

In the Shadow of the Styx

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This book is dedicated to my mummy, the late Matilda Dinah Mwangale Simiyu.
Thank you for everything.

“Maybe we’re standing like coins on the edge?”

Allie considered this. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, we might be able to shake things up a little and find a way to come up heads.”

“Or tails,” suggested Allie.

“What are you talking about?” said Lief.

“Life and death.”

—Neal Shusterman, *Everlost*

Prologue

When she walked out of the bathroom, which was across the hall from her room, she peeked to see whether Leo had stirred. He was standing in the middle of the room, fully dressed to his black, alligator-skin boots.

‘Do you have what you need now, Mya?’ he asked her, his voice slightly huskier than usual.

She was startled out of her thoughts by his words. She wasn’t sure if all this was happening or he was simply a figment of her imagination, though if she were to imagine herself in passionate embrace with anyone, God knows his name wouldn’t top her list. *Arrogant, insensitive, alligator-killing son of a.... gun*, she thought resentfully.

“Y-yes. I have what I need,” she replied and pivoted away, heading for the stairs to the attic, where she kept her herbs and the cauldron that sat waiting in the fireplace. Sensation was still shooting through her body in disconcerting aftershocks, and there was something wet running down her legs she didn’t want to think about too much. She could feel her legs wanting to shake with reaction but she would not let them. She had to set her mind to the spell and try to keep it on the business at hand.

He followed her up the stairs. She sighed wistfully. Why couldn’t he just *go!*?

Chapter One: Ghosts

Phil ran his hand down her naked flesh as she slept, watching her clear white skin in fascinated absorption. She was a big girl, his Amazon, from her fiery, strawberry hair, inherited from Viking antecedents, long dead, to her piercing, green eyes that made him shiver every time she glanced at him. Most days he couldn't believe she was his. His finger trailed down her endless legs, thick and shapely as saplings, ending in long toes gaily painted yellow. She was asleep now, worn out from his passion, and hers. A smile played around her rosebud lips even as she dozed. Perhaps she could feel his gaze on her.

"Lillian?" he whispered in her ear before he bit it playfully. Her smile widened, but she didn't open her eyes or say a word. "Lil me darlin?" he drawled, but again, she ignored him.

He leaned over her and placed a kiss behind her ear while he pressed his already erect member into her backside. Phil was a small guy, except where it really mattered. A shiver ran down her body as his lips touched her flesh, and Phil took it as encouragement. He promptly inveigled one of his legs between hers, widening the space between her legs as he slipped his long, slim fingers into her, kissing her neck all the while. She made a small sound of encouragement but didn't open her eyes. That was all he needed to position himself to enter her from behind, all the while running his hands softly up and down the inside of her thighs, teasing her with sensation. She moaned sensually, arching her back to give him more access, her eyes still closed.

He thrust suddenly into her, unable to hold back any longer. His eyes widened as the brown of his irises narrowed into pinpoints of pleasure. His mouth opened in a soundless groan as he thrust faster and faster into her, the encouraging noises she made egging him on. It was over in minutes, but neither minded. It had been a long night of celebration.

"I don't feel well, Lillian, I don't feel well at all. Are you sure about the pork in that jambalaya?" Phil asked as he came back from his third visit to the bathroom later in the morning.

"The jambalaya's fine. It's your bloody habit of not washin' your hands that is the fuckin' problem, Phil," Lillian replied irritably, though if asked, she'd have to admit that she wasn't feeling a hundred percent either.

"Okay, okay. Cool your jets, Lil, I was just asking," Phil replied.

"Sorry. Long night," Lillian replied contritely.

"Really? What were you up to?" Phil said, instantly forgetting his discomfort as he jumped on the bed, facing her as she lay down.

Lillian rolled her eyes and turned away from him. She loved Phil with all her heart, but he could be just a smidge more affectionate than she was used to. South London did not encourage loving behaviour among its residents.

Phil and Lillian had been enjoying a nice, candlelit dinner the evening before to celebrate Lillian's attainment of citizenship in the United States. Phil could hardly understand her strong, cockney accent half the time, but his heart had been hers at first sight and he hadn't looked back since. The narrow complication of already having a girlfriend hadn't stopped him from walking up to her with a fat bunch of daffodils the

first time he saw her and asking her to marry him. She had laughed in his face, but he'd seen the interest in her eyes as they travelled over his five-foot-four frame, small but well built. The Navajo blood that ran in his veins gifted him his dark hair and brown eyes, and his Spanish ancestry was responsible for the bronze of his skin. And probably his height as well. His mother's people were small, if proud, Spaniards. Although he was an accountant by trade, he worked over at the Evans' alligator ranch and therefore indulged in some wrestling with extremely large reptiles. That accounted for his pleasantly muscled frame. When he'd told Sally that what they'd had had been good but it was over now, she hadn't been pleased. But it didn't worry him; she would get over it. She had to because he wasn't going back to her. Especially now that Lillian had agreed to stay.

Phil's stomach suddenly went into a cramp and he collapsed on the floor, squirming in pain. His stomach was churning like it was full of snakes attempting to exit via the stomach wall instead of following the correct route down to his anus. It actually seemed to undulate. He waited in horror for long, writhing figures to shoot from it in a burst of black slime and green goo, just like in the movies. Lillian leaped naked from the bed and attempted to straighten him out.

"Phil! Phil! Wot's the matter wi' you?" she cried urgently, "should I call someone... a doctor or somefing? Speak to me!" But Phil continued to thrash about on the ground. Lillian stood up and ran to the phone, dialling 999 instinctively before remembering she was in America now and dialling 911.

"Hello! Hello! Is this the emergency services? Me boyfriend's in pain, you need to come quick!" she shouted down the line, speaking as clearly as possible so they'd understand her. These Americans did not like foreigners.

"What is the nature of your emergency, ma'am?" the voice on the line asked her.

This inquiry was too much for Lillian's agitated spirit. She banged the phone down in frustration, looking around desperately for inspiration. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she grabbed the nearest item of clothing, which happened to be her dress from last night. She leaned down and picked Phil up, slinging him over her shoulder in a fireman's lift and running out to the car with him. She grabbed her shoes as she passed at a run and the car keys. Lucky for both of them that Phil was such a diminutive man compared to her frame, which was a strapping five-foot-eight and 230 pounds. Furthermore, she'd been an amateur wrestler for many years before moving to the States to wrestle with alligators on the Evans' alligator farm in le Marais. She worked there as a keeper and could bench-press twice her body weight. It was a match made in heaven.

She drove hell for leather to the Le Marais clinic, the one ran by the missionaries. Dr Jonathan Ross was on duty, and he took one look at Phil and murmured "food poisoning" before moving on to the next patient. Lillian wanted to grab at him to make him stay, but he was already out the door. The nurse who came to do triage took Phil's temperature then hurried out of the treatment room, looking worried. Two minutes later, Dr Ross was back, his face much graver than before.

"What has this man eaten today?" he asked Lillian. For some reason, he was fading in and out of her vision, and she didn't know why. The room suddenly went black and Lillian collapsed on the floor with a thunderous thud. She didn't writhe and moan with pain, but it was clear that whatever afflicted Phil had affected her, too. They were both

foaming at the mouth. Dr Ross called for gastric lavage in a panic, feeling sorely inconvenienced by all this drama. He had a bottle of '64 Bordeaux waiting for him in his office!

Phil was going into cardiac arrest. Dr Ross shouted for the crash cart. He grabbed the defibrillator and prepared it for use. Just as he was about to administer the shock treatment to Phil's chest, the nurse attending to Lillian cried out in alarm. Lillian's heart was fibrillating too! Dr Ross went into total panic and ran out of the room. "Fuck!" he screamed. "They're dead."

The nurses watched him go in shock then the head nurse, Nurse Carrie, grabbed the paddles and rubbed them together.

"Clear!" she shouted, and then administered the shock to Phil's chest. Nurse Eva went down on her knees and began to administer CPR on Lillian. There was a candy stripper named Harpreet who had just started working at the hospital. She was from India, come to Le Marais for an eighteen-month exchange programme. It was her first day, poor dear, and she was at a complete loss as to how to proceed. She looked toward the door and saw an old, black woman peering into the room. She was tall and slim with hair that was fully white and stood up in an untidy halo around her head. She looked crazy, but her caramel eyes were calm and sane.

"Is everything alright?" she asked in a deep, gravelly voice.

"I'm sorry, vat are you doing back here?" Harpreet asked her uncertainly.

"I heard a sound, like a cry for help. I thought they were calling *me*, so I came." The woman said.

"Why would they be calling you?" Harpreet asked, not even realising that she knew automatically who 'they' were. The old woman shrugged her shoulders, a wry look in her eye.

"Well, I don't say 'me' exactly, but I expect they meant for anyone who *could* hear to come help," she said.

"Vat is your name?" Harpreet asked her.

"Matia Andrewes, at your service. What is yours, dear?" Matia asked her.

"Harpreet Singh. I am new," she said with a bob of her head.

"Well, Harpreet. I am afraid it is much too late for either of us to help these two. Their spirits have been severed from their bodies. Bad juju went on here, I can see. Well, I shall be leaving you now. My granddaughter awaits me," Matia said.

"Vait!" Harpreet shouted, not sure why she didn't want the old lady to leave.

"Peace, Harpreet. It will be alright," Matia said, and with a small wave, she was gone. It was like the sound came back on for Harpreet after that. The nurses were shouting and Dr Ross was screaming into the phone at reception, calling for backup. On the floor and in the bed, the two corpses lay—the only peaceful and quiet beings about.

Chapter Two: Initiation

Well, Harpreet wasn't quite right about that. Lillian and Phil were not peaceful at all. They were agitated and afraid—being suddenly torn out from your body when you weren't expecting it was hell on the nerves.

"Phil? Wot's going on? Why can I see our bodies over there, yet we're standin' over 'ere?" Lillian asked tentatively.

"Probably because we're ghosts, judging from what that old lady just said. Weren't you listening?" Phil asked, a tad irritably.

"No. I was probably too busy dyin', but whatever. Now wot?" she asked, clinging onto his arm.

