



ILLUSTRATION BY TOM GALAMBOS



# GHOSTWISE

By CAIAS WARD

**O**BBA was only inches above five feet, his hair tight and kinked, his skin a deep brown and warm gold. His clothing was serviceable and sturdy, as befit a wanderer; thick boots, trousers, layers of shirt and coat worn but cared for. He did not wear his gloves now, showing that from six inches above his wrists to the tips of his fingers were white, as though the life were peeled away. It wasn't pink or blue or ruddy, but marble and chalk, moonlight and the cloak of snow on a cemetery plot.

The same color as the girl's hands who stood before him. She trembled before her makeshift cave of furniture and fabric stacked up in her royal apartment in the castle. Tired and disoriented, the girl's chalk hands shook on olive arms. Her brown eyes were pinned, her muscles loose, and her hair unwashed several days. She was maybe fourteen years old, stout and pretty and scared.

The apartment was as tattered as she. On the floor lay dressers and sofas, flipped, smashed, and scattered. Toys from far-flung nations crunched under the steps of the group. Jewelry and fine clothing rent apart and hurled. Colored light touched the floor from cracked stained glass windows. The air stank of raw chamber pots, stale sweat, and barrow-bone.

"I am sorry for my appearance, Father," the girl slurred, "but all the servants were scared away and I am so tired."

Obba walked to the girl, brushing aside the guard who tried to get in the way. He was not much taller than the girl, but Obba took up much space with his peculiar hacking sword on one hip and an ancient pistol, with a wide revolving cylinder set in its middle, on the other. He knelt down, taking the girl's head in her hands, tilting her head, looking in her eyes.

"King Sorani, I told you in my letter not to drug her," Obba said through gritted teeth.

King Sorani and his entourage of advisors, arcanists, and guards muttered among themselves, afraid to speak for a moment.

"There was no way she could sleep," one of the arcanists said. "No way... could we sleep, with the screams." He cast his gaze downward.

Obba rose up and walked to the arcanist, nose to nose.

"Drugged, she was an empty vessel which they rode every night."

"They?" the King said.

"The ghosts," Obba said, "you fools."

Obba looked the girl in the eyes again.

"Bathe and dress this child properly. Clean and empty the room. Place two chairs, a table and a large bed. Food, as well."

The advisors, arcanists, guards, and the King stood, looking at each other.

"NOW!"

Obba's voice washed over them, a voice of two worlds and The Wall Between Worlds. The arcanists clutched their heads in

agony, the guards staggered back, the advisors cried. A scribe, dutifully writing of the proceedings on a clipboard, dropped his marking-stick in a tremble of his limbs. The King held his breath overlong, coughing when he could hold it no longer. Their souls shook in their bodies, like wine sloshed around in a skin ready to burst.

The girl stood her ground, inspired by the voice she clearly heard in two worlds.

"You know I am Ghostwise," Obba said, his voice deeper, crackling with dread. "You have seen my white hands. You know I bear a blade which in my hands can cut two worlds, and I carry an Yt-halan pistol from a time when two worlds were one. And now you hear my voice in two worlds, that of flesh and soul. Must I show you more of my power before you let me help your daughter?"

An advisor scrambled from the room; soon, servants arrived to clear the space of the detritus and attend to the girl. The King sent his hangers-on away and took Obba to the side.

"You said there was a price in your letter to us," the King said, "other than the small amount of coin you asked for travel."

"The price is I will train her to be as I am," Obba said. "Do you accept this?"

"Surely you must want more?"

"Do you accept this?" Obba repeated.

"Yes," the King stammered. "She is my world."

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**O**BBA warned the guards of the noises, and told them none should enter until he signaled. The King had many questions, and Obba would not answer them except to say "your daughter is Ghostwise, and she must learn to be Ghostwise." The King finally nodded, his eyes heavy as he hugged his daughter. Soon, doors closed, the sounds of barricades separating Obba and the girl from the world. Obba sat with the girl at the table brought for them.

"I am Obba. What is your name?"

The girl, cleaned, presentable, and elegant, sat in the plain chair. She hid her hands, not looking at them, and instead her eyes flitted over the room seeking out invisible assassins.

"There are no spirits here, if you do not trust your sight. What is your name?"

"The Lady Sorani," she said, more clear-headed now that the drugs had worn off.

"Your title is 'The Lady Sorani'," Obba said. "What is your name?"

"Jansyth."

"I am Obba Babatunde, from a place called Holmaris, to the south, where it is cold. I became Ghostwise when I was your age, and learned from my aunt, who was also Ghostwise. And now I shall teach you."

"What if I don't want to learn?"

