

In Pursuit of the Ghost Thief

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Chapter 1

Another One Gone

“Oh, don’t tell me another one has disappeared!” Cecilia the See-through Countess glared angrily at her servant.

“I’m afraid so, madam,” Alfonse the Headless replied. He carried his head gripped firmly under his arm like a football, and turned it abashedly downward, so that its eyes gazed toward the floor. He always did that when he was embarrassed, and that happened relatively often. But Alfonse was a hulk of a man, and even without his head stood much taller than the countess. Besides, it wasn’t his fault that ghosts continued to disappear without a trace from the small town.

“Who is it this time?” groaned the See-through Countess.

“The little ghost with the moth holes. It disappeared this morning, and no one knows where it went,” Alfons answered.

“Ten little ghosts sat down to dine, one gave up the ghost, and now they are just nine,” hummed Chang Meow Sing. The cat sat on the countess’s lap and giggled.

“This isn’t the time for jokes,” the countess admonished angrily, brushing Chang Meow Sing down off her knees. Chang Meow Sing was no ordinary cat. The Italian explorer Marco Polo had brought her back from his trip to China. That was almost eight hundred years ago, but Chang Meow Sing was still homesick and since her death had been haunting various places in Europe as a skeleton cat. Through many twists and turns, she had ended up as the lap cat of the See-through Countess.

See-through was not only her name; the countess actually was see-through, and she could walk through walls, too. Like all ghosts, she remained invisible to the human eye when she wanted to. But Cecilia could only just be seen dimly even by spirit creatures most of the time. Only when she got very angry, like she was now, were her contours as clearly visible as the wing of a fly under a microscope.

“This cannot go on! Every day one of us disappears. Soon there won’t be anyone left at all!” the countess thundered. She wanted to pound her fist on the coffee table in anger, but her hand went right through the tabletop as if it were fog.

Chang Meow Sing giggled and even Alfonse couldn’t suppress a bashful grin.

“There is nothing to laugh about!” the countess scolded. “Something has to happen, or we will soon be the only three ghosts in Ottershausen!”

Not so long ago there had been about a hundred ghosts, sprites, and other spectral beings in Ottershausen. Now their number was reduced by half, and almost every morning another one went missing. The See-through Countess was the oldest of the spirits and thus a kind of mayor of the ghost and spirit world. Cecilia felt responsible.

“Any suggestions?” The See-through Countess looked at Alfonse.

“Eh, I... well, one could...,” the headless man stuttered. “Maybe we could disappear ourselves. I mean, then we would see where we landed, and maybe we would meet up with the others there.”

“And who would take care of the others who are still here?” the countess retorted, rolling her eyes to show her irritation.

“With respect, when the teapot is empty, one cannot drink more tea. That is, soon will be no one here to take care of,” purred Chang Meow Sing.

“Let us go and see if anyone besides the little ghost with the moth holes is missing.” The countess got up from her chair.

In order to be able to sit at all, Cecilia wore a thin, magic film in her undergarments that prevented her from sinking right through the seat and falling onto the ground. Her high-heeled shoes were lined with the same foil, otherwise she would have sunk through the ground into the earth, and fallen out eventually on the other side of the planet.

The chair she had been sitting on was located in the sole café in Ottershausen. It was a popular place, but the old ladies who treated themselves to a piece of cream cake and a pot of coffee here had absolutely no idea that there were three ghosts among them. For them, the See-through Countess and her little entourage were invisible. As long as they did not want to be noticed, they could neither be seen nor heard. Cecilia and the other spirits had decided several years earlier to bid farewell to stifling attics, damp basements, brackish ponds and cold castles, and instead to enjoy the comforts of a modern town. Ever since then, the ghosts sat on people’s couches with them as they watched television in the evenings, slept in soft beds under warm down comforters, and helped themselves to the pantries of their unknowing hosts. The old ladies and the other residents had no idea. All in all, the spirits in Ottershausen led an extremely pleasant life, and the countess really could not understand why more and more of them were leaving.

They certainly were not leaving voluntarily, of that the countess was certain.

On the way to the exit, Cecilia didn’t pay attention to whether she ran into the old ladies. She didn’t need to. The See-through Countess simply wafted through any obstacles in her way. The people didn’t notice, and merely perceived the scent of chamomile tea that suddenly surrounded them, with some surprise.

Chang Meow Sing and Alfonse the Headless, on the other hand, had to be more careful. Even if they were invisible, they could be felt. The skeletal cat weaved itself adroitly between their legs and Alfonse tried not to bump into anyone.