"Now ... we wait, I guess. I expect someone will be along soon to tell us where to go," Phil said with more certainty than he felt. But Lillian was clearly panicking, and so he would have to keep it together for the both of them. He squeezed her hand reassuringly, keeping tight hold of it and hoping no one was going to tear them from each other.

"Phil? Do you think hell exists?" Lillian chose this inopportune time to ask, speaking very clearly in her extreme fear. "Because if there is, well ... I don't know Phil, I just might be going there—"

"No one's going anywhere!" Phil said, a bit louder than necessary. His voice echoed eerily, and the nurses faltered in their agitated conversation, as if they'd heard something. Phil and Lillian continued to stand, waiting to see if any doors would appear, or perhaps an angel or a white light at the end of the tunnel ... but nothing whatsoever happened and, little by little, they began to relax. The morgue people came for their bodies, and Phil and Lillian debated whether or not they should accompany them.

"I think, for now, we probably should stay with them," Phil said uncertainly, and they followed the trolleys out of the room. The morgue was located conveniently next door to the clinic, and there was a corridor that linked both buildings. It made it very easy to transport bodies from one place to the other. The traffic rather tended to be one way though, at least so far.

As they followed the two men pushing the trolleys down the corridors, Phil and Lillian kept their hands tightly linked, eyes peeled for anything unusual. There was a man standing at the end of the corridor, outside the door that led to the morgue. The men who pushed the trolleys walked right past him as they pushed the bodies through the swing doors. They ignored him and he them, and Phil and Lillian decided to do the same. When they drew abreast of him though, he put out a hand to stop them.

"I'm sorry, but this is as far as you can go," he told them as he reached with his other hand to remove his Armani shades from his eyes. He was dressed in a black suit—it looked like Armani, too—and a white shirt with a slim, black tie. His black shoes were so shiny they'd be able to see their reflections in them if they had some. He was very tall, almost seven feet, and his eyes were silver. His hair was a thick, wavy brown and he had a jagged scar that dissected his face from the bottom of his right ear to the tip of his

hairline on the left. It crossed his nose and passed between his eyes, narrowly missing the left. It looked to have been made by something extremely sharp.

"Forgive me, but who are you?" Phil asked him.

"My name is Jones. I am the gatekeeper for this sector, and you cannot pass," Jones said.

"Gatekeeper? Are you like the Grim Reaper or something?" Lillian asked in fascinated fear. Jones moved his lips in what they assumed he thought was a smile. It looked more like something a shark would do if sharks ever smiled.

"The Grim Reaper ... That is very funny. No, I am the gatekeeper. And you cannot pass," Jones said.

"Right, we got that the first time," Lillian said. Afraid she would get them in trouble with her big mouth, Phil squeezed her hand. It didn't work. "So, who are you then, and why can't we pass?" she continued.

"Your area of manifestation ends here. Your ectoplasmic shell cannot stretch outside these walls unless called by some powerful witch. You are trapped in here," Jones said.

"So, there's no better place? No heaven, no hell, no purgatory, no eternal rest—none o' that?" Lillian persisted.

"Oh there is, though if you were ready for any of those things, you would have gone already. But you are still here," Jones said.

"Very observant of you, Jones. Nothing gets by you! So tell us, how do we get ready for all that, and what the hell are *you* anyway?" Lillian asked.

"I am the gatekee—" Jones began.

"The gatekeeper," Lillian interrupted. "Yeah, yeah we got that. But what. The hell. Is that?" she asked him slowly, like he was possibly retarded.

"The gatekeepers are servants of time. We are sentries on the Road to Perdition or Redemption. We turn back lost souls, whose way is unknown to them. We cannot help you find your way. That, you must do on your own."

"But how can we find our way if we don't know where we are going?" Phil asked, startled into speech.

Jones merely shrugged and, putting on his shades, turned his back on them and stood *en garde* in front of the door to the morgue. Lillian and Phil looked at each other in trepidation then shrugged and turned simultaneously back in the direction of the hospital. If they couldn't follow their bodies, then they'd just have to come up with another plan.

"Did you check out his suit?" Lillian asked Phil, "That was Armani or I'm a hobbit."

"I think the time for us to be concerned about labels on suits has passed, Lil, don't you?" Phil replied a little tiredly. All this "being the brave one" was wearying.

"I just meant, the bloke's wearing Armani and he's not human, so wot does that tell us about how the afterlife works?" she replied.

"I don't know. What *does* it tell us?" Phil asked her, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Well, I don't know, do I? But it tells us *somefing*. We just have to figure out what," she replied.

There was a child standing at the hospital end of the corridor, leaning against the wall with his legs crossed. It looked like he was watching them come, which was a little scary

for Phil. He didn't want to be the cause of anyone going crazy because of seeing a ghost, and certainly not a child!

"You guys are new, right?" the kid said to them as they came up to him.

"New?" Lillian asked him, seeming less bothered about this boy seeing them than Phil thought seemly.

"Yeah, you know. Like, newly dead," the boy replied.

"You ... see dead people?" Phil asked uncertainly.

The boy laughed out loud. His laugh seemed to echo off the walls in a way that made Phil's little heart shrink and his buttocks tighten in instinctive self-defence.

"I *am* dead genius. Have been for a while actually. I got whacked by my stepdad. I don't think he meant to kill me, just maybe shut me up. But ... here I am," he finished, spreading his arms out.

"I'm sorry," Phil said, for lack of anything better.

"It's okay. I'm cool with it. Wish my mother would leave the dead beat, though. I think that's what's keeping me here. If she left him, I could go, too," the boy said.

"How do you know that?" Lillian asked him curiously.

"Well, I asked around and I also figured some things out for myself. I'm an only child see, or was. My real dad died in the Vietnam war and my mum was left with nothing but a little baby and no money to raise him. So she married this bastard named Bart. Kind of a bastard name isn't it? Bart. Sounds like someone who sits around all day in a wife beater and farts. Too bad he's not, or my mother might have left him already. But he runs the mill that used to belong to my dad. He's quite hardworking, I'll give him that, but that's just about the only good thing I can say about him. He had quite a heavy hand with the rod, if you take my meaning. For any goddamned reason, too. Well, one day, I got sick of being whacked for any stupid reason and stood up to run away. But he was just lifting his stick to hit me again and got me in the back of my head instead of my butt. Knocked me out cold. Fell flat on my back. I think there was some brain damage. It took me a week to die. It was Bernard who told me about the whole unfinished business deal. He's been around a while," the boy replied.

"That's a horrible story. Who's Bernard? Is he one of those gatekeeper things?" Lillian asked.

"Nah, he's an old ghost. Been around for like two hundred years. You mighta heard of him maybe? Bernard de Marigny ... he sez he's famous and shit," the boy said, mouth twisting sceptically even as he said it.

"Yes, actually, I do know that name. I used to gamble a bit in my youth, on the riverboats. There was this guy, an old-timer, used to talk a lot. Said that this de Marigny fella brought craps to America. I remember because he was always using him as an example of the dangers of gambling. He's here, is he?" Phil asked, a bit star struck.

"Oh yeah. And always trying to get people to play with him. He can be a bit of a nuisance, but he knows a lot of stuff, so I hang with him sometimes," the boy said.

"When did you die? And wot's your name?" Lillian asked, a bit indelicately in Phil's opinion.

"Oh, I'm Andy. Andy Crenshaw. I've been dead since 1974. That's fourteen years in this shithole. I've tried to leave but I haven't found out how yet," he said.

“Crenshaw? As in the Crenshaw mill?” Phil asked in disbelief.

“Yep,” Andy said.

“I’d heard the owner had copped it in Vietnam, but I didn’t know about your stepdad,” Lillian said.

“Not many people know him. He’s an out-of-towner. Keeps to himself, you know? Wouldn’t do to have people knowing you murdered your stepchild now, would it?” Andy said with sarcasm.

“No,” Lillian replied automatically.

“Do you have your vouchers?” Andy asked, changing the subject abruptly.

“Vouchers?” Lillian repeated puzzled.

“Yeah. The gatekeeper didn’t give you any? Did you ask him something you shouldn’t?” Andy asked them, a bit censoriously for someone they’d just met. Lillian and Phil stared at him in trepidation.

“We don’t know. What were ... wot’s going on?” Lillian asked desperately.

“Come on,” Andy said, straightening up and walking through the walls. “I’ll take you to Severin. He’ll explain everything.” His voice echoed back at them. Lillian and Phil looked at each other, eyes round with fear. They looked at the wall, wondering if they should dare. There really wasn’t a choice. They took a deep breath and tightened the grip on each other’s hands, then, closing their eyes, they walked into the wall, following Andy.

Chapter Three: Severin

Severin was up in the little ICU. He was sitting next to a patient strapped up to so many machines you could hardly see him.

“Severin, I have some newbies for you,” Andy said, pointing behind him at Phil and Lillian.

“Shhh!” Severin whispered severely. “It’s happening.”

Lillian opened her mouth to ask what was happening but Andy made a quelling gesture at her, and she shut it again. There was silence in the room apart from the sound of machines, beeping and hissing and making other sinister sounds. Severin sat cross-legged about midway between the floor and ceiling, balancing effortlessly on nothing at all. He had long, yellow hair and vivid, green eyes, which he kept trained on the body in the bed. He had a tall, lanky frame with freakishly long hands and feet. He looked quite solid otherwise, as if he was human and not as insubstantial as Phil and Lillian felt. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was floating in midair, Phil would have been quite convinced he was alive.

“It’s the fear that’s causing you to fade,” Severin said suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?” Phil replied uncertainly.

“You’re wondering why Andy and I look human, and you don’t. The fear you’re feeling is causing you to fade,” Severin replied, turning for the first time to look directly at them.

“We can talk now?” Lillian asked, half sarcastically.

“I thought that he was finally ready to sever the bond with his body, but he’s stubborn this one. He keeps fighting,” Severin said, indicating the body on the bed.

“Who is he?” Lillian asked curiously.

“His name is Derek Argent. Thirty years old. He was in a hit-and-run two months ago. A girl hit him, name of Charlotte le Carre. She didn’t have a license to drive, but her family is influential, so she didn’t suffer any consequences. He’s been here ever since, hovering between life and death. The le Carres paid his family and they let it go. I have a feeling he’s going to have problems moving on, this one,” Severin said in a toneless monologue.

