





**SPECTRE
COLLECTORS**
TOO GHOUL FOR SCHOOL



BARRY HUTCHISON

*nosy
crow*



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For Michael Lopez,
co-founder of the original
Spectre Collectors. I hope
you're still having grand
adventures, old friend.

B. H.



Denzel Edgar was halfway through some particularly unpleasant maths homework when he saw the ghost.

He'd barely taken out his workbook when he first felt the icy tingle down his spine. He was sharpening his pencil when all the fine hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Denzel looked around to find where the draught was coming from, but every window and door was shut tight.

He was wrestling with a head-wrecking bit of algebra when his eraser jumped out of his pencil case and flopped on to the dining room table. Denzel stopped writing and looked at the rectangular rubber with its graphite-

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

stained ends. He looked at his pencil case. Then, with a shrug, he placed the eraser back inside.

A moment later, it hopped out again. This time, Denzel didn't move to return the rubber to the case. Instead, he just stared at it, wondering quietly what was going on. As he stared, his breath formed wispy white clouds in front of his face. It reminded him of being outside in December, only he was inside. And it was June.

Denzel's whole body began to shiver. He felt cold from the inside out, but he felt something even more troubling, too.

He felt like he was not alone.

"Wh-who's there?" he whispered. The words sounded smothered by the suffocating silence of the house. He heard nothing, saw nothing, but felt ... something. A tickle of movement across his face and through his hair, as if the air itself were taking form around him, becoming something different, something more.

Down on the tabletop, Denzel's eraser stood on end. It walked towards him, rocking from side to side the way his dad would walk the wardrobe from one end of his bedroom to the other whenever they took it upon themselves to reorganise the place. Unlike the wardrobe, though, the rubber was walking all on its own.

Instinctively, Denzel slapped his hand down on the

waddling eraser. He felt it squirm in his grip as he forced it back into the pencil case and zipped it inside. The pencil case twitched and wriggled, so Denzel slammed his schoolbag down on top, and quickly backed away from the table.

He could feel his heart beating at the back of his throat. His dad's wouldn't be home for another hour or more. He was all alone in the house.

So why couldn't he shake the feeling that he wasn't?

And then he saw it, reflected in the glass of a picture frame: a dark shape lingering in the corner of the dining room, spreading up the walls and across the ceiling like a nasty case of rot.

At first, Denzel tried to convince himself he'd imagined it. The dark thing behind him wasn't real. It couldn't be real. He was going mad, obviously. That last equation had fractured his poor overworked brain, making him see ... whatever that thing was.

He knew if he could just summon the courage to turn round he'd find nothing there but the empty wall. Maybe there'd be a shadow or something, but nothing like the writhing tangle of smoky black tendrils that was currently reflected back at him.

Slowly – ever so slowly – Denzel turned. As he did, he closed both his eyes, so by the time he was facing

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

the corner, he was still none the wiser as to whether anything was actually there.

He wanted his eyes to open, but his eyes were having none of it. It took several deep breaths and a whispered pep talk before his right eye relented. His left one, however, remained fully committed to staying shut.

To Denzel's dismay, when he opened his eye he saw that the corner wasn't empty. The thing that lurked there looked like a cross between an octopus and a chimney fire. It was as black and intangible as smoke, with six or seven long tentacles all tangled in knots. The shape seemed to pulse in time with Denzel's crashing heartbeat, getting faster and faster as Denzel's panic bubbled up inside him.

One of the thing's tentacles reached out for him, and Denzel stumbled back. He raced for the door leading into the hall and pulled it open. The tentacle whipped past him, slamming the door again and holding it shut.

Denzel ducked and scanned the room, searching for something to defend himself with. The best he could find was a little plastic model of the Blackpool Tower that a neighbour had brought them back from holiday. It wasn't the ideal weapon with which to battle a malevolent supernatural entity, Denzel suspected, but it was the only one he had.

"S-stay back!" he said, thrusting the Blackpool Tower towards the smoke thing, pointy-end first. "I'm w-warning you."

One of the smoky tendrils lashed out. A snow globe – another holiday memento – exploded against the wall above Denzel, showering him in glass, glitter and a tiny reproduction of Edinburgh Castle.

Yelping in fright, Denzel covered his head, just as a dining chair flipped into the air and slammed down beside him with a *smash*. Denzel dived for the door again, but the tendril still had it held closed.

The window! It was Denzel's only chance of escape. Waving the Blackpool Tower in what he hoped was a vaguely threatening way, he leapt over the broken dining chair and raced towards the window. He was making a grab for the cord that would pull up the blinds when the whole thing exploded inwards, knocking him off his feet and on to the dining table.

Denzel's momentum carried him over the polished tabletop. As he slid off the other side, the table tipped, shielding him from the smoke thing – and whatever had blown his window to bits.

