
VASHTI HARDY
WILDSPARK
A ghost machine adventure
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To my mum, Erica
– a belated birthday pressie!


The world of
WILDSPARK


N
W
E
S
Scar Pike
Haywood Farm
North Owlcot
Staplefield
Batterthwaite
Bimbledown
Medlock
Gawthorpe
Factorium
Doric Wells
Augustine



Chapter 1

THE STRANGER

On the bright side of the valley, ten furrows from Lane End and some twenty furlongs from the village of North Owlcot, in a place where the great metal city of Medlock was just a dream, there was a small farm. The farmhouse was a time-worn cottage nestled in barley-swathed fields divided by drystone walls. Wayward geese busied themselves near the pond and sheep grazed around single-standing oak trees. Automaton farmers sowed seeds, while scarebots kept the crows at bay.

Prue watched from the upper field, her elbows perched on the back of a broken mechanimal plough

horse, oily hands clasped together, as a speck of a figure wound his way up the lane. Even from this distance, Prue could see there was a smart uprightness to the stranger's walk unlike anyone she knew from the surrounding farms. As he neared, he paused and looked into the lower field where the automated potato digger ambled through the furrows, and Bess, one of the mechanimal dogs, patrolled, waiting to be called for evening herding. After a few moments, the stranger continued onwards and took the path towards the farm. When he turned, he looked up in Prue's direction. She ducked behind the mechanimal horse, which in retrospect was pointless because she was certain he'd already seen her.

A sudden ping, followed by the squeak of metal, drew Prue's attention to the ground in front of her.

"Darn it!" she said as the hoppity wrench sprang merrily down the hill. Barley whipped her calves as she chased after it, its little steel jaws bobbing up above the golden tops before disappearing again. "Come back here, you little metallic monster!" She dived and wrestled with it for a moment, as it battled to jump away. This particular hoppity

wrench not only seemed to have a loose restrainer, but a faulty homing device; it should've been able to make its own way back to the tool shed, but she had often found it hopping its way down the lane towards North Owlcot. Francis had tried to fix it last year, but he said some things just didn't want to be fixed.

She breathed out heavily and clipped the loose restrainer back in. "There." It bobbed its legs for a few moments, then gave up trying. When she peered above the barley, the stranger was nearly at the farm doorstep. Prue hurried downhill, through the tracks towards the house, keeping out of sight by stooping low, the hoppity wrench clamped firmly under her arm. She slowed her pace as she approached, then, after another quick peek to make sure the stranger wasn't looking, she hurried behind the water butt which was beside the farmhouse, close to the door. There was a sharp knock. After a few moments the door creaked open.

"Hello," said Mrs Haywood, an edge of suspicion in her voice.

"Hello. My name is Charles Primrose, Craftsman Primrose," he said brightly.

"And how can I help you, sir? Are you looking for produce?" Mrs Haywood asked doubtfully.

"I hope you don't mind me arriving out of the blue, but I was in Staplefield and someone mentioned that you have an extremely proficient young mechanic." He looked down at a note in his hand. "By the name of Francis Haywood?"

Prue's stomach lurched at the sound of her brother's name. Mrs Haywood didn't answer.

"Do beg my pardon. I'm from the Imperial Personifate Guild of Medlock – I expect you've heard of the innovations in bringing ghosts back into the world of the living."

Prue's heart gave a little jump.

"Yes, we do have newspapers in the country."

"Of course."

There was another awkward pause.

Prue peered from behind the water butt. Craftsman Primrose had a friendly, youthful face, with hair that was floppy on top and neatly trimmed at the sides. He wore wire-rimmed spectacles and was dressed in practical, but well-cut, expensive cloth – a fitted jacket in earthy brown tweed and matching trousers. A watch chain looped from his

waistcoat button to pocket. He looked exactly how Prue would imagine one of the city inventors to look. Craftsman Primrose's eyes flicked in Prue's direction and found hers. He gave a quick smile. The sun lit a flash of silver writing as he took a midnight-blue card from his pocket and held it towards Mrs Haywood.

"We're looking for apprentices at the Guild. Developments are happening all the time and we need the very best young minds to learn our craft and carry on the great work. We're searching far and wide; in fact, I'm looking for my own apprentice to take on."

"If things are moving fast that's a sure sign to slow down, don't you think?" said Mrs Haywood. "Just because you can do something, it doesn't always mean you should."

Prue huffed to herself.

Craftsman Primrose lowered the card. "Not keen on the personifate technology, Mrs…?"

"Haywood."

There was an awkward pause.

"Perhaps you'd like to keep this and think it through. It really is a wonderful opportunity for a

young person: the chance of an apprenticeship with a craftsman at the very forefront of technology. There would be an initial trial period, of course; nothing is guaranteed."

Prue admired his polite persistence, but Mum was like an immoveable boulder when she wanted to be. It was where Dad said Prue got her determination from.

The man gestured out towards the farm. "The machines in the fields are quite fascinating, and very unusual for a remote farm like this, if you don't mind my saying – and I'm certain the engineer who made those," he glanced down at the note again, "Francis, would be very keen to find out more about my offer."

Hearing his name again sent Prue's mind into overdrive, the thoughts of what had happened closing in, the lights turning out in her head. She forced it away.

"I'm afraid there is no one here who would be interested."

Prue desperately wanted to jump out and say that she'd made the machines too, but it was as though she suddenly had her own restraining lock on.

"Oh, that is a shame," said Craftsman Primrose.

Mrs Haywood didn't answer him. Dad would maybe have invited him in at least.

"It's getting rather late. I'm looking for bed and board. Do you happen to have…?"

"I'm afraid we don't take in strangers."

"Perhaps you know of a local establishment?"

"There's an inn back in Staplefield."

"There's nowhere closer?"

"It's the nearest there is."

Apart from the bed and breakfast lodge in North Owlcot, Prue thought.

Craftsman Primrose put the card back in his pocket. "You really do have some impressive machinery on the farm. It would be a pity for young inventing talent to—"

"Good day to you, sir. I'm sorry I couldn't be of help."

Craftsman Primrose dipped his head respectfully, turned, and began walking back down the path. Mrs Haywood watched him until he was out of sight, then she exhaled a long breath. Prue pushed herself deeper into the shadows as her mum took a few steps outside of the doorway and turned in her

direction, towards the west field.

"Proo-ue!" she called, in a sing-song voice. "Tea's on the table!" Then she sighed and said under her breath, "It's for the best."

There was the soft click of the latch closing and the waft of warm sourdough loaf. Prue counted to twenty, making sure her mum was well out of hearing range, then she ran down the path. Craftsman Primrose had already disappeared around the bend in the lane. Prue began jogging after him, but a flicker of silver caught her eye in the wall. She slowed to a stop, then pulled out the card and a rolled-up piece of paper that was beside it.

The card was a beautiful shade of midnight, embossed with a silver symbol: three interlaced arcs enclosed in a circle. She flipped it over – in silver print it stated:

Charles Primrose
Craftsman of the
Imperial Personifate Guild of Medlock
By appointment of the Sovereign Chancellery

Prue unrolled the note. In neat handwriting it

simply said: *I leave for Medlock tomorrow morning.*

Her heart thumped in her chest. It was understandable that her mum hadn't told the man; it had only been a year since Francis's illness. She sighed. Convincing her parents would be impossible – what was she thinking? And anyway, he'd been looking for Francis, not her. She threw the card and note into the weeds and stomped back towards the farm.

But after a furrow, she found herself running back, picking them up and stuffing them into the front of her patched dungarees.