“Oh,” was all Lillian could think to say.

Severin suddenly unfolded his legs and placed them on the floor. “Come,” he said turning toward the door. “Let’s talk.”

“Thank God he used the door,” Lillian whispered to Phil. “That was ropey that was, going through the wall.”

Phil assumed ‘ropey’ meant bad, if her experience had been anything like his. Lillian tended to revert to her native cockney when agitated.

Severin went over to the nurse’s station and sat down behind the reception. He gestured to the other two chairs, indicating that they should sit. Andy leaned against the counter, smiling in anticipation.

“So, how did you die?” Severin asked, jumping right in.

Lillian and Phil looked at each other in trepidation, then, naturally, Lillian spoke.

“Well, we were, we woke up in the morning. Phil had a restless night of it. We’d been celebrating like, cause of me gettin’ that green card. We had a jambalaya, see, from the old lady wot lives down the way. People say she’s a witch but she seems perfectly fine to me. Anyway, Phil said I had to taste it. I’m a bangers and mash girl meself, but no harm in trying somefing new, is there? Or so I thought. Then Phil got sick, he started to clutch at his stomach in pain. So I got on the bell, right? For to call the ambulance, but the tosser over there was rabbiting on a bit. So I cut her off, picked Phil up off the floor, and brought him to hospital meself. The thing is, the doctor was a total wanker. I sort o’ fell down and then we was dead,” she finished with flourish.

“Right,” Severin said, unfazed by this rather confused account. “So who would have motivation to poison your food?”

“Poison!?” Phil said in alarm, “who said anything about poison?”

“You ate food, you both died. What? Did you think you had simultaneous cardiac arrests?” Severin asked in that toneless voice, one golden brow raised. Andy cackled from his post at the counter.

“Who would poison us?” Phil whispered in disbelief, “I’ve known Matia Andrewes since I was a child. She wouldn’t poison anyone!”

“What about Sally?” Lillian asked.

“Who’s Sally?” Andy asked eagerly. “Jealous mother? Girlfriend? Daughter?”

“You live in a sad world, young man,” Phil said a bit pompously, “but to answer your question, Sally is my ex-girlfriend.” Andy whooped with glee. “But she would not do such a thing either!” Phil continued.

“Are you sure about that?” Severin asked, looking at Phil in the eye. Phil was silent for a while then his eyes dropped. Severin nodded.

“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” he said, rather irrelevantly in Phil’s opinion.

“She wasn’t scorned,” he mumbled inaudibly. “It was more of a mutual decision.”

Lillian snorted, “I’ve yet to see a breakup that was mutual. That simply means one person didn’t want to look like a ponce so they didn’t protest when the other one left.”

Phil had to admit that this was possible.

“So that’s why we’re still here? Cause we was poisoned and we want revenge?” Lillian asked.

“We do not want revenge!” Phil tried to say but everyone ignored him.

“It could be revenge or some other reason. It will take some time to ascertain,” Severin said. “Andy here has been waiting to find out for all this time and he hasn’t yet. So fear not, your time will come.”

“Wot? You’re saying it might take us *fourteen years* to figure out why we’re still here?!” Lillian asked, her voice becoming shrill in her agitation.

“Bernard’s been here for two hundred,” Andy said faux helpfully.

“I am not going to bloody wait *two hundred stinkin’ years* in this effing hospital to find out why I’m still here!” Lillian shouted shrilly. Severin winced at the noise and Phil put his small arms around her massive shoulders, holding her protectively to him. Her anguish was distressing to him. Andy smirked in amusement. “I say we’re here for

revenge,” she declared determinedly. Phil loosened his hold. He loved the gritty side of Lil’, and if she was busy being determined, maybe she’d forget to be upset.

Severin nodded his head, although whether this was in response to her statement or to his own internal voices, they couldn’t tell. Andy straightened up and drifted away. Clearly the entertainment was over.

“So what do we do now?” Phil asked Severin quietly.

“Nothing. You do nothing. You have no vouchers, so it’s not safe for you. I suggest you remain in the room where you died for now. Until you can convince the gatekeepers to give you some,” Severin said.

“Aren’t you a gatekeeper?” Phil asked hopefully.

Severin shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid not. I’m housekeeping, not gatekeeping. You’ve heard of the Celtic myth about the last person to be buried in a graveyard being the guardian until someone else dies?” Phil made a noncommittal gesture. “Well, it’s true to a certain extent in my case. My family have been in housekeeping since time immemorial. We look after the dead, until the next Bruin dies, then we can move on. I’ve been Housekeeper for fifty years now. I understand my nephew is gravely ill, though, so I may be moving on soon.”

“When you say ‘look after,’ what exactly do you mean?” Lillian asked.

“I mean I keep things tidy, make sure no one makes too much of a stramash, attracts the wrong sort of attention, causes too much of an upheaval in the living-dead dynamic—that sort of thing,” Severin said.

“Wrong sort o’ attention?” Lillian asked, frowning in puzzlement. “From whom?”

“Well, I’m not sure you’re ready to hear about that right now. Perhaps you’d do better to—”

“Tell us,” Lillian demanded in a steely tone that brooked no opposition. So Severin told them.

Just because they were dead didn’t mean they were safe. Even in the realm of the dead, danger lurked. While there were ghosts such as they were—spirits adrift in the fabric of time looking for purpose—there were also others. Among these were mercenaries—rogue spirits working mainly for Met Kafu, and other Evil Spirits or demons. They stole energy from other spirits, such as Phil and Lillian, to enhance the ability of their masters, with the help of black-magic inclined voodoo priestesses and witches, to effect spells. If the mercenaries stole enough energy, then the spirits were left as intangible as the wind, with their ability to do anything at all severely diminished. Of course, this reduced their chances of completing their unfinished business, if they could even find out what that was. The vouchers, issued by the gatekeepers, repelled these mercenaries so that they could not get near.

“And how do we get these vouchers?” Phil asked fearfully.

“You ask the Gatekeeper to give you one,” Severin said.

“It’s that simple?” Lillian asked sceptically.

“Well ... the Gatekeeper may ask for something in return,” Severin said noncommittally.

“Something like?” Lillian prompted.

Severin shrugged. “Some sort of *quid pro quo*. You’d have to speak to him; I really can’t say,” he replied.

Just then, a huge wind began to blow, and it seemed like a hurricane had sprouted in their midst. Phil and Lillian clutched each other in fear, expecting the worst. Just as suddenly as it appeared, the hurricane disappeared, and in its place stood a distinguished gentleman of middling height. The tip of his black beard was curled into a ringlet that emphasised the pointiness of his chin. He was dressed in old-fashioned costume, with fancy black breeches tucked into shining white stockings, his silver-buckled shoes shone to perfection. He had a long-tailed coat buttoned over his waistcoat, from whose pocket hung a gold watch. A blinding white shirt with a frilled collar and sleeves completed the picture of what was obviously a French dandy of old. He bowed elegantly to them.

“Bernard de Marigny, *à votre service*,” he said. “Would you care for a game of craps?”

Chapter Four: Bernard

Andy came back into the room in Bernard's wake. Obviously, he had gone in search of the Frenchman in order to increase the entertainment value of the proceedings. He leaned back against the counter to see how the games would play out. Lillian glared at him to let him know she was on to him.

"Err, I'm Phillip Hamilton. This is my girlfriend, Lillian Ecclestone," Phil said politely as he offered his hand. Bernard looked at it curiously and, with a slight "Hmm," turned to Lillian and took her hand instead. He kissed it in the customary French manner, murmuring, "*Enchanté, mademoiselle*," as he did so. He then turned to Phil and bowed very correctly to him, saying, "I am pleased to meet you, sir."

Phil bowed uncertainly back, murmuring his pleasure at meeting Bernard as well. Pleasantries marked, Bernard reached into his pocket and produced some dice. He threw them in the air and they landed on the crap table that had appeared suddenly in the middle of the ICU reception area. Bernard gestured for them all to gather round.

Andy murmured quietly to Phil, "He's such a show-off. Better play with him anyway. He's pretty useful."

"So how do you play this game?" Lillian asked.

"Well, it's easy," Andy replied. "First, you roll the dice, make sure they hit the wall on the opposite end. Place your bet *before* the come-out roll. If you're the shooter of the dice, the game can't start unless you place your bet on the pass line. Then the rest of us can place our bets. Your first roll of the dice is the come-out roll. If you shoot a 7 or an 11, you win even money. If you shoot 2, 3, or 12, then it's craps and everyone loses. If you shoot any other number, this number becomes the point. Which means that the bets remain in place and you don't have to make another bet to play again. So then the dealer—that's Bernard—takes the buck and places it on the number that is the point. So the shooter—that's you—will try to roll your point before you roll 7. If you succeed, everyone wins even money; if you don't, it doesn't matter either way. Geddit?"

"Err, I think I'll just watch first, thanks," Lillian said, her brow furrowed in confusion.

She retreated into a corner and observed as the game got louder and more boisterous. Andy seemed to be shooting something called Snake Eyes, which was causing major excitement. She didn't know why, but she was pretty sure Andy was cheating.

Still, she had barely any attention to spare for what was going on at the craps table. Phil was enjoying himself she could see, and that was good. But all she could think about all of a sudden was how they were dead! They had died today, at this hospital, in a little town near New Orleans, where she knew not a soul ... okay, she knew some people. The bosses at the Evan's farm were alright, she supposed, especially the Missus. Leyla Evans was kind and generous, and treated her workmen like they were part of the family. Not but a lot of them *were*. That Leo, for example, who ran the Alligator Shoppe with his mother, was just fifteen years old, he'd said, but *tall* with it, and he was the Evans' nephew. He was dark that kid was—and a heartbreaker, too. If she were but ten years younger, she *might* give him a bit of a try ... What was she doing thinking about sexy teenagers anyway? She was dead. *Dead!* She'd never see her mam again or tackle her little brother to the ground. Life as she knew it was over ... *Over*.

Lillian wanted to cry but there were no tears. She sank slowly to the floor, contemplating eternity.