Cautiously, Denzel poked the top of his head above the table edge, just enough to give him a view of the room. Two figures stepped through the gap where the

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

window and part of the wall used to be. It was hard to make them out through the cloud of plaster dust, but from their silhouettes it looked like the bigger of the two was carrying an assault rifle.

Denzel looked at the small plastic Blackpool Tower he'd somehow managed to keep hold of during his short flight across the room. After a moment's consideration, he quietly set it down on the floor.

"Scanning for hostile," barked the figure with the gun. It was a man, that was all Denzel could figure out. Youngish, he thought, but he couldn't be sure. He jabbed his little finger in his ear, trying to clear out the ringing noise from the explosion. Someone must have heard the sound. Help would be on its way. With a bit of luck, no one would kill him before it arrived.

"Any sign?" asked the other figure. This one was a teenage girl, Denzel reckoned, and sounded far less confident than her partner.

"Can't pinpoint it," the man said, and something about his voice this time told Denzel he was a teenager, too. A red light blinked on the barrel of his gun, as he slowly circled on the spot. "But it's here."

Denzel glanced over to the corner. The black shape was still there, pulsing and twisting as before. He found himself gesturing towards it with his eyes, trying to

draw the strangers' attention to it without being noticed himself.

"Perhaps the Third Eye of Sherm will shed some light on the situation!" the girl said grandly. Denzel heard the boy sigh as his partner began to mumble below her breath. The room was still one big cloud of white dust, but through the fog Denzel saw a shape illuminate in purple light on the girl's forehead. It was an oval with a circle in the middle, like a child's drawing of an eye.

"The Third Eye of Sherm!" boomed the girl, in a voice that rolled around the room. When the echo faded, the boy gave a disapproving tut.

"Do you have to do that every time?"

"Yes," said the girl. "It's tradition."

"It's dumb," the boy replied. "Besides, it blows our element of surprise."

The girl jabbed a thumb back towards the hole where the window had been. "Um... Hello? I'm not the one who obliterated the wall. The front door was literally five paces along the street."

"You have your traditions, I have mine," said the boy. "Whatever. Can you see it?"

"The Third Eye of Sherm sees all," said the girl.

"Yes, but does it see the hostile?"

The girl turned and scanned the room. The purple

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

glow of the eye on her forehead swept across the walls like a searchlight, passing right across the smoke-thing. “No,” she admitted. “It doesn’t see that. It can’t be here.”

The boy gave his gun a smack with the heel of his hand. The light flickered then came back on. “You sure? I’m definitely reading something.”

“What do you trust more? Eight billion pounds of advanced tracking technology,” began the girl. She tapped her forehead. “Or this baby?”

“Eight billion pounds of advanced tracking technology,” said the boy, without hesitation.

Denzel wanted to scream to them that both the tracking technology and the fancy glowing eye were both rubbish, because the “hostile”, as they called it, was right there in the corner of the room, just sort of hanging about looking ominous.

He watched both figures turn around another couple of times, each carrying out their own search. He’d expected to hear sirens by now, but there seemed to be no sound at all coming in through the hole in the wall. It was almost 5pm. The street should be filled with the teatime rush.

Denzel glanced over to the dark shape in the corner, and suddenly got the feeling that it was looking back at him. It had no eyes, but he could feel its gaze drilling into

him, piercing right down into his soul.

“Oh well. False alarm, I guess,” said the girl. The dust cloud was settling, and Denzel could just make out that she wore a dark-red robe with what looked to be ridiculously wide shoulder-pads. She wiped a hand across her forehead, and the glowing eye disappeared. “Let us slip away like the Shadows of Shak’tee!” she said, making an elaborate gesture with her hands.

The boy looked her up and down. “What was that meant to be?”

“Just something I’m trying out,” the girl replied, sounding a little embarrassed. “I thought it’d make me appear more, you know, *mysterious*.”

“It makes you appear deranged,” the boy said. “Come on, let’s go.”

Denzel felt his stomach tighten as the two figures turned back towards the hole in the wall. The dark cloud began to throb more quickly, and Denzel could almost sense its excitement. Soon it would have him all to itself, and Denzel got the feeling that was just what it wanted.

“Wait, d-don’t leave!” Denzel yelled. He pointed to the corner, where the dark thing now twisted into knots. “It’s there. It’s right there!”

The two figures turned sharply, the girl raising her hands in front of her, the boy taking aim at Denzel with

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

his weapon. They stepped closer and Denzel got his first clear look at them as they emerged from the cloud of dust.

He had thought the girl was wearing a robe, but could see now it was a flowing red cape draped over a dark-green tunic. A belt of gold-coloured rope was tied around her middle, and there were more rings on her fingers than in a jeweller's shop window. She looked younger than Denzel had been expecting – fourteen, maybe, possibly even thirteen like him.

The boy beside her was a little older, but not much. He was dressed in a military uniform, but not one from any army Denzel had ever seen. The camouflage pattern on the outfit was made up of shades of silver and blue, with shiny blue boots that reached halfway up his shins. Not really the ideal colours for hiding in bushes, Denzel thought. His sleeves were rolled up, and his gloved hands gripped the stock and barrel of his weapon, which Denzel was somewhat dismayed to note was pointing at his head.

