Wales Yard, Barnaby sat across from Commander Flint and Chief Inspector Murtaugh.

“We believe the target is a location, not a person,” Flint said.

Murtaugh just scowled. “He wants a crowd. We need bait.”

Barnaby raised a hand. “We can’t use civilians.”

“We won’t,” Flint said. “Technically.”

Back at the office, someone had left three poisoned canned goods on his desk. Clearly labeled. Courtesy of the forensics division.

He set them aside, poured cold tea into his mouth, and stared at the wall for seventeen minutes.

At home, the fire had gone out.

His wife left supper on the table—a lonely bowl of gray soup and a folded napkin with *please eat* written on it.

He did, mechanically, while staring at a ledger of deaths organized by date, location, and whether or not the victim had recently eaten mushrooms.

Later, in his study, surrounded by chalk circles, red string, and every report printed in triplicate, Barnaby whispered to himself, “One last course.”

The phrase sat in the air like smoke.

The rest of the week went the same.

Mornings before dawn. Meetings that never ended. Letters, reports, memos stacked like coffins. Afternoons at hospitals. Evenings in underground kitchens. Weekends with the dead.

Every spare moment consumed by charts, maps, and theories.

He slept like a corpse and woke like a ghost.

And somewhere out there—Jack waited

*Monday, 7:06 a.m.*

The file tower had collapsed again.

A subtle landslide of memos, reports, witness statements, autopsy records, and food shipment requisitions had avalanched from Barnaby’s “To Be Sorted” stack and was now halfway to blocking the door. He stared at it from his desk with the bleary stare of a man who had already fought this battle thrice and knew the war was unwinnable.

He took a sip of tea. It was cold. He realized hadn’t made any yet this morning. He took another sip.

A headache was already coiling behind his temples. Not the sharp pain of stress or the dull throb of exhaustion, but the grinding kind—like a crank being turned, slowly, behind the eyes. He reached blindly for a pen, realized he was holding one already, and sighed.

It had been a week.

A week of grim telegrams, of rising public anxiety, of poisonous whispers in every alley and pub and street market. Of bodies. Good gods, the bodies. They’d buried more citizens in the last seven days than in the entirety of the Summer Cholera of ’82. Whole families that had shared one last meal together, and had not been found for days. People eating the last of their horded cans, and only finding out too late that the poisoner had evolved even that far. And no one—not Wales Yard, not the Crown, not the department—had a single name.

Well. They had one.

Jack.

Whoever he was, he’d written a letter—a fevered screed of misspellings and rage and near-religious mania—and mailed it to every paper with enough ink left to run a front page. And while its grammar had bled from every paragraph like a punctured artery, its message had landed like a plague bell:

**“One more big one.”**

The final act. The last course. The grand, ghastly finale.

Barnaby leaned back, chair creaking. Before him, the evidence was arrayed like an autopsy in progress. He had tried to organize it into neat categories—Timeline, Victims, Locations, Suspected Contaminants, Distribution Chains—but it all blurred together now. Notes overlapped. Timetables contradicted. Graphs looked like fever charts.

His eyes drifted shut for a moment.

“Don’t fall asleep,” said a voice.

Barnaby jerked upright.

The ghostly janitor floated just inside the office, arms folded, an incorporeal mop hovering a few inches behind him like a loyal hound. He looked, as always, like someone who’d been murdered for poor customer service.

“You snore like a haunted kettle,” the ghost added, drifting closer and peering at the notes. “That your idea of a ‘filing system,’ is it? Or is this the ‘throw papers at the floor and hope for divine intervention’ method?”

Barnaby massaged his temples. “Good morning.”

“Debatable,” the janitor muttered. He circled a cluster of red-pinned notes. “You know, for a man buried under more parchment than Tutankhamun, you’re remarkably slow on the uptake.”

“I’m trying to piece it together,” Barnaby muttered. “Every victim, every delivery route. There has to be a pattern.”

“There *is* a pattern,” the ghost said, rolling his eyes. “It’s chaos. That’s the pattern. You lot love your charts and memos and forms in triplicate, but your boy Jack? He’s not filing anything. He’s scribbling anarchy in poison ink.”

Barnaby squinted at the chart labeled **Distribution vs. Casualties**. “It’s not all random. The poisonings occurred outside of business hours. Late deliveries. Unauthorized access to distribution hubs. If we can find the point of origin—”

“Oh, good, yes,” said the janitor, circling him like a buzzard. “Find the ‘point of origin’ while you bleed out from paperwork paper cuts. Don’t mind me. I’m just the janitor. *The dead one.* What would I know about it?”

“You never know *what* you know,” Barnaby said, jabbing a pencil at him. “You float around muttering about floor wax and blood smears, and every now and then you drop a hint that cracks a case wide open.”

“Must be maddening,” the janitor said with a grin. “Like chasing omens through a fog. Still, better than your current strategy of stress-induced decay.”

He hovered by the bookshelf, poked at a stack of forms with his mop. “Still using Form 72-B for foodborne spectral irregularities? That thing was outdated when I was alive. Which, granted, was during the Crumpet Riots.”

Barnaby sighed and turned back to his papers. “If you’re not going to be helpful—”

“Who says I’m not?” The janitor floated toward the door. “Just because the puzzle’s impossible doesn’t mean you’re not a piece of it. That’s the beauty of bureaucratic doom. You never see the end until you’ve already stamped it.”

He disappeared through the closed door.

Barnaby blinked, then leaned forward, staring hard at his notes again.

Outside business hours.

Unauthorized access.

Contaminants in food processed centrally… but only some shipments affected. It couldn’t be a supplier. It had to be internal. Had to be someone who knew their schedules, their blind spots. Someone who—

A knock.

He opened the door to find his wife, holding a small basket wrapped in gingham cloth.

“I figured you hadn’t eaten,” she said, stepping inside.

“I haven’t,” he admitted.

She took one look at the paper-covered battlefield and sighed. “Barnaby.”

“I’m fine.”

“You are *not* fine. You’re a paper ghost.”

She cleared a space and set down the basket. Inside, a modest but lovely lunch: egg salad, a small cheese roll, a slice of apple tart. A thermos of tea, miraculously hot.

He touched her hand as she passed him the tart. “You’re a miracle.”

“I’m a woman with a pantry and pity. The eggs are -not quite- chicken, the apples are the last in the bin, the pastry is made with a type of flour I don’t even want to take about. The cheese is nice, though” she said, smiling softly. “Eat. And come home before dawn for once. The children think you’ve joined the Undeparted.”

He chuckled faintly. “Give them my love.”

“I do. Every night.” She kissed his forehead and slipped out.

Barnaby chewed slowly, mind whirring.

He pinned more notes. Drew a new line on his map. It crisscrossed a dozen neighborhoods, but converged on one odd intersection—a food inspection office that had, oddly, reported *fewer* issues than anywhere else. Almost none.

He jotted a note to look into it.

The light changed as the day crept by, golden dawn becoming harsh midday, then sinking into amber afternoon. He barely noticed. His hands moved on their own—stacking, sorting, drawing connections that refused to stay stuck.

The door creaked. The janitor floated in again, muttering to himself.

“…and what sort of fool alphabetizes policy addendums by *author*? Absolute gobshites…”

He paused. “Still here, eh?”

“Still trying,” Barnaby said.

The janitor nodded to the now-wall-sized evidence board. “Seen messier crime scenes. But not many.”

Barnaby rubbed his eyes. “Do you think I’m wrong?”

“Wrong?” the ghost repeated. “Oh, my dear Barnaby. Of course you’re wrong. You’re a civil servant.”

He grinned. “But you might still be *useful*.”

*Monday, 3:14 p.m.*

The light had turned sullen by the time Barnaby realized he hadn’t touched the tea Eliza brought him. It was now lukewarm at best, but he drank it anyway, grateful for the bitter jolt. He’d once sworn he’d never let the job get to him—never become one of *those* bureaucrats, pale and paper-skinned, haunted by filing cabinets and talking to their hole-punchers. But the lines between man and ledger had long since blurred.

He stared across his paper kingdom. The office had grown smaller over the hours—claustrophobic, nest-like. Piles of notes bristled from every surface like the fossilized bones of extinct thoughts. Even the evidence map—his prized centerpiece—had turned mutinous, curling at the corners, bloated with conflicting strings and annotations. It resembled less a chart and more a man’s fraying mind.

He tried again.

**Victim List**, updated and annotated:

* Two hundred Thirty-seven confirmed fatalities from food poisoning.
* One hundred fifteen suspected additional cases.
* Nine still in hospital, prognosis grim.

All scattered. All seemingly unconnected. Until one noticed the time of ingestion. The pattern held: off-hours meals, usually hastily prepared. Late-night snacks. Emergency rations. Food pulled from unlogged crates.

Then the map again. Routes. Deliveries. A tangled mess of supply lines, interdepartmental redundancies, and panicked substitutions. The war had taxed the system—ration delays, staff shortages, substitutes authorized by signature-stamped whisper.

Someone was exploiting the chaos. No question there.

But who?

And then, most maddeningly—why?

What was the endgame in seeding poison into the bellies of bakers, cobblers, soldiers, chefs, fishmongers, children, postmen, pensioners?

Unless… there was no endgame.

Unless it was the game.

He was halfway through scribbling that thought—*Is the pattern itself the message?*—when the janitor reappeared. This time, floating upside down, broom now slung jauntily across one shoulder like a soldier’s rifle.

“Still alive, are we?” the ghost asked.

“For now.”

“Well, that’s something. You look like you’ve been mauled by a particularly aggressive inkwell.”

Barnaby gestured toward the map. “The poisonings aren't random. They're *symbolic*. He’s choosing victims from all walks. Every class, every trade. It’s not about one message—it’s about dismantling the illusion that anyone is safe.”

“Clever boy,” the janitor muttered, drifting down to sit cross-legged midair. “You figure that out all on your own, or did one of the corpses whisper it in your ear?”

Barnaby didn’t rise to the bait. “He’s trying to break trust. In the food supply. In the bureaucracy. In *us*. He’s creating panic.”

“And doing a bloody good job of it,” the janitor said. “You should’ve seen the line in front of the Spectral Complaints Window this morning. Two old phantoms tried to possess the same form and ended up stuck together like a bureaucratic conjoined twin.”

Barnaby stared at a red-pinned location. “Can ghosts be poisoned?”

“Not unless they’re very foolish or very sentimental,” the janitor replied. “Why?”

He was already scribbling. “Because we had one—Alfred Tull, the candlewright from Blackditch. Died three weeks ago, run over by a carriage. Manifested last week in a pub complaining of gut pain. Claimed it started *after* death.”

The janitor tilted his head. “You’re telling me Jack poisoned someone so hard it traveled across the veil?”

“Maybe,” Barnaby whispered. “Or maybe Alfred wasn’t dead when he was poisoned. Maybe he ingested it *as* he died.”

They both paused.

“That’s worse,” said the janitor cheerfully. “Terrible. Horrifying. Can’t wait to read about it in your department’s quarterly.”

Barnaby rubbed his face. “It could mean the poison has spiritual resonance. That it lingers. That the aftereffects are—”

“Barnaby,” the ghost interrupted, in rare seriousness, “you’re spiraling.”

“I *have to* spiral,” he snapped. “Because someone out there is planning one final strike, and it’s going to be bigger than anything we’ve seen. I need to find something. Anything.”

The janitor floated down until they were nearly eye-level. “Want a tip?”

“Yes, please.”

“Stop chasing him like he’s a man.”

Barnaby blinked. “What?”

“You’re looking for someone who signs forms, takes lunch breaks, minds schedules. But this Jack—he’s not that. Not anymore. He’s an idea wearing skin.”

“I can’t work with that,” Barnaby muttered. “Ideas don’t leave fingerprints.”

“No,” said the ghost, floating backward. “But they always leave *echoes*.”

And with that, he vanished through the ceiling.

Barnaby stared at the map again. Then turned to a fresh page.

**If Jack isn’t a man, what is he?**
He jotted:

* A metaphor?
* A collective?
* A legend made real?
* A bureaucrat gone mad?

He paused at the last. His pen lingered.

He’d had the thought before, but it felt more solid now. The timing. The access. The knowledge. This wasn’t a stranger peeking through the keyhole. Jack *knew* the system. He knew where to insert the rot.

Barnaby looked up at the towering bookshelf, at the volumes of regulations and directories and internal forms—each more labyrinthine than the last.

He’d always loved it. The neatness of it. The ritual.

And Jack had taken that same structure and *warped* it.

If Barnaby could find how, maybe he could find *where*.

*8:47 p.m.*

The candle on his desk had burned low and stubby, wax pooling like spilled memory. Barnaby’s stomach growled. He ignored it.

The silence in the building was total now. No footsteps. No echoing gurgle from the pneumatic mail tubes. Even the ghosts seemed to have tucked themselves away, as though the office itself held its breath.

He skimmed a report from two days prior: a meat shipment rerouted due to “supply clarification errors.” The note was signed with an approved seal… but the name attached was one Barnaby didn’t recognize.

He flipped to another. Different shipment. Same anomaly.

The signature was always *different*—but the seal?

The same.

He pulled down the *Departmental Seals Reference Codex* and thumbed through it, page by worn page.

Found it.

Seal #132-B: **Food & Resource Emergency Authorization – Grade Delta Clearance.**

“Delta?” he whispered. “No one uses Delta anymore. It was decommissioned in—”

A chill ran down his spine.

Whoever this was, they weren’t forging names. They were using an obsolete clearance level no one checked anymore. A ghost in the machine. A sanctioned specter among the living.

He scribbled a note:
**Trace use of Seal 132-B over last six months.**
**Request access to Emergency Archives.**
**Interview Office of Obsolete Protocols.**
**[possibly haunted?]**

He leaned back, triumphant for one brief moment.

Then frowned.

It was still just a thread. A cracked nail on a boarded-up door.

He was no closer to Jack.

No closer to the last course.

His candle flickered, wobbled, went out.

Barnaby sat in the dark.

And then the ghost returned one last time, now gently polishing the glass of the window with a cloth that looked suspiciously like ectoplasmic dishrag.

“Still here?” he asked, not unkindly.

Barnaby didn’t answer.

“You won’t find him in there, you know,” the janitor said, glancing at the mountain of documents. “You might find what he did. Where he went. What he ate. But not him.”

“I *have* to,” Barnaby whispered.

“You don’t,” the janitor said. “You want to.”

Barnaby looked up. “What’s the difference?”

“About fifty hours of lost sleep and a slowly rotting cheese roll, by my count.”

The janitor gave one last swipe at the window and floated for the door.

“Good night, Finn.”

Barnaby murmured, “Good night.”

And then he was alone again.

The only sound was the wind outside and the faint ticking of a dozen clocks that no longer ran on time.

***Barnaby Finn’s Office, Department of Postmortal Affairs***

*10:17 p.m.*

The lamps were dim now, hazed with soot, their light like the last flickers of reason. The Department had long since emptied—clerks gone home, ghosts disbanded to corners unknown. Barnaby sat alone in the stale hush of bureaucracy long past its bedtime, sleeves rolled up, cravat hanging loose like a flag of surrender.

The table before him was no longer a desk but a battlefield.

Forms clashed with memos, reports tangled with requisition logs, and somewhere between a stack of death certificates and an overturned inkwell, Barnaby's resolve was dissolving. He had entered the day with purpose and left it a husk with too many coffee stains and not enough answers.

He stared at the pins again—those insufferable pins. Red for dead, blue for suspected, green for known connections. But the lines between them? They no longer meant anything. He had drawn and re-drawn, strung and re-strung, until it looked less like an investigation and more like a nervous breakdown rendered in string.

Nothing connected. Or rather, everything did, and that was worse.

If it had just been Parliament officials, it would be sabotage. If it were only paupers, it might be systemic cruelty. But Jack had no pattern of preference. No political target. No personal vendetta. His reach touched housewives and grocers and chimney sweeps and military cooks and, in one particularly grotesque incident, a bishop who had choked to death on poisoned boiled eggs during a christening.

Jack wasn’t picking people.

He was picking *symbols*.

Barnaby let out a strangled groan and banged his head gently against the desk.

“I think the table’s already dead, sir,” came a voice from the door.

He looked up, startled. Marian stood in the frame, holding a tin lunchbox and wearing her coat over her nightdress. She looked unimpressed.

“I told you I’d be late,” he said weakly.

“You said 'late', not 'missing and presumed devoured by filing cabinets.'”

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, placing the tin on his desk. “You need to eat.”

“I did,” he lied.

She opened the tin with the determined air of someone unafraid of cold potatoes and pickled eggs. “You sniffed tea and glared at a pastry. That doesn’t count.”

He accepted the food in defeat, chewing mechanically. The potatoes were soft and salted just enough to remind him she loved him more than he probably deserved.

“I’ve got something,” he said between bites, gesturing at a heap of papers. “Maybe. Seal 132-B. Obsolete but still in circulation. Shows up on supply reports with names that aren’t traceable.”

“That sounds promising.”

“It’s not.” He swallowed. “It’s like chasing shadows through fog. There’s no way to know if the seal's being misused, or if someone simply never bothered to update the authorization codes. For all I know, some overworked manager just forgot to die and has been approving things from a broom closet for fifty years.”

“You mean like your director?”

He snorted. “Lord Grimshaw *earned* his undead status. Probably filed a formal request to rise again, triplicated.”

She smiled, then grew quiet. “You look tired.”

“I *am* tired,” he admitted. “But I can’t let go of it, Marian. He’s not just killing people—he’s doing it in a way that makes the whole *system* look complicit. Makes everyone doubt the rules. The forms. The process.”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” she said gently. “He wants you off balance.”

“He’s doing a splendid job.”

She leaned down and kissed the top of his head. “Don’t forget—you’re not alone. If this takes a week or a month, you’ll still have us.”

He wanted to tell her how much that meant. Instead, he murmured, “I don’t even know what I’m looking for anymore.”

Then she was gone, leaving the scent of lavender soap and strong tea behind her.

Barnaby returned to the desk.

*11:45 p.m.*

He was down to his last lead.

It was a maintenance request.

One filed three months ago to replace broken cold storage in the Department’s sub-basement. No name on the submission. Just a department number—mistyped—and the Delta Clearance Seal. The request had been fulfilled. The storage updated. And no one had ever investigated why.

He retrieved the file and read it again.

It wasn’t about what was *poisoned*. It was about what was *stored*. What came and went through official channels that shouldn’t have. What passed unnoticed because it wore a bureaucratic disguise.

The food wasn’t always poisoned at shops or kitchens.

It was poisoned *here*.

In the belly of the beast.

Barnaby stood, stiff and aching, and crossed to a locked cabinet. From within he withdrew the *Facility Access Manifest*, a heavy tome chained to its shelf like an ancient spellbook.

He flipped through it.

There. Sub-basement G.

Four separate requisitions. All tagged Delta. All signed “R. Swillbrook.”