‘Wot’s goin’ to happen to us now?’ she thought a bit desperately, *‘Fuck that Sally! Desperate, vicious, murderin’ cow! How could you do this to us? How could you do this to him if you love him so much?’*

No answers were forthcoming, so she sighed sadly and tried to think what to do. Maybe she should go and try to speak to the gatekeeper and maybe get him to give her some vouchers. She wasn’t ready to become mercenary-bait or whatever. While she was there, she could probably ask about the Armani shades and Armani suit and what a person had to do to get their hands on those. She looked down at herself, examining her appearance.

She had died in one of her best dresses. It showed off her substantial cleavage to full advantage and was the same deep green as her eyes. Her strawberry-blonde hair was done up in a fancy beehive, and she was wearing her pearl drop earrings and a matching bracelet. Her bejewelled hands with their trademark rings of all kinds sparkled in the light, making her stare in wonder. The light shone right through her hands, but the rings seemed to reflect it. She had rings for all occasions and she wore them all at the same time. Although she’d come to the hospital with her shoes in her hands, she found that they were on her feet now. Gold, strappy heels that showed off the surprising elegance of her size-14 feet. She’d painted her nails yellow this morning, both fingers and toes. She couldn’t keep her fingernails as long as she liked because of the alligator job—the rotted meat tended to get stuck in if she did. But she compensated by letting her toenails grow as long as they liked. Her skin was a porcelain smooth and this brought out her deep-green eyes to good advantage. She pulled her dress a bit lower to show more cleavage, and then she stood up, smoothing down her dress. She wasn’t sure *what* exactly that gatekeeper was, but she could see he was male, and ain’t nothing males liked better than a bit o’ titty in their faces ...

Jones

“Lil! Where are you going?” Phil called to her as she sashayed out of the room, but she didn’t want to talk, so she twiddled her fingers at him instead and kept walking. The nurses’ reception area was now full of nurses chatting about this and that as they wrote in their charts, completely unaware of the loud craps game going on right in front of them. Descending the stairs to the first floor, she saw Dr Ross was making his slow, unsteady way down the stairs as well. There was something seriously wrong with that man, was her thought as she gave him a kick in the stones. Her foot went right through him and she withdrew it quickly, not wanting to think about her foot in actual contact with the *insides* of his balls. That line of thought was cut off quickly before it grossed her out.

The ground floor was a hive of activity. There was a line of patients waiting to see the doctor—more fool them—including, she saw, Jade Evans, mother of Leo. She did not look well, but then again, she never did. Folk said she was a lush and a bit of a slapper as well; it was no wonder her son was so dark. She turned down the morgue corridor, glancing to the side to see if Andy would be leaning on the wall. That boy was a bit dodgy; she’d do well to keep an eye on him. There was no one about, though, and she reached the end of the corridor without incident.

Jones wasn’t there.

Instead, there was a Goth-looking bird with blue hair, picking her nose with long, black-and-white striped nails. She had black-and-white striped stockings to match and a tight leather top. She seemed to be pierced *everywhere* and her black combat boots looked like they had some miles on them.

“Err, awright? I’m looking for Jones,” Lillian said tentatively.

“Jones’ shift is over for this decade. I’m on duty now,” the girl said in a surly tone.

“Oh,” Lillian said, pulling her dress up to conceal as much of her cleavage as possible.

“Well, my name is Lillian and I would like a voucher,” she said quietly.

“You would like a voucher? Get in line,” the girl said.

“Sorry, we seem to have gotten started on the wrong foot. I’m Lillian, I’m from London. Pleased to meet you,” she said, extending her hand to be shaken.

The girl looked at the hand like it was a poison-oozing creature from the deepest depths of hell. Lillian slowly lowered her hand, her smile fading. Her shoulders slumped in defeat and she began to tremble, tears close to the surface. How had she gotten it wrong, *again*? she wondered. Then she got a hold of herself, taking a deep breath and telling herself to grow a spine.

“Okay look here, bird. You got vouchers. I need vouchers. Name your price,” she demanded of the girl, glaring at her balefully. Diplomacy had never been her thing anyway; she had always been a shoot-from-the-hip kinda gal. The girl stared at her in stupefaction then she began to laugh and laugh and laugh. The sound was strange, like a bit of flotsam that had lain for years accumulating dust, and now was resurrected with an accompanying eruption of dust into the air. A “dusty sound” was the only way Lillian could think to describe it. It went on for quite some time, and Lillian was a little afraid she would go on laughing till the decade was up.

"You. Threaten me?" the girl said, ceasing the laughter so abruptly it further disconcerted poor Lillian.

"I wasna threaten—" Lillian began.

"Weren't you?" the girl interrupted. "Well, then."

There was a very awkward silence. Lillian took a breath to speak, then blew it out again. Someone needed to write a book on Afterlife Etiquette. Where was Emily Post when you needed her? Didn't she die in the sixties? That was like forty years ago! Long enough ago for her to have written a blue book for the dead. Some people were so inconsiderate! She'd probably gone off into happily-ever-after without so much as a backward glance. There is no way some eighty-something-year-old had unfinished business! Everyone *she* knew was probably *long* dead.

"You want vouchers? Then you'll do something for me," the girl's voice cut into her thoughts.

"Wot's your name?" Lillian asked. "Its only, if we're going to be working together and such, I can't exactly be calling you ... well, nuffin, right?"

"We are not going to be working together. *You* are going to do something for *me* in return for vouchers. Clear?" the girl stated.

Lillian nodded her head.

"Good. Well then, you can call me Emily," the girl said, with a sarcastic twist to the mouth that could pass for a smile, Lillian supposed. These gatekeeper gits were not a happy lot.

"You mean because I was thinking about Emily Post, yeah? Okay, that's mint. Now, how about you tell me what I'm supposed to do before I lose the plot completely?" Lillian asked with panicky weariness. Dealing with these afterlife people was a lot harder than dealing with alive people. How much longer would she have to do this? She needed to know there was a light at the end of this long, dark tunnel.

"I need you to pass a message for me," Emily said.

"Oh? To who?" Lillian asked, perking up. This didn't sound too bad.

"A witch. Her name is Mama Ruth. I was given a message for her, but I hadn't delivered it by the time my shift was on. So, you need to do it."

"Okay. Where do I find this witch?" Lillian asked with trepidation. Maybe not as easy as she'd hoped.

"She lives in the woods, down the river, past the Evans' place, toward the southern end of the bayou," Emily replied.

"And how am I to get there?" Lillian asked desperately. "I can't leave the hospital!"

"Vell, there are vays," Emily said, affecting a fake Russian accent, the first real smile Lillian had seen on her face breaking through.

"Tell me," Lillian begged.

Emily just stared at her blankly. Then she said, "The message is, 'Keep watch. Mercury and Neptune align. The child of destiny approaches.'"

"And how am I to deliver it if I can't get out of here?" Lillian persisted.

"You have one week. After that, the mercs will have your scent. You will be on your own," Emily said. Then she turned toward the door, standing *en garde*. She had no shades, but her watch was very definitely a silver Rolex. Lillian could not believe she had

the energy to notice. She stared at Emily for a while, hoping for something more, but she just stood unmoving, staring at the door like it held the secrets to life.

Chapter Five: Escape

Lillian turned around and walked back the way she came, head in turmoil. How was she to get to this Mama Ruth. Suddenly she heard the voice in her head.

"Lillian?"

Lillian ground to a halt, looking around for who had spoken.

"Tell no one apart from Mama Ruth about the contents of the message. If you do, consider our deal forfeited."

Lillian turned around slowly to look back at Emily. She stood as rigidly as Lillian had left her, eyes on the door. The voice in her head was not Emily's. It was deeper and much more scary. But seeing as she hadn't made deals with anyone else, it had to be her. Lillian turned back and hurried down the corridor almost at a run. She did not look back.

Phil, Andy, and Bernard were still playing when she got back to ICU. The waiting room was more crowded now, with people waiting to see the patients, she supposed. *Did Derek Argent's people visit?* she wondered. *If it was me and I sold him out like that, I certainly wouldn't,* she thought. She came up to Phil, standing behind him until he turned to face her.

"Hi," he said with a smile.

"Hi. We need to talk," she replied.

"Uh-oh!" Andy said, making a whistling noise. "You're in trouble, bro."

"Don't be silly, Andy," Phil said absentmindedly. "Excuse us," he took Lillian's arm and led her to one of the waiting-room benches.

"Where have you been, Lil?" he asked her with concern. "You look troubled."

"I *am* troubled, Phillip! I spoke to the gatekeeper—there's a new one, Jones is gone. This one's worse. She said she'll only give me a voucher if I deliver a message. To some witch wot lives in the forest! I told her we couldn't leave but she was all like, whatever and them. Now I got one week or else it's curtains, the bruisers'll be on to us," she finished desperately.

"You have to leave the hôpital?" Bernard asked, appearing suddenly beside them and making Lillian jump about a foot into the air.

"Yes," she gasped out on her way down.

"No worries. I know just the guy," Bernard said.

"You do?!" Lillian asked, clutching his arm in relief, causing a slight frown to appear on Phil's forehead. He considered himself to be quite an easygoing guy, except with Lillian. He couldn't seem to help being so possessive over her. It was the Spanish in him, he supposed, though he didn't believe in stereotypes.

"Yes I do, *ma chérie*. Do not fear. You will deliver your message." Bernard said, patting her on the arm like she was a nervous puppy. "But first, you must play ze craps. After, we will find Armand."

"Is that another ghost?" Lillian asked, relieved tears streaming down her face.

"No. Armand is ... other. Never mind that now. Come and play," Bernard said.

Chapter Six: Armand

Lillian lost miserably, which was quite unsurprising for her, considering she had no idea what she was doing. She just wanted the game to be over so they could go see this Armand. Andy was playing with every appearance of enjoyment, but Phil kept glancing anxiously at her, like he was worried. Bernard was completely absorbed in the game, not even noticing the nurses and patients that occasionally passed through him and the craps table. Finally, he disappeared the table and gestured to Lillian and Phil to follow him. He headed to a corridor that was unlighted and getting ever darker as he headed toward the end. There was a flight of stairs that went to an upper floor. Bernard floated up it, disappearing into the gloom that permeated the top of the stairs. Lillian and Phil hesitated, and then they began to climb after him.

