

The Haunting of Jonathan Jones

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The rain was just starting as Jonathan Jones pulled up in front of the library. *I'm not supposed to be here*, he thought, staring at the harsh fluorescent glow spilling out of the windows into the October night. *I should be home with my feet up, drink in hand, TV blaring, with a fat Scottish Terrier asleep on my lap.* He ducked his head into the collar of his coat and hurried across the road before he could get too wet. The place was deserted, which was par for the course for a Friday evening.

“Do you know where I could be right now, Sarah?” he asked as he entered. He looked at the student behind the circulation desk. “Do you have any idea what I could be doing this exact moment?”

The girl barely looked up from her phone. “Good to see you, too, Jon.”

“I was about half a glass of whiskey away from being unable to come in tonight,” he grumbled. “If that call had come twenty minutes later, I would still be at home with my Boris Karloff marathon.”

“Yeah,” Sarah replied dryly, “how inconsiderate of Theresa’s husband to have a heart attack and interrupt your big evening.”

Jonathan removed his coat and tossed it over a chair as he took his place behind the reference desk. “Thanks for making me feel like an asshole,” he said. “I was just venting.” He looked around. The main floor, an open space filled with tables, computer stations, and private study rooms, was devoid of all life other than the two employees. “Anybody in the building at all?” he asked.

Sarah shook her head. “Don’t think so,” she said. “I haven’t seen anybody.”

He sighed. “Typical Friday, then. We’re going to sit here twiddling our thumbs for three hours while nobody comes in.” He sat down and leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head as he surveyed the empty library. He slowly spun the chair to take in a panoramic view of the floor. He sighed. “Well, if I’m going to stay awake until ten, I need some coffee. You want any?”

She shook her head again.

The door to the librarian's office suite was unlocked. It was proper procedure to lock it before leaving, but Theresa had likely left in a hurry. Jonathan switched on the light and inspected the coffee maker. There was an inch or so left in the pot, but the glass was cold to the touch. He wasn’t about to drink it. He went through the motions of removing the used filter, pouring out the old stuff, rinsing the pot, and refilling the machine with fresh water and grounds. He clicked the machine on and stepped back onto the library floor. No point sitting

there watching it percolate. Jonathan looked at the empty reference desk, and the mere thought of sitting back down without his coffee made him yawn.

“Anything that needs doing?” he asked Sarah. “Seriously, I’ll take anything. I’ll even do whatever busywork you have to do. If I sit down at that desk right now I’m going to fall asleep.”

Sarah looked over her shoulder. “There’s a couple of books that need to be shelved,” she said. “I was putting it off until the end of the night, but if you’re really desperate…”

He nodded. “Yeah, hand ‘em over.”

Sarah passed him the books and he headed upstairs to the stacks.

The main floor of the library was modern, but the bones of the building were more than a century old, and they showed in the stairwell. The heavy oak handrail had been smoothed and polished by countless palms. The granite steps showed noticeable wear where innumerable feet had trodden, and Jonathan’s footfalls echoed through the stairwell as he removed another microscopic layer from the tread. He paused briefly at the landing for the second floor, glanced at the spines of the books in his hand, and continued upwards to the third.

The main floor was quiet, but the silence in the stacks was so quiet that it was tangible. It was like a thick summer heat, so heavy and oppressive it could practically be felt weighing on the skin. Though he knew exactly where to go from the call numbers, Jonathan took a moment to look up and down the floor, appreciating the profound silence. Even when the library was full of students, the upper floors managed to

retain their hushed quality. True, they were reserved for quiet study, but the silence went beyond that. Sounds made on the stacks floors never traveled very far, and seemed to fade and die moments after being made, as if unable to endure in the sanctified silence.

The lighting fixtures on the upper floors were old, and hadn’t been converted to fluorescent bulbs, so the stacks were filled with a dull yellow of incandescent light. It probably cost the library more in electrical bills each year to keep them running than it would to convert them, but Jonathan didn’t mind. The lights were softer here, warmer and more inviting than the harsh white of the main level. The lamp at the far end of the floor was flickering again, he noted. He’d have to put a work order in, though he’d worked there long enough to know not to expect too much.