But when he passed by two women eating strawberry cake with whipped cream, he could not resist. He placed his head on the table and waited until their attention was turned elsewhere. Then he quickly shoveled two forkfuls of cake and cream into his mouth.

“Alfonse! Where are you?!” the See-through Countess called. She was just about to leave the café through the display window and turned around impatiently toward her servant.

“I’m coming, my lady!” Alfonse replied obligingly. He ran toward her and in the process accidentally ran into a waitress. With a loud clatter her tablet bearing

three lemonades and a plate of cake fell to the floor. While the waitress couldn't explain what had bumped into her, Alfonse had already reached the exit.

"Chinese proverb say: Man without head is like cherry tree without blossoms," meowed the skeleton cat. "He did it again!"

"I can see that for myself," the countess replied gruffly. "Alfonse, you left your thick skull lying on the table. That's the third time this week!"

Alfonse immediately turned around and rushed back to the ladies' table. Again a loud clattering could be heard as the headless one, in his hurry, ran into another waitress.

"My apologies, it certainly won't happen again," Alfonse murmured after he had fetched his head and they had left the café together.

"You say that every time," the countess sighed. "And now let us finally go."

"If you will pardon my saying so, do we have to go up to the old Bela?" purred Chang Meow Sing, pointing with a paw toward the castle ruins atop the mountain that towered over the city. "Not that I am afraid, but my legs are not the youngest anymore."

"We can spare ourselves the climb," responded the See-through Countess. "The old curmudgeon up there is the only one everyone would be delighted to have finally disappear."

The three spirits had already become so used to their comfortable city life that they took the bus to the sports center instead of walking. An old merman had taken refuge in the swimming pool there after he determined his old mill pond was too isolated and cold for him.

The green geezer had set his trident out on the tiles and was dozing on a lounge under an umbrella near the pool.

"I am glad to see you," the countess greeted the merman. "I was afraid you might also have gone away."

"Not I, but three of my mermaids are already gone. And the little ghost with the moth holes..."

"Yes, I have already heard." The countess waved a tired hand.

"You have to do something to stop this already!" the merman demanded, and stuck his head in the water to cool off a little. "You are the countess, after all!"

"Do not worry, I already have an ingenious plan," the countess replied. "But I must move along now and look after the others."

"What is your ingenious plan, my lady?" Alfonse asked when they had left the swimming pool.

"If you will pardon my saying so, I would also be most interested to know," Chang Meow Sing agreed.

"I will fill you both in as soon as I have a plan," the countess explained. "And that will be soon."

Together they visited a few basement sprites that had taken up residence in a bowling alley, a vampire who lived in a funeral parlor, and a handful of elves who inhabited a flower shop. All of them were uneasy. And all of them demanded that Cecilia finally do something about the situation.

As the See-through Countess waited in front of the flower shop for Alfonse, who had left his head next to a tub of bellflowers inside the store, she discovered the solution to their problem. It was hanging right next to the door of the shop.

“Now I know what we’ll do!” she exclaimed.

“With all due respect, what then?” Chang Meow Sing wanted to know.

“I wanted to ask the same question, my lady,” said Alfonse, stepping out of the flower store with his head under an arm.

“We are going to engage professional help!” Cecilia announced, pointing to a poster. It was an announcement for a theater performance taking place that evening at the school in Otterhausen. The play was called *Master Detective Sherlock Holmes and his Friend, Doctor Watson*.

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Because they played the lead roles, Lilly and Henry had a dressing room for themselves. It was a small space with a mirror, a sink, two chairs, and a table on which stood a bottle of soda.

Henry sat down to glance at the text one last time. Lilly paced back and forth in the small room like a tiger in a cage.

“Don’t worry, she’ll still show up,” Henry said. He couldn’t concentrate with her moving around anyway.

“Who do you mean?” Lilly stood still and looked at him.

“Well, your mother. That’s who you’ve been waiting for, isn’t it?”

“That’s none of your business. As far as I’m concerned, she can...” Lilly didn’t get any further because a pink mist suddenly came through door.

“Do you see what I see?” Henry stuttered.

Lilly just nodded and stared at the mist, which slowly took the form of a see-through figure. The bizarre apparition wore an old-fashioned dress and a long string of pearls. In her right hand she held a little bottle of perfume, which she pointed at Henry and Lilly like a pistol.

“I am so pleased to meet you, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. Welcome to the world of ghosts and mythical creatures!” they heard a voice say.

In the next instant, drops of a strange liquid landed right on their faces. Unconscious, Lilly and Harry sank to the floor.