The top floor was completely dark. It looked like an attic with tiny windows that did not let in much light. Broken furniture littered the room as well as what looked like obsolete equipment. In the far corner, next to a broken window, sat a man. He was a tall man, perhaps six-foot-four, with long, wavy, black hair that reached his buttocks, held together with a brilliant-red ribbon, tied in a neat bow. His eyes were a piercing grey, looking out of a rakishly handsome long face with a forbiddingly straight nose. This contrasted sharply with his soft and pouty-looking lips and the entire effect was ... compelling, Lillian reluctantly admitted to herself. This was further emphasised by his attire, which consisted of black jeans around his impossibly long-looking legs and a white T-shirt with a photo of Slash murdering some guitar strings. He leaned back casually on the stool he sat on, with one leather-booted leg propped casually on the window ledge. He did not look round as they approached, though he seemed aware of them by the way he tensed.

Lillian narrowed her eyes as they came close and the light from the window fell on him. Armand looked so familiar, like she had met him before, but she couldn't quite place him. They stopped as they reached him, surrounding him in a silent semicircle as they waited for him to acknowledge their presence. Still he did not look round. Phil and Lillian took their cue from Bernard, who, in spite of his status as Oldest Ghost on the Block, seemed deferential to this Armand. Considering that he was clearly much older-looking than Armand, it was intriguing.

"It's dangerous, what you mean to do," Armand finally said in an extremely low voice. They could hear him clearly all the same. Lillian was relieved that someone had finally said something and took a deep breath to answer. Phil got there before her, however.

"Er, hello. I'm Phil, this is Lil. We are asking for your help."

"I gathered that. However, you must show that you are ready to do this. It's dangerous as I said, and far from easy. There is no turning back once you get on this road. You must be sure," he replied.

"I'm sure," Lillian said, a little more loudly than was warranted in her nervousness. She stepped forward so that she could look Armand in the face because he still had not turned around to face them. She stood in front of the window and stared down at him. As her shadow fell across his face, he looked up at her, and his eyes pierced the soul she didn't know she still had.

"Hello," she said softly and breathlessly. "I'm Lil."

"Armand," he said, not breaking eye contact with her. Suddenly, her knees felt weak and breathing became that much more difficult. She couldn't understand it because as far as she knew, she'd left her heart and lungs behind with the rest of her body. Phil reached for her and pulled her toward him, a bit more roughly than she liked. It broke the trance she was in, however, and she came to herself with a hearty thud. Looking around, she saw Andy sniggering with amusement off to the side of them. Phil looked visibly upset at something, while Bernard's eyes were still trained on Armand, seeming to notice nothing else.

"I will help you. But once you embark on this quest, there is no turning back. Are you ready?" Armand asked, still facing the window.

"We're ready," Lil said quickly, before Phil could say anything. Armand nodded his head once, as if in affirmation.

"Meet me here, when the moon is at its zenith," he said. Bernard bowed elegantly and gestured for them to walk back toward the stairs. Lil and Phil obediently turned and headed in that direction with Bernard following close behind and Andy trailing. As soon as they reached the ICU floor, Lil turned to Bernard and asked breathlessly, "Who is he?"

"He's like a former human being converted by magic into ... I don't know, a creature of magic?" was Andy's garbled reply.

"Very illuminating," Lillian said wryly, settling down on the waiting-room bench and putting her feet up. Her mythical heels were killing her! "But wot I was askin' is—"

"I know what you were asking, but Armand is complicated. He used to be a man four thousand years ago, one who was extremely interested in magic." Andy drifted over to the bench and reclined on it. Lillian leaned toward him, interested.

"Then wot happened?" she asked.

"Well, he was a warrior, and I think there were some wars going on with the Egyptians and whatnot. There was a guy called Dedi, who lived like a thousand years before Armand. He used to cut heads off poultry and then reattach them. Armand got hold of the scrolls, looked at the whole legend behind the 'curse of the pharaohs,' did some experimentation of his own, and he attracted the attention of some not very nice beings."

Lillian straightened her legs, moving closer to Andy in her interest. She didn't notice Phil curl himself into the corner in what definitely looked like a sulk. Bernard was back at his craps table, playing by himself.

"Then wot happened?"

"Well, it gets kinda murky from here on out, but from what I understand, he messed with things he shouldn't've. Attracted the attention of these things that came crawling out of dark holes nobody even knew existed. There were repercussions. He needs to make amends, so he's a servant of the fates until further notice."

"So what is he doing here?"

"Waiting."

"For?"

"He won't say."

"So how do you know he's waiting, or that he's a servant of the fates, or whatever?"

"I hear things," Andy said vaguely, drifting away.

Lillian stared after him then started as she remembered Phil. She looked round at him and saw that he was all curled up in the corner, looking quite upset. She got up and went to him, trying to lean her head against his shoulder, but he shrugged her off.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," Phil shrugged, not meeting her eyes.

"Armand? Is it Armand? Because he can help us to survive this situation we find ourselves in."

"Is that why your eyes were practically falling out of your head when you were staring at him upstairs?"

"Wot can I say? I admit he took me breath away, but that's just hormones. You and me, we are forever. Don't you know that?"

"I thought I did, but I'm not so sure anymore. Is it because we are tied together by this ghost thing, or do you really want to be with me?"

"Phillip Hamilton, I left me mam and me bruv in the bloody UK to come be wiv u. Wot more dyu want?"

"Oh I don't know, just try to keep your eyes in your head and the drool in your mouth," Phil said in an uncharacteristically snarky tone.

"Okay, I'm not going to talk to you when you're like this," Lillian said, standing up and walking away. She kept walking, not even paying attention when she went through someone or through the walls. She headed back up to the attic, thinking that she might as well get a move on, on finding out what they had to do. Armand wasn't there though, so she took the stool that he'd been sitting on and stared out into the gathering twilight, thinking hard.

Just yesterday, they had come back from the government office, where she'd taken her oath to forever be faithful to the "Yoonited States" and whatnot. They had been so excited ... well, Phil more than her. I mean, she had been glad to get citizenship because she loved her job wrestling crocodiles—sorry, alligators—at the Evans' farm. It was like she'd found herself when she came here. And there was certainly nothing equivalent in England that she could do. Phil was like the icing on the cake. She'd never expected to fall in love. It had come as a complete surprise to her. She had been sexually attracted to Phil from the first. She saw him, but she'd never expected he'd feel the same. He was so clever and sophisticated, and she was so South London. Plus he had that girlfriend, Sally her name had been, all dark-haired, green-eyed perfection. Petite. Phil's "perfect" match. And he'd chosen her! She could hardly bring herself to believe it even now. And now ... now they were dead!

She looked down at her hands. If she'd ever spared a thought for ghosts, she'd always had this image of them as insubstantial, invisible "Casper the Friendly Ghost" type things with no shape or form. But apart from the fact that she'd seen her body wheeled away to

a mortuary, there was really no change in her appearance that she could see. What did it all mean?

Chapter Seven: Mama Ruth

Phil climbed the stairs slowly, wondering where Lillian was. She was so anxious to do this thing with Armand, one would think she would at least show up ... He came to the top of the landing to see her sitting on the stool, staring out into the night. She looked so transcendently beautiful that he couldn't be angry at her anymore. Who was he kidding anyway? She was the love of his life; he did *not* want to fight with her.

He was so busy staring at her he didn't notice Armand come up behind him.

"She is remarkable, isn't she?"

"So you *had* noticed! She's my girlfriend."

"I know that. I noticed you marking your territory earlier."

"So back off!"

"You assume that I'm interested. I'm not. I left that life behind me a long time ago."

"So why would you tell me that she's remarkable?"

"Because she is. Don't let your insecurities about other people noticing just how breathtaking she is spoil what you have. She has proven her love for you. Forcing her to *keep* proving it will only drive her away."

"If you haven't done this for so long, how would you know?"

"I've lived a long time. Come," Armand said, drifting toward Lillian. His feet were moving on the floor, Phil could see that, but he still looked like he was gliding.

"Mama Ruth is a great and powerful witch. She will have means to pull you to her. All you have to do is attract her attention."

"Great! How do we do that?" Lillian asked.

"That is indeed a good question, my lady Lillian. The answer, though, is not so straightforward."

"I'm listening," Lillian said.

"There is a fire, a huge fire composed of brimstone and sulphur, potassium and copper. The colour of the flame is, therefore, a kaleidoscope of the rainbow. When it burns hot, the smoke that emanates from it acts as a conduit. Messages can be sent and received."

"And how—" Lillian began.

"—would you send her a message?" Armand finished for her, "Well, I suppose you write it down. On a piece of dark papyrus that has been aged for at least a century. You must build up your fire as hers burns simultaneously, and burn your message within the flames. Once Mama Ruth gets your message, she may choose to call you or not. If she does, you will find yourself in the Bayou. You will be on your own, if you do—at the mercy of whatever lurks there, beyond the help of any here."

"Where would we get—" Lillian started.

"—the dark papyri?" Armand interrupted again. "Perhaps Bernard can help you with that. Or Andy. You'll have to see if they'll help you."

"Wot would we say in the message?" Lillian asked, a bit tentatively. This was looking more impossible by the minute. "And how would we make the flames?"

“Why don’t you find the papyrus, then we’ll worry about the rest? Tick, tock,” Armand said, lounging on the stool again and staring out into the dark. It made Lillian really curious.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked him, without thinking.

Armand actually turned to look at her. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Well,” Lillian replied, stepping back from him in fear, “I just noticed that you stare out that window a lot.”

“Very observant of you. Perhaps I like the view.”

“Yes, the parking lot’ and some trees? Very interestin’, I’m sure. Beautiful even.”

“Sarcasm, is it? I had forgotten. It has been a while since I engaged in common human intercourse.”

Lillian opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again.

“It’s the word intercourse, is it not?” Armand said wryly, meeting her eyes. “You were going to make some crude jest.”