Jonathan made his way down the rows of bookshelves, his shoes making little noise on the old hardwood floors. He shelved the books--two in R (medicine) and one in U (military science)--before making his way back to the main staircase and returning to the first floor.

“Was it thrilling?” Sarah asked as she heard the stairwell door close behind Jonathan. “Did it just make your night, getting to do my job?”

“Extremely,” he replied. “I’m going to recommend to Theresa that we do away with student workers, I loved it so much.” He was on his way back to the office when he paused, stopped by the sight of the full and steaming mug of coffee sitting on the reference desk. “Oh, thanks,” he said, taking his seat. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Sarah looked up, confused. "Do what?"

He lifted the mug. "You didn't pour my coffee and bring it out here?" She shook her head, and Jonathan regarded his mug with suspicion. If Sarah hadn't done it, he was the only possible candidate, but he had gone upstairs to shelve while it was percolating. Hadn't he? Suddenly, his recollection of events was called into question. *Had* he gone upstairs right away? He thought the shelving was a diversion while the coffee brewed, but maybe it had been a diversion while it cooled. He took a tentative sip. It was cool enough to drink. He shrugged the doubts away and took a longer swallow. Whatever the sequence of events had been, the books were shelved and the coffee was brewed.

Sarah said something that he couldn't catch.

"What?"

"I said, 'maybe it was the ghost,'" she repeated.

The librarian rolled his eyes. "Are they still spreading that tale to the freshmen?"

"Hey, don't dismiss it. I know people--"

"Everybody 'knows people' who've seen something, or heard something, or had an older sibling that swears that it happened to them," he interrupted. "That BS is as old as the library itself. It's a college fable, Sarah, and it's not even a very unique one. Every old college in the world has a supposed ghost that they like to talk about to spook new students. I once visited a school that claimed to have the ghost of a cow that haunted their bell tower."

"Well, at least that one's original."

Jonathan took another sip of his coffee. "Can't argue with that, I guess," he muttered into his mug. "What's the version that they told you? Did it come out on a campus tour?"

She shook her head. "It was my freshman year RA. I lived next door, in James Hall, so there was a lot of talk about the ghost creeping over there. One of the juniors on the floor above me even claimed she'd seen it outside her window, but she was just lying for attention. Anyway, the story my RA told us was about a woman who was a student here...or maybe she was a librarian? I can't remember. Anyway, she hung herself here in the library, from the old rafters you can see up on the third floor. She climbed up one of the stacks, tied off the rope, and jumped. Sometimes you can see her through a third-floor window or hear her footsteps upstairs."

"Did your RA happen to mention why she hung herself?"

"No. Why?"

"Just curious. Most people go with the cliché of unrequited love or romantic betrayal. If she's a student in the story, sometimes the stress of college gets added to the mix."

A smile twitched at the edge of Sarah's mouth. "So you've heard it before."

"Only about a dozen times a semester," he replied. "And she doesn't always hang herself. In some versions, she falls down the stairs and breaks her neck, and in a few of the gorier and more imaginative ones I've heard she's murdered among the stacks. People take their own liberties with it. There's also the one about the library being a makeshift POW camp during the Civil War and the ghost being a Confederate

officer who was killed by his captors. I've also heard one about a disembodied hand that floats through the library, knocking over books and moving things around."

"Just a hand? What's the story behind that?"

"Oh, a variety of different accidents, each more outrageous than the last. My personal favorite is the one where a student reaches into the book drop and the door slams shut, cleanly severing their arm at the wrist." He made a sharp chopping motion with one hand.

Sarah laughed. "Seriously? People buy that shit?"

"You'd be surprised."

"What about you, Jon? Which do you believe?"