He blinked.

There was no R. Swillbrook.

He checked the civil registry. The pension roll. The death index. The employment log.

Nothing.

No such person had ever worked in any ministry.

So who filed the orders?

Who accessed the supplies?

Who chilled the poison?

And why did no one notice?

He turned back to the desk.

There were no more forms to read. No more strings to tie.

He had nothing left but questions.

And exhaustion.

*1:12 a.m.*

The janitor returned a final time, dragging a spectral mop behind him like a weary knight.

“Well?” he asked.

“I found a ghost.”

“That’s promising.”

“A bureaucratic one. Name shows up on records, but not on life.”

“Maybe it’s me,” the janitor said. “You ever think of that?”

Barnaby raised an eyebrow. “You don’t strike me as the poisoner type.”

“I once made a pot of tea strong enough to kill a mid-level demon, if that counts.”

The ghost began wiping down the invisible grime on a wall only he could see.

“You realize this is all pointless,” he said.

Barnaby didn’t respond.

“No, I mean it,” the janitor went on. “You’ll chase him for weeks. You’ll trace seals and shuffle papers and maybe you’ll even catch a name. But you won’t find him, not properly. Because Jack’s not hiding in the shadows—he *is* the shadows. The system made him, fed him, and now he’s chewing his way back out.”

“Then what do I do?” Barnaby asked, not quite whispering.

“You do what you always do,” the ghost replied, floating backward through the door with a slow bow. “You file it. You sort it. You try.”

Then he was gone.

Again.

And Barnaby was alone.

*3:33 a.m.*

The candles had guttered. The air was cold.

Barnaby sat motionless, hand still on the desk, though he hadn’t written in hours.

His coat was a blanket. His thoughts a whirlwind. His hope a dwindling ember.

He had read every file.

Checked every case.

Reviewed every victim, shipment, memo, meal, and mistake.

And still, he didn’t know.

Didn’t know who Jack was.

Didn’t know when he’d strike again.

Didn’t know how to stop it.

And as the first hint of dawn crept through the sooty windowpanes, Barnaby Wetherby, Case Manager and Senior Branch Overseer of the Department of Afterlife Administration, exhaled and finally admitted the truth.

He was no closer to solving it than when he started.

**It was nearly done.**

**The pieces were in place—quietly, methodically, beautifully placed—and all that remained was the final flick of the wrist. One last push. One last name on one last form. One last meal.**

**Jack stood beneath a flickering gaslamp on a rain-slick street, hands in pockets, eyes calm. To the average passerby, he was nobody—just another civil servant, soaked and weary, smelling faintly of ink and dust and something else no one could quite place. But inside him, thoughts turned like clockwork, oiled and gleaming.**

**He had always known it would come to this. That the world would collapse not with a bang, but with a sigh—tired of its own weight, strangled by its own paper chains. The rot had been baked in from the beginning, wrapped in seals and sanctioned with signatures. All he had done was accelerate the inevitable.**

**That was the genius of it.**

**He hadn’t created the weakness. He’d only pointed to it, loudly, in red ink and blood.**

**They would never admit it, of course. Not the Crown, not the Ministries, not those cloying little mid-managers with their forms and their rules and their endless tea breaks. They would scramble to control the narrative, to isolate the damage, to pretend it was all some lone madman with access to arsenic and a penchant for poetry.**

**But it wasn’t madness.**

**It was art.**

**Revenge.**

**Truth.**

**They called him a murderer.**

**And yes—yes, he had murdered.**

**But so had they.**

**They, with their quotas. With their starvation slips. With their chemical preservatives and their tax levies on salt and soap and soapstone urns. They had murdered by policy, by omission, by efficiency. They had made death a department.**

**He merely made it… poetic.**

**He smiled, just slightly.**

**The next act would be exquisite.**

**He already had the method. The means. The location. All properly requisitioned under someone else’s name, of course—approved, stamped, signed. The poison was subtle, bitter as betrayal and twice as fast. It would pass through inspection with flying colors and find its way onto the plates of the deserving before they even realized their forks were halfway to their mouths.**

**And when it hit?**

**Oh, they’d know. For a brief, glittering moment, they’d *know*.**

**It would be too late by then, of course. But it would be enough.**

**And after that?**

**Nothing.**

**Nothing but the silence of a machine with its gears ripped out.**

**He leaned against the wall, breath fogging in the chill.**

**They always asked why. If they ever caught him, if they ever looked him in the eye, that would be the first question.**

**Why?**

**Why go to such lengths? Why this way?**

**And he would answer, as he always had—**

**Because they deserved it.**

**Because the whole bloody machine needed to be torn apart.**

**Because no one else had the spine to do it.**

**Because—**

**Because—**

**Because—**

***Because they took ever’thin.***

***All of it.***

***He hadn’t had nuffin. Not ‘til he made it. Not 'til he worked, proper-like. But work weren’t enough, was it? Never was. Ya can’t file yer way into a full belly. Can’t logic yerself warm at night.***

***Worked fer years, din’t I? Good worker, hard worker, always the first in, last out. Did me duty. Signed me name. Checked the boxes. Polished me badge ‘til it shined like bleedin’ silver.***

***And what’d it get me?***

***A cupboard full’a dust an a belly full’a nothin.***

***Them at the top—oh, they fed. Fat cats in red coats, feasting on rules and meat pies. While we, the little cogs, we starved polite-like. Died quiet-like. Pushed off with a smile and a stamp an a good day to you, sir.***

***They never saw what it did to us. Never smelt the stench of rot behind the bakery, where the real meat got tossed. Never had to pick through bins to find bread what weren’t too green to chew. Never watched yer mum waste away ‘cos the infirmary were outta soddin' papers to sign her name.***

***So I did it, din’t I?***

***I did what none of ‘em had the bollocks to do.***

***I made ‘em notice.***

***Started small, y’know? Little sprinkle. A pinch. Nothin serious. Just enough to slow the cogs. A little bruise in the apple. A hairline crack in the porcelain.***

***Then they started slippin.***

***One by one.***

***Fallin over like dominos in a draught.***

***And the best part? The best bleedin’ bit?***

***They still don’t know.***

***They’re trippin over themselves lookin for motive, for reason, fer some great master plan.***

***But I ain’t got no plan.***

***I got a point.***

***A bloody big one, jabbed right in the eye of the whole Empire.***

***I am the plan. I am the point.***

***I’m the slow drip that turns a roof to rubble.***

***The mildew in the floorboards.***

***The rot in the grain.***

***The shadow what never blinks.***

***And soon—soon, love—it’ll all be over.***

***One more.***

***One last course, like I said.***

***One last breath, an the smoke’ll part.***

***An they’ll see, won’t they?***

***They’ll see what I done. What I showed ‘em.***

***Won’t matter who I am.***

***Ain’t me that’s important.***

***It’s what I done.***

***Cos this world? This broken, bastard world? It don’t deserve to run no more. Don’t deserve its wheels, its stamps, its quiet deaths in numbered drawers.***

***Deserves only one thing:***

***The end.***

***And I’ll give it to ‘em.***

***With a smile.
With a spoonful.
With a signature.***

***And they’ll choke on it.***

There came a point, sometime just before dawn, when Barnaby could no longer tell whether he was awake or dreaming, standing or sitting, man or ghost. He was on the floor, he was fairly sure, though the rug beneath his face seemed to swell and sink like a sluggish tide. The world pulsed behind his eyelids, and his breath rasped as if he had swallowed a filing cabinet full of dust and regret.

It had started two days prior. Or perhaps three. The sun had risen and set in a smear of colors that blurred together like water over ink, and his hours had been filled with graphs, charts, pins, maps, folders, letters, tea gone cold, and thoughts—so many thoughts. Thought stacked atop thought until the tower collapsed under its own cleverness, and now he was here, curled like a comma in the far corner of his study, mumbling questions to the carpet and wondering if he’d died and just failed to notice.

He hadn’t eaten in what felt like a week. He couldn’t remember his last full sleep. The last proper bath had been something of a legend by now, talked about in reverent tones by his family as though it had occurred in a bygone golden age of soap and sanity. The most he could manage was to smear at his face with a damp cloth and whisper apologies to his reflection.

They had stopped. The poisonings had stopped. Seven days now. No new deaths. No collapsing mycologists. No wheezing waiters or frothing patrons. The great wheel of bureaucracy had, for a moment, ground to a halt. Even the meetings had ceased. The grand table in the Director’s chamber sat abandoned, chairs empty, crystal decanters untouched. It was as if the entire city had paused for breath.

But Barnaby could not breathe.

What if it started again?

What if it hadn’t ended, only paused?

What if the silence was the final breath before a scream?

He had gone over it all again. And again. And again. Jack's letter. Jack’s mind. Jack’s voice, that oily, slippery thing that slithered through the lines, halfway between sanity and sewer water. Every turn of phrase had been dissected. Every misused apostrophe charted. He’d mapped the madness like a cartographer with a taste for nightmares, and still—nothing.

Nothing.

He had done everything right. He had followed the rules. He had climbed the ladder, filled the forms, filed the dead. He had followed protocol to the letter. He was the kind of man who remembered to initial the back pages. He was the sort of husband who brought home the right kind of biscuits. He had been good. And now? Now he was a man-shaped ruin with too many papers and not enough answers.

A hand touched his back.

Warm. Real. Human.

“Barnaby,” said a voice. Soft. Familiar. Tired, but solid.

He blinked and lifted his head. His cheek had molded itself into the weave of the rug, and his mouth was dry and sour. Standing above him was his wife, in a house robe, hair half up, spectacles slightly askew. In her hand, a chipped mug of tea steamed gently.

“You need to sleep,” she said. “And bathe. And stop trying to solve entropy by yelling at your notebooks.”

“I can’t,” he whispered, because anything louder might break something inside him.

She sat beside him, knees cracking faintly, and passed him the mug. It shook in his grip, but he drank. Lukewarm, strong, sweet. The flavor of mercy.

“I don’t understand it,” he murmured. “Any of it. I don’t know who he is. I don’t know why he stopped. I don’t know what comes next.”

“You never did,” she said. “None of us did. But you tried.”

“I failed.”

“You tried,” she repeated, firmer now. “And people lived because of it. Don’t diminish that.”

He didn’t answer, only sipped. The warmth slid down into him like a lantern slowly re-lit.

Then, with no fanfare, no gust of wind or eerie glimmer, a familiar voice said, “If this is a domestic moment, I’ll just vomit into the potted fern.”

Barnaby didn’t even lift his head.

The ghost janitor stood by the door.

“How—how did you get in here?” Barnaby’s wife asked.

“I’m not *in* here, love, I’m haunting the *idea* of here. That chair’s got enough workplace resentment to qualify as a secondary office. Don't ask questions you don’t want stupid answers to.”

Barnaby let out a weak wheeze that might once have been a laugh.

The janitor drifted closer, mop tucked under one arm like a soldier bearing arms. His translucent face wore a scowl of exaggerated distaste.

“You look like someone fed porridge to a tax ledger and gave it feelings.”

Barnaby closed his eyes.

“I’m tired,” he said.

“Of course you are,” the janitor muttered. “This whole mess started with dead people. Then more dead people. Then paperwork about dead people. You’ve been elbow-deep in ghosts and ghouls and bad grammar for months. That’d break anyone with more soul than a tea biscuit.”

He paused, cocking his head toward Barnaby’s wife.

“She’s good, though. You married well. You remember that when you’re done leaking from the eyes.”

“I’m not—”

“Barnaby,” said his wife, laying a hand on his chest, “you’re crying.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

Then, without being asked, the janitor made his way to the far end of the study, picked up a sheaf of files, and began straightening them with the sort of grumpy care that could only be called affectionate. He didn’t speak again, just cleaned—flicking dust from shelves, adjusting crooked pens, muttering about the state of the inkwells. And then, as quietly as he had come, he was gone, fading into the wall with a parting grumble of, “Still smells better than the office, though.”

The next three days passed in a slow spiral of recovery.

Barnaby slept. Deeply. He woke soaked in sweat and sobbed into his pillow. He ate toast and soft eggs and cried when the butter was just right. He bathed and let his wife scrub the grief from his skin with soap that smelled faintly of lavender and old books. He sat on the porch wrapped in a shawl, and his children brought him drawings of happier things—clouds and dragons and a stick figure family with smiles too big to be true but beautiful nonetheless.

The house was quiet.

The city was quiet.

Even the Bureau had sent a letter—not a summons, just a note. “Take the time you need.” Signed by Grimshaw himself. Sealed with wax and a fingerprint in ash. Meetings postponed. Investigations paused. No new deaths.

The silence, for once, felt like peace.

And on the third day, Barnaby stood in his study. Still pale. Still tired. But standing. Breathing. And when he looked out the window, past the edge of his papers, his ghosts, and his grief—he thought, just for a moment, that he saw something like the beginning of hope.

Barnaby Wetherby returned to the Bureau five days after his collapse, dressed impeccably but walking like a man who had been exorcised and reassembled. His waistcoat was pressed, his shoes polished to a ministerial gleam, but his eyes—those clever, observant eyes—held a flicker of something raw and strange. Not haunted, precisely. Something older. Wiser. Sore.

He stepped into the Bureau’s atrium just before dawn. The enchanted gaslights flickered as he passed beneath them, adjusting subtly to his presence. A whisper of wind coiled around him in greeting—the result of some long-forgotten ambient spell worked into the floor tiles, designed to calm the nerves of arriving functionaries. It worked, slightly.

His pocket mirror buzzed faintly, pulsing with lavender light. A missive blinked across the glass:
**Welcome Back. Desk 723: Tea Pre-Warmed. Files Reorganized Per Directive.**
It signed off with a familiar note:
**–JONATHAN.**
In the corner of the mirror, a caricature of Barnaby’s own head nodded reassuringly.

Barnaby exhaled, the ghost of a smile curling his lip. Jonathan, as ever, was a marvel. He tapped a reply in Morse-code flicks across the glass:
**Meeting. Large. Everyone. Soon. Tell me when and where.**
The mirror shimmered, indicating the message had been received—and then, with mechanical precision, dissolved into a to-do list as long as his forearm.

He navigated the winding halls to his department with quiet purpose. The walls hummed softly with stored enchantments—timing spells, weather wards, errant notification pings. He passed a scrying basin that burbled irritably to itself and a pneumatic scroll-tube delivery system that launched a canister directly into the head of a goblin courier from Public Works.

The goblin flipped it off and waddled away, muttering.

When Barnaby reached his office, the door opened with a sigh and a slight bow, reacting to the embedded sigil he’d had etched into his ring. Everything was precisely as he’d left it—except the stack of documents on his desk had been sorted, colour-coded, and annotated. His personal tea pot, one of those rare clockwork-brewed types with a little brass owl for a spout, was already hissing to life.

He barely had time to settle in before Jonathan appeared—appeared being the only word for it, since he clearly didn’t walk in so much as phase into the space. Jonathan was the sort of assistant whose competence transcended physics. He wore a navy-blue coat of bureaucratic rank with such crispness it may as well have been starched with starlight. His face was angular, eyes sharp, and the aura of reliable exasperation radiating from him could be measured in joules.

“You’ve returned,” Jonathan said.

“I have.”

“You look less dead.”

“I am.”

“I’ll update the resurrection records.” Jonathan clicked a note into his wrist-slate without sarcasm. “I’ve covered for you while you were out. Director Grimshaw required someone of your caliber to fill in for you, and we could find no one. I was the least lacking, and have done my best to fulfill your duties. Please refrain from any further unplanned absences, I have no desire to attempt this again.”

Barnaby chuckled softly, then pushed his notes toward the younger man. “We need a meeting.”

Jonathan paused mid-scribble. “How large?”

“Larger than the time the mermaid union threatened to go on hunger strike unless we reinstated saltwater fountains.”

Jonathan blinked. “...That’s substantial.”

“We’re coordinating every department that touched this case. No exceptions. I want Wales Yard, Food Safety, Kitchen Alchemy, the Postmortal Liaisons, magical forensics, statistical divination, the whole damn Department of Nutritional Anomalies—”

“—They’re technically still suspended after the Exploding Turnip Scandal.”

“I don’t care. If they filed even one document, they’re coming.”

Jonathan pursed his lips. “Very well. The largest available space?”

“Big enough to hold an inquest, a trial, and a séance simultaneously.”

Jonathan opened his portfolio with a series of finger snaps and muttered invocations. Maps and schedules appeared mid-air, hovering like stained glass. They shimmered and shuffled as he muttered to them. After a moment, he pointed at a particular theatre hall listed in looping script.

“The Orpheum Room,” he announced. “Located on the fifth spiral of the High Bureau, adjacent to the Department of Technomystic Calibration. Seats 478. Enchanted acoustics. Curtains of Truth detection embedded in the walls. Last used for the Grimoire Ethics Panel on sentient spellbooks.”

Barnaby gave a solemn nod. “Book it.”

Jonathan flicked his pen and the hall lit up in reservation. “five hours from now.”

Barnaby exhaled. “Perfect.”

“What shall I label the event?”

Barnaby’s brow furrowed. “Don’t call it a task force. Don’t call it a debrief. Call it… a Reckoning.”

Jonathan hesitated. “Capital R?”

“Capital R.”

Another flick of the pen. “Filed.”

Barnaby stood and turned to the wide window of his office, watching the rising sun smear golden light over the clouds below. The Bureau stood tall enough to eclipse entire neighborhoods. From here, you could watch the dirigibles gliding like lazy sharks over London’s patchwork rooftops. If you stared long enough, you might even see the fog try to slink away in embarrassment.

He turned back to Jonathan. “I want everyone who touched a page on this case in that room. Every analyst, every investigator, every tea-sodden diviner and mid-rank clerk who filed a coroner’s addendum.”

“I’ll issue compulsory attendance orders through the Sanguine Registry,” Jonathan replied. “If anyone tries to claim they didn’t get the memo, the memo will arrive via plague bell and a cloud of stinging insects.”

“Perfect,” Barnaby said. “And make sure we have representation from civilian alchemy and the Ministry of Supernatural Nutrition.”

“They’ll argue about jurisdiction.”

“Let them. I’ll arbitrate with a thrown chair if I must.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. “We have that on file?”

Barnaby gave a weary smile. “Used it during the Reanimated Poultry Crisis of ’79.”

Jonathan sighed fondly, then swept out of the room with the unearthly efficiency of a spectral tax assessor.

As soon as the door swung shut, a mop floated into the room. The spectral janitor glided in behind it, muttering darkly.

“Bloody hell, it smells like paperwork and soul-sweat in here,” the janitor grumbled. “You back from the brink, then?”

Barnaby didn’t look up. “I survived.”

“Barely. Heard you went all fainting-goat. Collapsed like a romance heroine. Pity I missed that part.”

“I’m calling a meeting.”

“Oh, bloody marvellous. That’ll fix everything. Meetings. Like feeding jam to ghosts.” The janitor peered around the office. “You’d think with all this fancy magic and mirrored nonsense, someone would’ve conjured up a solution by now.”