“Well, now that you say ‘crude jest’, it just makes it all very childish and juvenile, don’t it? Kind of spoils it.”

Armand moved his lips in what Lillian assumed was a smile.

“So, you didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“I think I’ll save that conversation for *if* ... you get back.”

“Very well. Well, we’d better get started then, hadn’t we?”

“You had.”

Lillian and Phil’s eyes met in consternation, and then they turned as one and left the attic. Bernard would be in the ICU, playing at craps they assumed, but they didn’t want to approach him without a plan. A tour of the hospital was warranted, they agreed. Maybe find out who else was lurking about the hospital, waiting on eternity. They needed more information on all these creatures telling them what to do. From some other party that was slightly more neutral perhaps, less ... mystical. A normal ghost, one could say, who didn’t have a clue, like them. Andy, while meeting the basic criteria, definitely didn’t count, the sneaky lil’ bastard.

They did a full reconnaissance, from the roof to the basement, but not a ghost of a clue did they find. They did bump into the old woman, Matia, who was apparently making enquiries as to their deaths from the hospital nurse, Carrie. She wasn’t being too friendly though, the nurse, and was very dismissive of the old lady. They tried to attract her attention, but she didn’t seem to hear them.

“I thought you said she was a witch?” Lillian said to Phil.

“She is. I don’t know, maybe they don’t all hear spirits. Or there is some ritual or something,” Phil replied.

They went to ground in the basement, deciding to lay low for the rest of the night. Tomorrow, after all, was another day. They found some old beds pushed against the wall and decided to lie down. They thought about getting undressed but didn’t know how that worked when you were dead. Phil turned to Lillian and she faced him as well. They stared at each other intently then Phil leaned forward and placed his lips on Lil’s. He felt an echo of the usual passion that used to assail him every time his lips touched hers. He

couldn't feel her lips and he opened his eyes to look at her. Her eyes were open too and she was staring at him in horror.

"Do you feel it?" she asked, her voice was shaky like she was crying, but no tears fell from her eyes.

Phil shook his head, staring at her. Her shoulders were definitely heaving like she was crying, but other than that, no tears fell from her eyes, and her eyes did not become red.

"I guess sex is out, huh?" Lil said with a strange half shrug. She looked upset.

Phil leaned forward again and pressed his lips on hers again. He felt the echo of physical passion, although the love welled up as strong as ever when he looked into her eyes.

"Our bodies are gone, so I guess the bodily functions went, too. But the love ... you feel it, too, don't you?" Phil asked, suddenly uncertain.

Lillian stared at him and then she smiled, "Yes. I feel it, too," she said.

Chapter Eight: Dark Papyrus

Dawn found Phil and Lillian at the ICU reception, waiting for Bernard to come. The clock was ticking, and now they had six days to get this done. Lillian thought back to the crazy night they'd spent, huddled together in the basement. They had tried to see if they could get some sleep, and were conversely rather tired, having discovered that spirits don't sleep. The effort they'd expended in trying had exhausted them more than they could imagine. It also brought home forcibly to them the fact that they were dead. Lillian shivered a bit, thinking about it.

"Are you okay?" Phil asked, putting a protective arm around her as they sat on the waiting-room bench.

"I don't know. I feel like we should look for some breakfast, but obviously we don't need it. It's messin' with me 'ead."

"I know. I'm kind of disoriented myself. I wish Bernard would hurry up."

Andy came strolling through the walls.

"Well, hello there. What's up with you two?"

"We're waiting for Bernard. Have you seen him?"

"Ach! He doesn't hang out here that much. He's mostly in the triage area. Much more room for the table."

"Oh. Well, thanks. Cheerio then," Lillian said, pulling Phil to his feet and heading for the stairs at a fast trot.

"Oy! Wait." Andy called after them, hurrying to catch up.

Bernard was indeed in the triage area, curled up on his table, fast asleep. Phil and Lillian hesitated to wake him, especially seeing as they couldn't figure out how he was asleep in the first place. Phil reached out a tentative hand and touched Bernard on the shoulder. He started immediately like he'd been tased with 150 volts.

"*Que?*" he murmured.

"We're sorry to disturb you," Phil said tentatively, "but we wondered if we could have a conversation."

Bernard jumped to his feet and beckoned them over to the triage room, settling comfortably in the nurse's chair and indicating that they should sit on the triage bed. Phil and Lillian sat obediently side by side on the bed, crossing their arms and feet, and waiting to take their cue from Bernard. The waiting room was thankfully deserted this early, so there was no worry that the nurse would come in with a patient and take over the room. Bernard sat staring at them, not saying a word, making Lillian feel like if someone didn't say something soon, she'd be forced to punch something or explode.

"*Que puis-je faire pour vous?*" Bernard asked, causing Lillian and Phil to look at each other blankly. "Forgive me, it is early and I've been asleep; my mind is not yet ready for second languages. What can I do for *vous*?"

"Well," Phil began, "we need dark papyrus."

"Ah. And you think that I 'ave some of zis dark papyrus?"

"We hoped that you could help us procure some."

"Ah," Bernard said again. "You 'ave 'eard of my skills, I see. The question is, what will *vous* do for *moi*?"

“Wot do you want?” Lillian asked bluntly.

“A full day of craps. And you, *ma cherie*, must play. If you win ze ’ouse, that is, *moi*, I will get you zis dark papyrus. If not, well ...”

“We’ve never played craps before. How fair is that?” Lillian cried.

“Well, actually, I’ve played before,” Phil demurred, “I did mention the river boats ...”

“But he wants *me* to play!” Lillian said, turning to face Phil, “I don’t know ’ow!”

“Never fear, my love, I shall teach you.” Turning to Bernard, Phil asked him, “When are we to play this game?”

“What is it you Americans say? No time like ze present? Are you not on ze clock?” he replied, with an elegant lift of his brow.

“How do you know about the clock?” Lillian asked, a bit agitated because Emily had said no one was to know.

“Well,” Bernard said with a shrug, studying his nails keenly, “I ... know things.”

“We’re not the first, are we?” Phil said, watching him keenly.

There was a loud silence in the room.

“No,” Bernard said reluctantly at last. “You are not.”

“Wot ’appened to the others?” Lillian asked anxiously.

Bernard did not reply but continued to examine his nails as if they held the secrets to the universe. Lillian and Phil eyed each other in consternation.

“Andy,” Lillian said.

“Yes,” Phil nodded in reply as they both turned toward the reception area. Andy was at the reception desk, thumbing through patient files.

“Andy,” Phil said, looming over him with as much authority as he could muster, “what happened to the others?”

“Others?” Andy asked vaguely, not looking up from the files. Lillian grabbed hold of his hair and pulled.

“Ow!” Andy cried indignantly, “What did you do that for?”

“Pay attention!” Lillian said in reply.

“What happened to the others Andy?” Phil asked.

“What others?” Andy asked irritably.

“The others who asked Bernard for help to get the dark papyrus,” Phil said.

“They didn’t need dark papyrus,” Andy said.

“What *did* they need? And what happened to them?”

“They didn’t come back.”

Lillian and Phil stared balefully at him, waiting for him to continue.

“I don’t know what happened. They tried to get out, but they didn’t come back.”

“Why did they try to get out?” Phil asked desperately.

“The vouchers. They needed the vouchers.”

“And ... ?”

“And ... Bernard got them out of here. They didn’t survive out there, though. I think the mercs got them finally.”

“Because they didn’t find the gatekeepers? Or what? *What happened, Andy?*”

"I don't know what happened!" Andy shouted, and there was a collective shiver among the few inhabitants of the reception room, as if a strong, cold wind had swept through it. "They went and they didn't return," he continued more quietly.

"How many, Andy?" Lillian asked.

Andy shrugged sullenly, not meeting their eyes. "Five, maybe six," he said.

"And you don't know *where* they are now?" Phil asked.

"I hear them sometimes, when it's really quiet. They try to get someone's attention, I suppose, shouting at the top of their voices. But they're too weak."

"So they're here?" Phil persisted.

"They are in the ether. Not here specifically, but not ... not here," Andy said uncertainly.

"Come on, Phil, let's go so you can teach me how to play. This is getting us nowhere, and we're running out of time."

She grabbed Phil's arm and dragged him away, toward the craps table. This was hard enough without scaring themselves with the fate of ghosts from vouchers past.

"The basic concept behind craps is that you win or lose at the roll of a dice," Phil began, going on to explain the basic rules and what was needed from her in order to beat the house.

"What it comes down to basically is luck. You roll that dice and pray," Phil finished, tossing the dice with flourish. It hit the wall of the craps table and landed on a 4 and a 10.

"Whoa," Phil shouted. "Point!"

"Is that good?" Lillian asked in a distinctly disinterested tone.

"It's a start. Come on, no point in further delay. Let's get this done."

He took her hand and they went in search of Bernard.

□

Andy watched them go with trepidation. He really liked these ones. They had spunk. The newly dead generally tended to be perishing with fear, or whiny. Worse yet, they could be both. Andy didn't have much patience with it. Even when he'd been alive, his father had taught him to stand up and be counted. No use whining and complaining. Then he'd gone to Vietnam and been killed, and Andy had been the head of the house, at least for a while. He'd tried to help his mother with the mill, but his schoolwork suffered, and she'd decided to marry again so that his "childhood" need not suffer. The irony: she just made sure he never grew up. His stepfather had been alright at first. He worked at the mill, he came home. Sometimes he threw the occasional compliment at his mother, or threw a baseball with him. The drinking had gotten worse very gradually, and the first time he'd hit Andy's mother, the shock of it had left Andy immobile. The next time though, he'd been prepared with a tyre iron and took the fucker down before he could do too much damage to his mother.

His stepfather had never forgiven him for that, though. He'd lain in wait, and one time when he came back from school, he'd ambushed him and hit him with the very same tyre iron. Andy wasn't sure if he'd meant to kill him with it, but the fucker had aimed for the back of his head, and his life had been cut off so suddenly he didn't realise for weeks that he was dead. His stepfather had buried the evidence, and then went home and told his

mother that he'd run away. Andy wasn't sure if his mother really believed it or not. She'd searched for him for months, but there was nothing that Andy had been able to do.