He stared at her, incredulous. "None of them," he said firmly. "It's all ridiculous. Let's say for a moment that I believed in ghosts, which I don't. If there was a murder or suicide that dramatic on campus, there would be at least *some* record of it, and I haven't found any. Yes, before you ask, I've looked. There's always one freshman who wants research help because they're writing a paper on the Rhodes Library Ghost. There were no Civil War camps anywhere near here, and certainly not a POW camp in the building, so there goes our Confederate soldier. As for the disembodied hand, well... I'm just a librarian, but I don't think there's enough force in the book drop to snap a pencil, let alone sever a human wrist."

"Maybe it's all three," Sarah suggested, smirking. "Maybe the Confederate officer deserted his unit during a battle. He made his way here to hide, but was discovered by a librarian. He strangled her to keep her from exposing him. But she fought back, and injured his hand. It got infected, and so he

cut it off to prevent the spread of the infection. But he did it incorrectly, and he bled to death."

"Very imaginative," he remarked. "Straight out of a penny dreadful. Now you have your own version to scare freshman with. Or you could save it for Dr. Jackson's creative writing class. I'm sure she'd love it. You could end it with the image of the two of them trapped here together for eternity." They both laughed at the idea.

Gradually, the two employees lapsed back into silence. Sarah browsed her phone, reacting occasionally to an image or a text. Jonathan sipped his coffee and amused himself by completing an online crossword puzzle. The clock behind the circulation desk ticked on. Outside, the rain picked up, drumming steadily against the library windows.

The puzzle finished, Jonathan set the mug down on the desk. He did so with perhaps a bit too much force, as the sound caused Sarah to jump. "Sorry," he said, standing. "I'm just going to the bathroom. Try not to burn anything down."

The only bathrooms in the library were located on the lower level of the building, with the reference books, bound periodicals, the archives, and the boiler room. The whole floor was prime fodder for ghost stories. Most students only used the lower level for the bathrooms, which were located just off the stairwell. From the bathroom doors, they had an uninterrupted view down the length of the floor, past the towering rows of dictionaries and encyclopedias to the archives door. The door itself was the centerpiece of the scene. It was huge and heavy and almost as old as the library itself, though it had been reinforced with additional security features over the years. It

was the kind of door that would appear in a story about ancient, unfathomable evil with warnings carved on it in unknown languages, or that would lead to the forgotten crypt of an accursed king. The imposing effect was heightened by the old boiler room, which was located in the opposite corner of the basement from the archives, but occasionally filled the floor with groaning and rattling as it struggled to perform its duties.

Jonathan paid the archives door little mind as he emerged from the stairwell and turned toward the men's room. It was difficult for him to find dread in the old door when he knew that the most terrifying thing behind it was the cramped conditions that spoke to the library's lack of funding.

The bathroom, like those of many old buildings, hadn't been renovated in decades, and the ceramic tile that coated the floor and two-thirds of every wall created an echo chamber where the slightest sound was magnified tenfold. It didn't matter that nobody else was in the building; the thump of his feet against the floor and the clatter of the slightly-too-narrow, slightly-too-long stall door as he closed and bolted it still made him somewhat self-conscious. He settled himself with a sigh, dug his phone out of his pocket to entertain himself, and allowed nature to take its course.

He was deeply invested in an article detailing the sociopolitical climate of somewhere he couldn't even find on a map when he heard slow, heavy footsteps echoing through the bathroom. He looked up just as a shadow moved in front of the stall door. He stopped, staring at the long, narrow door as he waited for the person to knock or push or ask if anyone was in there.

Nothing happened.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Uh, occupied," he said, his voice echoing.

The shadow on the other side of the door did not move. For several long moments, Jonathan sat there, pants around his ankles, wondering why it was taking so long for the stranger to process his response. The door rattled.

"Hey, occupied!" Jonathan shouted. "There's an empty stall right next to this one!"

The rattling stopped, and for another few long moments the shadow did nothing. Eventually, it moved away, the heavy footsteps booming through the old bathroom.

Jonathan finished his business and cautiously opened the stall door. The shadow hadn't entered the stall beside him, and he hadn't heard the bathroom door thud shut. He wondered if whoever it was still lurked in the bathroom. He peered around the edge of the stall.