“I need to see the big picture. I need everyone’s notes, memories, reports, everything. We’ve missed something.”

The janitor snorted. “Probably buried under a requisition form and some Ministry clerk’s half-chewed quill.”

“Are you offering to help?”

“Hell no,” the janitor said, swiping a mop through a bit of lingering ectoplasm near the fireplace. “But I’ll keep the floors clean while you lose your mind again. Somebody’s gotta keep things tidy when the world falls apart.”

Barnaby returned to his notes. Charts. Coroner’s reports. Poison residue data. Statements from eyewitnesses. Magical forensic analyses. Cross-referenced death times and kitchen locations. The entire past two months distilled into a blizzard of handwriting and stamped seals.

Somewhere, in the margin of one page, a diagram of mushroom types blinked softly—the ink enchantment indicating it had been tampered with. He blinked. Another thing for the list.

At half past seven, a file clerk brought a tray of encoded message scrolls, all tied with wax-sealed ribbons. Barnaby nodded. By eight, the automated filing birds—tiny constructs made of parchment and steel—had begun dropping memos like oversized mosquitoes, each one chirping urgently before falling dead on his desk.

By half past eight, he had amassed a stack of data half the height of his chair.

Jonathan returned shortly thereafter, looking preternaturally composed.

“Invitations have been sent via quickpost and mirror-channel. Attendees confirmed so far include: Commander Lady Judith Flint. Chief Inspector Archie Murtaugh. Lead Forensic Alchemist Mx. Cecily Dray. The Bureau’s Culinary Compliance Division, including that one elf who keeps arguing about nutmeg. Haruspex consultants who’d read spilled guts for omens. Wales Yard inspectors, kitchen inspectors, civilian alchemists, junior clerks who collated death certificates.

Everyone.”

They would all be in one place. For the first time since the first victim had dropped face-first into a bowl of risotto, the entire investigative web would knot itself together in one room.

“Three hours,” Jonathan reminded him, already halfway to the door again. “I’ll have the lobby door wards lifted thirty minutes in advance, and the chairs pre-warmed.”

“Thank you, Jonathan.”

Barnaby turned back to his desk. The enchanted gaslight overhead flared slightly, sensing his elevated pulse. It softened the glow, adjusting itself to the color of calming lavender, and emitted a faint scent of rosehip and clove. Spells like these were commonplace, barely even noticed anymore—mundane comfort woven into government infrastructure.

But now, every little charm and ward felt like part of the larger body, the great humming system that had somehow failed to catch a killer.

He needed this to work.

He’d been re-reviewing each of the deaths for hours—cross-referencing the time of consumption, the precise food item, the server, the presence of other individuals, even the magical weather reports on file for those hours. (It turned out that rainfall made poisoning marginally less effective. The Ministry of Urban Weather Management had submitted three papers on the matter, none of them readable without translation glyphs.)

Somewhere in the middle of his sixth review of victim number 141’s medical autopsy—subject's liver still glowing faintly under starlight exposure—he realized he hadn’t blinked in a full minute. The ghost janitor hovered beside him again.

“Your face is doing that ‘I’ve read myself into an aneurysm’ thing,” the janitor observed, poking a bit of dried ink off the edge of the desk.

“I can’t afford to miss anything.”

“You already have. We all have. That’s the point of meetings.”

Barnaby frowned. “What do you mean?”

The ghost shrugged, a curious ripple in his translucent shoulders. “You’ve got notes from dead people, dreams from half-sane clairvoyants, statistical runes made out of pie charts, and one bloke who only talks in gastronomic haikus.”

“I’ve read all of it.”

“But not at the same time.” The ghost circled above him now, trailing the faintest smell of old soap. “The meeting ain’t just about the facts. It’s about what happens when all them brains get rattling together in one pot.”

Barnaby stared ahead. “So what? Stir the stew?”

“Something’ll rise to the top. Or explode. By ourselves we are good. When we work together we can be great. Sum, parts, you know the rest. A boss bosses people around. A leader leads a team. Which do you want to be? Either way, better than what you’ve got now.”

The janitor passed through the door without opening it, muttering, “You better eat before you start hallucinating gremlins again.”

Barnaby didn’t move for several minutes. Then he did. He stood up, stretched his spine until it popped, and summoned a tray with a bell-tug and minor summoning rune. A minute later, a small glowing trolley trundled in, hovering six inches off the ground. It carried a single covered dish, a steaming mug of something herbal, and a tiny napkin embroidered with his name.

He stared at it.

Then he smiled.

His wife had packed it. No one else in the Bureau ever remembered he hated peppermint. This was chamomile and lemon rind.

He opened the dish: slices of warm bread. Stew—real, thick stew, spiced with cumin and something faintly citrusy. A note was tucked underneath the bowl.

**Please eat this before you interrogate your own shoes. Love, Marian.**

The handwriting curled sweetly, firm and intelligent, just like her.

He ate slowly, savoring every bite like it had come from a world he’d almost lost. Perhaps he had. But now he was back, and the evidence was in root vegetables and handwritten notes.

Afterward, he returned to sorting documents. He organized them into stacks by discipline—necromantic analysis, forensic reports, magical toxicology, and culinary spellwork. Each pile bore its own rune of stability to prevent pages from shifting or flying off if a breeze—or a spectral presence—swept through.

Jonathan returned just after noon, his mirror flickering with attendee confirmations. The hall was ready. Tea service arranged. Even the scrying projection system had been double-checked so they could call in witnesses from afar.

Barnaby looked up. “How’s the attendance?”

“Overcapacity. They’ll be standing in the aisles.”

He sighed. “Better than empty seats.”

“I also arranged an on-site clerical transcription charm,” Jonathan added. “Every word said will be recorded in triplicate by an enchanted fountain pen. They’ll be copied to the archives, the case file, and your personal study.”

Barnaby’s eyes warmed. “You think of everything.”

“I try,” Jonathan replied, eyes flicking over another scroll. “We’ve even reinforced the lighting with lanterns of lucidity. Keeps the mind sharp. Popular in long debates about maritime insurance.”

Barnaby nodded. “And… the Director-General?”

“Lord Radcliffe has cleared his schedule. He’ll be there. Front row.”

That mattered more than Barnaby had expected. Reginald Radcliffe didn’t show up for just anything. For the man to sit in the front row of a meeting—not merely preside over it, but attend—meant something had shifted. Barnaby wondered what.

He spent the next hour finalizing his address. Not a speech. Just the opening. A welcome. A context. A push to dig deeper. The group would expect answers. He would give them resolve.

As the meeting hour neared, Barnaby took a moment to dress. His coat bore the symbol of his department: a casket and quill, entwined with laurels. He affixed his Bureau pin, a polished copper disc engraved with his rank, which glowed softly under the office enchantment—verifying his identity, intention, and state of mind. The enchantment paused, flickered, then glowed green.

Mental stability: confirmed. (Mostly.)

He breathed.

He reviewed the files one last time.

He tapped the mirror and called Jonathan. “Open the lobby doors.”

From the other end, Jonathan’s face appeared, expression unreadable but calm. “Done.”

And just like that, it had begun.

Even from his office, Barnaby could hear the thrum of people arriving in the Orpheum room antechamber. The clatter of boots, the rustle of robes and coats, the occasional flash of magical residue as charms were nullified at the entrance.

He watched it unfold from his mirror—a live feed, linked to the room’s observation glyphs. The area filled. Clerks from Legal Apparitions. Inspectors from Wales Yard in their salt-crusted overcoats. A woman from Alchemical Licensing was already eating something suspicious from a glowing lunchbox. One of the forensic chefs polished a ladle nervously. Haruspex consultants stood in a cluster, comparing entrail patterns.

Everyone.

Now all that remained was for Barnaby to welcome them into that room and speak.

But not quite yet.

There were still a few minutes to go.

He grasped the one-time teleport charm. One like it had been sent to every attendee. Unlike theirs, his was set to the stage, while they would arrive in the building lobbies designated teleport reception area.

He stood in the silence of his office for one last moment, hands clasped behind his back, gazing down at the sprawling fog-wrapped city far below. Everything they’d uncovered—every tragedy, every failure, every clue—was on the verge of becoming something whole.

Or falling apart entirely.

He would know soon enough.

And this time, he wouldn’t be alone.

He spoke the charms trigger, and the office stood empty.

The grand meeting room—formally titled Lecture Hall B: Matters Arcane and Postmortal—was the largest space Barnaby had ever booked. It was cavernous, with rows of tiered seating, a speaking dais at the base, and floating chandeliers enchanted to emit light as warm and steady as midsummer noon. The air smelled faintly of cedarwood polish and spectral chalk—likely from the phantasmal professor who gave lectures here on alternate Tuesdays.

Barnaby stepped in with a mixture of awe and deep-set anxiety. Beside him, Jonathan moved with quick, efficient grace, already conjuring forth checklists and glowing parchment memos from his sleeve-pockets.

“Well,” Jonathan said, tone neutral but eyes scanning for defects, “we’ve got ten minutes until the doors open, and the entire Bureau will be watching.”

Barnaby exhaled through his nose. “No pressure, then.”

“Just the fate of the investigation. Perhaps the Department. Possibly the Crown’s credibility in all matters postmortal.”

“You’re a comfort, Jonathan.”

“I do try.”

Barnaby turned to the task list and nodded. “Right. One last check. Let’s begin.”

They moved like two halves of a seasoned team—Jonathan always two steps ahead, floating clipboards of enchanted paper into position while Barnaby summoned documents, sorted handouts, and double-checked every table and seat.

First came the materials. An entire crate of magically duplicated reports hovered through the doors, guided by a snorting elemental that smelled of parchment and oak glue. Jonathan thanked the elemental with a small silver token—a practice both polite and regulation-bound—and directed it toward the distribution tables at the hall’s rear.

“These,” Jonathan explained, setting down a thick stack of binders, “are the final reports. We’ve had them simplified with enchantments—everything highlighted that’s deemed critical, with supplementary notes that appear if you tap the margins.”

Barnaby peered over one. Indeed, a light shimmer ran through the edge of the page when he touched it, and a neat footnote emerged: Suspected origin of Batch #4 poison: Market Street loading bay. Alchemical signature: Hemlock and something older.

“Brilliant,” he said. “We may just pull this off.”

Next came the handouts—single-page summaries, maps, timelines, and a handful of diagrams that depicted the spread of deaths across London, illuminated like constellations of grief. Each had been spell-sealed to prevent tampering and folded into discreet, wax-sealed packets.

“I’ve left space at the bottom for additional notes,” Jonathan said, producing a pen with a nib shaped like a raven’s beak. “These pens are enchanted, of course. Anything written with them duplicates onto the original record in the archive.”

“I really don’t know what I’d do without you,” Barnaby muttered.

“Most people don’t.”

They arranged everything in silence for a few minutes, the only sound the soft fluttering of paper, the low hum of the lightspells overhead, and the occasional chirp from the brass annunciator in the corner, which randomly called out updates like “Tea inventory verified!” or “Seating enchantments stabilized!”

Then came the refreshments.

Jonathan opened the side door with a twist of his ring—a simple-looking band etched with runes so faint they shimmered only under spelllight. The refreshment area had been hidden behind an illusionary wall, currently shimmering out of sight to all but Bureau-cleared staff.

Inside stood two long, cloth-draped tables. One for tea, biscuits, and cakes, the other for tea, coffee, and alchemically prepared digestive restoratives—just in case anyone ate something questionable. Barnaby stepped forward and lifted one of the lids on a biscuit tin. The sweet scent of ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg wafted out.

“Careful!” Jonathan chided. “They’re not for before the meeting. We can’t afford any stomachaches, spells gone awry, or biscuit-related distractions.”

Barnaby replaced the lid, then hesitated. “Jonathan, are we… certain the food’s safe? I mean, not to be a nervous wreck, but…”

Jonathan turned toward him, hands still holding a teacup and an enamel tin of lemon drops. “I personally sourced every item, had the Bureau’s alchemical kitchen prepare them under supervision, and performed two independent contamination checks—one with a spectromancer and one with a kitchen witch who’s never missed a curse in twenty years.”

“Ah,” Barnaby said, cheeks pinking. “Of course you did.”

Jonathan gave him a rare smile. “You think I’d let you poison half the Civil Service on my watch?”

“…It would be one way to end the investigation,” Barnaby muttered.

“Tempting, but no.”

They both chuckled. The sound was short-lived, but precious.

Next came the sound system. The podium at the base of the hall was equipped with a voice-amplifying orb—one of the newer models designed by the Department of Shouting—and a feedback-dampening charm woven into the rugs.

Barnaby tapped the orb. “Testing.”

The sound echoed once and then rebounded across the room in perfect clarity.

Jonathan nodded, scribbling on a floating checklist. “Acoustics are set. No interference, no echoes, no accidental summoning loops. That one time with the Swearing Bell? Never again.”

Barnaby smiled despite himself. “Good. Very good.”

Then came the moment. All the materials in place. The magic humming quietly in the air. The chairs straightened by telekinetic arms. The lights at full shimmer. The floor gleamed like old crystal. The illusion of calm and control as close to perfect as they could manage.

Jonathan turned to him, conjured a fresh teacup from a warming drawer, and handed it over.

“Here,” he said. “Before they arrive. You need something to study your nerves.”

Barnaby took the cup, careful not to tremble. The scent of Earl Grey steadied him more than the warmth did. He sipped, grateful.

“You’ve done everything,” Jonathan said. “You’ve tracked every lead. Seen the worst of it. And now… everyone who matters will be in one place. If this isn’t the moment we end this…”

“…then it’s not possible,” Barnaby finished. He swallowed. “I know.”

Jonathan gave a final nod and floated a soft wool blanket into a nearby chair. “Now breathe. You’ll do fine. I believe in you. This ends here, now.”

Barnaby didn’t speak right away. His mind was a flurry of timelines, chemical diagrams, shifting motives and sightings and slips of paper scrawled with desperation. The weight of the poisonings pressed like an invisible coat on his shoulders. So many dead. So many close calls. And yet…

He wanted—needed—to be the one who solved this. For his colleagues. For his city. For himself.

But also—for his father-in-law.

That was the twist of it. Barnaby didn’t want to admit it, but somewhere beneath all the data and theory and professional pride lay that persistent, boyish craving: approval. The kind that came on heavy cream stationery, with words like capable and head of house underlined.

He thought of his wife’s wry smile. Of her mother’s ever-arching eyebrow. Of the kids, confused by long hours and missed suppers. He thought of the Janitor, floating muttering through late-night corridors. Of spilled tea and spectral dust and food that made people die.

He wanted it to end. He wanted to be the one to end it.

Barnaby sipped his tea again. His stomach rumbled—not with pain, just nervous anticipation. He was prone to upset when anxious, but for now, he felt… steady. Centered, perhaps. He handed Jonathan his cup, and watch as Jonathan conscientiously wiped it, and ducked into the small attached kitchen to put it into the waiting dish bin. Everything in the room was as perfect and prepared as it could be.

Barnaby stood up, straightened his cravat, brushed imaginary dust from his cuffs, and walked slowly toward the front doors.

An unseen clock struck the hour.

He took a deep breath.

And opened the doors.

**Oh yes—oh yes—they were gathering, all of them, packed into one room like cattle in a pen, bleating and ignorant and ripe. Jack paced, no, stalked, up and down the length of this cluttered little room, hands twitching, face split in a grin far too wide for any sane man. His eyes sparkled with the glint of plans fulfilled and blood to come.**

**“They think they’re safe, they think they’re clever, sitting round their little tables with their ledgers and forms and their snooty bloody tea, but I see them, I see right through their paper masks!” he hissed, spittle flecking the air. “All those puffed-up inspectors and polished little necromancers and blinking know-it-alls—they’ll all be there! In one place! One sweet, succulent, flaming opportunity!”**

**His breath hitched into a giggle, then spiraled into a choked, gleeful laugh. “I waited! I waited like a good little ghost in the gears, all proper and planned, with my powders and parcels and polite, pretty deaths—but now?” He jabbed a trembling finger at nothing at all. “Now I can make a statement, eh? Now I’ll make ‘em understand! They’ll suffer. They’ll beg. They’ll feel it in their bones ‘til they rot!”**

**He spun once, arms wide, triumphant.**

**“And when it’s done—when they’re done—the people will scream in the dark and I’ll be there to watch. And take over.”**

**He licked his lips.**

**“Time for the last course.”**

The hum of enchanted lanterns overhead gave the chamber a warm, even glow, their amber light flickering gently with bottled will-o’-wisps kept content through a complicated system of charms, alchemical oils, and small bribes. Rows of attendees filled the small theater, arranged in a horseshoe around the modest podium on stage. Despite the grandeur of the affair, there was no fanfare, no trumpets nor illusions, only a sense of quiet dread softened by bureaucratic determination.

Barnaby Wetherby stepped up to the podium, gripping its edge with one hand as he adjusted the small lapel pin that activated the echocharm—an audible enhancement spell sewn into the wood that projected the speaker’s voice to every ear in the room. He glanced sideways at Jonathan, who nodded reassuringly and adjusted the slight distortion filter on the sound relay crystal, polishing it with a fine cloth.

“You’re quite certain this will work properly?” Barnaby asked under his breath.

Jonathan gave a dry smile. “It’s been tested three times today. You just checked it yourself moments ago. She’s sound as a stone bell.”

Barnaby cleared his throat, feeling a tightness there—not the nerves so much as the dry air, he told himself. A glass of water waited for him on a small table behind the podium, but he left it for now. His hands were cold. His stomach churned, though not too badly yet.

He looked out at the sea of faces—inspectors, officials, consultants, clerks, alchemists, and occult practitioners of every regulation-approved stripe. Every department that had touched the investigation was represented.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Barnaby began. The spell hummed as his voice reverberated cleanly to the back rows. “I want to thank you all for being here. I know many of you have already put in hours of work, days of work—some, even weeks and months—on this case. And I also know how deeply and personally the nature of this crime has affected all of us.”

He paused, letting the weight of the room settle. A faint shimmering from one of the protective wards glowed along the ceiling—a glyph to prevent hostile enchantments, approved by both the Department of Civic Magic and the Alchemical Oversight Board.

“We don’t know the name of the person who did this. Not yet,” he continued. “But we do know what he is. We know that no sane mind could devise such a plan, no stable soul could hold in all that cruelty and keep smiling at the post each morning. But we know that the killer is one of us—not us, individually, of course, but within our world. In the corridors of governance. Behind a desk. Among the rows of ration files or requisition slips.”

A low murmur rippled through the room. He paused again, then pressed forward.

“The killer is meticulous. Brilliant, even. And deeply, unflinchingly mad.”

He began to pace slightly, one hand resting on the edge of the podium. The charm shimmered as it adjusted his position for volume consistency. His stomach gave a soft lurch—almost like the sensation one gets before a bout of nerves makes itself known—but he pushed through it.

