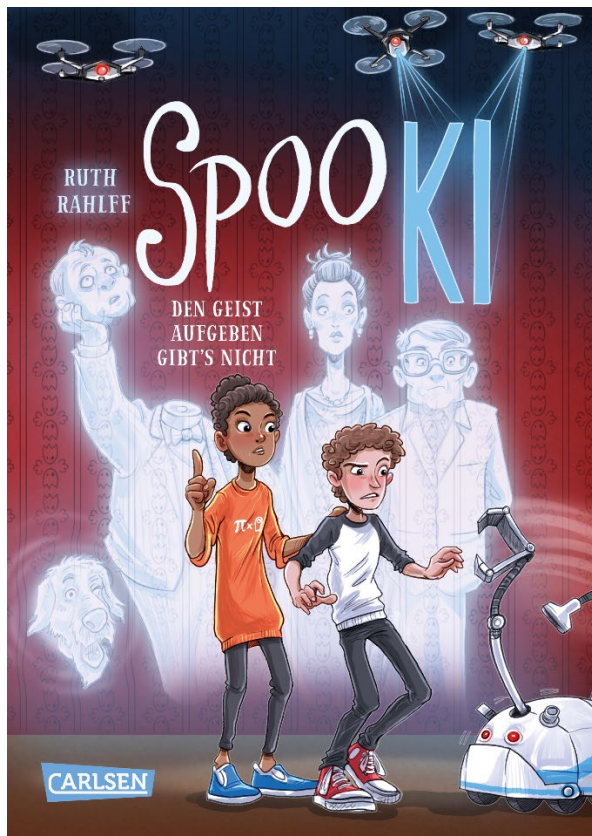


## Ruth Rahlff: Vol.1, ScaAlry: Give Up the Ghost – No Way!

### Bd. 1: SpookI – Den Geist aufgeben gibt's nicht.

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ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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## Chapter 1

That Monday, disaster came to me in the form of a little black poodle.

Of course, I realised it much too late. But it was Monday morning - something terrible always happened to me then. It was like a law of nature.

Last week Damon had knotted my basketball shirt so tightly that it took me twenty minutes to turn the cloth sausage back into a garment. Clearly, I was late for PE, and just as clearly, I received a grumble from Mr von Hageboom, our PE and computer science teacher.

The Monday before, Damon had tipped his coke over my keyboard - on purpose. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite so obvious to Mr von Hageboom and I had to spend an hour cleaning everything up with damp cotton buds. After school, of course. In comparison, a poodle with a pink collar really didn't seem threatening. Fallacy.

First I noticed how Nonsense's neck fur stood up. Stiff as a board, he stopped a few steps in front of me.

"Hey, be cool," I tried to soothe him. "Don't you see the glittery heart on his collar? You've got to be kidding me."

Nonsense paid no attention to me. Instead, he narrowed his eyes into two slits and lowered his head aggressively. A low growl escaped from his throat.

If I had been the poodle, I would have run away, but he kept strutting towards us as if the footpath were the gangway to a private jet.

But just before he reached us, he suddenly stopped and sniffed in our direction.

Then all at once he pulled up his chaps and made a leap into the air as if he had sat down with his butt in a thorn hedge.

This only incited Nonsense even more.

"Listen, he can fit under your belly. You can pee on his head!"

A tremor ran through the poodle. Uncertainly, he turned his head to the right and left and now also began to growl.

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A long thread of drool was already dripping from Nonsense's lips, but before I could reprimand him, someone shouted, "Lucifer. Heel!"

I winced. What was Mr Tarantino doing here?

At the same moment, our new neighbour also recognised me. "Robert!"

Nonsense bared his teeth a little. "Nonsense, stop it!", I whispered to him.

Offended, Nonsense looked at me.

"Let's go home," I hissed.

He yelped indignantly.

Tarantino, meanwhile, had leaned down to Lucifer and was talking soothingly to the distraught poodle.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Did something scare you?" Nonsense panted and nudged me.

"No, you are not allowed in class. When are you going to learn? When I graduate from high school?"