The bathroom was empty.

"Okay, very funny," he said as he returned to the main library level. "Unfortunately for you I don't scare so easily."

"Huh?" Sarah was emerging from the storeroom behind the circulation desk holding a small pile of books. "What are you talking about?"

Jonathan gestured over his shoulder to the stairs. "Your little stunt in the bathroom just now. Very funny. Was that supposed to be the soldier, or the woman rattling the stall door?"

The student stared at him. "Jon, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't moved from the desk. The only

time my ass left that chair was just now, to get these.” She held up the books. “Someone just dropped them through the slot. Sadly, no hand to go with them.”

“Well,” he said, “someone came into the bathroom and rattled the door. Anybody come in since I went downstairs?”

Sarah shook her head. “Not a soul. Maybe it really was the ghost, coming after you because you don’t believe.”

He grunted. “Now I *know* you’re bullshitting me. Fine, don’t admit it was you. I don’t blame you. Wasn’t a very good prank anyway.” He resumed his post at the reference desk.

“Hang on, how do I know that this actually happened? Maybe you’re making the whole thing up in an attempt to spook me.”

Jonathan frowned. “Yeah, because while pooping, I decided to concoct a ghostly encounter, and the best I could do was ‘someone came in and rattled the stall door.’ I’m no writer, but give me a little credit here, Sarah.”

“You sure you didn’t see spectral leather boots or a ghostly skirt hem under the door?”

“Yeah, both, as a matter of fact. And I was out of TP, until a disembodied hand floated over the stall and handed me a fresh roll.”

“See, now there’s a ghostly encounter.”

Jonathan shook his head. “Either someone came in and you missed it, or you’re lying to me for whatever reason. I’m not going to worry about it. We’ve only got--” he glanced at the clock on the wall and groaned “--two hours to go. Dammit. Does time work differently in this building? How is it not time to leave yet?”

“Leave?” Sarah replied, dropping her voice an octave and drawing out the word melodramatically. She stared, wide-eyed, at the reference desk. “But you’ve always been here...” She allowed her voice to trail off before transitioning into a throaty cackle.

The librarian was unamused by the joke. “You’re going to be insufferable for the rest of the night, aren’t you?”

Sarah laughed--normally, this time--in reply, but the laughter was cut short as her eyes went wide and the color drained from her face. She leapt up, hand over her mouth, and sprinted out the front door of the building. Confused and concerned, Jonathan followed.

The powerful, stomach-turning sour smell that filled the air told Jonathan what had happened before he saw it. He found the student just outside the main entrance, her head bent over the nearest flower bed as she coughed and retched. The librarian reached out a consoling hand, but pulled it back in horror as Sarah brought up a fresh wave of whatever she had recently eaten. She coughed again once it was up, spitting a few times to clear her mouth, and stood.

“Shit,” she muttered weakly. “Where did that come from?”

Jonathan did his best to look concerned while simultaneously keeping his distance and breathing through his mouth. “What did you eat today?” he asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” she said. “Honestly, I felt fine until about ten seconds ago.” She gently rubbed her stomach, exhaling slowly. “I think I’m good,” she said, though

she still looked a little green. “I think I got whatever it was out of me.”

The librarian shook his head. “No offense, Sarah, but I’d rather you get out of here.”

“Jon, I’m fine. It was a little nausea.”

Despite her assertions, she looked to Jon as if she would bring something else up at any moment. He glanced at the flower bed. “There’s nothing little about that. Go back to your room, Sarah. Drink some ginger ale and eat some crackers or something. I can handle things here.”

“I don’t want to leave you all alone.”

“Sarah, it’s a Friday night. Nobody’s coming in. Get out of here. Feel better.”

The student covered her mouth as a rancid-smelling burp passed her lips. “Okay,” she acquiesced. “If you’re sure.” Jonathan nodded and made a shooing gesture with his hands. Sarah took a few steps away from the library and turned. “You’ll take care of all of my closing duties? You know how to do them?”