“That’s how he’s gotten this far. Because we don’t expect madness in the mundane. We look for chaos in the shadows, not in cubicles and call rooms and staff canteens. But madness cloaked in bureaucracy? That’s the most dangerous kind.”

He took a steadying breath. A ripple of discomfort fluttered in his chest—not pain, just an unwelcome unease. He glanced briefly toward the rear of the theater where Jonathan was calmly making notes.

“We have prepared a summarized dossier of all current evidence, all testimonial threads, all forensic analysis and magical trace data. You’ll find those in your folders, along with supplemental reading for after this meeting. This is not an end-of-the-road presentation. This is a beginning.”

He leaned forward slightly, steadying himself as the floor seemed to tilt just a hair beneath his feet. It didn’t, of course—it was a well-made stage, regularly inspected. His stomach made another quiet complaint, firmer this time. A slight sheen of sweat gathered at his collar.

“After this meeting, we will break into collaborative units, cross-departmental, to analyze the data in parallel. You will be assigned based on prior exposure to individual cases, specialized expertise, and—yes—even magical compatibility, based on your official registrations. We will leave no report unread, no charm unexamined, and no margin unsearched.”

A pause. Another breath. It felt like a hand was tightening slowly just beneath his ribs.

“And we will do this, together,” he said, each word slightly heavier than the last. “Because the killer is clever—but he is not perfect. You cannot maintain a mask like that indefinitely. Not in front of the eyes of everyone in this room. Not when this many people are looking.”

There was something off about the air. Not the lighting—it still glowed with bottled luminescence. Not the wards—they hummed with steady power. But something in the back of his throat, just at the edge of recognition. He reached for the glass of water and took a small sip, careful not to cough.

He forced a small smile. “You’re all here because you’ve seen a piece of it. And now we stitch it together.”

Barnaby’s hand slipped briefly from the podium, and he corrected it. His balance was still fine, but the warmth of his skin was rising, and the back of his neck felt prickly under the collar of his shirt.

“I know many of you are tired,” he continued, blinking hard. “I know the pace of this investigation has been relentless, and the workload staggering. But there’s no one else better suited to the task. Not a one.”

His voice cracked slightly. He coughed, and the charm magnified it by accident. A ripple of murmurs circled the room. He smiled and waved off the sound.

“Apologies. Bit of a frog in the throat.”

He took another drink, deeper this time. The water had a faint metallic taste—likely the spell-reactive crystal tumbler, nothing more.

Behind his eyes, a soft pounding had begun. Dull, not sharp. Persistent.

He straightened up again and looked out across the room, breathing through the sensation.

“We will not solve this tonight,” he said quietly, letting the words hang. “But we will begin the process that leads to the truth. And I believe—truly believe—that we are closer than we think.”

He gripped the edge of the podium again, knuckles paling slightly. His vision swam for half a second, then cleared.

He wasn’t going to faint. He wasn’t going to vomit. It would pass. He’d had nerves like this before. Meetings, public speaking, surprise inspections from the Director himself. He’d always been able to push through.

And this—this moment—was the most important speech of his life.

The sour heat in his stomach intensified.

Not now, he thought. Not now, not now, not now.

He continued speaking, voice growing faintly hoarse. “So we will begin. And we will not stop until this monster is caught.”

He wiped at his brow, and his sleeve came back slightly damp. He didn’t notice the faint trembling in his left hand. He did, however, notice the whisper of doubt curling in the very back of his mind. A name. A syllable.

He pushed it down.

He had more to say. And the meeting wasn’t over yet.

The nausea wasn’t just persistent now—it was multiplying. Coiling like an eel around his intestines, biting its way up toward his chest. Barnaby’s voice remained steady, or at least he hoped it did, though he was no longer entirely sure how it sounded. He was forcing the words through his lips like filing forms in triplicate—mechanical, necessary, urgent.

His vision blurred again. He blinked quickly. The audience wasn’t shifting, not truly, but the outlines of faces softened, as though seen through condensation on a pane of glass. He gripped the podium harder. It felt like it might tilt backward if he let go.

“…so if you turn to the next section of your briefing folios,” he was saying, “you’ll see a chronology of each poisoning, listed with corresponding… with corresponding variables of time, location, method…”

He had to pause. A new wave of pain pressed in beneath his ribs, sharper than the last. It forced a soft breath between his teeth.

Lady Honoria, seated near the front, tilted her head, watching him closely.

“…method of, ah, ingestion,” he continued, almost gasping the last word.

This was no longer nerves.

He knew his own stomach. He’d lived with its betrayals since his academy days—surprise inspections from the High Censorate had once sent him sprinting to a loo so urgently he’d knocked over a senior warlock’s smoking chair in the process.

But this… this wasn’t fear. This was something else.

“Director Grimshaw,” Lady Honoria leaned forward, whispering.

Barnaby pressed forward. “We believe these cases reveal an emergent pattern—subtle but significant—when viewed against standard departmental operational hours. The killer works when we don’t. Or—”

He nearly gagged. There was bile in his throat, acrid and thick. He swallowed it. A bead of sweat rolled from his temple down the side of his nose.

“—or more precisely, he works just outside the hours in which paperwork would usually catch him.”

Grimshaw rose from his chair. “Barnaby,” he said, low but clear, “Are you all right?”

Barnaby raised one hand, half in greeting, half in denial. “Just a… moment.”

“Do you need to sit?”

“I…” Barnaby’s knees buckled slightly. He caught himself, swaying. The sound system whined as his weight shifted the volume modulation charm. He stepped back from the podium.

Jonathan was already moving up the side steps, calm as ever, hands behind his back, expression unreadable. “Let me,” he said gently, stepping beside Barnaby, his voice close but pitched so the crowd could still hear. “Please, do sit.”

The audience murmured in a wave of concern as Barnaby allowed himself to be guided to the front row, where Grimshaw and Lady Honoria now stood with furrowed brows.

“I’m sorry,” Barnaby muttered as Jonathan helped him into the chair. His collar was too tight. His hands trembled. “I just need… I just…”

“You did splendidly,” Jonathan said, patting his shoulder. “Rest for a bit. I’ll take it from here.”

Jonathan turned smoothly, stepping to the podium. His long fingers adjusted the lapel charm, and his voice projected with an easy authority. “As Mr. Wetherby said, the compiled reports indicate a clear rhythm of activity—one that avoids standard detection protocols.”

Barnaby leaned back, eyes fluttering shut. The pain now radiated from his core outward. Waves of it. Hot, full-body, rising like fire through his veins. Each breath was labored.

He heard Jonathan’s voice, crisp and composed.

“We have organized all reports into indexed batches. Those with previous field contact may find their insights requested in breakout sessions following the general review…”

He’s so calm, Barnaby thought.

Reliable.

Trustworthy.

He looked toward Jonathan again, who spoke clearly, calmly and composed.

Yes, Barnaby thought. He’s ready. He always is.

Behind him, the refreshments waited on enchanted carts set to chill and warm their contents respectively. Rows of fresh scones, buttered crumpets, sugared tea-biscuits, and small sandwiches were neatly arranged beside a dozen polished teapots, each bearing a label: Darjeeling, Earl Grey, Jasmine, Alchemical Digestive Blend, and so forth.

Earlier, as he and Jonathan had laid it all out, Barnaby had paused, glancing over the spread.

“You’re absolutely sure this food is safe?” he’d asked quietly.

Jonathan had looked up from placing the saucers. “Of course. I arranged it all myself.”

It had seemed a silly question at the time, but now, that comment echoed oddly in his mind, looping back with the rhythmic, nervous churn in his stomach. He’d trusted Jonathan implicitly, hadn’t he? He had to. He did.

He’s always been so—

The pain sharpened.

They think I am having another breakdown. At the peak of my career, brought down by belly pain. Pain. Pain pain pain PAIN PAIN PAINPAINPAIN

A single thought tried to surface through the haze.

I should have checked the food again.

No. No, Jonathan had done that. Jonathan had said so himself.

He could still smell the tea—Darjeeling and bergamot, citrus and faint clove. He’d sipped it twice, right before the speech. Jonathan had handed it to him. He’d thanked him.

His stomach lurched violently, and his fingers clutched the arms of the chair.

He opened his eyes, just barely. The ceiling glyphs above him were spinning now—not actually, but in his vision. His skin felt clammy. Too hot and too cold all at once.

There was another sip of water in the cup at his side. He lifted it with great effort, but his hand shook so violently it spilled across his front. He stared at the droplets on his waistcoat. Each one looked like a spell circle, shivering with meaning.

And still Jonathan spoke.

“…batch seven addresses the peculiarity of repeated mycotoxin traces—none tied to any legitimate agricultural source, nor any properly licensed fungal cultivators…”

Barnaby exhaled sharply, then inhaled even more sharply as a cramp gripped his abdomen. He stifled a groan.

No one was looking anymore. All eyes were on Jonathan.

He’s doing brilliantly, Barnaby thought, somewhere between pride and dread.

I can trust him with this.

He’s got it under control.

He always—

Wait.

A strange sensation brushed against his thoughts, like wind against the back of his neck.

Jonathan.

John.

Why hadn’t he ever called him that? Why did it feel so formal? After all this time—months, years now, working so closely. Surely, surely at some point, he would’ve said, “Call me John.”

Eventually, everyone became familiar with people they worked with. Everyone else did, ta least, didn’t they?

Didn’t they?

Did anyone else call him that?

“Jonathan,” he whispered aloud.

His lips barely moved. His vision was fog now. But the name lingered on his tongue.

Jonathan. John. Maybe even Jonny

Barnaby’s heart stuttered. Not metaphorically—his chest skipped, then slammed back into rhythm like a dropped gear catching.

The nausea spiked. His arms shook violently. His breath came ragged.

No. No, it couldn’t—

He tried to rise, but his legs were jelly, his head a spinning top. He opened his mouth to speak, but the word wouldn’t come.

Jonathan’s voice continued, calm and clear.

“…and finally, we believe the timeline conclusively excludes external involvement—meaning this must be internal. A member of the Department. A functionary. Someone with deep access…”

Good old Jonathan was continuing, even as he was failing. Good old Jonathan. Good old John. Good old Johnny. Good old John. Good old... Jack.

The pressure in Barnaby’s head pulsed so hard his vision went white at the edges. His body slumped forward.

He was falling. He could feel it in his bones.

The ground never seemed so close and yet so impossibly far away.

And then it hit him.

A rush of clarity so brutal it was like being struck across the face with truth itself.

Oh gods. Jonathan is Jack.

And darkness took him.

The first thought that coalesced in Barnaby Wetherby’s mind was that the chair was very uncomfortable.

His second thought—though slower in arriving—was that the chair was also badly stained. Threadbare. The sort of chair that everything clung to: lint, sorrow, faint echoes of disappointment.

His third thought was a curious one: This chair is very familiar.

It took him twenty seconds to realize exactly how he knew it. And twenty more to accept what that meant.

He was sitting in the waiting room of the Department for the Management of Postmortal Affairs.

Not his office. Not the meeting hall. Not even a side corridor.

The waiting room.

Where the newly dead came to fill out Form A-17B (“Declaration of Postmortal Awareness”), be issued their Temporary Spectral License, and, for those unfortunate enough to have lingering complaints or metaphysical red tape, receive their case assignments.

The implication arrived in the back of his mind like a cold draught off the Thames.

He was dead.

There was no drama to it. No trumpet blast or choir or swirl of cosmic lights. Just a man in a chair that he recognized, in a room he had walked through a thousand times, now realizing that he was sitting in it from the wrong side.

And the worst part?

Jonathan had done this.

The one person who knew the case backwards and forwards. The one who scheduled every meeting, managed every memo, reviewed every report. The man who stood beside him, calm and ever-prepared, handing him tea and encouragement while he delivered his final speech to the Department.

Jack.

Jonathan was Jack.

Barnaby leapt to his feet—or rather, attempted to. He didn’t so much leap as lurch, his body rising too fast and then stuttering midair, as though the gravity that had once held him fast had now decided to work on commission.

He scrambled through the waiting room, past the ghostly velvet ropes and the neat rows of pamphlets floating serenely in a glass display. One pamphlet, “So You’re Dead: A Gentle Guide,” briefly flipped open as he passed.

He burst into the hallway, which shimmered with the gentle hum of preternatural lighting—lanterns filled with slow-burning shadefire, illuminating the walls in a steady, unnatural dusk. Everything felt the same, but he felt off. Disconnected. His movements had a slight lag to them, and more than once his foot brushed through a stair or his hand passed through a banister as if reality had missed a spot while painting him in.

He knew he needed to get to his office.

If I can send a message, he thought, maybe I can warn them.

The refreshments! The tea! The biscuits! They were always served after the meeting—he’d insisted! There was still time. There had to be.

But his thoughts scattered as he rounded the corridor and tried to lean against a filing cabinet for support.

His hand passed straight through it.

He stumbled, surprised, and caught himself on what he thought was the edge of a desk—but that too afforded no resistance. His body tilted forward and passed through the drawer, the paperclips, and two forgotten receipts from a spectral alchemist in Kent.

“See?” said a voice, drawling behind him. “I keep tellin’ ‘em. You lot never appreciate the upholstery ‘til you’re slippin’ through it.”

Barnaby turned—slightly too fast, which caused him to pirouette half an inch off the floor before righting himself—and saw the janitor.

The janitor. The same one. Always the same one. Slightly transparent. Always mopping something. Always watching.

Today was no different. He was holding a mop fashioned from the hair of a banshee and the femur of some large rodent. The bucket at his side whispered softly to itself.

“You,” Barnaby said, breathless—though his lungs no longer worked in the traditional sense. “You’re here.”

“I’m always here,” the janitor replied, idly wringing the mop. “Where else would I be? Afterlife ain’t got a retirement plan, mate.”

Barnaby blinked at him, drifting a few inches closer. “I’m dead.”

“Yup,” the janitor said, looking down at the puddle he’d been tending. “Been expectin’ you. Though, not quite this soon. You lot up top usually make it to at least the pension age before someone poisons your biscuits.”

Barnaby reeled slightly. “So you know?”

The janitor raised one spectral eyebrow. “Know what? That your loyal little assistant slipped you a dose of mortal closure? That the biscuits are death in a tin and the tea’s got enough toxin to drop a necromancer?”

He shrugged.

“Let’s just say I’m in janitorial services, not investigation. But I got eyes. Ghosts been walkin’ backwards all week. Files floatin’ in with no forms to match. Something was comin’, and now it’s here.”

Barnaby grasped at the wall beside him and once again passed through it. “I have to warn them.”

The janitor made a noncommittal grunt and gestured toward the hallway. “Well, you’d best figure it out quick. You’re in the in-between now. Might be stuck like this a while. And the more time you spend floatin’ in circles tryin’ to lean on furniture, the less time you’ve got before someone opens those biscuit tins.”

Barnaby was already moving—no, floating—down the corridor.

He passed the copy room where enchanted quills were scribbling out departmental memos without any living hands to guide them. He passed a bored-looking ghost with her arms crossed, waiting for a case manager to call her name. He passed the wall where his own portrait hung—at least it had once. Now, it was shadowed over. The ink had run down the glass, as though even the frame mourned his absence.

He turned a corner, phasing slightly through a doorframe In the process, and saw it: his office.

The familiar plaque was still affixed to the door. Barnaby Finn, Branch Manager .

He surged forward, determined.

And promptly fell through the doorknob.

“Buggeration,” he muttered.

With a deep breath—again, more out of habit than need—Barnaby steadied himself, leaned forward…

…and passed directly through the door.

Barnaby stumbled through the door, barely slowing his momentum as he careened into the center of his office. A few stray files fluttered open on his desk, caught in some phantom breeze, but none moved by his hand.

He reached the mirror on the wall—his enchanted communication mirror, linked directly to the conference hall at headquarters—and attempted to activate it.

“Connect to central,” he commanded.

Nothing.

He waved a hand over the runes, tried to press the glyphs that normally shimmered to life, but his fingers passed through the glass like mist.

He growled in frustration. “Come on, come on—connect!”

The mirror remained still and blank, reflecting only his own transparent self, wild-eyed and nearly vibrating with urgency.

He pressed both palms flat against it, trying to will it to light, to shimmer, to respond. But the truth was rapidly setting in.

He was dead. This mirror wasn’t meant for the dead.

Even the most advanced necro-communication protocols required a living anchor—someone on the other side to trigger the connection. Barnaby had neither a tether nor time.

Only an official communication could breach the “Do Not Disturb” charm that was placed over the meeting hall. He had no way to reach them in time. He needed another option.

His eyes flicked around the room in desperation. The bookshelf. The painting of the Alchemical Audit of ’79. His desk. His—

His gaze landed on the cylindrical pipe protruding from the far wall, just beneath the owl-inlayed clock.

The pneumatic tube.

It was enchanted, of course, like most of the department’s delivery systems—more than strong enough to ferry tightly rolled documentation and the occasional unlucky intern with mild compression spells. It led directly to the intake bay at headquarters.

Barnaby’s eyes widened.

It was mad.

It was improper.

It was brilliant.

He turned and flung the door open—though the physical act of turning the knob was mostly for show, since his hand passed through it anyway—and floated into the main office.

“Someone!” he shouted, twisting in the air to stay upright. “I need someone in here! Now!”

Several heads turned from desks, filing cabinets, and one overstuffed armchair where a junior clerk was struggling with a rebellious form that kept scratching out its own entries.

A tall, sandy-haired clerk named Milo blinked at him from behind a stack of correspondence.

He hesitated, gave a small, polite wave, and wandered toward the open door.

“Sir?” he said, eyes scanning Barnaby’s ethereal form up and down. “You really are committed to engaging with clients, aren’t you?”

“No time to explain,” Barnaby said, floating back into the office. “I need your help.”

“With… what exactly?”

“I need to be stuffed into the pneumatic tube.”

There was a long silence.

Milo looked from Barnaby to the tube. Back to Barnaby. Then back to the tube.

“…I’m sorry, did you say stuffed?”

“Yes,” Barnaby snapped. “Rolled up, squished, compressed—whatever it takes. The refreshments are poisoned. The tea. The biscuits. All of it. Jonathan—Jonathan—he’s Jack, and he’s going to kill them all!”

Milo blinked.

“Well, you’re definitely dead, but I don’t think it is proper to be folding my supervisor.”

“Milo.” Barnaby floated directly in front of him, eyes wide with urgency. “If you don’t help me get to headquarters right now, you won’t have to worry about folding me up because there won’t be an office left to be part of tomorrow.”

Milo opened his mouth, paused, and then nodded.

“Yes, Sir,” he said faintly.

Barnaby reached behind the coat rack, where the “Mild Compression for Delicate Deliveries” charm lay dusty and mostly ignored, grabbed it, then stretched his arms and took a deep breath.

“I’ve never folded a supervisor before.”

“You’ll do great.”