Tarantino raised his eyebrows and looked at me confused - no wonder! Even more so when Nonsense now whimpered in disappointment.

Tarantino's facial expression promptly changed from confused to totally irritated. "Who are you talking to, Robert?" he asked indignantly. Thank you very much, Nonsense!

I couldn't think of an answer to Tarantino's question off the top of my head. He wouldn't have believed the truth anyway.

"What kind of behaviour is that? Maybe I should talk to your parents."

Fortunately, at that moment, a loud buzz cut him off.

Astonished, he looked up and I followed his gaze. A small black box appeared above the hedge of the caretaker's flat. A drone!

Instantly, Lucifer forgot everything around him. He snatched at the thing, but with an elegant turn the drone flew over his head. Lucifer wasn't going to be shaken off that quickly, though. He pursued it across the road, which was immediately followed by a furious concert of horns.

"Lucifer!" cried Tarantino in horror.

Of course, the poodle didn't hear a thing. On the contrary, he went up a notch.

Hectically, Tarantino waited for a gap in the traffic. "What was that all about, Robert? You've completely upset my poor little one with that growl."

"Me?! But ..." Before I could continue speaking, I saw Nonsense now sprinting across the roadway as well - right through the middle of an ice cream truck! I wasn't worried about Nonsense. But as far as Lucifer was concerned, I feared the worst.

"Nonsense!", I yelled.

"Robert!" roared Tarantino.

Did I mention that it was a Monday morning?

Unlike Tarantino, Nonsense paid no further attention to me, but pursued the poodle and the drone towards the school like a maniac. Damn! If he got too close to Lucifer... I couldn't take that chance!

## Chapter 2

At the next gap in the traffic, Tarantino and I sprinted across the road and ran after them.

There - the drone turned off! I slowed down as it disappeared behind the roof of a house. Unfortunately, this did not have the same effect on Lucifer, who continued to race at an unabated pace.

And Nonsense had almost caught up with him ... "STOP!"

The two rushed straight towards the school gate. Where Damon, of all people, had to stand! And in the company of Ava and Justus, of course. Monday was getting better and better.

I ran faster. Maybe I could prevent the worst ... - too late!

Lucifer got between Damon's legs, hit a hook and kept running. Damon lost his balance, he looked for a foothold and in the process his hand grazed Nonsense's neck fur, who was still chasing the poodle.

I saw Damon turn pale and his body shiver. The next moment the spook was over. Nonsense shot around the corner behind Lucifer and Damon wheeled around. His eyes fell on a strange girl with a backpack over her shoulder. "Are you crazy? Watch your mouth!" he railed at her.

Darn, there was trouble.

I braked. Tarantino sprinted past me and disappeared with the dogs behind the school wall.

I had to chase them, but Damon grabbed the girl. "Hey, why are you bumping into me? Are you blind or something?"

The girl remained surprisingly cool. She only frowned and released herself from Damon's grip with a decisive movement.

Ava and Justus took a step forward and blocked her path. Ava tried to reach for her arm, but the girl dodged in time, firing off a look that made Ava pale and quickly lower her hand again.

Oh crap! Should I be catching Nonsense now or getting involved here?

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The girl was half a head taller than the others, but there were three of them and she was alone. Besides, she really couldn't help it that Damon had gotten too close to Nonsense.

But what if something happened to the poodle because of Nonsense?

Tarantino would certainly hold me responsible if something happened to his beloved Lucifer. And then he would definitely want to talk to Mum and Dad. And then ... No, I had to avoid that at all costs.

At that moment, the bell rang for the first lesson. A few last students streamed through the main entrance. Class was about to begin. Our class teacher, Mrs Watanabe, didn't like it at all when people were late. But Damon didn't bother with such considerations, of course. He grabbed the girl's backpack and unzipped it.

She whirled around. "Hands off!"

Her voice was so loud that two fifth graders looked around. But when they recognised Damon, they left in a hurry.

