

Chapter 1

My Speech To The College

Two days after the Provost's funeral, Dr. Funkelweede, as the oldest remaining Council member, called an emergency meeting of the College Council to be held in Front Square. He'd asked me particularly to attend. I was curious as to why he'd singled me out, though I'd heard that most of college would be there. This development really brought home to me the gravity of our situation; the college was still under Halbizia's curse, and particularly, we no longer had the Provost's wisdom and experience to guide us. Who'd be the new Provost? And most importantly, would he or she, lead us in the fight against Halbizia?

The meeting kicked off at mid-day beneath a sparkling blue sky. Surrounded by the now familiar college buildings and neatly cut lawns, it was almost impossible to believe the chaos and terror of the recent attack in this same spot. Only the odd scorch marks on some of the statues indicated anything had happened. However, the assembled ghosts' troubled faces told a different story as we waited, in a semi-circle, facing the library. Dr. Dodo, the college's oldest academic stood on the steps; he now seemed even older and more bent in his black academic gown, which flapped in the gentle breeze. As he raised his arms, he reminded me of a decrepit crow. He didn't sound much better as he wittered on about the college, its glorious history and how it would be even more glorious in the future. I sensed he was moving rapidly onto his favourite subject (dodos) when a student shouted:

'We need a speech with aplomb.'

The Porter, as moth-eaten as usual and clutching his ever-present lamp, stood between me and the student. He immediately snarled, ‘Who are yer callin’ a plum, yer young whippersnapper? I was niver a plum in ma life.’

‘He was talking to Dr. Funkelweede...’ I explained, trying not to laugh. ‘*Aplomb*...not a plum.’

‘Plums niver agreed with ma innards...’ he began, but was immediately interrupted by shouts from the crowd.

‘Simon, Simon...’ they called. ‘We want Simon...’

I couldn’t believe my ears. *Why were they calling me?*

‘Speech, speech...’

Somebody pushed me forward, and as I floated towards the steps, I noticed the Porter wore an indecipherable expression; but there was nothing new. All the other ghosts smiled and nodded encouragement.

‘You can do it, Simon,’ whispered Darwin in my ear as I passed. I nodded as if agreeing with him, however, my legs were numb and if my heart could still beat, it would be hammering in my chest right now.

I made it to the platform, yet looking out at the vast sea of faces a surge of panic threatened to overwhelm me. What was I doing up here and what did they want me to say or do for that matter? Even as I asked myself these questions, I knew the answers. I knew because it was all I’d thought of since I released the Pirate Queen from *The Book of Ornis* and, in doing so, saved Fi. And since Gauntley’s

death, it seemed almost ordained that I take his place. I was a de Bruin after all and I was here to fight Halbizia. If I had to become Provost to achieve that end, so be it. And if my efforts ended in my own ghostly death, then at least I'd have given it my best shot. I wouldn't have let the de Bruins down....

It only took a few seconds for this to flash through my mind and then I acted.

Instinctively I bowed. I even managed a slight flourish - I thought the occasion merited it. Sir Syl would have been proud. Thinking of his kindness to me brought a lump to my throat but I couldn't dwell on that now. I had a job to do; a serious job. And perhaps I was the only one who *could* do it!

The crowd clapped and cheered. I was on the right track; that was encouraging. So far so good, but what was I going to *say* to them? I'd never made a speech in my life. Where did I even begin?

I'd have to make it up as I went along. I swallowed hard.

'When I was at school that is before I died, my teacher told me I'd never become anything. And she was right, because I didn't even manage to grow up. Halbizia saw to that.' I could feel myself shaking. Fi floated up beside me and squeezed my hand. It was odd but I was glad she was there.

I carried on, feeling a little more confident and shaking a little bit less. They weren't throwing things at me - at least, not yet. 'I know a lot of you didn't think much of me when I came here three weeks ago. I was too small, too scrawny. I didn't look like a warrior or a de Bruin. I know that you're...we're all devastated that Professor Gauntley has left us.' There were fresh sobs from some sections of

the crowd, and I could see Fi's sword-hand wobbling, although most of the other ghosts were more stoical.

'Simon for Provost,' shouted a voice in the crowd. It was immediately taken up and soon everyone was chanting it. I blushed with embarrassment.

I raised my hand and after several minutes the shouting died down.

'I'm only twelve and I don't know much, about anything really, but if you are prepared to believe in me, I'll fight Halbizia to the end,' I heard myself saying.

'We're behind you, laddie,' shouted a voice from the back.

A great cheer went up and this time it lasted for ages. 'Provost Simon, Provost Simon,' the whooping and laughing crowd chanted. Fi unexpectedly smiled at me. I must be doing something right.

'Shiver me timbers,' shouted the clearly mad Commodore, appearing out of nowhere. The shouting had probably disturbed him. He was immediately rugby-tackled to the ground by several postgraduates. They hustled him into the library.

'Prepare to weigh anchor, you scurvy rats,' cried the Commodore, as a parting shot.

Fi actually giggled. I knew then she'd be alright.

As the noise died down, I continued, 'We need to put our heads together and come up with a plan. We're at war and we need a new Council.' There were excited murmurs and nods of agreement from the ghosts. Even the motley

creatures from *The Book of Ornis*, standing to one side of the crowd, looked interested and whispered excitedly to one another.

I immediately saw several ghosts I'd wanted onside; Brother Tobias, Darwin, Miss Smithering-Smythe, Gusty (for his great enthusiasm if nothing else), the Jester with Miss Tomé waving merrily from his top pocket, and Dr. Dodo. And of course Fi.

'Anyone who wants to join the Council, please meet me in Council Chambers tomorrow. From now on, it's a case of "all hands on deck".' Everyone laughed. It was a pity the Commodore wasn't around to enjoy it.

We finished by singing the college anthem, in memory of Professor Gantley. All the ghosts joined in with great gusto, so I guess it was the right decision.

But before I slipped away, Darwin said to me quietly, 'I need to see you tomorrow in my laboratory, first thing...I have an idea.'

Well! What could he have in mind?