Milo carefully reached forward and grabbed Barnaby by the shoulders—or rather, the edges of his coat, which were slightly more tangible than the rest of him—and tried to pull him downward.

Barnaby gave no resistance, but his spectral body distorted like steam caught in a draft. Milo grimaced as he gently compressed the head and shoulders, coaxing Barnaby into a cylindrical shape.

“I apologize, Mr. Finn,” Milo muttered.

“For what?”

“This bit.”

With a grunt, Milo gave one solid, full-body squish, rolling and compacting Barnaby into the ghostly equivalent of a sausage.

Barnaby would’ve screamed, if he’d had lungs. Instead he just emitted a faint shrieking hum that rattled the stapler off the desk.

With reverent speed, Milo cradled the now-roll-shaped supervisor in both arms, shuffled to the pneumatic tube intake, and opened the hatch. A gentle gust of air with a faint scent of cloves and bureaucracy wafted out.

He slid Barnaby inside.

“Safe travels, sir.”

He slammed the hatch shut.

With a whump and a faint echo of spectral complaint, the tube whooshed to life and the delivery disappeared down the enchanted pipeline.

Milo stood still for a moment, listening to the distant rumble of Barnaby’s departure.

Then he turned to the rest of the office, cleared his throat, and said:

“I think the boss will be out of the office for the rest of the day.”

The moment the latch clicked shut on the pneumatic capsule, Barnaby Wetherby experienced an emotion that could only be described as spectral vertigo. It was rather like being turned inside out and then backwards, while also being shouted at by a tornado.

The pressure sealed around him, and then: *fwump*. The world narrowed to a whistling tunnel of brass and enchantment. Barnaby, now entirely composed of ectoplasmic bureaucratic indignation, hurtled through the Department’s sprawling, eldritch pneumatic tube system. The tubes weren’t just physical conduits—they bent through folds in space and bureaucratic topology, linking the various wings of the civil service through routes even Merlin might hesitate to map. Each curve was a compromise between speed, integrity, and some forgotten treaty with the Guild of Interdimensional Transit.

He shot past ghostly markers—an enchanted pigeon lost to the post in 1807, a misshelved tea trolley with wheels that never stopped spinning, and a floating diagram titled “DON’T PUT HUMANS IN HERE (AGAIN).” Barnaby passed that last one upside down, mentally noting its placement for later review. His form stretched and compressed with every magical acceleration pulse, and the ethereal shell of his jacket fluttered madly behind him like a flag of desperate paperwork.

“Never again,” he muttered aloud to the pressurized brass walls, though his voice trailed behind him like a wake.

As he hurtled forward, he tried to orient himself by the passing sigils etched in the tube walls. The Division of Necro-Taxation. The Hall of Dimensional Census. A brief stop at the Tea Reconciliation Bureau, where the capsule clunked into a glowing sigil, rotated three times, and then spat out a puff of bergamot-scented steam before continuing.

His spectral face was pressed flat against the inside of the glass dome. The final curve banked hard to the left—at a speed even a banshee might call discourteous—and then: impact.

The canister exploded open into the Central Office Mailroom in a cascade of ghostlight and stationary.

The pneumatic capsule ejected Barnaby like a disgruntled memo. He shot out, spun midair, and landed awkwardly atop a pile of folded requisition forms and enchanted paperweights, some of which groaned resentfully under the sudden arrival. A clerk in a deep green jacket, who had been casually humming and dusting a dragon-scale filing cabinet, turned slowly. He blinked.

There was a moment—a very long one—where neither Barnaby nor the clerk moved. Then the clerk slowly adjusted his glasses.

“I, uh,” Barnaby began, trying to rise. His left leg went through a stack of scrolls. “Am here on… urgent ghost business.”

The clerk, who turned out to be a Junior Interdepartmental Courier Third Class named Hugh, nodded solemnly and said, “Sir, did you just post yourself here?”

“There wasn’t time for anything else,” Barnaby said, trying to gather himself and smooth his spectral hair. “The refreshments are poisoned, Jonathan is Jack the—look, there’s a whole story, but I need to get to the auditorium now.”

Hugh tilted his head, nodded again, and said, “You really *are* trying to connect with our clients more directly, sir.”

Barnaby groaned.

Around them, the mailroom hummed with barely constrained order—clockwork owls updated ledgers, a spectral badger sorted interoffice missives by sniffing their enchantments, and the central mail matrix glowed a soft, bureaucratic blue. The lights flickered sympathetically as Barnaby stumbled forward.

He was, at least, in the right building. Now all he had to do was find his way through the half-material labyrinth of the Department headquarters—while intangible, nauseated, and still recovering from being rolled like a cursed sausage.

“I need a route,” he muttered, looking at the glowing runes carved into the floor for guidance.

Hugh stepped beside him and gestured with a wand tipped in parcel-tape crystal. “Follow the red glowing line,” he said helpfully. “Emergency paths for administrative apparitions—new standard since the Incident in Records.”

Barnaby nodded grimly. The line pulsed beneath his feet, winding out of the mailroom like a lifeline—or perhaps a deadline.

He took a deep breath, which did absolutely nothing because he no longer had lungs, and prepared himself to sprint ethereally through three floors of enchanted bureaucracy to stop a mass poisoning by a man he had once trusted with his tea preferences.

“Right then,” he said. “Time to haunt with purpose.”

Barnaby floated into the auditorium, his ghostly presence barely noticed by some of the more mundane officials. But when his eyes locked onto Jonathan, standing next to the director of civil affairs, holding a cup of tea, Barnaby’s heart — or whatever part of him still remained — lurched.

“Stop!” Barnaby’s voice rang out, sharp and urgent. The room stilled, every eye turning toward him. The director, mid-motion with the teacup, paused, confusion flickering in his eyes.

“It’s poisoned! All of it is poisoned!” Barnaby shouted, his words echoing through the room.

Without missing a beat, the Director of Civil Affairs reached out swiftly, knocking the teacup from Jonathan’s hands. It flew through the air, crashing onto the floor with a sharp, discordant sound.

“Everyone, stop!” Barnaby shouted again, his voice trembling with intensity. “Do not eat or drink anything! It’s poisoned!”

The room fell into stunned silence. People exchanged wary glances, unsure whether to believe him or dismiss the warning. But Barnaby wasn’t done. He pointed directly at Jonathan, his ghostly form flickering as he hovered in the center of the room. “Jonathan is Jack!” he cried out, every word heavy with dread. “He’s the one trying to poison you all!”

Gasps filled the air, and Jonathan’s face twisted with panic, his eyes wild. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife, and for a brief moment, it seemed like the entire world held its breath.

Inside Jonathan's mind, there was a fleeting moment of clarity. For the briefest of seconds, he saw the situation for what it truly was — a trap, a web tightening around him. His heart raced, and his fingers trembled as he looked around at the faces of the gathered officials. He had been caught. There was no denying it. The food, the poison, everything had been planned with such precision, but now it was all slipping away, and he felt the grip of panic clutch at his chest.

But then, just as quickly, the madness began to overtake him. His thoughts spiraled, fast and erratic, like a whirlwind of half-formed ideas. *They don't know. They don’t understand. It’s all going according to plan, it has to!*

His mind screamed with a manic energy, the same energy that had driven him to write his cryptic letters to the papers. *They think I’m Jack, but they don’t know how far I’ve come. They don’t know how perfect I am, how much I’ve shaped the world around them.* A manic smile tugged at his lips as his eyes darted from face to face, seeking an escape, a way to salvage his grand scheme.

As his thoughts scrambled, a final fragment of lucidity cut through the haze. *As long as I wear the mask of Jonathan, I can still hide. I can still make it out of this. They won’t stop me. Not yet. Not until the world feels my true triumph.*

And so, with that bitter hope still flickering inside him, Jonathan braced himself, even as his mind shattered around him.

Jonathan’s voice shook, but it still carried the weight of years spent carefully crafting his words, a skill honed through countless hours in the civil service. He took a deep breath, his eyes darting across the room as he straightened himself, his posture now the picture of composure, as if the storm raging inside his mind didn’t exist.

“Gentlemen, please,” he began, his tone steady and refined, a far cry from the manic energy that had taken hold of him moments before. “This is all a terrible misunderstanding, I assure you.” His gaze flickered to the director of civil affairs, whose disbelieving eyes met his. Jonathan’s voice softened, his words almost pleading, though he tried to maintain an air of authority. “I have served this department with nothing but the highest regard for its purpose, for all of you. Every action I’ve taken, every decision I’ve made, has been with the singular goal of improving this organization, of helping it function with efficiency and integrity. You’ve all seen it.” His hand swept outward, gesturing vaguely to the group. “My dedication, my years of loyal service. It cannot be dismissed so easily.”

He took a half-step forward, his eyes locking with the director’s. “I would never harm any of you. Do you truly believe I would jeopardize everything I’ve worked for? Everything I’ve built?” His voice rose slightly, as if emphasizing his earnestness. “No, no, this is—this is some sort of mistake, some unfortunate series of events that I can’t explain in full right now. But it is not my doing, not in the way you think. If you’ve eaten anything, if anyone has eaten or drunk from those cups, I would never have wanted it to happen. You must believe me.”

Jonathan’s mind raced, but he kept his expression serene, his words rolling out with a practiced smoothness. *This is all still salvageable. This can still be turned around. If I can just convince them, if I can make them see reason...* He met the director’s gaze again, his eyes now filled with a desperate intensity, though his voice remained steady. “I’ve spent my career ensuring the safety of this department, protecting it from threats, from disruptions. I’ve been a part of this system for as long as any of you. Do you truly think I would wish to harm it? I’ve never wavered in my commitment to this work. This… this is a tragedy, but it is not the result of any malevolent intent on my part.”

Jonathan took a half-step back, his posture now seemingly more fragile, as if the weight of his own words might be starting to sink in. His fingers tightened against the edge of the table. “I would never want any of you to suffer. My life has been dedicated to your service—each and every one of you. I don’t even need to mention the countless hours, the years spent in the trenches of this bureaucracy. I know all your names, all your faces. I have been a part of your lives, and you of mine. To think that I would risk everything, everything we’ve built here, on a whim—on a desperate act—is simply beyond comprehension.”

His voice softened again, quieter now, though still laced with that same controlled elegance. “I am devoted to this department, to all of you. Please, understand. This is not what it seems.”

Jonathan’s heart pounded in his chest as his mind continued to race. *It’s not too late. It’s not too late. If I can just make them understand...* But deep inside, he couldn’t shake the nagging thought: *What if they never believe me?*

Barnaby floated into the room, his spectral form gliding silently through the air. His eyes locked on Jonathan, who was still standing at the center of the room, trying to maintain the illusion of calm in front of the group. As Barnaby moved forward, the room seemed to part like the Red Sea, every eye turning to him in recognition. The air grew heavier with anticipation, the murmurs dying down as he approached.

Barnaby’s presence was undeniable, a quiet, chilling force. The sound of his ethereal feet brushing against the floor was barely perceptible, but to Jonathan, it felt as though the entire room had gone silent in preparation for what would come next. His ghostly figure hovered just a few paces in front of Jonathan, and the tension in the air seemed to thicken with every passing second.

Barnaby’s gaze was fixed on Jonathan, his tone calm but cutting through the air like a knife. “Are you sure this food is safe, Jonathan?” he asked, his voice ringing with quiet authority. The words were simple, but they carried weight, the kind of weight that made Jonathan’s pulse race. Every inch of Barnaby’s form seemed to demand an answer, his spectral eyes piercing through the carefully constructed persona of Jonathan’s calm exterior.

Jonathan hesitated for just a moment, his eyes darting nervously over Barnaby’s face. But he quickly regained his composure, straightening his back and puffing out his chest. His smile returned, strained but confident, and he spoke with a calm that was becoming increasingly forced. “Yes,” he said, voice ringing with the certainty he had convinced himself of, even if the cracks were starting to show. “I am positive. I’ve made all the arrangements myself. I had everything checked and double-checked. There is no way that I would do anything to this food or drink to harm anyone. You have my word.”

Barnaby remained silent for a moment, staring at him with a look that seemed to drill through his every word. The room was still, expectant, as if waiting for the next move. Barnaby’s gaze never left Jonathan’s face, his eyes unblinking, cold as ice. The tension thickened. Every heartbeat felt like an eternity.

Then, without warning, Barnaby moved closer. The ghostly figure closed the distance, his form hanging in the air like a dark cloud over Jonathan’s head. The very air around them seemed to chill as Barnaby’s voice lowered, but his words rang out with quiet authority, echoing in the farthest corners of the auditorium.

“Well, in that case,” Barnaby said, his voice stern but measured, “why don’t you have the first cup?”

The words landed like a slap in the face, a sharp, unyielding challenge. Barnaby’s tone was laced with something far more biting than mere accusation. It was a dare, a test, and as he spoke, every eye in the room was drawn to the two of them, sensing the power shift. The room seemed to hold its collective breath, waiting for Jonathan’s response.

Jonathan’s confident mask faltered. The smile he’d carefully cultivated wavered, replaced by something far less certain—an edge of panic creeping in around his eyes. He stood frozen for a moment, the weight of Barnaby’s words pressing down on him. For the first time, Jonathan’s carefully constructed veneer seemed to crack, and a sliver of fear, barely perceptible but undeniable, flickered in his eyes.

The room waited.

Barnaby’s presence hovered over him, silent, but pressing. His unblinking gaze never left Jonathan, daring him to make the next move. It was as if Barnaby had placed him in a trap with no way out—no clever words, no excuses. Just the undeniable truth. The poison was in the room, and Jonathan knew it. But now, he had to decide whether to face the consequences of his actions... or be exposed for the lie he had been living.

The air between them seemed to freeze.

Jonathan remained composed, even as the tension in the room reached a palpable crescendo. Barnaby’s words hung heavy in the air, but Jonathan’s posture never wavered. He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and with the coolness only someone like him could muster, he turned toward the table where the teacups were carefully arranged.

His fingers twitched slightly as he reached out, but he quickly regained his poise. With meticulous care, he selected a cup, porcelain, delicate, and unassuming. He turned it in his fingers as though it were the most precious thing in the room, and in that moment, all eyes were on him.

First, Jonathan reached for the sugar bowl. It was a gleaming crystal vessel, the sugar inside sparkling under the light. He carefully lifted the lid, revealing the smooth granules that glistened like diamonds. With an almost reverential touch, he scooped two perfect lumps of sugar from the bowl, watching them fall with a soft, delicate clink into the teacup. There was no rush, no hurry. Every movement was deliberate, precise, like a well-practiced ritual.

Next, Jonathan selected the milk jug, its pale liquid swirling lazily inside. He poured a small, measured amount into the cup, the milk mixing slowly with the sugar. He took care to add just enough—enough to create a soft creaminess, but not too much to overpower the tea’s natural flavor. The act was methodical, as though each drop mattered more than the last.

With the milk added, Jonathan reached for the teapot. The handle fit perfectly in his hand, the spout curving elegantly. He tilted the teapot gently, pouring the steaming tea into the cup with precision. He poured slowly, watching as the amber liquid swirled and mixed with the milk and sugar, forming a warm, inviting blend. It was a perfect balance of colors—a soothing contrast of deep brown and soft cream. Jonathan, ever the perfectionist, allowed the liquid to settle for a moment, his eyes observing its progress as though it were the final stroke of an important painting.

Once the tea was poured, he picked up the spoon—silver and polished, gleaming softly in the light—and dipped it into the cup. He stirred slowly, precisely, in small, controlled circles. The spoon clicked softly against the sides of the cup as he moved it in slow, measured motions. Tap-tap-tap. Three precise taps on the rim of the cup, the metal making the tiniest of sounds that barely registered to anyone else but him. He set the spoon delicately onto the saucer, its polished surface gleaming in the soft light. Every motion was perfection itself.

Now, Jonathan lifted the cup with one hand, the porcelain cool against his fingers, yet to be warmed by the liquid within, the tea gently swaying. His gaze remained steady, unwavering as he slowly began to raise it to his lips, his calm expression unbroken by the chaos around him. He knew what this moment was, the culmination of his efforts. Every detail was accounted for—the sugar, the milk, the stirring, the precise taps, the careful lifting of the cup. It was an art. It was his art.

But just as the cup neared his lips, the sound of heavy footsteps interrupted his concentration. The silence in the room seemed to stretch and bend as everyone turned to see the chief inspector of Wales Yard stepping forward. His expression was grim, his eyes focused intently on Jonathan.

In one swift motion, the chief inspector reached out, his hand closing around the teacup with practiced ease. Jonathan barely had time to react as the inspector knocked the cup out of his hand, sending it spinning through the air in a graceful arc before it shattered on the floor. The liquid splashed across the carpet, a small burst of steam rising from the broken cup as it came to rest.

“If he really is Jack,” the chief inspector growled, his voice low but filled with authority, “I’m not letting him get away that easily.”

Jonathan’s mouth tightened, but he said nothing, the mask of calm slipping only slightly. The inspector wasn’t done. His voice rose now, ringing through the room as everyone shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“I’ll have this tested immediately,” the chief inspector continued, his tone biting. “And until that’s done, no one is leaving this auditorium.”

He turned swiftly to his officers, who had been quietly watching the scene unfold. “Bar the doors,” the chief commanded, his eyes never leaving Jonathan. “Separate everyone from the food and drink. No one is to touch anything until we know what’s been done.”

A few of the officers moved quickly, their footsteps echoing in the now-still room as they stationed themselves near the doors, blocking any exits. Others made their way toward the tables where the food had been laid out, carefully moving the plates and cups out of reach. There was no panic, but the tension was thick in the air, the sense that something vital was about to break wide open.

The chief inspector, still holding his ground, turned to address the room again. “Everyone, take your seats,” he ordered sharply. “This is not over. I will have an alchemical forensics team sent for immediately to test these cups, this food, and any other relevant materials. No one is leaving until we’ve gotten to the bottom of this.”

As the officers continued to move into position, Jonathan stood frozen, his face a study in composed denial. He said nothing, his gaze flicking toward the now-empty cup that had once been so carefully prepared. His hands, normally steady, curled into fists at his sides.

The room was now silent, save for the shuffle of feet and the faint sound of movement. No one dared to speak. All eyes were on Jonathan, who had once been their trusted colleague, their devoted servant of bureaucracy.

The inspector’s sharp gaze didn’t leave him. “Until we know the truth,” he said quietly, “no one leaves.”

The room, though thick with tension, settled into an eerie quietness. The Victorian decor, with its gilt-framed portraits and heavy drapery, seemed almost mocking in its stillness, as if the entire gathering was caught in some delicate, uncomfortable dance of propriety and anxiety. The members of the room—each a representative of the highest echelons of London society and government—moved with a kind of controlled grace, their faces masks of polite composure despite the storm that brewed beneath.