“I was working in this library before you hit puberty,” he reminded her. “I can handle it.” He shooed her again, and she hurried off down the path, head bent forward against the rain.

Jonathan watched her go, shaking his head and marveling at the series of events that had transpired that evening. If he were more superstitious his mind would be drifting to curses and vengeful spirits, but as it was he simply chalked it up to bad luck. He turned and headed back into the library.

Jonathan resumed his position behind the reference desk, picking up with another crossword puzzle. He lifted his mug--carefully, because the coffee was almost at the edge--and took a tentative sip of the fresh, steaming contents. After assuring himself that the coffee was cool enough to drink, he took a longer sip, and it wasn’t until several sips later that he remembered that he hadn’t refilled the mug.

He stared, bewildered, at the cylinder of black ceramic in his hand, trying in vain to remember if and when he had decided that his coffee needed topping off. He drew a blank. If at some point, Jonathan had picked up the mug, walked back into the office, refilled it from the carafe, and returned to the desk, he had no memory of doing so. And yet here was the evidence that *someone* had done just that, a thin plume of steam rising from that evidence into his face. He looked up--more out of some strange instinct than out of any expectation to see the culprit--toward the office suite, just in time to see the door click shut.

“Hello?” he called. There was no possibility that the door had closed on its own. No windows in the library were open to let in any draft, and Jonathan knew from experience that the main office door had a tendency to drift open if it wasn’t firmly latched. Someone had pushed it closed.

When he heard no response, Jonathan rose and headed for the door. “Hello?” he called again. “Sarah?” It seemed impossible that the student worker had decided to return so soon after being sent away and had managed to slip into the building without his noticing, but he couldn’t think of anyone

else that might have gone into the office. “Sarah, I told you to go home.”

The doorknob rattled in his hand, but did not turn. He knocked. “Hello? Who’s in there?” He tried the knob again, without success, and a moment later something heavy thudded against the inside of the door, causing him to jump back. “Hey!” he shouted. “What are you doing? Who’s in there?” He leaned in close, his ear nearly to the door, and could clearly hear movement on the other side. Someone was moving through the offices at a tear, slamming doors and throwing objects of all sizes, based on the repeated clattering and crashing.

Jonathan hurried back to the reference desk, keeping his eyes on the office door. He picked up the phone and dialed campus security. The line rang twice before he heard the click of someone picking up. “This is Jonathan Jones in the Rhodes Library. There’s--” he paused, realizing that there wasn’t another person on the other end of the call. Instead, the earpiece was giving off a faint static, and underneath the twang of banjo and fiddle and the muffled sound of someone singing. He paused. “H-hello?” he hazarded.

“*We hoist on high the Bonnie Blue Flag...*” sang the voice, crackling and skipping like it was being played on a badly damaged old record.

Jonathan started. In all the times he’d called campus security over the years, he’d never known them to have hold music. He hung up and tried again, with the same result. He tried a third time, but hadn’t even started dialing before the music picked up again. He slammed the phone back onto the

cradle, staring at it for a moment in stunned silence before remembering the entire reason he’d tried to use it. He looked back up the office door. It was still closed, though from the desk he was unable to tell if the person inside was still wrecking the place.

It took him what, in hindsight, was an embarrassing length of time to remember that he had a cell phone in his pocket. He fumbled to pull it out and dial the number.

“Campus police,” the dispatcher answered, and even in his panic Jonathan recognized the smoky rumble of Greg, the campus police chief.

“This is Jonathan Jones at Rhodes Library. Someone has locked themselves in the librarian’s office. It sounds like they’re throwing furniture around.” He must have sounded crazy, he realized, his words running together in a barely-coherent stream. He wouldn’t have been surprised if they just hung up on him.

“Okay, Jon. Sit tight.” Jonathan heard the static of a radio in the background, and a muffled exchange as Greg relayed instructions to the officer on patrol. “All right,” the chief said, returning his attention to the librarian. “Nan’s on her way. She’ll be there in a minute. Do me a favor and stay on the line, yeah? Let me know if anything happens.”