Furious, the girl stared at Damon. "Give that back right now." Her eyes flashed, but Damon didn't care. He leaned casually against the wall, played with the zip and grinned maliciously.

I swallowed and straightened my shoulders. Then I stepped towards the four of them.

### Chapter 3

"Hey, guys."

Admittedly: That was not exactly the most original greeting in the world.

Damon frowned. "*Hey, guys?*" he mimicked me.

It started promisingly.

Damon, Ava and Justus stared at me like an insect they were about to crush under the soles of their super cool sneakers. Meanwhile, the girl took the opportunity to grab her backpack.

"I'm not done with you yet!" snapped Damon.

Ava and Justus blocked her way. Damon arched his pseudo-bodybuilder chest and grabbed me by the upper arms. Now we were so close I could count his freckles.

Eleven, twelve ...

He smiled nastily and put me in a headlock.

"Um... Is that your bike in front?" I nodded my chin, which was about the only thing I could move at the moment.

Damon did not react and pressed his forearm against my throat.

"The green mountain bike?" I pressed out. "The one the rubbish collectors are taking away?"

Fittingly, as if on cue, the rubbish truck behind Damon made one of those typical hissing noises and now Damon let go of me and drove around.

The truck rolled a little further and now blocked the view of the bicycle racks.

Damon stretched his neck and tried to make something out.

Surprised, Ava and Justus let go of the girl and looked uncertainly back and forth between their leader and the rubbish collector.

I nodded at the girl so that she would hurry away. But to my surprise, she shook her head.

The rubbish truck started up again, and even someone like Damon with the perceptiveness of a toaster realised that I had tricked him.

"Ey!" he groaned.

Before he could catch me, I quickly took a step out of his reach.

Instead, Justus had now grabbed the girl again, while Ava jumped towards me from the side.

A hoarse barking could be heard from some distance away. I would have heard that out of hundreds of dogs' voices. "Nonsense! Here!"

If he realised I was in trouble, he would come racing here at Mach 3 speed.

Nothing happened for a few seconds.

So, IF he was aware ...

Ava grinned wickedly. "Well, Robert, are you talking to yourself again?" "The freak," Damon sneered.

"Staring around and chatting to himself," Justus jeered. He looked at Damon and applauded.

And now? Should Damon pat him on the head, give him a treat and say: "Well done, my boy"?

"No one else wants to talk to him either." Ava raised her perfectly plucked eyebrows and gave me a snide look.

At some point in the last school year, the three of them seemed to have set out to make my life hell - and I really had to hand it to them: THE job they really took seriously.

I sighed. "I was just calling for my dog."

"Since when do YOU have a dog?" Damon's voice dripped with contempt. "I don't know anything about that."

Well, that was no surprise. Damon's entire knowledge could easily fit on a post-it. You couldn't expect too much.

"Hey, he asked you a question," Justus snapped at me, still holding the girl.

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She tried to shake him off, but this idiot with the emotional intelligence of a blackboard rag only gripped tighter.

All right.

"Damon, you wouldn't know my dog if he peed on your leg," I replied truthfully.

While my answer was still seeking its way through Damon's cavity of skull, silence fell for a moment.

I could literally see how it clicked in him. And then he lashed out and punched me in the chest so that I staggered against Justus.

The girl took advantage of this. She rammed her elbow into Justus's stomach and freed herself from his grip.

He was so stunned that he just stared at her in bewilderment. If that wasn't the perfect moment to run away!

Then Mrs Watanabe appeared on the other side of the road.

So much for the perfect moment. Now escape was completely out of the question.

"I hope you're getting acquainted already," she called out to us. "Damon, I don't have to remind you of our conversation on Friday, do I?"

As soon as she reached us at the school gate, she smiled at us.

"Isabella, I would like to welcome you to our class. It's great that you've made friends right away." She looked from me to the girl and back.

Isabella looked me in the eye and smiled wryly. "I think so too," she said.

## Chapter 4

A few minutes later, we all entered the classroom. Relieved, I slipped into my seat.