The gentlemen, accustomed to sitting in such spaces with quiet dignity, adjusted their collars and sleeves with the faintest of movements, not a word passing between them. Their expressions were unreadable, brows furrowed just so, giving nothing away as they slowly lowered themselves into the heavy, cushioned chairs. The ladies, their gowns rustling with the slightest noise, followed suit, gliding into their seats with a precision that made it clear they, too, were equally at ease in this unexpected crisis. Their lips barely moved as they exchanged the smallest of murmurs, their eyes wide but never straying too far from the unfolding scene.

Every so often, a soft whisper broke the silence, but it was all within the boundaries of the expected decorum of high society—no raised voices, no interruptions, only the polite tremor of suspicion and uncertainty.

"Do you think this could be true?" one of the younger gentlemen, barely more than a boy, asked in a voice barely above a murmur.

"I never imagined such a thing," came the response, a lady's voice, soft yet incredulous. "He always seemed so… reliable."

Another gentleman, his glasses perched delicately at the end of his nose, nodded gravely but said nothing, his fingers tapping an almost imperceptible rhythm on the arm of his chair. No one dared to speak loudly enough to break the grim silence that enveloped the room.

Minutes seemed to stretch on for hours. And then, as if summoned by some unseen force, the door opened with a quiet creak. A group of alchemical forensic experts, arrayed in their crisp uniforms and equipped with various strange devices, entered swiftly. Their leader—a tall, gaunt man with sharp features—surveyed the room before nodding to the chief inspector.

“Sir, we are at your disposal,” he said, his voice low and controlled, as though accustomed to working under pressure.

“Good,” the chief inspector replied, his gaze locked on Jonathan. “You know what to do.” He turned toward the table, gesturing toward the spread of food and drink with a flick of his hand. “Start with the tea, then the biscuits, and proceed from there. Everything—cups, plates, utensils. We need every detail examined. And don’t overlook the sugar or milk. I want you to test it all.”

The team, accustomed to such precise orders, immediately split into smaller groups, their movements quick and practiced. The air was heavy with the subtle click of alchemical instruments being assembled, the faint smell of certain powders and elixirs mixing with the scent of old wood and fine china.

One of the forensics specialists began testing the tea cups, taking small samples from each cup, dropping a small vial of glowing liquid into the brew. The substance in the vial bubbled gently as it made contact, glowing a faint yellow as it spread through the tea. The expert made a quick note in a ledger, their face betraying no emotion as they moved to the next cup.

Another forensic expert, using a thin silver rod, began sifting through the biscuits, carefully testing each one. The rod glowed faintly as it touched the crumbs, the magic imbued in it reacting to any foreign substances hidden inside. He worked with a steady hand, moving from one plate to the next.

As the team continued their work, the entire room held its collective breath. The silence was deafening, broken only by the faint sounds of metal instruments tapping against glass or china, the soft scrape of the rod across the biscuits. Then, with almost imperceptible precision, one of the alchemists dropped a sample from the tea into a shallow dish. A faint glow of green spread rapidly across the liquid’s surface, a telltale sign of poison.

The room went completely still. Every eye in the auditorium turned toward the team, watching as the expert looked up, his face suddenly pale.

"It's positive," he said in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "Poison."

Jonathan, who had been watching the proceedings with an eerie calm, suddenly twitched. His hands, once steady, began to tremble ever so slightly. His breath caught in his throat, and his face tightened, his lips barely moving as he tried to maintain his composure. Then, the tremors began. His fingers twitched, his shoulders jerked, and his body shuddered as though something inside him was fighting to escape.

The manic energy, which had been so carefully concealed beneath the mask of Jonathan, began to slip through. His eyes, wide with panic, flickered toward the team, then back to the chief inspector. But it was too late. The walls had closed in around him. He had underestimated the speed with which his plot would unravel.

A faint whisper escaped his lips, barely audible, but laced with a frantic edge. "No… no… this isn't how it was supposed to happen."

But no one was listening to him now. All eyes were on the forensic team, as their work continued. And Jonathan, still twitching in his seat, could feel the weight of his own unraveling mind.

Jonathan’s body began to twitch again, his face twisted with the strain of trying to hold onto the last remnants of his fractured mind. His breath came in ragged gasps as he stared around the room, almost as if he could see his thoughts unraveling in the faces of those around him.

“If I can’t take them all down, if I can’t remove the heart of it—there’s no way they’ll understand,” he rasped, voice quivering with the intensity of his delusions. “There’s no way they can see it! How could they? How could the people— *they*—ever truly know, know what they have until it’s gone? Until they realize that every moment of their life, every breath they take, is held up by these hands, these silent, unseen hands. The bureaucrats, the civil servants… *we* are the ones who keep them alive, keep them safe, keep them *from* chaos, from the terrifying unknown. But they don’t even know we exist! They never see us. They take us for granted.”

His eyes widened, and his voice took on a frantic, urgent pitch as he stumbled forward slightly, trembling. “That’s the truth, isn’t it? That’s the truth that nobody knows! They don’t understand how *vital* we are—how vital *I* am. And if they never know, if they never understand it—how can they go on without it? How can they possibly keep going? Without the pulse of the system, the beating heart of bureaucracy—without that... they’re nothing! Nothing! They’ll never even notice when it’s gone, when we’re gone. And they’ll only realize too late that the system *cared* for them, like a parent, a silent guardian, watching over them, day after day. But they’ll never *see* it, never know it, unless I—unless *we* are gone, and then they'll see it, then they'll finally understand!”

He gestured toward the room in frantic sweeps, his voice rising with each erratic word, his eyes flicking from face to face, seeking any kind of response, any trace of understanding. “It’s *my* job! My duty! To show them. To make them realize what they’ve been given! But they’ll never see the truth—*the truth*—until it’s too late. And now, now that I can’t take the head off the body of the beast, cut out its beating heart, there’s no hope for them. They’ll never understand how much they *needed* us, how much they relied on us. Until now… *until now*.”

His voice cracked, nearly breaking, but he pressed on, losing all sense of coherent thought as his eyes gleamed with frantic energy. “You think it’s about me? It’s not! It’s about them! It’s about *them* understanding! Don’t you see? Don’t you see? Without us—without the beating heart of bureaucracy—there’s no world to live in, no purpose, no meaning. And they’ll never know… They’ll never know!”

The rambling spiraled, the words growing more disjointed, now a mindless torrent that drowned out everything else. His hands fluttered, clutching at nothing, shaking with madness. “They’ll never—never know how much we’ve done for them. How much we’ve *given*. How could they? How could they understand when they never knew—never knew, never saw—until now!”

The room fell silent, except for the frantic, high-pitched ramblings of Jonathan, no longer the man they knew, but something else, something completely lost in his delusion, a madman, a beast in a three piece suit.

Finally, the Chief Inspector of Wales Yard stepped forward, his face hardening with resolve. “That’s enough, son,” he said firmly, his voice cutting through the madness like a blade. “We’ve heard enough from you.”

Jonathan’s ramblings faltered for just a moment before his eyes flickered in confusion, but he continued on, mindlessly repeating his words, too far gone to care.

“Let’s get him out of here,” the Chief Inspector ordered, his tone final, as the officers moved forward. They quietly, but firmly, began leading Jonathan out of the room, his voice trailing behind them in a constant, erratic stream of barely coherent sentences.

As the door closed behind them, the room fell into an eerie silence, the weight of what had just transpired hanging in the air like a thick fog.

Barnaby straightened a stack of neatly annotated documents, each one copied in triplicate and affixed with the wax seal of his newly ghost-approved Departmental Signature Authority. “Now,” he said, his voice settling into a precise rhythm, “here is where the plot moves from horrifying into the utterly unhinged.”

Lady Honoria, seated upright with the regal bearing of someone who’d once attended a séance with the Queen, lifted an eyebrow. “More unhinged than poisoning half of Westminster?”

Barnaby gave a single, solemn nod. “Much more. Poisoning, you see, was only the opening act. Jonathan did not merely want disruption. He sought *decapitation*—not literal, of course, but bureaucratic. He wanted to eliminate the entire senior leadership of the civil service in one fell swoop.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Constable Norris. “You’re saying the meeting yesterday was the goal?”

Barnaby turned toward him, hands clasped at his waist. “Precisely. The poisonings were a test and a prod—meant to create sufficient chaos to necessitate a massive interdepartmental meeting of high-level personnel. And when that happened—when the oratorium filled with directors, commissioners, advisors, even *magistrates*—Jonathan planned to strike. One dose. One moment. One entire echelon of leadership *gone*.”

A shudder ran through the room, settling like frost around the edges of the table. Even Lord Aldous Grimshaw, so often composed and spectral in his stillness, turned his head with the slow movement of one absorbing betrayal.

Barnaby paced slowly now, voice building momentum like a rolling bureaucratic tide. “He would survive, of course. That was the plan. Jonathan made sure he’d be the only high-ranking official not directly consuming anything that day. He passed out tea—do you recall? With his own hands. And yet he drank none. It was a symbolic gesture cloaked as hospitality. Had the poison worked on me, as intended, we would not be here today. It should have taken hours, but he did not know I have, or rather had, an allergy to some part of his accursed potion.”

Lady Honoria crossed her arms. “That explains the self-congratulatory speech. He didn’t want credit just for uncovering the problem. He wanted to *rebuild* everything. To step forward from the ashes like some paper-pushing phoenix.”

Barnaby smiled, but there was no joy in it. “Yes. Jonathan envisioned himself as the savior of a shattered system. Once everyone else was gone, he intended to ‘restructure’ the civil service—his own word, used frequently in his personal journals, which were uncovered along with the alchemical lab. He believed the people of Albion would realize, amid the resulting collapse, just how much the civil service had done for them. That *we* had done for them. And in our absence, public sentiment would swing from indifference to desperate nostalgia.”

Carrington muttered, “He was going to martyr the whole system to make the country miss it?”

“Exactly,” Barnaby said. “He wanted the public to suffer—not out of cruelty, but out of instruction. He thought that through widespread administrative paralysis, people would finally understand the quiet, constant care given by invisible hands: paperwork filed, permits approved, resources distributed, cemeteries catalogued, postmortem hauntings logged and responded to in triplicate. He wanted the civil service’s absence to be felt like the disappearance of a gentle parent. And when the people cried out, he’d arrive—not in triumph, but in solemn duty—to rebuild what he alone had the vision to remake.”

There was a long silence.

Then Grimshaw spoke, his voice low and as dry as dust in a cellar. “Did he honestly believe anyone would accept such a system? That anyone would follow a man who had orchestrated such suffering?”

Barnaby tilted his head. “I believe he did. You see, Jonathan didn’t want fame. He didn’t want a statue. He didn’t care if the public ever knew his name. He just wanted *acknowledgement*—not by the newspapers or the common man, but by *us*. His peers. The directors. The policymakers. The administrators. He wanted to be recognized in his own circles as a perfect civil servant. The man who saved the system from colapse. He wanted to be whispered about in the same reverent tones we reserve for legendary ministers and long-dead auditors. He thought he would still be anonymous, a few more deaths ours, and no one would be the wiser.”

Inspector Norris flipped open his notebook. “And if he succeeded?”

“We’d all be dead,” Barnaby said bluntly. “Well, the rest of you. And Jonathan would have inherited a vacuum of authority. He had already begun drafting reorganization proposals. New departments. Revised mission statements. Abolishment of redundant agencies, and the consolidation of certain minor departments under a ‘High Council of Administrative Efficiency’—which, of course, he would chair.”

Carrington scoffed. “He really planned to seize control?”

“Yes,” Barnaby said. “Not with military might. Not through political campaigning. But through a filing cabinet coup. He believed the world would be so desperate for order, so broken by the loss of civil structure, that *anyone* who stepped forward with a plan would be accepted. And he—he had all the plans ready.”

Lady Honoria glanced toward the Wales Yard constables. “And your investigation confirmed this?”

Inspector Norris nodded. “We searched his residence thoroughly. Found the alchemical lab—undetectable poisons, trial formulas, some antidotes. More than that, we found blueprints. Charts. Flow maps. Reassignment schedules for thousands of fictional employees. He’d constructed a fantasy bureaucracy, complete with projected output metrics and morale evaluations. There were speeches too—pages of them—never delivered, but carefully composed. Rhetoric about rebirth, duty, efficiency.”

“And his journals,” Carrington added grimly, “read like manifestos. Not rants. Cold, deliberate, clinical planning. No remorse. Only logistics.”

Lady Honoria’s face was tight with barely controlled revulsion. “And this man served as the personal aide to the Director-General?”

“Yes,” Barnaby said. “Because he was very, very good at his job.”

Grimshaw’s voice, low and bitter, cut across the table. “We trusted him.”

Barnaby didn’t respond. There was nothing to say.

Honoria broke the silence. “We have witnesses. We have physical evidence. We have motive. What is the current plan for prosecution?”

Inspector Norris looked vaguely uncomfortable. “That’s… one of our stranger problems, actually. Nearly every official who would normally be assigned to a case of this scale was *in the room* yesterday. Including magistrates. Including government advocates. Others are still recovering from the shock. They all saw him break down. All of them are biased.”

“So we have no one impartial enough to handle the case?” Grimshaw asked, incredulous.

“We’re scouring the provinces,” Carrington said. “Looking for a barrister or magistrate who wasn’t connected, who doesn’t owe their appointment to someone Jonathan tried to poison.”

Lady Honoria gave a faint sigh. “And once we find one?”

“He’ll be tried. Officially and publicly,” Barnaby said. “And in the meantime, there are plans in place for evaluation by physicians and alchemists. They want to understand him—what went wrong, what let him rise through the system despite his instability. He wasn’t mad in the usual sense. He was perfectly lucid. Just… warped. Obsessed with the system, and his place within it.”

“And it wasn’t his first obsession,” Norris added. “We uncovered sealed records from several years ago. Jonathan was once suspected of stalking women in Whitechapel. Ladies of the evening. There was one confirmed attack—he tried to corner a woman in an alley. She, thankfully, was more than capable and left him battered enough to crawl away.”

Lady Honoria blinked. “Why wasn’t that investigated more thoroughly?”

Carrington shrugged. “It was sealed. Likely a magistrate—one who saw promise in Jonathan and wanted to spare him a scandal. But it left a mark. After that, his writings change. There’s more about control. About helplessness. About shame.”

“So,” Grimshaw said slowly, “this wasn’t just political. It was personal.”

Barnaby nodded. “It always was.”

The front page of *The London Sentinel* bore a headline that crackled like thunder across the city: **“Jack the Dripper Caught! Civil Service Poisoner Foiled by Heroic Ghost.”** The illustrated engraving beneath showed a gaunt, wide-eyed man being hauled away, mouth frozen in a mad shout, with a spectral figure—stylized and serene—floating in the background, one translucent finger raised in warning.

The newspapers had a field day. *The Times*, *The Evening Standard*, even *The Daily Quizzical*, all carried their own breathless accounts. The more reputable broadsheets focused on the bureaucratic ramifications, praising the efficiency of Wales Yard and the integrity of the civil service, while the tabloids dove into wild theories: “Ghost Detective Saves Empire,” “Apparition Unmasks Assassin,” and the rather presumptuous “Spooky Savior to Stand for Parliament?”

Inside the Ministry’s secure meeting chamber, a far quieter—though no less momentous—discussion was underway. In the grand chamber of the Ministry of Administrative Affairs, the air was thick with the scent of aged parchment and the faint hum of enchanted chandeliers. The room, adorned with towering bookshelves and intricate tapestries depicting the history of the civil service, was filled with the most esteemed figures in the bureaucratic realm. They had convened to discuss a matter of utmost importance: the restructuring of the civil service to prevent future crises like the one recently averted.

At the head of the polished mahogany table sat Sir Reginald Ponsby, Permanent Secretary of the Treasury. His silver hair was meticulously combed, and his piercing blue eyes scanned the room with authority. To his right was Lady Marian Swift, Chief Commissioner of the Department of Public Works, her emerald brooch glinting under the chandelier's light. Beside her, Mr. Tobias Wren, Director of the Bureau of Magical Affairs, adjusted his spectacles, the lenses reflecting the ambient glow.

Further down the table, Ms. Beatrice Halloway, Head of the Department of Health and Well-being, sat with a calm demeanor, her hands resting gently on a stack of reports. Next to her, Colonel Nathaniel Hawke, Chief of the Department of Defense and Security, exuded a stoic presence, his uniform adorned with medals of honor. At the far end, Professor Percival Grimsby, Director of the Office of Educational Standards, stroked his beard thoughtfully, his eyes betraying a mind deep in contemplation.

Barnaby Finn, the spectral consultant whose recent heroics had saved the civil service from catastrophe, hovered near his assigned seat. His translucent form flickered slightly, a testament to his ethereal nature.

Sir Reginald cleared his throat, drawing the room's attention. "Ladies and gentlemen, the recent events have exposed significant vulnerabilities within our bureaucratic structure. It is evident that our current system, while venerable, requires reform to prevent such incidents in the future."

Lady Marian nodded in agreement. "Indeed. The centralization of power has made us susceptible. We must consider establishing a new department, one with oversight authority over all branches of the civil service."

Mr. Tobias adjusted his spectacles. "A department solely responsible for setting policies, procedures, manuals, and guidelines. No direct involvement in daily operations, but ensuring that every department adheres to standardized practices."

Ms. Beatrice interjected softly, "Such a body could ensure consistency and accountability across all sectors, promoting efficiency and reducing the risk of misconduct."

Colonel Hawke's deep voice resonated through the chamber. "From a security standpoint, an oversight body would act as a deterrent to internal threats, ensuring that no individual can exploit the system's weaknesses."

Professor Grimsby leaned forward, his eyes twinkling with curiosity. "An intriguing proposition. But who would be capable of leading such a department? The individual must possess an intimate understanding of our bureaucratic intricacies and command the respect of all present."

A contemplative silence enveloped the room. Barnaby, observing the discussion, posed the question that lingered in everyone's mind. "Who could possibly run such a department?"

As he scanned the assembly, he became acutely aware that every gaze was fixed intently upon him. The realization dawned slowly, his translucent brow furrowing in surprise. "Oh," he murmured, "you mean me?"

Sir Reginald offered a rare smile. "Mr. Finn, your unparalleled dedication and recent actions have demonstrated your profound commitment to the civil service. There is no one more suited."

Barnaby's form flickered as he grappled with the proposition. "I am deeply honored by your confidence. However, my... condition poses a significant challenge. As a ghost, my continued presence is uncertain. I could discorporate at any moment, rendering me an unreliable head for such a pivotal department."

The assembly exchanged glances, the weight of Barnaby's words settling over them. The prospect of appointing a leader who might vanish into the ether was undeniably problematic.

Breaking the silence, Sir Reginald spoke with measured assurance. "Mr. Finn, I may know someone who could assist with this particular predicament. Would you guide him, Director Grimshaw?"

After a quick nod from Lord Aldous, Barnaby's ethereal eyes widened slightly. "Truly? That would be... most appreciated."