Jonathan nodded, realized that there was no way that the chief would be able to detect that, and voiced an assent.

No sooner was the word out of his mouth than he heard the click of a lock. The office door began to swing silently open, revealing a dark room beyond.

“Greg,” he whispered. “The door’s opening.”

“Do *not* go in there, Jon.”

Jonathan leaned forward, squinting at the doorway, but couldn't make out any movement. “I don't see anyone,” he said.

Greg continued to speak, but Jonathan had stopped listening. He was staring intently at the open doorway, scrutinizing the darkness in a vain attempt to see anything at all. Was the office always so dark at night? As he stared into the blackness, he couldn't seem to remember. For all he knew, the office was always dark, even at midday. It seemed plausible, at least at the moment.

“Jonny,” Nan said, snapping him out of his trance or meditation or whatever it was he was in. He hadn't even heard her enter. She was standing just inside the entrance, one hand on the stun gun at her belt, her eyes moving between the librarian and the open office door. “You okay?”

He nodded, hanging up the phone without a word.

“Anybody come out of there?”

He shook his head.

Nan turned her head toward the doorway. “Hey!” she called. “This is campus police. Come out of the office.” The dark doorway was silent. “Campus police!” she shouted again, and was once again met with silence. She looked back at Jonathan, who shrugged. Without a word, Nan inched toward the open doorway, one hand slowly stretching forward, the other remaining firmly on the stun gun at her hip. Jonathan's heart began to race as she moved. He knew it was only some kind of misguided prankster; why was he reacting like a

chainsaw-wielding psycho was going to burst out of the shadows?

Just as she reached the doorframe, Nan sprang forward like a scorpion, her hand darting into the shadows just long enough to flip the light switch. She pulled back, electroshock weapon drawn and ready as the room beyond was flooded with light.

Jonathan blinked as the entire office suite became visible.

Nan moved into the small vestibule between the offices, stun gun still ready as she glanced in each of the rooms in turn. After a moment's assessment, she stowed the weapon. “Uh, Jonny?” She called. “You wanna come in here?”

His heart hadn't slowed a beat as he hurried around the side of the reference desk and toward the security officer. He found Nan standing in the director's office, looking confused. “I thought you told Greg you heard furniture being thrown,” she said.

Jonathan looked around. He first noticed that he and Nan were alone--there was no one else in the office suite. The second detail that he noticed took a bit longer. He was so desperately scanning the room for something out of place that his eyes didn't immediately register that nothing was out of place. He blinked, and blinked again to be sure. He had heard chairs moving and glass breaking, objects crashing against floors and walls and doors...and yet nothing looked to have been moved. Everything was exactly where it should have been, down to the bowl of paper clips next to Theresa's keyboard. “What the hell?” he muttered.

He jumped back into the common room and looked in his own office, then at the offices belonging to his other two colleagues. Each was exactly as it was every day of the year. “What the hell?” he repeated, louder. He spun around, facing the officer. “Nan, I swear...”

She held up a hand. “Calm down, Jonny. It’s okay.”

“No, Nan, I know what I heard! Someone was in here! The door was locked, for godsake!”

“Jonny,” she repeated, this time with a hint of campus police authority. He stopped instinctively. “Let’s go have a seat,” she said, her voice easy and soft once again. “You can walk me through everything, slowly and calmly.”

Jonathan returned to the reference desk, and Nan pulled a chair over from one of the computer stations. He went through every moment of the evening, from his unexpected arrival to the stranger in the bathroom to Sarah’s sudden illness to the incident with the office door. He hoped he sounded sane; he was suspicious of his ability to do so, given how the latest event had ended. Through it all, Nan said nothing, although she did nod occasionally.

When the librarian had finished his tale, Nan said, “Sounds like it’s been quite a night.”

He scoffed, surprised at how much calmer he felt after spelling it out step by step. He’d even stopped trying to guess at what had happened in the office. Why bother? Everything was where it should have been. Maybe he had somehow imagined the whole thing. It had been a strange evening. “I guess that’s what I get for thinking it was going to be uneventful.”