The boy's eyes narrowed, then he shot the girl a sideways glance. "Third Eye of Sherm sees everything, does it?"

"Well your scanners didn't pick him up, either!" the girl protested.

"Duck!" shouted Denzel, as an *I've Been to Legoland Windsor* ceramic plate whistled through the air towards the intruders. The boy reacted quickly, ducking just before the plate hit him. The girl wasn't so lucky.

"Ow!" she yelped, as the plate smashed against the back of her head. "That really hurt!"

"Where is it?" demanded the boy, spinning in the direction the plate had come from.

"There!" Denzel cried, pointing to the corner again.

"He can't possibly see it," the girl protested, gingerly touching the back of her head. "I mean... You can't, can you?"

"Great big black cloud thing!" Denzel yelped. "Lots of tentacles. It's literally right there in front of you!"

The boy raised his weapon. "I'll take your word for it," he said.

He squeezed the trigger. A piercing squeal filled the room.

And everything in Denzel's world went white.

SPECTRE COLLECTORS



When the light faded, the black shape was nowhere to be seen. The boy *clacked* a switch on the side of his weapon and a hand grenade-sized red gemstone dropped from the bottom. The girl bent low to catch it before it hit the floor, then hurriedly wrapped it in what looked like the thin branch of a tree, muttering as she fumbled with the knot.

“Bullseye,” crowed the boy. “Boom!” He turned to Denzel, his satisfied grin quickly turning to a cold stare of suspicion. “You knew where it was. How?”

Denzel got to his feet, kneading his eyes with his finger and thumb. The glow of the light was still burned into

his retinas, and when he blinked the usual darkness had been replaced by a shimmering white fog.

“I could see it,” Denzel said.

“You could *see it*?” snorted the boy, looking him slowly up and down. “How could you see it?”

“I just sort of pointed my eyes in its general direction, and there it was,” Denzel said. “How could you not see it? It wasn’t exactly difficult.”

“No, not difficult,” agreed the girl, slipping the bound gemstone into a small leather bag that hung from her belt. “*Impossible*. You can’t see poltergeists. It can’t be done.”

Denzel shrugged. “Well, maybe it wasn’t a polter-thingy, then.”

“Poltergeist. And of course it was!” said the girl. She glanced at the boy. “I mean... It was, wasn’t it?”

“Sensors said so,” the boy replied.

“Well, yes, but ... that doesn’t prove anything. They’re not exactly reliable.”

“More reliable than your stupid magic eye.”

The girl gasped. “How *dare* you doubt the Third Eye of Sherm?”

Denzel left them to their bickering and gazed around at what was left of the dining room. The gaping hole in the wall was the worst of it, of course, but there was

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

plenty of other damage, too.

The top part of the table had come away from the base, and at least two of its chairs were in pieces. The display cabinet where the crockery was kept had been knocked over, and most of the plates lay smashed on the floor.

The carpet was thick with dust, splinters of wood and shards of glass, and there was an oval scorch mark on the wall where the smoke-thing had been.

“My dads are going to kill me,” Denzel mumbled. He turned to the intruders, suddenly angry. “Who are you two? What right do you have to come in here and trash my house?”

“We’ve got every right,” snapped the boy, jabbing a finger right up in Denzel’s face. “That was a Class Eight hostile apparition. Left unchecked it could’ve done all kinds of damage.”

Denzel gestured around at his dining room, just as the lampshade fell from the ceiling and shattered on the floor. “And what, you thought you’d give it a hand?”

The boy stepped forward so he was leaning over Denzel. Denzel held his ground, trying not to show how much his legs were shaking.

“Yeah, but the difference is it doesn’t tidy up after itself,” the boy said. “Unlike us.”

He eyeballed Denzel for a few seconds. Denzel stared back, trying not to flinch.

The boy unclipped a walkie-talkie from his belt, but the girl put a hand on his wrist to stop him and smiled hopefully. “Wait, can I try?”

The boy sighed. “Not this again.”

“I’ve got it this time, I’ve totally nailed it. Promise. Just let me try.”

The boy glanced at Denzel, then at his partner. He shook his head, but lowered the radio. “Fine. Whatever. Do it. But be quick.”

The girl clapped her hands excitedly, then stepped back. “OK,” she mumbled. “Here goes. This is it. This time there’s no stopping—”

“Get a move on,” the boy snapped.

“Right. Yes. Here goes.”

Denzel watched as the girl’s fingers danced and weaved through the air. As she waggled her digits, she chanted. It sounded like gibberish to Denzel, but after a moment the girl’s fingertips began to sparkle and shimmer.

Lowering her hands, she turned to the gap in the wall. “Here we go,” she whispered. “It’s going to work this time. I can feel it. It’s going to work.”