That, at least, had turned out well. Now I was only worried about Nonsense and the poodle. And Tarantino.

"This is Isabella Mendoza, your new classmate," Ms Watanabe explained.

She introduced Isabella to the rest of the class and told us that Isabella had just moved here with her mother from California, where she had lived for two years. And now she had ended up here of all places? Poor thing!

"There is one seat left next to Robert." Ms Watanabe pointed to the chair next to me in the last row. "That's a good fit, because you know what? You live on the same street."

"I see," said Isabella.

"I see," I said. And Ms Watanabe smiled happily.

"Please all make Isabella feel welcome here," she continued, marching to the lectern.

"We already did," Damon muttered and gave us a hateful look. He was really good at that. But that seemed to be about the only thing.

Ms Watanabe sat down. "So, my dears, I have decided on the topic for our interactive class project with the headmaster."

"Cool!", Ava blurted out.

"Ava, we can do better than that," Ms Watanabe chided her mildly.

Ava moaned softly and raised her index finger in the air, but still waited until Ms Watanabe gave her a sign.

"I just wanted to express my joy," she said in an exaggeratedly formal manner.

But as usual, Ms Watanabe did not fall for it. She just looked at Ava with a frown.

"Um, what's the class project about?", Ava hurriedly followed up. "They haven't told us anything yet."

Ms Watanabe nodded. "Yes, it's a first and I didn't want to disappoint you in case it didn't work out."

Mrs Watanabe was the only teacher who was seriously concerned about such things and that was one of the reasons why I liked her so much. All the other teachers were heartily indifferent to how we were doing. Or else they belonged to our computer science teacher's species and saw their primary task as plunging us into the greatest possible misery.

"So what do we do now?" asked Ahmed, coming forward quickly afterwards when he noticed Ms Watanabe's gaze.

She folded her hands and leaned forward a little. "Our theme for the class project this time is animals. More specifically, we will focus on your pets."

Immediately everyone started talking wildly. That is, almost everyone. Isabella next to me was silent. And of course I didn't say anything either, because apart from a few bats, the odd rat and the owl under the roof, there were no pets in our house that I could bring and, above all, show. Or did will-o'-the-wisps count?

"Quiet, please." Ms Watanabe raised her hands placatingly. "Of course, something like a pony is out of the question. But hamsters, dogs and cats will do. Just please no animal bigger than a sheep. Who has a pet?"

To my surprise, almost everyone came forward, even Isabella.

"A Carolina turtle," she whispered when she noticed my gaze.

I see.

"We have twenty-one long-haired guinea pigs," Loretta told me. "They only feel comfortable in a pack."

"And we have a Siamese naked fur cat. I just don't know if my mother will allow me to bring her. She has already won several prizes and is extremely valuable," Preeti exclaimed.

Damon rolled his eyes. "I'm taking my snake Titan with me." Preeti looked horrified.

"If it's not dangerous," Ms Watanabe said, "and only in the terrarium, yes?"

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Damon nodded and scanned the class with his gaze. "Hey, freak, what's wrong with you?"

Damn it! Couldn't he leave me alone for once?

"Damon!" Mrs Watanabe interrupted. "I resent that choice of words."

"But the freak has a dog, he said so himself," Damon defended himself. "Come on, freak, why don't you bring him?"

"Damon, not that word!" Ms Watanabe admonished him.

Ava and Justus giggled. Damon grinned provocatively and tilted his chair. "He's probably too much of a coward to bring his dog. Or he doesn't have one."

All I heard was COWARD and all my fuses blew. "I'm not! And I have a dog - an Irish Wolfhound."

"Huh?" asked Damon, losing his balance and slamming into his table.

I crossed my arms and ignored him. Hoping the others would do the same.

Unfortunately, my hope survived only a fraction of a second, then crumbled to ashes like a vampire at the first ray of sunlight. And it was Ms Watanabe, of all people, who drove the stake right into my heart.

She smiled kindly at me and said, completely unaware of what she was doing:

"Robert, how nice that you have a dog. Dogs can also be real friends and help you..."