Sir Reginald nodded, his expression inscrutable. "Consider it arranged."

The chamber's atmosphere shifted subtly, the path forward illuminated by newfound possibilities and the promise of a reformed civil service. The meeting, the first of many, quickly ended, with a plan in place for Barnaby to move forward, and a commitment from all to assist him in any way possible.

Director Grimshaw did not speak a word as he turned from the meeting room. He merely inclined his head for Barnaby to follow, and the ghost, ever courteous, fell into step behind him.

The corridor they entered was unfamiliar to Barnaby, though he had wandered more than most in the vast administrative palace that housed the civil service. These halls, however, bore the scent of secrets and dusted histories. The walls at first were of rich, polished mahogany, lined with brass sconces holding witchlight globes that hummed with a gentle arcane resonance. Ornate molding traced along the ceilings, carved with figures of heraldic beasts and the names of great civil servants long gone. The floor beneath their feet—well, beneath Reginald’s feet—was a checkerboard of black and white marble, worn at the edges where generations had passed.

As they continued, the mahogany gave way to darker oak panels, rougher-hewn and less adorned. The transitions were almost imperceptible, as though the building had aged along with its purpose. Here, the sconces were iron, and the witchlight had a more amber hue, casting soft pools of light and longer shadows. The scent changed subtly—less beeswax polish, more dry parchment and ancient ink. There was a hush in the air, like a place where conversations had weight and whispers echoed.

Further along, the wood vanished entirely. The corridor became one of solid stone, massive blocks fitted together with impossible precision, likely enchanted to resist the centuries. The temperature dropped, though it was not unpleasant—more the chill of reverence than discomfort. The walls bore no ornament now, save for the occasional rune etched faintly near the floor or ceiling, pulsing once as they passed.

There were fewer lights now—just crystals set high into the vaulted ceiling, their glow steady and cool, untouched by time. Cobwebs gathered in corners, untouched by cleaning spells or custodial ghosts. The echoes of their footsteps grew longer, and even Barnaby’s soft spectral shush seemed to stir something deep within the walls.

Then the stone changed again—grew rougher. Not shaped by man but carved from the very bones of the earth. A tunneled passage, damp in places, veined with silver and thin veins of glowing quartz that pulsed like veins. Strange fungi clung to the walls in some places, casting their own dim bioluminescence—gentle blues and greens that did not so much light the path as mark it.

They passed doors now, far between, of strange design—dark ironwood bound with copper and obsidian hinges, or massive slabs of bronze etched with sealing wards. One door, circular and rimmed with runes, seemed to turn slowly on its own as they passed, revealing a narrow spiral stair that led into blackness. A soft moan of wind—or perhaps breath—escaped before it sealed itself again.

Barnaby hesitated only once, when they passed a statue carved into a recess. It depicted a gaunt, many-eyed creature crouched over a desk, quill in one hand, hourglass in the other. Each eye was a different stone—obsidian, sapphire, garnet, even a tiny polished pearl. The creature’s mouth was a line of careful stitches. A plaque beneath it read simply: **“Diligence.”** He could not say why, but the sight of it made his non-heart thrum.

Finally, the passage opened.

It was a vast cavern—no, more than that, it was a cathedral built by time and shaped by magic. The chamber stretched so far overhead that wisps of cloud clung near the ceiling. The light came from enchanted chandeliers, hundreds of feet above, each holding constellations in miniature, flickering in careful imitation of the heavens.

And hanging from that impossibly high vault, suspended by dozens of enchanted chains and silver wires, was the articulated skeleton of a dragon.

Its bones gleamed ivory-white, each one engraved with runes and inlaid with lines of copper and moonstone. Its wings were spread in a majestic swoop, claws outstretched as though still hunting, and its long tail curled gracefully as if caught in the last moment of flight. The skull, massive and regal, bore a golden circlet fused to the bone.

A brass plaque on the far wall proclaimed its name: **Gwyndraig, the Deathless Flame, Wyrm of Dinas Emrys, First Among the King’s Skyguard.**

Barnaby could not help but stare.

The chamber floor was layered in platforms, desks, scaffolds, and rows of magical and alchemical equipment. There were laboratories here—some open, others walled in with glass or humming wards—alongside conservatories filled with mystical flora. One tree, floating midair in a field of inverted gravity, bore fruit that sang softly to itself.

Retorts bubbled. Star charts recalculated themselves. Manuscripts bound in scales whispered to invisible readers. A basin of polished obsidian rippled like water, showing distant stars and dying empires. A single large cage housed something that looked suspiciously like a talking badger giving a lecture to a cloud of floating eyeballs.

And at the far end, atop a wide dais of obsidian carved with pictograms so ancient even Barnaby could not name them, stood a plinth of rough granite. Upon it rested a sword.

The sword shimmered not with light, but with **depth**—silver and starlit blue, like looking into the sky at midnight through a pane of crystal. It was elegant but not decorative, old but not weary. The blade itself vibrated faintly in Barnaby’s awareness, as if aware of him and considering.

Behind it, in the shadowed alcove where smoke drifted from censers and tiny bells tinkled with no breeze, a figure moved.

He was tall, and thin, but there was nothing frail about him. His robes were so dark they seemed to drink light rather than reflect it. Intricate threads of gold and violet traced shifting constellations across the fabric, always changing, never the same twice.

The hood was drawn deep, casting his face in darkness, but now and then, the flicker of glowing eyes could be seen—like twin coals beneath glass.

He moved with precision, arranging flasks, repositioning candles, adjusting a pentagram of salt and bone that hovered three inches off the floor. He muttered as he worked.

“—unum corpus, duo animas... þū ne meaht... faedh agus draíocht... dómr ok líf...”

The words bled together—Latin and Old English, Gaelic and Norse, and perhaps something older still. Barnaby recognized fragments, spells of binding, soul anchoring, even the start of a weather charm repurposed for stabilization.

He drifted closer, instinctively careful not to cross any circles etched into the floor.

“Is that...?” Barnaby whispered.

Sir Reginald’s voice was steady, almost reverent. “Yes. Merlin.”

The figure paused. His hands froze mid-motion. One held a wand—twisted yew with a core of bone and wrapped in ivy; the other hovered over a brazier filled with moss that shimmered with cold fire. Slowly, the figure turned.

Though his face remained obscured, there was a pressure to his attention, like the weight of centuries resting on your shoulders. Barnaby, who had faced spectres, revenants, bureaucratic demons, and an angry baron’s poltergeist, suddenly felt very small.

Sir Reginald stepped forward and gave a respectful bow. “Merlin,” he said softly, “I have another worthy soul for you.”

The silence that followed was not empty—it was full, dense, meaningful.

Somewhere high above, the bones of Gwyndraig creaked faintly, as if the skeleton remembered a breath it could no longer take.

Barnaby said absolutely nothing. For once, he felt that silence was the most diplomatic response.

The hood fell away with the faintest brush of motion—no wind, no hands, just gravity and inevitability. The robe’s shadow peeled back from the figure’s face, revealing not some ancient archmage cloaked in mystery, but the unmistakable, perpetually unimpressed face Barnaby knew well.

His eyes, sharp as a ledger line and twice as judgmental, fixed on the director with a stare that cut through centuries of decorum like vinegar through limestone. The silence pulsed.

He raised one spectral brow, thumbed a bit of soot from his sleeve, and said in a voice both mundane and monumental:

“**Him?**”

For a moment—perhaps several—Barnaby stared, eyes narrowed, mind teetering at the edge of recognition. The face before him was familiar in a strange, irritatingly ordinary way, though entirely out of place in this vaulted chamber of stone and relics. He tilted his head. The long, weathered nose. The heavy-lidded eyes. The faint impression of soot along the jawline that never quite wiped clean. The spectral aura of stubbornness.

It clicked like a file cabinet drawer slamming shut.

“You…” Barnaby said slowly, pointing, as though labeling a specimen. “You’re my janitor.”

The figure straightened, his arms folded beneath his voluminous sleeves. “Not *your* janitor. Let’s not go inflating your sense of hierarchy.”

Barnaby turned to the director, voice rising in pitch. “Why does my janitor look like Merlin?”

The director said nothing, hands clasped behind his back, impassive as ever.

Barnaby whirled back. “No—sorry—why is Merlin my janitor?”

“Better question,” the janitor—Merlin—replied.

Barnaby’s mouth opened, then shut, then opened again. “Why is *my* janitor Merlin? Surely not all of the spectral custodial staff are secretly legendary undead figures. Please tell me they’re not all legendary undead figures.”

“Oh, heavens no,” said Merlin, waving a dismissive hand. “Most are former mid-level bureaucrats who refused to rest until all the ink was properly dry on Form 24-B, or other such nonsense. I’m a bit of an anomaly.”

“Anomaly,” Barnaby repeated flatly.

Merlin shrugged. “People kept invoking my name. ‘By Merlin’s beard!’ ‘Merlin help us!’ ‘Merlin, this tea is tepid!’—you know the sort. So I thought, why not keep an eye on things? Quietly. Discreetly.”

“In my office.”

“Lovely acoustics. And I liked your filing system.”

“You were cleaning under my desk.”

“Everyone has their part to play,” Merlin said, almost kindly. “Even the once and future wizard. Besides, what better way to observe the ebb and flow of bureaucratic currents than at the source?”

Barnaby’s brow furrowed. “You gave me advice. About ghosts. About ink wells.”

“Sound advice, I’d argue.”

“You gave me a broom for my birthday.”

“Enchanted,” Merlin added. “You’re welcome.”

Barnaby looked helplessly at the director, who finally spoke, his tone solemn. “Barnaby, we are entering a new era. The work ahead is immense. And it cannot be done with charms and ledgers alone. You will need knowledge. You will need power. You will need… cleaning supplies of a higher order.”

Merlin smirked.

Barnaby blinked. “I’m being mentored by Merlin the bloody janitor.”

Merlin inclined his head. “Prefer *maintenance sorcerer*, if you please.”

He turned slightly, brushing imaginary dust from his robes with the air of someone used to performing mundane miracles. Then, with a faint sigh, he added, “I did promise to care for these isles, and those who run them, until Arthur’s return. The whole of the realm, mind you. Quite the poetic oath at the time. Very dramatic. Sword-in-stone sort of theatrics.”

Barnaby raised an eyebrow.

“But there’s no bloody way I can clean the whole bloody thing,” Merlin muttered, crossing his arms. “Have you *seen* the state of modern governance? Departments springing up like mushrooms. Memos breeding in drawers. Reports written on enchanted paper that replicates itself in triplicate. Absolute chaos. So I decided to pick one spot and stay with it.”

He jabbed a thumb toward Barnaby, not unkindly. “And wouldn’t you know it—you lot seemed promising. A bit odd, a bit buried under procedure, but promising.”

Barnaby stared at him, utterly incredulous.

“You chose my office,” he said finally, “out of all the places in the civil service?”

“Had a good tea kettle,” Merlin replied simply. “Besides, you talk to ghosts. Respectfully, too. That’s rare. Most people just scream or throw salt.”

Barnaby opened his mouth, then closed it again. His brain, already overstuffed with revelations, was currently rummaging for something intelligent to say and coming up sorely empty.

“So,” he said after a long pause, “you’re Merlin. The Merlin. And you’ve been dusting my bookshelves for the past eight years.”

Merlin nodded. “Also alphabetized your haunted case files. You’re welcome again.”

Barnaby shook his head in wonder. “This is… a lot.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Merlin said with a grin. “They all do. Eventually.”

Barnaby blinked, the glimmer of enchantments dancing faintly across the surface of the immense stone chamber. He was still absorbing the sheer presence of Merlin—Merlin!—standing before him like an aged scholar halfway through cleaning up a dragon-related incident.

Director Grimshaw stood quietly nearby, hands clasped at the small of his back, eyes twinkling in the glow of floating orbs that lit the chamber like tame stars. Behind them loomed the massive skeleton of the red dragon Y Ddraig Goch, suspended in a perpetual loop of flight just beneath the vaulted ceiling. It was, somehow, both a museum piece and a living presence.

Merlin folded his arms across his robes. “Now. Let’s talk about what all this is.”

Barnaby gave a nervous chuckle. “Yes, please. Let’s. Because I was reasonably sure this morning I was just going to present a report on, what might as well be departmental biscuit expenses at this point. I am now the director of a commonwealth wide squad of the best paperpushers I can find,beg, borrow or steal, and have just been invited to the inner sanctum of a near-mythical, near-godlike, janitor.”

“Biscuit expenses are important,” Grimshaw said helpfully.

“But not usually a gateway to Arthurian conspiracy.”

Merlin gave a low, rumbling laugh. “Oh, it’s not a conspiracy. If anything, it’s civil service at its purest: layered, procedural, ancient as bones, and mostly concerned with whether anyone has filled out Form Z-37/D in triplicate.”

Grimshaw nodded. “He’s not wrong.”

Merlin stepped forward and gestured around the chamber. “This place—this sanctum—is one of several scattered across the Isles. Most of the senior officials in the government know of me. Not all know me directly, and only a very few know the full extent of what we’re doing. But the plan, Barnaby, is as old as Albion. Arthur is not dead. He sleeps. And when he returns, the land must be ready.”

He turned and walked toward the great desk at the back of the chamber, waving a hand. A chair moved on its own accord and settled behind him. Another floated in and gently settled beside Barnaby.

“The Round Table was never meant to fade away entirely,” Merlin continued. “Its purpose was not just chivalric or martial—it was administrative, social, spiritual. It was a way of guiding the kingdom with balance and care. And now, with the world so very much changed, we need it again.”

Barnaby slowly sat down. “You’re saying… we’re rebuilding it?”

“We have been,” said Grimshaw. “For quite some time. But quietly. Carefully. For the Round Table to function again in the modern age, it must not be political, or even visible. It must operate with discretion and integrity. That’s why it’s made up, primarily, of sanctioned undead.”

Barnaby raised an eyebrow. “Because sanctioned undead don’t retire?”

“Exactly,” Merlin grinned. “They’re consistent. They persist. They already understand sacrifice, and they’ve proven they’re willing to do the job until the end of time if necessary.”

“But why me?” Barnaby asked. “I’m just—I mean, I’m good at forms. I like systems. But I’m not a hero.”

Grimshaw smiled softly. “That’s precisely why. You don’t want power, Barnaby. You want order. That’s rarer than you might think.”

Merlin tapped the side of his nose. “You’ve already met several of the others, you know.The ones we asked approve of you, some more than others. Though they’ll have to tell you who they are themselves—until you're formally one of us, their identities are their own. Even among us, anonymity protects the purpose.”

Barnaby frowned. “But Director Grimshaw—surely he’s one. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have made it down that hallway alive.”

Grimshaw inclined his head. “A reasonable deduction.”

“The corridor between the meeting chamber and this chamber,” Merlin said, “is wrapped in wards, runes, temporal echoes, and one particularly opinionated spectral badger. Only someone accompanied by one of the Table may pass.”

Barnaby let out a long breath. “This is… a lot.”

“Of course it is,” said Merlin, waving a hand and conjuring a pot of tea that poured itself. “That’s why we’re not rushing you.”

“I died yesterday.”

“Your timing,” Grimshaw murmured, “has always been excellent.”

Merlin sipped from a chipped mug. “The world is shifting, Barnaby. Magic has been tamed, somewhat. But it has not been understood. Bureaucracy and sorcery, both intricate and opaque, are not natural enemies—they’re cousins, really. But even they can’t prevent the occasional madman from slipping through the cracks. You saw what happened with Jonathan.”

Barnaby’s expression darkened. “Jack.”

“Indeed.” Merlin leaned forward. “What he nearly did… that was the exact danger the Table is meant to prevent. Not just great wars and dragons and apocalypses. But the slow rot, the erosion of faith in institutions, the madness that wears a smile and holds a clipboard.”

Grimshaw interjected. “What we do now—what you’ve already done—is prevent disaster through daily diligence. You investigated. You compiled. You warned us. And you gave your life doing it. And then you continued.”

Merlin stood, his eyes glowing faintly now. “Arthur will return. I cannot tell you when, but the land will call him back, as it always does. Until that time, we are the stewards. We do not wear crowns or armor. We do not ride out in shining bands. We hold the kingdom together with ink and wax, rune and regulation.”

He gestured to a glowing sigil on the stone wall: the old symbol of the Pendragon line. “And when he returns, Barnaby Finn, we will be there to guide him through the world he wakes into. He will not know how a gas lamp works, nor a dirigible. But he will need to govern those who use them.”

Barnaby stared at the sigil, then looked back to Merlin. “So… what now?”

“You’re not committed yet,” Merlin said. “We don’t conscript. You’ve earned the right, but you must choose. If you walk away, we erase your memory of this conversation—not for secrecy’s sake, but for your own peace.”

Grimshaw added gently, “We only ask this of those who’ve already proved themselves.”

Barnaby was silent for a long while, fingers steepled. Then, quietly: “I always thought the Round Table fell because it became too proud.”

“It did,” Merlin said. “Too proud, too divided, too grand for its own good. That’s why this time, it’s a circle of desks. Folding desks, at that.”

Barnaby laughed, the sound bouncing strangely through the chamber. “You really do know me.”

“Of course,” Merlin said. “You’ve already been doing the work. All we offer is permanence.”

“And purpose,” Grimshaw added. “No small thing.”

Merlin stood again, walking past the dragon’s ribs, his voice echoing beneath the bones. “You’ll take your time. Ask your questions. You’ll meet the others, in time. But for now, I wanted you to understand the shape of the thing.”

“And until Arthur returns?” Barnaby asked.

Merlin turned, and the light from above caught his eyes, older than empires. “We keep these green and pleasant shores as green and pleasant as we can. We protect the people who never see us. And we make sure, day by patient day, that when the king returns… the kingdom is worthy of him.”

The shout came from one of the upstairs windows: “The coach! It’s turning onto the lane!”

From that moment, the entire household shifted into a state of bustling, joyful frenzy. Boots hammered against the stairs. Small feet scrambled across parquet floors. Even the corgis—Stubbs and Admiral—seemed to understand the significance of the moment, spinning in excited circles near the foyer like twin whirlwinds of fluff and barking.

Barnaby put down his pen and tidied the stack of case files on the desk. Barnaby smoothed his spectral waistcoat and stepped, or floated, into the corridor, joining the rush toward the front hall just as the great black coach came to a stop outside.

The door opened, and the figure who stepped down from the carriage moved with deliberate care and impossible stillness. His long coat was high-collared and immaculate, heavy wool in a deep navy that refused to show dust. His boots gleamed. His posture was perfectly erect. The top hat sat squarely on his head like a crown. His gloves—still neatly on—gripped the handle of a small, polished trunk that he set down on the step beside him without the faintest strain.

“Grandfather!” two voices called in harmony—Barnaby’s children, dashing through the open door at full tilt. Stubbs and Admiral launched past them, barking joyfully.