Denzel leaned left and right, trying to see out through the hole. “What’s going to work?” he asked.

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

“Just wait. Any minute now,” said the girl. “Any minute...” She squealed with excitement. “There! Look!”

Denzel watched as a grey squirrel hopped in through the damaged wall. It stopped on the carpet and peered around the room, its nose twitching. A moment later, two sparrows fluttered in, carrying something between them.

“Is that... Is that a duster?” Denzel asked.

“Yes!” the girl shrieked. She hopped excitedly from foot to foot as a stag ducked its antlers through the gap and trotted into the room, clutching a broom in its mouth. “It’s working! It’s actually working!”

“Great,” said the boy flatly.

The girl grinned from ear to ear as a family of ducks waddled into the room, carrying a number of power tools between them. “Brace yourself,” she yelped. “This is going to be the most magical clean-up ever!”



Three minutes later, the dining room had descended into chaos. The sparrows were pecking at the stag’s eyes, while it kicked the remaining dining chairs to pieces and tried to use its antlers to make kebabs of the ducks.

Two badgers, who had arrived late, were taking it in turns to rough up the squirrel. The squirrel, however, had managed to get its hands on a can of furniture

polish, and it chittered angrily as it sprayed the badgers in the face.

Denzel watched the carnage unfolding in horror. Beside him, the girl in the cloak scratched her head. “This didn’t happen to Snow White.” She sighed. “Oh well, back to the drawing board.”

She dodged a duck and ducked the deer, then turned to the boy and offered him a shaky smile. “Maybe you should do the honours, after all.”

“Oh, you think?” the boy said, reaching for his radio. “Domestic clean-up needed at this location.” He turned to Denzel. “How long until your parents get home?”

Denzel’s stomach knotted at the thought of it. “It depends on traffic and stuff, but – I don’t know – twenty minutes?” he said.

The boy muttered something below his breath then raised the radio to his mouth again. “Priority one. Get here now.”

There was a crackled confirmation from the other end of the line, and the boy returned the walkie-talkie to his belt clip. He and the girl both rounded on Denzel, just as the stag grabbed the broom in its mouth and set about trying to mash the sparrows into a feathery paste.

“This is madness,” Denzel said, gawping at the mess. “This is, I mean... This is insane. Who *are* you people?”

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

“We’re part of a top-secret organisation dedicated to protecting the human race from supernatural threats,” said the girl. She sounded almost robotic, like she’d said the same words a hundred times before. “We go by many names. The Cult of Sh’grath. The Messengers of the Allwhere. The Seventh Army of the Enlightened.”

The boy leaned in front of her. “But we prefer the *Spectre Collectors*.”

Denzel frowned, trying his best to ignore the squirrel that came riding past his feet on the back of a baby duck. “The Spectre Collectors? So ... what? You catch ghosts?”

Both the girl and boy nodded. “Among other things,” said the boy. “But like she said, it’s top secret. Above top secret, in fact.”

“So how come you’re telling me?” asked Denzel, suddenly nervous.

The girl reached into another bag that was tied around her belt and took out a handful of something that looked like glitter. Unlike glitter, though, the air above it seemed to shimmer, like heat rising from a hot tarmac road.

“Because,” said the boy. “You’re not going to remember any of it.”

Before Denzel could reply, the girl blew on the dust. It swirled into a miniature tornado, then hit Denzel full in the face. He coughed and spluttered as he felt it flutter

up his nose. It tickled his sinuses, like a sneeze that was sulking and refusing to come out.

“What did you do to me?” he demanded, then he looked down at the table in front of him.

His homework was there, open at a particularly brain-frying piece of algebra. He stared at it for a long time, before realising he’d already filled in the answer. He felt like he could almost remember writing it, but it was slipping away from him like a dream.

He got up from the table and walked to the window. The blinds were open and he could see the street outside. His dad’s car was pulling up, and Denzel felt his stomach rumble. It was Wednesday, which meant takeaway night.

“Please let it be Chinese, please let it be Chinese,” he whispered, crossing his fingers. He pushed his chair back in and made for the door leading to the hall.

Halfway there, he felt something crunch underfoot. Denzel bent and picked up a tangle of broken plastic.

“Huh,” he said, turning a tiny Blackpool Tower over in his hands. “How did that get there?”

He set the broken trinket back on its shelf, took a lingering look around the neat and tidy room, then headed through to join his parents for dinner.

A stylized graphic for Chapter 3. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below it is a large, black, stylized number "3". The "3" is surrounded by several horizontal, wavy lines that resemble a sound effect or a vibration. Above the "3" is a grey silhouette of a person with their arms outstretched, possibly a teacher or a student, with a small circle above their head. The entire graphic is set against a white background.

CHAPTER 3

Next morning, with his mouth still burning from the night before's tasty-yet-ultimately-disappointing Indian, Denzel set off for school.