"I'd like to see the dog that wants that freak for a friend," Damon interjected.

"Damon!" cried Mrs Watanabe indignantly.

"But didn't you say we couldn't bring anything bigger than a sheep?" asked Loretta. She held up her mobile phone and tapped on the display. "Irish wolfhounds are bigger than sheep."

Thank you, Loretta. Thank you! So the matter was finally off the table.

But it was Monday, so Mrs Watanabe said, "Well, Robert, is your dog well behaved?"

"Hmm, yes."

"Oh, then we can certainly make an exception in that case." She nodded at me with a smile. "Or does anyone have any objections?"

"Nope," Damon said. "We're all hot for this ... dog. If he's a freak like that too, it'll be fun."

"Damon, that's enough! After class, you and I will talk in private," Ms Watanabe said in a cutting voice, then added more kindly again, "That settles it. We'll discuss the further details in the next few days."

She smoothed out her black bun and took a breath. "Now, open your notebooks. We'll start with the essay."

Today the topic was: "My friends. Why they are so important for me."

What could I write about that? I chewed desperately on my biro. I had messed up, and really messed up. How was I ever going to introduce Nonsense to the class? An invisible ghost dog! What had I got myself into?

## Chapter 5

After class, I threw my backpack over my shoulder and crept to the computer room. I sighed inwardly. The trouble today was easily enough for all the Mondays for the next half year!

Well, another mistake. Because the day had even more in store for me.

I had hardly let myself sink into my chair when Herr von Hageboom came towards me with big steps.

"Robert, that's an even five." He slammed two pieces of paper on my desk. All the heads in the class went round. Loretta looked pityingly and Ahmed blinked nervously.

Damon, on the other hand, grinned and silently formed with his lips, "*You idiot.*" Mr von Hageboom propped his palms on the table and looked at me.

He was standing so close to me that his expensive aftershave was wafting up my nose. As always, he was wearing one of his embarrassing hoodies, tight jeans and super-fashionable sneakers.

"Hello! Earth to Robert!" He waved his hand in front of my eyes so that his leather bracelets almost touched my nose. "If you don't get your act together, your next paper will be an F. In computer science. That's not cool!"

Being cool was definitely hugely important to him.

"Super uncool," Damon grinned and Mr von Hageboom looked pleased.

I could have explained about the F, but first of all he wouldn't believe a word I said and secondly I would only get into more trouble. And I already had more than enough of those.

"Robert, this is computer science, not voodoo!" Ava and Justus giggled.

"Er ... well ... it's just not in me," I explained.

"What? It doesn't suit the master?" Herr von Hageboom folded his arms and looked at me as if my poor grade was an insult to him personally. "Jeez, Robert! He who gives up has already lost."

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Loretta nodded eagerly, yet the saying didn't even have the makings of a fridge magnet.

Mr von Hageboom pointed to the computers around us. "Here, in class, it works to some extent. But all your homework and written work is totally falling behind. You only do the most necessary things.

How could it be otherwise? The only device in our house that had anything to do with technology was the doorbell. Oh yes, and grandpa's old video recorder.

Neither of these things helped me learn programming. If I needed a computer, I could only use the ones in the library. If there was one free ...

"Next month. Last chance!", Mr von Hageboom whispered in my ear. "The ball is in your court." He straightened up, whirled around in a cloud of aftershave and turned to the whole class. "We're writing a test. Anyone who doesn't perform well will be kicked out of the class. And there will be serious consequences. All I'm saying is T-R-A-N-S-F-E-R." He gave me a meaningful look. "So if you have problems in other subjects as well, you'd better not mess up this test."

Damon grinned at me mockingly.

The fact that he was able to keep up with computer science despite his birdbrain could be considered a biological miracle. No one knew why - he himself probably least of all.

I put my head in my hands and moaned softly.

## Chapter 6

No other street in the city was as old as Zwieselgasse - I got that from grandpa, and he had to know. After all, he had been there when the first houses were built there centuries ago. And the house we lived in was definitely the oldest of all.