He didn't know how he'd ended up at the hospital, or why he was exempt from vouchers, but he was grateful for it. He'd seen the effects of the mercenaries, how they overwhelmed a ghost and drained it of all vitality. He shivered at the same thing happening to Phil and Lillian. They seemed stronger than the others. He hoped that they would survive. He could use the company.

Chapter Nine: Casper

Twelve hours later, Bernard was talking to a black-cloaked figure at the end of the morgue corridor. It wasn't the gatekeeper; this one was much larger and more terrifying. His hood completely covered his face, so they couldn't see what he looked like, but he towered over Bernard like a basilisk over its prey. They seemed to be having an extremely intense conversation. Phil and Lillian clasped their hands tightly together as they watched. It had been really close, but the god of craps had been with them, and they managed to beat the house. Now they waited anxiously for Bernard to get them the dark papyrus, apparently from Mr Hooded Cloak at the end of the corridor.

Bernard was coming toward them, a package in his hands. He held it out to them, his face betraying some trepidation.

"Here 'tis," he said sadly. "May it serve you well."

"Who is that?" Phil asked curiously, reaching out for it, with a nod of his head toward the Cloak.

"He is a purveyor of goods. Nobody you should be worried about," Bernard shrugged in reply.

"Good then. So, how do we get the flames?" Phil said.

"Back to Armand?" Lillian asked.

"Yeah."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

They linked hands and turned as one, headed for the top of the hospital.

□

"Armand?" they called as they reached the dark attic. They walked around, peering in dark corners, but the place was deserted.

"Now wot?" Lillian asked.

"Severin?" Phil suggested.

"Where would we find him?"

"Andy."

"Right. Reception?"

"Yeah."

They walked back down to reception but Andy wasn't there. There was a commotion down the hall though, as if some emergency were taking place. Without consultation, they knew that Andy would be there. They might only have known him for a day or so, but they knew one thing about him definitely—he always wanted to be in the thick of things. There was definitely nowhere thicker than right in the middle of a code blue.

Nurses and orderlies were rushing past them, pulling the crash cart and looking frantic. A doctor was shouting, "Clear!" at the top of his voice from a room at the end of the corridor. As they walked toward the commotion, they saw a figure standing just outside the door, staring in horror at the commotion inside. There was a jagged gash on the side of his leg like he'd been gored open with a blunt object. Blood was *everywhere*.

“Atropine injection 1cc!” the doctor shouted from the room. The figure at the door winced in pain as he watched whatever was happening in the room. Phil and Lillian came up to him and looked in the room as well. Dr Ross was holding a large needle he seemed to have just removed from the patient’s thigh. He was frantically sewing a large wound that ran down the side of his leg, while another doctor performed CPR. Nurses were frantically swabbing blood from what seemed like everywhere, and against the wall stood a tall, slim, African-looking girl with her fists pressed against her mouth in horror. Her large, brown eyes were open so wide they seemed to encompass her whole face as she stared fixedly at the scene in front of her. She was wearing a shabby print dress and had loafers on her feet. Her hair was plaited in two pigtails. She looked like an extra from *The Colour Purple*. Lillian stared at her, wondering what about her was so familiar.

Something about her posture and features reminded her of someone else ...

“What’s happening?” the blood-spattered figure beside them whispered in fear.

“You’re dead, dude.” Andy replied cheerfully, appearing suddenly from nowhere.

“I’m not!” the figure whispered in denial. “See, there I am. I’m not dead.”

“Well, they haven’t called it yet, but seeing as your spirit has left your body ...” Andy pointed out.

“What?” the man said, tearing his eyes away from his body and looking around at Andy, Phil, and Lillian, “What is this? Who are you people?”

“We’re ghosts,” Andy replied helpfully. “So are you.”

“I’m not. I’m an account manager at First Mercantile Bank of le Marais. My name is Bob,” he said, extending a hand out to shake theirs.

The doctor shouted, “Clear!” one more time, hitting Bob’s body with one more blast of electricity. Suddenly Bob the ghost disappeared in a streak of light and the heart monitor beside Bob the body began to beep again.

“Blimey! Did you see that!?” Lillian asked, her mouth wide open in wonder.

“He was dead, now he isn’t,” Andy breathlessly stated, reaching out a hand to take hold of Lillian’s. The frantic activity around the bed was slowing down as the medical crew did some clean up, winding up the stitching and cleaning up blood.

“Is he alright?” the black girl asked in a clear, soft voice.

“He’s breathing for now.” Dr Ross told her, “You’re not family, are you?”

The girl smiled wryly, considering that the patient was a Caucasian gentlemen, the likelihood that they were family was small.

“No, he was on the river. I don’t know what he was doing there. I found him after he was attacked. I brought him here,” she said.

“Well, that was very nice of you and I’m sure he’ll be quite willing to compensate you when he wakes. But for now, you need to go,” Dr Ross said, gesturing to her to leave the room. The girl smiled, shaking her head.

“I don’t want anything,” she said, walking out the room.

“What is your name, in case he asks?” Dr Ross called after her.

“Mya Andrewes.” The girl replied, disappearing down the corridor.

□

“Andy!” Lillian shouted as Andy headed down the corridor the other way from Mya Andrewes. “Where is Severin?”

"Severin left. His nephew died," Andy called back.

"So who's the new housekeeper?"

"His name is Casper," Andy threw over his shoulder.

"Casper the friendly ghost, perfect," Lillian murmured wryly to Phil. "Dyu think he'll know anything?"

"We'll just have to see, won't we?" Phil replied. Bernard was walking slowly toward them, head down.

"That's the first time I've seen Bernard walking like a normal person," Phil said. "Hey Bernard, you heard about Severin?"

"Si, I did."

"Would the new bloke be able to 'elp us with the flames?"

"*Je ne sais pas*. Why not ask Armand?"

"We can't find him."

"He should be in the attic," Bernard said.

"He's not," Phil replied.

Bernard peered in the room containing Bob the account manager, "'e 'ad a lucky escape, zat one," he commented.

Phil and Lillian kept silent.

"Check reception," Bernard said. Lillian opened her mouth to say that they'd been there already but Phil forestalled her by tugging her away. They went off to the reception and sure enough, Armand was there, staring intently at the black girl who had rescued Bob. She was talking to the Indian candy striper who had said her name was Harpreet. Armand stood not half a foot away from her, staring at her lips as she spoke. Lillian came up to him.

"Armand, hi," she said breathlessly.

Armand brought his long index finger up to his lips in a shushing gesture, not taking his eyes away from Mya Andrewes.

"Do you know her?" Lillian persisted.

"I will," Armand said mysteriously, "if you deliver your message."

"You know something about this?" Lillian asked incredulously, wondering just how secret this mission actually was.

"I know only what I've been told."

"Told by whom?"

"You want to know if I can help you with the flames. I can't. But the housekeeper can. Ask him for ingredients," Armand said, completely ignoring her question.

"What are the ingredients?" Phil asked quickly as Lillian opened her mouth to pursue her questions.

"I have told them to you—phosphorus, sulphur, copper—all burned in Beech wood in a bed of alder ash."

"And the housekeeper can get all those? Shouldn't we ask Bernard to speak to his purveyor of goods?"

"Bernard has done all that he will. Talk to the housekeeper."

"Where is 'e?"

"I believe he is conducting a tour of the maternity wing. The newly dead prefer to be around new life."

"Oh really? I hadn't noticed," murmured Phil.

□

Casper was playing peek-a-boo with a baby in the nursery. The baby was laughing with delight, and Casper echoed it, a huge smile on his face. He was shorter than his uncle Severin, but not by much. His shoulder-length hair was black and curly and his eyes were green. He was dressed in a yellow robe, over-flowered pyjamas, and rabbit slippers. They would have passed him right by if he wasn't the only new ghost on the block.

"Hey Casper! Hi, I'm Lil, this is Phil. We need your help."

"Jump right in, why don't you? No need to ease into things with pleasantries or anything," Casper replied cheerfully, not stopping the game with the baby. The baby was waving his arms and feet in ecstasy, showing all its gums as it laughed.

"Sorry, I'm from South London, we don't do 'pleasantries' over there. We get right to the point."

"Right. So, you need my help?" Casper replied in a sharper tone.

"Um, yeah. See, a gatekeeper gave us a message to deliver and if we don't, we don't get no vouchers. If we don't have no vouchers, we get narked by some mercs and we're stuck 'ere forever."

"And what would you like *me* to do about it?"

"We need some ingredients."

"What 'ingredients'?" Casper asked coldly.

"Some copper, sulphur, phosphorus. Beech wood, alder ash."

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Casper said wryly.

"Our deaths depend on it. So no, we don't scruple at asking for anything."

"Well, at least you're honest. I'll see what I can do. What do you have to trade with?"

Lillian and Phil eyed each other in consternation, "Trade? With?" Lillian asked uncertainly.

"Yes. How much currency do you have?" Casper asked.

"Currency!? We don't 'ave no bread wiv us!"

Casper chuckled, "You Brits and your quaint expressions," he said indulgently. "Who said anything about money? I mean currency."

"What currency?"

"Your time in the clinker. Your time on earth. You did some good, you did some bad. The good is your currency. You trade it in for someone else's bad, increase your time in the clinker, when you get outta here, but you get what you want."

"And how do we know how much currency we have?"

"It'll be written in your book. Did you get your book?"

"Book?"

"Okay, so no book. I'll put in a requisition for it."

"How long will this requisition take?" Lillian asked anxiously.

Casper shrugged, "I don't know. I'm new to this gig, I'm not sure how long the red tape takes around here."

"What killed you?" Lillian asked curiously.

“Cancer. Of the brain.”

“Sorry. That must’ve been hard.”

“Not really. There was no pain, and I knew that it was a transition, not an ending. Besides, my kids were grown and my wife left me for her boss when she found out I was sick, so ...”

“Tragic!” Lillian said quietly.

“Not really. Just life.”

“Look, we don’t have much time. We had a week to get this message to Mama Ruth. Two days of that week have already gone by. We need to hurry.”

“You know red tape—there ain’t much you can do about it.”

“You can grease the wheels a bit, assuming it’s anything like the civil service.”