As ever, he had his morning journey planned out to the exact minute. At exactly eight thirty-eight he would leave the house, remembering to wave to old Mrs Grigor across the road. At eight thirty-nine, he'd start walking towards the bus stop up near the shops. At eight forty, the bus would roar past him as if he wasn't there. Eight forty-one to five past nine would then be spent running frantically to school, and trying not to vomit from the effort.

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

It was the same routine every morning, and today was no different. His registration teacher, Mr Gavistock, barely batted an eyelid when he clattered in, puffing and wheezing and on the brink of passing out.

"Here, sir," Denzel offered, flopping down in his chair. The moment his bottom touched the plastic, the bell rang. Everyone else got to their feet and bustled out of the classroom.

"Ooh. Sorry, Denzel," said Mr Gavistock. He sucked on his grey moustache, his pen hovering just millimetres above the register. "The bell went before I could mark you as present. You'll have to pick up a late slip from the office."

Denzel glanced at the register. "Can't you mark me here now?"

Mr Gavistock slowly set his pen down and leaned forwards, his hands clasped in front of him. "No, Denzel. Because that would be against the rules."

"Yeah, but it's only a few seconds. And I made it before the bell went."

Mr Gavistock drew in a long breath. "But I hadn't marked you present when it rang, Denzel," he said. "My hands are tied."

"But—"

"My hands are tied, Denzel," said the teacher. "You

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

understand what I mean by that phrase? My hands are tied.”

Denzel stood up and hoisted his bag on to his shoulder. “Yeah, but, I mean... They aren’t, are they?” he said. “You could just mark me down. No one would really care.”

Mr Gavistock arched an eyebrow. “I could,” he admitted. Then he flicked his tongue across his ‘tache and smirked. “But where would be the fun in that?”

As a result of having to go to the office to pick up a late slip, Denzel was fifteen minutes late for maths. Mr Gavistock, who was also Denzel’s maths teacher, looked disappointed at him when he stumbled in.

“Twice in one day, Denzel,” the teacher said, shaking his head. “And I’m guessing you haven’t done your homework, either.”

“I have, actually,” Denzel said. He fished around in his schoolbag, then pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. Smoothing it against his chest, he handed the sheet to the teacher.

Mr Gavistock waved Denzel over to his seat and scanned the page. “Amazingly, this all looks to be right,” he said. “How did you manage that?”

Denzel sat down at his desk and rummaged in his bag for his pencil case. “Um... Just thought about it.”

Mr Gavistock raised a bushy eyebrow. “You ‘just

thought about it’?”

Denzel nodded. The truth was, he couldn’t really remember how he’d managed to solve the homework equations. He had absolutely no recollection of doing them.

“So what you really mean is you copied it from the Internet,” Mr Gavistock said. He raised a long, bony finger and tick-tocked it from side to side. “Tut-tut. Disappointing, Denzel.” He slowly tore the sheet in half. “Very disappointing.”

Denzel knew there was no point in protesting. Algebra wasn’t his strong point – he hadn’t yet figured out what his strong point actually was, but it definitely wasn’t that – and as he had no memory of doing the equations, he couldn’t offer much of a counter-argument.

Besides, the worksheet was already in at least eight pieces, so there was no coming back for it. He decided to keep his mouth shut and just get on with the day.

The rest of the morning passed in much the same way as every school day did – slowly, and with an overwhelming sense of disappointment.

At lunchtime, Denzel sat on his usual spot on the usual wall, waiting for his best friend, Smithy, to turn up. As usual.

Smithy wasn’t in any of Denzel’s classes, but they’d

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

been friends since the first day of secondary school, and met up at lunchtime every day so they could hang out and avoid having to talk to anyone else.

“What you got today, then?” asked Smithy. He spoke in a high-pitched nasal whine, thanks to some sinus problem he never grew tired of talking about in stomach-churning detail. He hopped up and sat on the wall beside Denzel.

Denzel opened his lunch box and peeled back the top layer of his sandwich. “Pastrami, dill pickle and Emmental,” he said. “On wholegrain. What about you?”

Smithy pulled a crumpled, slightly soggy brown paper bag from somewhere deep in his schoolbag. He opened it and gave it an experimental sniff. “Scrambled egg.” He looked hopefully at Denzel’s sandwich. “Wanna swap?”

“Not really,” said Denzel.

“Nah, nor me,” agreed Smithy.

Denzel gestured to his sandwich. “Want a bit?”

“Go on, then,” Smithy nodded. He reached into Denzel’s lunchbox and lifted out one half of the sandwich. Setting it on top of his lumpy paper bag, he proceeded to carefully remove the pickle and pastrami, then tossed them both away.

“Cheers,” he said, taking a bite of the now cheese-only sandwich.

They sat in silence for a while, munching on their lunch. Denzel’s feet were on the ground, while Smithy’s dangled several centimetres above it.

“What would you rather fight, right?” Smithy began.

“Go on,” said Denzel.