"Then the ghosts will come," Obba said, "and know you are a house with no front door. They will enter you, as they have, and compel you. They will make you dance and do their bidding, and you will be a prisoner in your own body until one of them tires of you and hurls you out of a window —" Obba pointed to one of the large stained-glass windows — "to the cobblestones below. And you will be dead, and the ghosts will still try to move your body for they are restless, and you are an easy vessel."

Jansyth shook, tears racing from her eyes. Obba stretched his hands out, open, his white fingers contrasting the dark wood table.

"Give me your hands, Jansyth."

He pushed his arms forward just a bit more, to encourage her. Jansyth brought her arms onto the table, her hands' skin tone matching his. He bundled them up in his own.

"I do not tell you this to make you cry. I tell you this so you know how serious the situation is and will be for you. To be Ghostwise is to live in two worlds at all times. But to be trained as Ghostwise is to make two worlds your home, and to be the master of both."

Jansyth squeezed his hands, an almost bruising grip. Her face reset, her back went straight as she withdrew her hands, placing them on her lap.

"What do I need to do to become the master of the house?" she asked.

Obba reached into a bag. To someone who could only see into one world, it would look like Obba was miming placing an object. Jansyth, however, saw a cup, cracked and pale, set down on the table.

"This is a cup which was in the hands of a man who was murdered by someone he trusted implicitly," Obba said.

Jansyth slowly reached for it, her hand passing through. She pulled her hand back, rubbing it.

"It's cold," she said.

"You will practice picking up the cup."

Jansyth reached for it again. She felt something, but her hand went through again. And again, and again. Her face twisted in frustration, but she kept at it.

"I feel it, but I can't get a hold of it," she said. "What am I doing wrong?"

Obba stood up in the nearly empty room, reaching down and picking up the cup. He walked away a bit and hurled the cup at her, hitting her in the arm. She winced as the cup fell to the floor, bouncing. Obba reached down, wiping his finger on the stone of the chamber floor. It was a hint of residue, translucent like the cup.

"What we make, what we destroy, has emotion tied to it. We bleed it out of ourselves and it clings to what we have made, what we destroy. The other world is not physical, but emotional. Ghosts linger due to great needs. Loves unrequited, anger unquenched, betrayal revealed. If we were to destroy this palace in bloody war, it would remain in the other world. If you were to step through The Wall Between Worlds, you could walk and find all the things which were once there. Look, right now. Really look..."

Jansyth looked at bare walls, empty space... a chair. She blinked, her eyes defocusing, and it faded from view.

"I saw a chair."

"It was important to you?" Obba asked.

"Yes. Very. My favorite doll sat in that chair, next to me, as my mother would read to me."

"All of those objects were destroyed in fits of rage, while you had attachments to them; when the ghosts controlled you, and I'm guessing your own frustrations. The emotion you felt for these objects linger on. A 'ghost,' if you would, of the dead. It is what passes through The Wall Between Worlds. It is not enough to grab the object. You have to feel it, know it is there, and make it yours when you pick it up. Deliberate in your action, until such deliberation is second nature. Look around the room again, as you did with the chair, and see everything."

Jansyth looked at the room again. She looked beyond this world, to the other, seeing first a haze and then the forms of beloved toys, well-cared-for dresses, and lived-in furniture.

"See it?" Obba asked.

"Yes, I do," Jansyth said, smiling.

"Now, clean your chambers."

"What?" she said.

"Clean your chambers," Obba repeated.

"I have servants for this," Jansyth said, the air of nobility thick in her voice.

"And when you find a Ghostwise servant, certainly. Until then, you must clean."

Obba dragged a chair out, sat down, and motioned for her to work when she did not move. She walked around the room, picking up her belongings from beyond, placing them in a semblance of order, her face first unaccustomed to servants' work, but then enjoying putting her home back in order, at least beyond the Wall. She hugged wraithly dolls, folded phantom blankets, and hung grave gowns on harrowed hooks. It took hours, the sun dipping down in the sky, but she reset the room to a phantasmal approximation of her home. Carefully, she climbed up onto her ghostly bed and sprawled.

"You are tired?" Obba said.

"No," Jansyth yawned. "Drained."

"To touch the objects of the other world," Obba said, "is to feel their emotions as they were your own."

Obba reached into his bag, pulling out a ghostly knife. It was stout and sturdy; he could see through the ghost of the blade, feel the murders in it. He walked to the bed.

"You know how to fight?" Obba asked, motioning for her to stand again as he held the blade out to her.

"I have trained," Jansyth slid off the ghostly bed, taking the knife confidently. "Do you have a longer blade?"

"You will use this blade," Obba said. "It is as solid as a blade on the other side will be, and until you have proven you can hold objects, best to keep it simple."

She turned it in her hands, taking a stance and practicing attacks which couldn't have been from a classical fencing instructor; her stabs and slashes were gaol-brutal.

"Rest now," Obba said. "You have a few hours. Sleep on the bed on this side of the Wall."