Lord Arcibald Pangham, sanctioned undead, gentleman emissary, and once-diplomat to the Subcontinental Mystical Corps, opened his arms with practiced grace. The children threw themselves into his embrace without hesitation or fear.

He did not bend so much as angle slightly, his long arms enveloping them. His face—ashen, waxen, perfectly preserved and bloodless—was split by a wide, warm smile. His eyes, an impossibly pale blue, showed no hint of death’s touch.

“You’re taller than when I left,” he said to his granddaughter.

“I’m the same height!” she protested, giggling.

“Then I must be shrinking,” Archie replied dryly. “How undignified.”

Behind them, Marian reached him with eyes already shining. She pulled him into a brisk but heartfelt embrace and kissed his cheek. “You’re colder than Bombay, and that coat is ridiculous.”

“The coat is diplomatic protocol,” Pangham replied. “And I assure you, it was far too warm for a normal person in India.”

Barnaby’s mother-in-law, Lady Margery Pangham —petite, stern, and unshakable in the way only someone who’d lived through three poltergeists and one minor god’s intrusion into her rose garden could be—approached him next.

“You brought the right tea this time?” she asked sternly, arching an eyebrow.

“I did indeed,” Archie replied, his voice flat and controlled, every bit the diplomat. “Assam and Nilgiri, both in diplomatic tins, unmolested by Ministry customs.”

Margery reached up and pinched his cheek. “Still cold,” she said. “But still my Archie. Welcome home.” She then abandoned all decorum, broke into a huge, genuine smile, and threw herself into his arms. Archie drew her up to him with nary an effort, and spun her around in huge, loving circles, her feet flying, and one shoe shot off. The corgis took of after it, and shared the duty of returning it to her.

The only person visibly unsettled by the pale, pristine figure at the threshold was the new maid, a young woman named Nell, who clutched the edge of a hallway table like it might keep her from floating away. Her face had gone pale. She stared openly, mouth working silently.

Archie turned his pale gaze to her and gave a faint nod. “Ah, a new face.”

“She’s only just joined us from Ludlow,” Agnes said without turning. “She’s not used to family members who are… officially posthumous.”

“I assure you,” Archie said gently, “I do very little haunting. Spectral intrusion is quite gauche.”

Nell managed a curtsey that looked more like she was preparing to bolt. She looked from Marian to Margery to Barnaby and saw only calm, happy smiles. No one seemed alarmed at the spectral glow around the man. No one flinched from the way his coat didn’t flutter in the breeze, or how his boots made no sound on the steps.

“I’ll… fetch tea,” she squeaked.

“Excellent idea,” said Margery brightly. “And biscuits, dear. The lemon ones. Archie never did care for strawberry.”

Inside, the drawing room quickly transformed into a scene of genteel celebration. A fire roared. The best china came out. Tea brewed. Cakes emerged from tins hidden for special occasions, even after the recent...food difficulties. Murphy the ghost-cat sulked from atop the piano and kept a baleful eye on the returned patriarch from a safe distance.

Lord Pangham sat precisely in the armchair that had always been his, his back unyielding and his hands neatly folded. The children sat at his feet, peppering him with questions about elephants, floating markets, fire-dancers, and enchanted monsoons.

“Elephants are a menace,” their grandfather said flatly. “Graceful, intelligent, and completely incapable of recognizing diplomatic boundaries.”

Marian rolled her eyes. “He was posted to Darjeeling, not on safari.”

Barnaby observed from the other chair, quietly pretending to sip his tea. No one asked the obvious questions—not about his appearance, nor his sanctioned undead status. It was long settled. He had died—officially, anyway—nearly a decade ago in a diplomatic incident involving a rival necromantic envoy and a cursed sari. But he had returned, formally sanctioned, bound to the service of the Crown and re-licensed for spectral continuity in foreign affairs.

Everyone in the family knew.

They simply didn’t bring it up.

Eventually, the younger crowd drifted to supper and servants cleared the tea. The drawing room quieted. Barnaby leaned back and watched his father in law gently wipe a smudge from his coat sleeve with a cloth he’d brought himself.

It was so casual. So practiced.

So *meticulous*.

Just like always.

But now, Barnaby could see the truth beneath the gestures. His father-in-law’s lack of blinking. The way he didn’t breathe unless speaking. The faint alchemical stitching at his cuffs—reinforcing the containment of his own body’s aura. The subtle glyphs on his boots—warding signs of grounding, protection, and impermeability.

He remembered Merlin’s words. He’d said Barnaby already *knew* some of the others.

Of course he had.

One of them had been eating breakfast in with him for years.

And Barnaby could keep it in no longer.

He rose, walked to the fireplace, and turned. “Father,” he said, “may I speak with you privately?”

Archie didn’t blink. “Of course,” he said, as though he’d been expecting it all along.

And he rose with that same impossible grace.

Barnaby led his father-in-law into the study and shut the door behind them with a quiet click. The walls muffled the bustle of the household outside—the clatter of cutlery, the children’s laughter, the new maid’s startled yelps as the cat phased through a wall again. In here, everything felt still, serious. The fire in the hearth crackled politely.

Archie settled himself into a chair across from the hearth with his usual, spine-straightening poise. Barnaby didn’t sit right away. He turned instead to the sideboard and poured them both a glass of port, then reconsidered, set one aside, and handed the other to Archie.

“Thank you,” said the elder man as he accepted the glass and raised it without drinking. His lips twitched. “For tradition, of course. It would be terribly rude not to hold one.”

Barnaby gave a faint huff of amusement and finally took a seat. For a moment, he looked into the fire, choosing his words with uncharacteristic care. Finally:

“I wanted to talk to you… about work.”

Archie’s pale brow arched a fraction of an inch. “This isn’t about the missing jam spoons, then?”

Barnaby gave him a pointed look. “You’ve been working very closely with Lord Grimshaw for some time, haven’t you?”

A pause.

Archie nodded. “For over a decade now. More closely since I relocated to India. Fewer eyes. Fewer questions.”

Barnaby leaned forward slightly, fingers steepled. “You always kept your professional distance, even after becoming… well… posthumous. It was one of those things no one talked about at dinner. And yet, sanctioned or not, it’s a very unusual status. Rare. Carefully granted.”

“Unusual,” Archie agreed, sipping his port without sipping. “And irrevocable, in most cases. But essential, when one’s talents become more useful in death than in life.”

“You’ve worked with the Director-General all that time?” Barnaby asked, watching him. “You’ve known him that long?”

“Longer,” Archie said quietly. “We joined the Department in the same intake. He was a junior attaché. I was... slightly more charming.”

“Not by much,” Barnaby said, surprising himself with the quip. “I met someone recently. Someone... who knows Lord Grimshaw well. Very well. An old friend of his. Very, very old, in fact.”

Archie’s expression didn’t change, but something in his eyes seemed to settle—like a puzzle piece dropping softly into place. He didn’t need to ask for the name.

“I know him,” he said. “Of course I do. We all do.”

“All?”

Archie set the untouched glass on the table beside him. “You’ve been invited to the table, haven’t you?”

Barnaby blinked. “It wasn’t worded that way.”

“No, it never is,” Archie said. “But the meaning is the same.”

“I was told I was being considered,” Barnaby said. “That I’d been tested, and found not wanting. And that if I proved capable… I’d join others who serve something larger than any of our departments. The Round Table.”

Archie gave a slow nod. “It was Arthur’s original idea, you know. Merlin merely repurposed it for the modern age. The world changes, but the need remains. Coordination. Unity. A guiding hand.”

Barnaby exhaled slowly. “He said I already knew some of them.”

“You did.” Archie folded his hands in his lap. “And you do. That’s rather the point. They choose from those already working within the fabric of service. It’s never a knight in shining armor riding in from the outside. It’s always the fellow you already know, already respect. Someone you’d trust with a crisis. Or your case files.”

“But I’m dead,” Barnaby said flatly. “Whatever they wanted from me, I’ve already fulfilled. I’m a ghost. I can’t join anything. I’m barely part of a seating chart.”

Archie tilted his head slightly. “You’re wrong, Barnaby.”

“I’ve no body,” Barnaby said. “My physical remains were released. I didn’t bind myself to them. I didn’t think I’d need to.”

His father-in-law gave a small, knowing smile. “As a candidate for the Table, your body would have been preserved.”

Barnaby looked up sharply. “Preserved?”

“It would have been a quiet matter,” Archie continued. “A few Ministry-aligned alchemists. An Order-sanctioned mortician. Some protective runes. Stasis glyphs on the coffin. Nothing extravagant. Nothing visible from the outside.”

Barnaby rubbed his face, which no longer had oil or stubble or warmth, and tried to understand the implications. “They planned for this?”

“They hoped for it,” said Archie. “They don’t make many offers. Most turn them down. Some fail the test. The rest... well, the rest are with us.”

Barnaby dropped his hand and looked back toward the fire.

He’d been trying not to think about it.

He’d died. For real. He remembered it all: the tightening in his chest, the dizziness, the sudden cold sweat, and the awful, distant sensation of his own body becoming unfamiliar. The last voice he’d heard was Jonathan’s, soothing and calm, telling everyone “It was probably a ruptured appendix, why don’t we move on and let the healers tend to him?”.

He’d spent those awful moments thinking about paperwork.

And now?

He was being offered a seat at the hidden Round Table. A permanent seat. An immortal one.

With that came responsibility, of course. That part wasn’t frightening.

But the permanence…

“It’s a lot,” Barnaby said finally.

Archie nodded once. “Of course it is. That’s why it’s not asked of many.”

Barnaby looked at his father-in-law. Really looked at him. The meticulous dress. The quiet dignity. The preserved civility. The complete and utter lack of decay, rot, or madness. He was undead, yes. But *sanctioned*. Stabilized. Grounded in duty and protected by magic and mandate alike.

He had always been *like this*, even in life. Now, he simply was it more... thorough.

Barnaby said, “And if I say yes?”

“Then the process begins,” Archie said. “Your remains are relocated to the vaults beneath the Table. You are reanchored, given rites, certified by the Director, the Crown, and by Him—”

“Him?”

Archie gave a look that said, *You know exactly who I mean.*

Barnaby swallowed. “And if I say no?”

Archie raised a hand, not to threaten, but to gently halt the tide of Barnaby’s spiraling worries. “Then you remain as you are. A respected ghost, still able to work in your limited capacity, still free to fade in time. There is no coercion. There never has been. I will let Him know you wish to speak with Him.”

Lord Pangham grasped his ring, the one he had gotten when he was sanctioned, and closed his eyes briefly.

“He will contact you shortly”

Barnaby stared into the fire, watching the light flicker across the glass that neither of them had sipped from.

He didn’t speak again for a long moment.

But he was thinking.

He was always thinking.

Once alone, Barnaby closed the door to his office—an act layered in symbolism, perhaps unintended, but clearly marking the boundary between mundane work and metamorphosis.

Merlin appeared from the corner, cloak now full-length instead of janitorial rags, but eyeing a stack of files exactly as he had before. His presence, once comfortable, now felt charged—like a dormant rune come to life.

“Thank you for meeting so promptly,” Barnaby began, voice even but edged with urgency.

Merlin nodded, and set down the freshly fetched tea he’d placed without announcement. “Of course. You had questions.”

Barnaby inhaled. “What would be required of me—if I accept.”

Merlin poured tea without a cup, the tea hanging in mid air. He then placed the cup precisely under it, and it dropped in without a ripple. His tone quiet, formal. No tricks.

“You’ll pledge your service to the Table: secrecy, duty, loyalty. You must continue your new role—forms, systems, oversight—but with your allegiance reorganized. You will act as a guardian, ready to intervene when normal channels cannot.”

Barnaby swallowed around nerves. “And going back into my body? Is that possible?”

Merlin’s gaze calmed. “Yes. But not easy. Preserving your remains under wards, the Table prepares for eventual sanctification. If you endure the Gathering Rituals, you will return—not as living man, but as sanctioned undead: frozen in the state you presently occupy.”

Merlin paused, letting those words settle.

“Frozen in body and spirit,” Barnaby repeated.

“Precisely. You will have no need for food or water—though you may taste, but it will not nourish. You will feel cold—more, in a gentle way than painful. Biological functions cease: heartbeat, warmth, cellular decay.”

“But—strength and…?”

“Absolute physical resilience. Strength beyond muscle, speed surpassing physical limits, stamina that never sours. Diseases, injury, hunger, sleep: irrelevant. You think your breakdown was crushing—it will never happen again. No collapse. No doubt. You will not age.”

Barnaby closed his eyes. Foundations shifted under him.

Merlin continued in a softer voice: “Intimate acts—relations with your wife—may continue. But bear in mind: it will be with a body that is—well—cold. We must be clear. Your wife needs to consent, to understand.”

Barnaby’s gaze flickered to the window, beyond which he pictured reluctance, compassion, sacrifice.

“Outlive everyone,” Merlin added gently, reading the question. “Friends, children, colleagues… every mortal you know. You will outlast them all.”

Barnaby’s throat tightened. He leaned forward.

“But you are not unholy. What you become is a servant of purpose—unstained by corruption, impervious to politics or fear. You will be bound to duty—and can be released only by the Crown.”

Merlin paused again. “Most who choose this path are knighted. You will have access to the full might and treasury of the Commonwealth: logistical authority, magical support, diplomatic resources.”

Barnaby’s mind raced: magical battle artifacts… covert sanctified positions… ability to intervene anywhere.

“All knights thus chosen have upheld the trust. No one has abused it. We choose those who would not.”

Barnaby looked again at Merlin—the man who’d helped on one of the worst days of his life, who’d also introduced him to this hidden world.

“You will have a personal liaison to the Crown,” Merlin continued. “Not another political handler, but a neutral conduit between the Crown, the Table, and you.”

Barnaby drifted into silence, staring at the swirling steam in his teacup. It was as though the world had shifted: not only his status, but his purpose—expanded, elevated, forever.

Merlin set down his cup. “That, in summary, is the offer. You will not be forced. You will have time. The wards around your body—and your spirit—can hold this state for months, maybe years. We must only know your decision before the stasis weakens.”

He waited, hands folded.

Barnaby noticed the office clock ticking, the mundane world beyond the door, the busyness of his bureaucracy—but he hadn’t felt so distant from it in years.

Merlin finally spoke again: “I’ll answer any questions you have.”

Barnaby sat very still for a long time. Merlin—though in that moment, he still wore the guise of a janitor with a smudge on his robes and a slight scent of chimney ash—waited patiently, without another word.

The silence was long, stretching like drying parchment.

Barnaby eventually looked up and gave a slow, deliberate nod.

“I believe,” he said, with a faint wry smile, “that I’m inclined to say yes.”

The old wizard’s brow lifted. “Are you sure?”

“As sure as I am about anything, lately.” Barnaby leaned forward. “I have questions, of course—many questions—but the alternative, frankly, is less compelling. I want to help. I want to fix what’s broken. I want to ensure something like this—like *him*—never happens again.”

“Jonathan,” Merlin said, voice dipped in disapproval.

“Jack,” Barnaby corrected with a flicker of distaste.

There was a moment of mutual understanding. A silent honouring of the fallen, and the poisoned near-future they had narrowly avoided.

Merlin sat back on the floating janitor’s bucket, which bobbed as if in perfect agreement with gravity and tea breaks. “It won’t be easy.”

“I didn’t expect it would be.” Barnaby glanced at his own translucent hand. “Though I do have one point of delicate negotiation.”

Merlin blinked once, with those wise, ancient eyes. “Yes?”

Barnaby coughed gently. “The… ah… intimate matters you mentioned. My wife and I—well, I’m not one to make executive decisions on *that* without proper spousal consultation. I’ll need to clear that part with her, as all good husbands should.”

Merlin’s face cracked into a grin. “That is perhaps the most noble request I’ve ever heard from a potential undead.”

“I try to remain thoughtful.”

“You’ll have time,” Merlin said, more softly now. “The wards around your body will hold for at least another fortnight, and then some. Long enough for her input and your own sober reflection.”

“I suppose my body is in some chamber somewhere?” Barnaby asked. “Wrapped in enchanted linens and sealed away in cold stone?”

“In the Royal Subterranean Vaults beneath Whitehall,” Merlin confirmed. “Guarded by two very irritable ghouls, a deeply nostalgic banshee, and several employed spiders with excellent union benefits.”

Barnaby allowed himself a weak chuckle.

“You’ll need to undergo the Rebinding. That’s what we call the process of reintegration,” Merlin said. “It’s like… hm, have you ever tried threading a spider’s web through the eye of a storm?”

“No.”

“Well. It’s not unlike that. You’ll feel it, Barnaby. Every stitch. But when it’s done, you’ll no longer be a spectre of loss. You’ll be a sentinel of the Crown.”

“I’ll become... like Grimshaw, like my father-in-law.”

“Not quite. You’ll still be you. They were rather, shall we say, focused, before they were sanctioned. But yes, you’ll be among those of us who’ve stepped beyond the bounds of breath to serve longer, harder, and without reward save purpose.”

Barnaby looked down at his hands again.

“Will I look different?”

Merlin considered this. “You’ll look like you, just... a bit paler. Less wrinkled. Slightly statuesque, in that way the truly incorruptible always are. But no claws, no glowing eyes. This is sanctioned necromancy, not stage illusion. Lord Pangham, as you know, has always cut a rather formidable figure. The rituals only distill and sharpen what is already there.”

“And the pain?”

Merlin nodded slowly. “Substantial. But not fatal. That part is already behind you.”

A long breath, despite no longer needing to breathe. “All right.”

Merlin stood, finally. The illusion fell away completely now, leaving him cloaked in ageless robes of blue and gold. He pulled the mop from his belt—it had never been a mop at all, Barnaby now saw. It shimmered and elongated in his hand into a staff of elderwood, capped with an orb glowing faintly with silver flame.

“I will begin the arrangements,” he said. “Let your wife know what must be said. Then come to me, and we’ll begin the rite.”

“Will I be knighted immediately?”

“That depends,” Merlin said, a little cryptically. “Do you own a sword?”

“I have a very stern letter opener.”

Merlin laughed, and with a sweep of his hand, the door to the office opened of its own accord. “You’ll do fine, Sir Barnaby. Or, I suppose, soon-to-be-Sir. Your act of sacrifice and the tale of your heroism will satisfy the public, so there will be no questions of your worthiness. Most people think that being sanctioned is a reward, very few know it is also a burden.”

Barnaby stood, his thoughts running faster than his feet. The fate of the civil service was on his shoulders. The Round Table had not vanished—it had merely gone underground, waiting for the day it would rise again.

And he—Barnaby Finn, once a bureaucrat, now a ghost—was going to be part of it.

Maybe even the best part.

Merlin ducked his head back in, and, with a grin, said “You will need a new janitor. I’m afraid I must move on to the next candidate. She is a spectacularly interesting Sanitation Engineer, with novel ideas about waste management and a rather lovely grasp of filth, muck and slime.”