“A zombie with the brain of an evil genius, or an evil genius with the brain of a zombie?”

Denzel chewed thoughtfully. “An evil genius with the brain of a zombie,” he decided.

“How come?”

“Because he’s not really an evil genius any more, is he?”

“Yes he is. He’s an evil genius with the brain of a zombie,” said Smithy.

“That’s exactly my point,” Denzel said. “A zombie with the brain of an evil genius is a super-intelligent unkillable monster who wants to rule the world. An evil genius with the brain of a zombie is just a normal zombie. He’ll just shuffle about a bit moaning and trying to eat people.”

Smithy nodded. “Fair enough,” he said. He reached into his paper bag and scooped out a handful of cold scrambled egg. “Want some?” he offered.

Denzel screwed up his sandwich wrapper. “Nah, you’re all right,” he said. He nodded at a bin near the wall six or seven metres along from them. “How much will you give

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

me if I get this in?”

“A million pounds,” Smithy said, cramming the sloppy egg into his mouth.

Denzel shook his head. “That’s too much. That’s mad.”

“Oh, OK.” Smithy said. He shrugged. “One pound?”

“That’s better,” Denzel said, shutting one eye. He held the rolled up ball of cellophane between finger and thumb and moved it back and forth like a darts player taking aim.

“And Denzel Edgar lines up the shot,” Smithy said in a hushed whisper. “All eyes are on him now. Just one throw stands between him and a victory that’s sure to go down in history as one of the all-time pinnacles of human achievement. Edgar holds his breath. He aims. He throws...”

The ball of plastic wrap curved through the air, bounced once on the rim of the bin, then dropped inside.

Smithy jumped down and thrust his arms into the air. “He makes the shot! The crowd goes wild! Truly, they may as well all drop dead now, safe in the knowledge that they’ve witnessed the single greatest moment in all of human history, as young Denzel Edgar takes—”

The ball of plastic landed beside Smithy with a soft *paff*. He stopped cheering and looked down at it. “Oh, I take that back,” he said. “You missed.”

Denzel hopped down and picked up the cling film wad. “It came back out,” he said, frowning. “That’s weird.” Taking a step closer, he tossed it underarm into the bin. He held up a hand to stop Smithy launching into another celebration.

They both watched the bin for what felt like quite a long time. “What are we waiting for?” Smithy whispered.

Denzel relaxed. “Nothing. I don’t know. I just thought—”

The ball leapt out again and rolled to a stop in front of Denzel. He and Smithy both looked down at it, then at each other, before finally turning their attention to the bin.

“Hello?” Denzel called. “Is there someone in there?”

A flattened Coke can spun up from inside the bin, then clattered on the ground. “Great. We’ve got a bin weirdo,” Smithy muttered.

“What’s a bin weirdo?”

“It’s a receptacle for holding rubbish, *freak*,” Smithy said. He grinned. “See what I did there? I deliberately misunderstood your initial question so— Wah!”

Smithy ducked as a torrent of litter exploded upwards out of the bin like lava from an erupting volcano. Cans and plastic bottles shot several metres into the air, then clattered to the ground around them. Crisp bags swirled

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

on the breeze and floated down like autumn leaves.

Once all the rubbish had come to rest on the ground, Smithy turned to Denzel. "I think you broke the bin."

Down at their feet, the litter began to tremble. It vibrated across the tarmac, gathering in a spot just a few paces ahead of the boys. They both took a step back as the rubbish assembled itself into two piles, which both quickly grew upwards until they formed pillars just a little taller than Smithy and a little shorter than Denzel.

The pillars joined together and continued to grow upwards, forming one garbage-filled mass. As he stared, Denzel began to recognise the shape.

It was a person. Or a figure, at least. A ten-foot tall figure made of drinks cans, chocolate wrappers and half-eaten bits of fruit.

Smithy puffed out his cheeks. "There's something you don't see every day," he said.

"We should probably run," Denzel began. "I don't think—"

"DIE, RUBBISH-MONSTER!" Smithy hollered, swinging with his schoolbag as he launched himself at the towering figure's legs. The litter parted and he stumbled right through, hit the bin, then fell head-first inside.

"Should've run," Smithy called, his voice sounding echoey and muffled. "Totally misjudged that."

A hand, made largely of banana skins and Wotsits, grabbed for Denzel. He staggered back, swinging at it with his schoolbag. "Get off," he yelled.

The hand slammed down and Denzel dodged, barely avoiding being splattered against the ground. The mulchy stench of rot wafted up his nostrils, making him gag.

Smithy was still in the bin. The litter-thing didn't seem to have any interest in him, and was focusing all its attention on Denzel instead.

Denzel's heart crashed. The monster stepped closer on its teetering legs, and Denzel felt a tingle at the back of his mind, like the stirring of a long-forgotten memory.

"There is something awfully familiar about this," he whispered.

And then, he ran.



CHAPTER 11

Denzel hightailed it past the bike sheds, across the visitors' car park, and round the outside of the dining hall.