Nan chuckled, and smiled wryly. “Maybe it was the ghost after all.”

“Don’t even kid about that anymore,” he chided. “The last person to crack that joke ended up vomiting in the bushes.”

She laughed. “Tell you what, Jonny. You close in, what, forty minutes?” She glanced at her watch and nodded. “Chad’s on with me tonight, and this is the only interesting thing that’s happened all night. I’ll hang around here until you close. That sound okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “That sounds just fine. Can I get you a coffee or anything? I think there’s still some in the pot I made earlier.” She shook her head. “Okay then. Well, we got some books dropped in before Sarah left that I haven’t gotten to yet. I’m gonna take care of those. You good to sit here?”

“I’ll hold down the fort.”

Jonathan picked up the stack where Sarah had left it on the circulation desk and took stock of its contents: two in B (philosophy), two in E (American history), and one for the curriculum collection, a special category of children’s literature and education texts which was held in a small room on the top floor.

It was only when he was in the stairwell that he remembered that it was raining outside. It had let up somewhat--earlier he had heard it driving against the windows, and now it was a faint patter against the glass. At least he wouldn’t have to sprint to his car when the night was over. He shelved the books on the second floor without incident, and headed to the curriculum room.

Why they had this room, Jonathan wasn't sure. He knew of other libraries that didn't, and it always felt unnecessary to him. The room wasn't big, but they had somehow managed to cram in enough shelving for all of the books, and even wedged a table and chairs into the middle of it all. He squeezed around the edge of the table and down one of the rows to shelve the final book.

And just like that, he was done. Nothing left to do but finish his coffee and chat with Nan until closing time. He allowed himself a contented sigh as he slipped out of the row. Nan had summed it up pretty well. It *had* been quite a night, and he was thankful that it was just about over.

What should have been a self-satisfied stroll back to the staircase was cut abruptly short as something in one of the stacks caught his eye.

A large black book lay on the floor, pages open and pressed against the ground. It must have fallen from the shelf, he realized, though the physics of that seemed unlikely. Nonetheless, he approached the book and picked it up. It had fallen open to what looked like the middle of an academic essay about literature, judging by the presence of the word *bildungsroman* at the top of the page. The cover was plain; he recognized it as one of the library's that they used on books that were old or damaged, or to bind volumes of journals. He closed the cover and flipped the book over to examine the spine: *The Barchester Literary Journal, vol. 2, no. 11*.

Jonathan frowned at the book. "How did you get up here?" he wondered aloud. Bound journals were kept in the basement. He glanced at the shelves around him, searching for

clues, and realized that he was in the same row of the medicine section as earlier that evening. He even spotted one of the books he'd shelved. This tome definitely hadn't been lying on the floor then. He shrugged. "Well, let's get you back where you belong," he said to the book, and returned to the stairwell.

Jonathan turned left at the bottom of the stairs, bathrooms behind him as he walked past the rows of reference texts to the journals. Bound volumes of journals were kept on compact shelving, huge creaking things on old metal tracks that had to be moved with massive wheels at the end of each row. Jonathan grunted as, with no small amount of effort, he turned one of the wheels, causing one shelf to slam into several others and shoving them all, shuddering and moaning, down the length of track until a three foot aisle appeared before him. Once in the row, it was easy to spot the empty space in the otherwise unbroken shelf of identical black volumes, and Jonathan replaced the wayward journal in its appointed place.

As the journal came to rest on the shelf, a thunderous crash filled the basement. Jonathan reflexively jumped back, assuming that the shelves were about to close in around him, but they remained still. He dashed to the end of the row as another mighty crash sounded.

The librarian stood for a stunned moment at the end of the row, looking around and trying to determine where the sound could have originated. His first thought was the boiler room--perhaps the old piping had finally given up. Strange noises from its corner of the library were not uncommon. He was halfway to the boiler room door to investigate when a third

crash came, and he realized that the sound was coming from behind him.

Jonathan turned and found himself staring down the long lane of stacks to the great oaken edifice of the archives door.