Ms Watanabe had explained to us the other day the saying "Someone or something is past its prime".

That was probably not the case with our house. Because most likely it had never had good times. At least it already looked crooked in grandpa's hundred-year-old black- and-white photos. It was at the end of a long, winding cul-de-sac, hidden behind bushes and trees. Our garden was quite large, unlike all the other gardens in the area, totally overgrown and surrounded by a high, rusty fence to keep out human visitors.

But we never had any anyway.

I was constantly afraid that at some point someone from the building authority would take notice of us, that's how rotten and dilapidated the house was. The windows were cracked and the walls were full of cracks. Over the centuries, balconies, oriels and turrets had been added at every possible corner, but I would never have entered most of them voluntarily.

I was not tired of life.

Just before I reached our garden gate, I heard a whistling in the bushes of the neighbouring house.

Oh! Was Lucifer hiding there? Or rather, what was left of him after his encounter with Nonsense?

Before I could make sure, the branches bent the hedge apart and Tarantino's face appeared in front of me.

Today I was not spared anything either.

He held Lucifer in his arms and clicked his tongue accusingly.



As far as I could see, the poodle was unharmed, though rather dishevelled. There were clumps of dirt and long thorns in his fur and a light grey layer of dust covered his body. He looked at me happily and wagged his tail enthusiastically - apparently he had really had fun today. Tarantino obviously saw it completely differently.

"The poor guy is scared to death." Reproachfully, he held out Lucifer to me. "I really want to discuss this with your parents. I even had to call in sick today because of all the excitement."

Tarantino was a kind of artist, at least that's what he told everyone. However, he didn't seem to be particularly successful with his kitschy dog portraits. That's why he worked part-time at the public library.

"What would your parents say to such behaviour?" he asked sternly.

Goosebumps covered my forearms.

"Of course nothing," I replied.

"Because they don't know about it!" he said triumphantly.

"No, because I don't misbehave."

He raised his eyebrows. "A twelve-year-old who behaves well? That's like a vegetarian lion: a myth!"

"Er ... yes, of course." I shouldered my backpack. "But Lucifer ran away all by himself."

Lucifer obviously agreed, because he wagged his tail enthusiastically.

Tarantino gasped for air, so I quickly said, "And now I have to go." With firm steps I marched towards our garden gate.

"Stop! Wait!"

Tarantino wanted to run after me, but the thorny bushes by the fence blocked his way.

"Give your parents a message!" he called after me. "Next week is the neighbourhood meeting. It's about the rubbish collection in our street."

"We have almost no rubbish," I tried to talk my way out of it. But he didn't let go that easily.

"Nonsense! Rubbish accumulates in every normal household with several people. Besides, it is important that everyone participates in the gathering."

"I'll tell him." I walked faster. The garden gate loomed in front of me. My salvation!

With three sentences I brought myself to safety, slammed the gate and ran to the front door.

As soon as I stood in the hallway and dropped my backpack on the floor, Mum floated towards me.

"Did you have a hard day, sweetheart?" she asked. "Come on! Daddy tried out a great new recipe."

My stomach did a somersault, but not with joy. But of course I didn't want to offend Dad, and besides, I didn't know what he had cooked today.

I usually had normal things like pizza, spaghetti or fish fingers. Unfortunately, mum and dad were a few centuries out of practice. That's why something usually went wrong because Dad either forgot important ingredients, didn't set the temperature correctly or converted the quantities incorrectly.

Apart from that, Mum had once told me that both of them had had employees for cooking during their lifetime and had only found their way into the kitchen as an exception.

So that together explained a lot.

In the parlour, as Mum called our living room, Grandpa looked up from his newspaper. The front page was emblazoned with the headline 'Spectacular landing on the moon!'

Well, after all, he had arrived in 1969 by now.

"Boy, what are you so pale about? Have you seen a ghost?" he shouted and burst into rumbling laughter at his joke.

"What's wrong with you?", Dad now wanted to know and made a worried face.