He was tearing across the little rectangle of concrete between the dining hall and the school's main entrance when the screaming started. His schoolmates scattered as the rubbish-thing skidded around the corner and chased Denzel down, its long litter legs bounding easily across the yard.

"Out of the way, watch out, coming through!" Denzel yelled, hopping and jiggling through the throng of older girls who sat on the school's front steps. The girls tutted

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

their annoyance at first, before launching into a chorus of panicky squeals when they spotted the towering trash-figure approaching.

Denzel clattered through the front door and stumbled into the reception area. The inner security doors were shut tight. He rattled on the handles, instantly incurring the wrath of the school secretary on the other side.

"Oi!" she said, rapping her knuckles on the glass. "Cut that out. Ring the buzzer like everyone else."

"Just open the flippin' doors!" Denzel yelled, glancing back over his shoulder. "Hurry up!"

The secretary crossed her arms. "Ring the buzzer," she said.

"Aaargh! OK!" Denzel cried. He fumbled with the button and a loud *BZZZZT* rang out. "There! Happy?"

The secretary touched the button that unlocked the door. "Yes," she said. "Wasn't so difficult, was—"

She screamed and staggered backwards as the outer doors were ripped from their hinges and the trash-creature ducked to fill the doorway. Denzel yanked open the glass doors and scrambled through, just as the cheesy-corn-based-snack hand grabbed for him once again.

Hurtling along the corridor, Denzel dodged and shoved his way through throngs of pupils. Squeals and scuffles

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

of panic started somewhere behind, and Denzel knew the monster was still coming for him. The panic quickly erupted into screaming hysteria, as everyone who was currently in the corridor decided they'd really rather not be.

Pupils ducked into doorways and dived through windows, desperately trying to get out of the path of the rampaging trash-beast. Denzel puffed and panted, tasting the thing's pungent scent with every rasping breath.

He skidded around the corner at the end of the corridor, and glanced back just long enough to see the monster bounding along on all fours, getting closer and closer and—

THWACK! It failed to turn in time and slammed into the wall at full speed. Denzel kept his distance as the creature collapsed in on itself, becoming once again just an unmoving mound of crisp bags and Coke cans.

Denzel watched the rubbish-heap closely, searching for any sign of movement. He was studying it so hard that he failed to notice a door open right beside it. Denzel jumped as Mr Gavistock exploded out of the room.

"What is the meaning of all this noise?" he demanded. He yelped as he slid on a half-eaten cheese and pickle sandwich, only just managing to stay upright.

The teacher gaped in horror at the rubbish heap, then rounded on Denzel, his bony finger wagging. "How dare you, Denzel? How *dare* you? Look at this mess! I am beside myself with rage. Do you understand what I mean by that phrase? Beside myself with rage!"

"Uh, yeah, but..." Denzel began, standing on his tiptoes to see over the teacher's shoulder.

"You never fail to disappoint, do you, Denzel?"

"No, but..."

"After this morning, I thought... Look me in the eye when I'm talking to you," Mr Gavistock barked. He jabbed his finger in Denzel's direction. "And where do you think you're going?" he demanded, as Denzel hurriedly began to back away. "Get back here this—"

WHAM! A scything arm made mostly of plastic bottles and Styrofoam trays smashed the teacher against the wall with a really quite surprising amount of force.

Denzel dashed down the corridor as Mr Gavistock slumped to the floor. The trash-monster finished pulling itself back together and the chase was on again. Denzel's legs ached. His heart pounded. He desperately needed the toilet. There was no doubt about it—this was shaping up to be one of his top five worst lunch breaks ever.

He turned another corner and saw the corridor ahead was jam-packed with kids. They sat on the floor

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

and leaned against the walls, chatting and laughing, completely unaware of the enormous monster currently hurtling in their general direction.

There was no way Denzel was getting through that lot in a hurry. He skidded left and threw himself at the fire exit. Pushing down the bar, he stumbled outside. The alarm began to wail, but was promptly drowned out by the sound of a twenty-foot-tall garbage-beast exploding through the doorway behind him.

“Oh, come on!” Denzel groaned. All around him, his schoolmates stared in wonder, then screamed in terror. Denzel hurried through the criss-crossing mass of panicking bodies, heading for... where? He had no idea, he just knew he had to put as much distance as possible between himself and the trash-thing.

The school’s side gates were dead ahead. There was a road out there, then a housing estate with a network of twisting back alleys. Maybe he could lose the monster in there.

Lowering his head, he raced for the exit, trying to block-out the thudding of the litter-thing’s footsteps closing behind him. Denzel dodged past a smaller boy who appeared to be literally frozen to the spot in fear, and suddenly the gate was looming dead ahead.

With a final frantic push he forced his legs to move

faster. Keeping his head low, he threw himself towards the exit...

Then slammed hard into a patch of rock-solid thin air. Denzel stumbled backwards, clutching at his suddenly throbbing skull.