Another crash resounded again, metallic and cacophonous, so potent that the door seemed to shudder on its hinges. The handle rattled furiously, followed quickly by a heavy, rhythmic pounding, as if someone knocking against the wood.

There was no imagining this, he thought as he stepped toward the door, heart racing, hands trembling, mouth dry. There was someone--or something--behind the door, trying to get it to open. He had only heard the din in the office, but this was visible. He could see the struggle shaking the archives door, which he knew took no small amount of strength. Where was Nan? How had she not heard the noise and come running?

Ten feet from the door, the pounding and rattling stopped. Jonathan swallowed. The basement had gone silent in an instant, leaving him staring, sweating and pale, looking at a perfectly ordinary door, too afraid even to breathe. So absolute was the silence that, when the bolts in the archives door slid back, the noise could clearly be heard across the space.

The archives door jolted forward as if being opened for the first time in centuries, and then stopped as suddenly as it had started, leaving a gap of only a few inches between itself and the door frame. Nothing moved for several moments, but in that time Jonathan became aware of a powerful smell, a pungent sulfuric smell that filled his nostrils and stuck in his

throat. His eyes watering from the stench, Jonathan coughed, turning his attention away from the door for just a moment.

When he looked back, even though his eyes were rimmed with tears, he could see at once that something had changed. The door had not moved an inch from where it had stopped, but something within the tiny crevasse of an opening had, emerging from the darkness with a silent flutter and perching itself just on the edge of the door. Jonathan blinked and wiped his eyes to get a better look at what he initially took to be an enormous spider.

His heart froze. It was not a spider, but a hand, holding the edge of the door with a cold and indifferent vice grip. It was gaunt and grey, the nails long and black, the fingers covered in a strange blue-black material that was either tattered cloth or fraying and ancient skin. A long moment passed as Jonathan stared at it, imagining the rotting, ragged corpse that must be lurking on the other side of the door, waiting to push open the archives door and emerge into the world of the living, and as his mind filled with the vision of creaking sinews and cracking bones, a great and ghostly wail poured forth from the crevasse. The anguished scream of a damned soul echoed through the basement, rattling the books on their shelves and boring down into Jonathan's core.

He ran.

Jonathan tore across the basement and scrambled up the stairs, his frantic grip on the railing the only thing that kept his feet from flying out from under him and sending him crashing back down into the basement. He slammed the staircase door behind him as he reached the first floor and pressed his ear

against it, listening for the shambling step and the tormented cry of the unquiet dead moving beneath him.

It was as he was absorbed in this that he felt a hand lay itself gently on his shoulder, and he leapt into the air with a terrified scream, startling both himself and Nan, who leapt back.

“Easy, Jonny,” she said, like she was trying to settle a spooked animal. “It’s just me. What’s the matter?”

Words failed him as he took several quick, heavy breaths. He looked from Nan to the door and then around the floor of the library, hearing nothing but his own terrified breaths. Cautiously, he pushed the staircase door open a few inches, and heard nothing from below. He swallowed and, with effort, released his death grip on the door handle, which swung shut before him.

“Nan,” he managed after a long moment, “you okay if we close early tonight?”

She looked at him with genuine concern. “Yeah,” she replied. “Yeah, I think that might be a good idea. Get your stuff. I’ll hit the lights.”

Jonathan was shocked that he was able to walk to the reference desk and gather his coat and bag with such ease and normalcy, even if he did glance over at the stairwell door every so often. He reached the main door just as Nan hit the lights, leaving the library floor lit by only the few emergency lamps scattered throughout the ceiling. Jonathan locked the door behind them, and had to admit that he was grateful that Nan stood in front of the library and watched as he got into his car

and drove away, before climbing into the campus police car and continuing on her rounds.

They drove off into the rainy night, leaving Rhodes Library dark and vacant, the old stone facade looming up in the darkness like a Gothic castle.

“We’re losing our touch,” a voice said. “It never used to take this long to get us a bit of peace and quiet around here.”

Somewhere in the shadows, another voice grumbled its assent.