"Is Nonsense here?" I asked and squatted down on the sofa next to Papa, studiously avoiding sitting on the stuffed ermine head of Mama's stole.

Dad, who had his right arm up to his shoulder in a top hat, looked up in amazement. "Why? Didn't he pick you up?" he replied and slowly pulled his arm out.

"No, and that's ..."

At that moment, the cylinder moved a little and a snout with a few whiskers appeared.

He had done it again!

"You promised me you wouldn't mess around with the rabbits anymore," I said reproachfully. "They get mega-scared every time."

Dad pulled his shoulders in guiltily. "Yes ... er ... sorry. It just happened to fall into my top hat."

I took the cylinder from him, grabbed the trembling bundle and took it to the porch door. When I set it down outside between the crumbling stone tiles, it immediately hopped away.

"I really don't know how that happened," Dad tried to talk his way out of it and ran his hand through his hair in embarrassment.

"Nonsense, Henry!" grandpa rumbled in his chair. "That was another one of your supposed magic tricks that have gone wrong so many times before."

Dad coyly kneaded his bony fingers and sank down. "Nothing happened," I comforted him.

"But that you just can't let go of that wretched sorcery!" continued Grandpa, grumbling. "Look at what it's done to you!"

"Well, I'm in good company here," said Dad. "So, what about Nonsense?" Before I could answer, Mum came in with a bowl of soup.

"Enjoy it, Robert."

"Thank you," I said wanly, dipping the spoon into the deep red liquid in front of me. "Bon appetit." Mum beamed at me and floated over to the fireplace. "Dad has cooked cream of asparagus soup."

"Oh." I stumbled and paused with the spoon just in front of my mouth. I knew white asparagus and green too ... But since when were there dark purple asparagus spears? And wasn't the asparagus season long over? I carefully lowered the spoon again.

Dad must have seen my confusion, because he got up from the table and floated through the wall towards the kitchen.

"As a plan B, I cooked extra spaghetti napoli," he called out to me and immediately came in with a steaming portion of pasta. "Because I wasn't quite sure if the beetroot juice with the asparagus was such a good idea."

While I was tucking into the spaghetti, I told them what had happened today.

"That stupid brat!" cried Grandpa indignantly. "That Damon again, you say?" He took his head off and angrily slammed it down on the tabletop. "I think I should have a go at him! After that ..."

"No!", Mum, Dad and I quickly interrupted him.

I didn't want to imagine what would happen if Grandpa went after Damon.

Not only were Grandpa's best days over by now. He would also be breaking one of our iron rules. Any problems I had in the human world had to be solved without the help of other spirits. Under no circumstances was anyone allowed to notice that I lived in a family of ghosts. That's why mum or dad only intervened in very rare exceptional cases. If it was absolutely necessary, they could manifest themselves and take shape. But they only did that when they had to, because it cost them an incredible amount of strength.

The last time they manifested themselves was at my first day at school. And even then only very briefly, before they had to leave again on some pretext.

"All right. Whatever you say! But don't come whining to me later," grumbled Grandpa. Offended, he stood up, put his head under his arm and disappeared through the wall of the room.

"I have something that will cheer you up," Mum changed the subject. "We're going to have a visitor shortly."

"Great." Unmoved, I continued to eat. When we had visitors, they were only from the spirit world. And usually Mum and Dad had a lot more fun than I did.

Dad nodded eagerly. "Your cousin Lorenzo."

"Don't know him."

"Yes, you know him," he contradicted. "You just don't remember the last time you met him. You were too little then."

"He's about your age," Mum cheered, looking at me expectantly.

"If you subtract a few centuries," grumbled Grandpa, who had apparently sulked enough and stuck his head through the closed door.

"His father sends him to us," Mum continued, "because he's quite busy at the moment. Apart from that, Lorenzo needs some company - he's far too often to himself. Just like you, my darling!"

"I'm fine," I protested, but Mum ignored my objection. "I'm sure you'll get along splendidly."

That would be something. All the ghosts around us were ancient or even older - not that I minded. Not at all. But they lived in a completely different century.