“Ow, ow, ow!” he grimaced, hopping from foot to foot. He squinted at the empty space in front of him. “What was that?”

He raised his arms in front of him and tried a more cautious jog forwards. Almost immediately, he hit an invisible wall. The outline of his handprints *fizzled* in the air, then vanished when he stepped back.

“What? But... I mean...” Denzel spluttered, but before he could work out what the end of that sentence was going to be, the stench of rotten fruit and chips was suddenly all around him.

Slowly, Denzel turned. He looked up.

And up.

And up.

The trash-monster loomed over him. It had given itself eyes made of ketchup-stained paper plates. It also had a Pringles tube where its nose should have been, but that could just have been a coincidence.

“Top *three* worst lunch breaks ever,” Denzel whispered. There was nowhere to run now. Denzel could only wait

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

for the thing to attack, and hope it didn't hurt too much.

But it didn't attack. It dropped to one knee, and bent low over him until the smell of rubbish made Denzel gag. "What... What do you want?" he choked, but before he could get an answer, the creature imploded. There was no big noise or epic fanfare to accompany it – one moment it was there, the next moment all its component parts had rushed to meet each other in the middle of its body.

The litter squashed together and compacted into a lumpy sphere, no bigger than a basketball. It fell to the ground with a hefty *thud*, and Denzel found himself looking down the barrel of a futuristic assault rifle.

A boy, just a little older than him, stood at the less-dangerous end of the weapon, squinting down the sights. He wore a blue and silver uniform with shiny blue boots. A girl in a colourful cape and tunic stood behind him. They both raised their eyebrows in surprise.

"You!" said the boy.

"You?" said the girl.

"Uh, yeah. Me," said Denzel. He looked at them both in turn. "I feel like I should be saying 'you', too, but I have no idea who you are," he babbled. He raised his hands. "Don't shoot, by the way."

There was a savage screech from a few metres away.

"Leave my friend alone!"

Smithy flew at the boy with the gun, swinging with his fists. The boy stepped aside and Smithy flailed past. He crashed into a bin, flapped his arms for a few panicky seconds, then toppled head-first inside.

"Misjudged that again," Smithy said, his voice echoing. "Should've thought it through. Um... Could someone...?"

The girl caught Smithy by the belt of his trousers and pulled him free. "Thanks," he said, dusting himself down, then he jumped in front of Denzel, hands raised in a karate-chop pose. "Now, stay back! I'm warning you."

The boy lowered his rifle and Smithy gave a satisfied nod. "Yeah. That's right. Back off, man. These hands are lethal in the right ... hands." He winced. "That was awkwardly phrased, but you get the idea."

The trash-ball shuddered, making Denzel and Smithy both yelp and leap back. The girl knelt beside it. She mumbled below her breath as she tied what looked like very long twigs all the way around the densely packed rubbish.

"What is that?" Denzel asked.

"Willow branches," said the girl. "Blessed by three embodiments of the goddess Brigantia, granting it binding power over the dark realms."

Denzel blinked. "Uh, cool. That was nice of her," he

SPECTRE COLLECTORS

said. "But I meant the rubbish-thing."

"A ghost," said the boy.

"A ghost?" said Denzel. He and Smithy began to laugh, then realised the other two weren't joining in. "What? You're not serious."

"Technically, it's an ectoplasmic manifestation," said the girl, standing up. The willow branches were tied tightly around the trash-ball, which now showed no interest in moving.

"Ah, right," said Denzel. "One of them."

The boy looked him up and down. "So ... what do we do with you?"

The girl nudged him. "The bigger question is, what are we going to do with *them*."

She gestured to the school. Virtually the entire roll of pupils had gathered at the windows and doors to watch what was going on.

The boy clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "The barrier's in place, right?"

The girl reached a hand past Denzel's head and extended a finger. A crackle of energy passed along her arm. "Yep."

"Then gas them," said the boy. He reached into a pocket on his belt and pulled out a piece of transparent plastic. He slipped it over his nose and mouth, then

nodded at the girl to do the same. "Gas them all."

It took a few seconds for the boy's words to filter all the way through into Denzel's brain. The girl was slipping on her own mask when he finally reacted.

"What? What do you mean, 'gas them'?" he demanded, then he struggled and squirmed as the boy wrapped an arm around his chest from behind. A plastic mask was forced over the bottom half of Denzel's face.

The girl took a pouch from the gold-coloured length of rope she had tied around her waist like a belt. She tipped a handful of glittery dust into her hand. "What about him?" she said, nodding towards Smithy, who was hopping from foot to foot and swishing his hands, karate-style.

The boy shrugged. "What about him?" he said.

"Harsh," said the girl, then she pressed the dust against the invisible wall. The barrier shimmered, revealing itself as an enormous dome that covered the entire school.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Denzel demanded, but before anyone could answer, everything inside the dome was lost in a choking cloud of glittering orange.