“It’s not. But you got currency. You can negotiate.”

“With whom?”

“With me. My currency is a bit more complicated, though. I’m not interested in hanging around for the next fifty years until one of my sons die. If you will act as surrogate housekeeper for me, when I am ready to go, then you get your book by close of business today. If not, well ...”

“Wow. You want to palm your job off on us?” Lillian.

“Deal or no deal?” Casper replied, ignoring both her words and tone.

Lillian sighed deeply, “Deal, you bloody twat.”

“No need to get nasty. Let’s get started then,” Casper said, walking toward the entryway. As he walked, his image became blurry until he completely disappeared. Behind them, the baby he’d been playing with began to cry.

A Kaleidoscope of Flames

Much to her surprise, Lillian's book had much more credit than Phil did. Phil declared himself unsurprised, though.

"It's your honesty. You *always* tell it like it is. That's pretty rare, you know?"

"Ah, pshaw! I just got a really big mouth. No big deal."

"Well, according to the credits in your book, apparently it is," Phil replied with a smile.

Casper wanted fifty credits to procure the ingredients. This consisted of maybe a quarter of Lillian's book plus half of Phil's. Lillian and Phil asked for time to confer.

"That's a bloody lot of credits for some wood and metal," Lillian murmured in protest.

"What other choice do we have?" Phil countered with a shrug. "We have to give them to him."

With a sigh of resignation, they went back to Casper to let him know their decision.

"Is there any way we can trade for them back?" Lillian asked.

"Well, anything's possible," Casper said, "Now, can we make the transfer?"

"Y-yes." Phil stuttered.

"Right, okay. Now put your books side by side on the table." Casper paused to let them do so, murmuring, "Thaat's right" as they did so. He then took out what they assumed was his own book and laid it beside theirs. He stood back, staring at the three books lined up like ducks in a shooting range. Phil and Lillian stared at him, waiting for they knew not what to happen. Suddenly, the lights in the room became dim, and then they began to flash on and off. The room temperature dropped sharply and even in their ghostly state, they shivered, more with nerves than anything. Ice crystals began to form on the window sill. Casper continued to stare at the books, unblinking.

They were in the foyer, and it was midnight. Dr Pinot sat at the reception, thumbing through a day-old paper, while nurse Carrie cast covetous eyes at him. There were no patients waiting. Le Marais was a small town, and one really had to feel like they were dying to make the trip through the dark, humid night to the hospital. Superstitious belief permeated the town. Many believed that the hospital was haunted. Most patients who had come in at night were in labour and felt they couldn't wait until morning, were bleeding profusely from some orifice, or else were convinced of their imminent death should they wait for daybreak to see a physician. Still, in-patients had to be monitored, so a doctor was obliged to be on call every night.

The nurse and doctor did not turn a hair at the sudden drop in temperature, although nurse Carrie definitely shivered, Lillian saw her do it, and then wrap a shawl tightly round her shoulders. Dr Pinot, however, was oblivious.

Their books seemed to be melting in the cold, turning liquid and running into each other. Lillian rubbed her eyes uncertainly, not sure she was seeing what she thought she was seeing. Lillian's book was pink in colour and Phil's was green. Casper's was the colour of slime. As the books melted, the colours ran together, forming an impasto of colour with pink on top and slime right at the bottom, sandwiching green in between. The colours began to meld into a bluish-purple colour, turning pink and then green and then into a sort of dirty brown interspersed with lighter portions of *café au lait*. Lillian and

Phil stared in fascination as this transformation took place. The brown goo on the table suddenly firmed up again into the shape of a book. It held for a moment and then exploded with sound and fury, and bits and pieces flew everywhere. Instinctively, Phil and Lillian covered their faces and ducked to avoid the pieces. When they opened their eyes, there were again three books on the table. Only Lillian's was the colour of blood now, and Phil's was a moss green so dark, it looked almost black. Casper's though, was now lime green.

Lillian was the first to reach out and touch her book, opening it tentatively, almost afraid of what she would find. The same incomprehensible runes peppered the pages inside though, and she stared at them, wondering if the pages were a bit more yellowed than before or that was her imagination. She was so absorbed in trying to figure it out that she didn't at first feel it when Phil nudged her.

"Lil!" he said sharply in her ear, making her start.

"Wot?!" she replied in the same tone.

"Look!" Phil said, pointing to the corner. Their ingredients lay there in a pile.

"Where did those come from?" Lillian asked in wonder.

Phil shrugged, "Casper, I guess. Shall we get to it?"

"No time like the present, like Bernard said," Lillian said, shrugging back. They went over and picked up the metal and wood, then looked at each other uncertainly.

"Now wot?" Lillian asked Phil.

"Armand, of course," Phil replied, heading for the attic stairs. They'd barely begun to climb when they looked up and saw the man himself, standing at the top of the stairs.

"I see you've been successful," he said, unnecessarily in Lillian's opinion. "Please, let's go to the mortuary," he continued, gesturing for them to turn around.

"Why?" Lillian asked.

"You need to be in proximity to your bodies," Armand said.

"But ... we can't! The gatekeeper wouldn't let us through." Lillian countered anxiously.

"Fear not. Just outside the door is close enough," Armand replied, unperturbed.

"How will we know her fire is on?" Lillian asked. Her anxiety was rising by the minute and she wasn't sure whether she wanted this to work or not. It sounded awfully dangerous out there in the bayou by themselves.

"Her fire is always on," Armand replied.

"But wot if she isn't near it?" Lillian persisted.

"She will have rigged it to take messages," Armand said, not even cracking a smile at the prospective ridiculousness of a fire that took messages.

Lillian backed away from the tableau they were building, sinking down to the floor near where Emily had stood the last time she was here. The gatekeeper was nowhere in sight, but Armand said that she was within reach should they attempt to leave.

Armand finished directing Phil where to put all the sticks and things, and then asked him to write the message on the papyrus.

"Lil?" Phil called.

"Wot?" Lillian replied dejectedly.

"Papyrus?"

“Why’re you asking me? Don’t you have it?”

“No. *You* kept it. Bernard gave it to you,” Phil replied in an alarmed tone. Lillian started suddenly.

“Oh! Here it is. Forgot I had it,” her voice trailed off as she handed Phil the papyrus. He sat down next to her and then started to feel his pockets.

“Er, do you have a pen?” he asked Lillian. A voice chuckled in amusement from the darkness further down the corridor.

“You’ll need a quill, dumbass.” Andy’s voice floated down to them.

“I don’t suppose you have one?” Phil asked, hanging grimly onto his temper. He disliked uncivilised confrontations.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Andy said, and his hand appeared in front of Phil’s face, holding a quill and ink.

“And what do you want for it?” Phil asked wearily, getting the hang of how things worked in this world—pretty much the way it worked in the land of the living, apparently. Ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.

“Nothing. Just ... come back,” Andy said, much to their surprise.

Phil wrote the note and Armand built up the fire. It really did burn with every colour of the rainbow. Armand stretched out his hand and said something unintelligible, then he gestured for Phil to come forward. He came slowly, cautiously, not sure how to proceed. He held out the papyrus with painstaking care, wondering whether he should throw it in the fire or what. Before he could decide, a tongue of flame reached out and snatched the papyrus from his hand, consuming it in a thrice. There was a prolonged silence.

“Now wot?” Lillian asked at last.

“Now, you wait,” Armand replied, walking off.

The fire died down quickly, and eventually disappeared like it had never been. Lillian continued to sit on the floor, staring into space. Phil stretched his hand out, gathering her substantial girth into himself, so she was leaning on his small shoulders. Andy stood close by, leaning seemingly nonchalantly against the wall.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of light midair, over the place the fire had been. Everyone jumped in shock, and when they recovered slightly, they noticed a papyrus similar to theirs lying on the floor exactly over the place the fire had been.

Mama Ruth had sent a reply.

Chapter Ten: Come

The note had one word written on it:

Come.

Lillian and Phil looked at each other in consternation.

“Does she mean *now*, do you think?” Lillian asked Phil tentatively.

“No time like the present,” Andy pointed out.

“Yeah, but ...” Lillian protested weakly, suddenly feeling that she *couldn't* do this.

““If it were to be done, better it be done quickly,’ I think the saying goes. Come, Lil. No need for fear. There’s two of us now. We can do this,” Phil said, placing a reassuring hand on her arm.

“Can we?” Lillian asked him intently.

“Yes, we can,” Phil said decisively, stepping smartly up to the spot where the fire had been. He stared uncertainly around, wondering how they were to proceed.

“Say her name,” Andy told him.

Phil reached for Lillian’s hand, “M-mama Ruth?” he whispered tentatively. The next thing he knew, he was flying through the night air. The full moon was a blur in his peripheral vision. There were a lot of trees around them, looming ominously like a bunch of angry, old men annoyed at this intrusion of their territory. He saw the bayou just ahead of them, shimmering eerily in the moonlight. A night for ghosts to walk indeed. He tried to remind himself that he was one of those ghosts now, but his nonexistent heart was beating in his chest like a runaway drum.

Wait, that actually was a drum beating. The flying came to an abrupt end, and they landed on the ground with nary a sound. The drum beats, however, continued. They were coming from somewhere ahead of them. Phil looked at Lillian, eyes wide with a fear he could not hide. Seeing her fear steadied him somehow, though, and he straightened his spine. He was the man of the house. He could not show weakness or they were both lost.

“Shall we follow the sound?” he asked Lillian, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“I don’t know, Phil. I’m scared,” Lillian replied, her voice shaking, as were her hands, clasped tightly in his.

“Maybe we should call her again? Yes, let’s do that,” he said, answering his own question. They both called out tentatively and waited with bated breath for an answer. None was forthcoming and eventually they decided to follow the sound of the drums, for lack of a better alternative.

The forest was extremely dark and there were things that rustled in the dark, scurrying away at their soundless approach. The sound of the drums got neither louder nor softer. They beat steadily, like a heart going about its business.

There was a curious mist in the air, which grew thicker the closer they got to the drumbeats. Phil took Lillian’s hand, holding on tight to it. There was something about this mist that didn’t feel right. He almost suggested they turn back, but turn back to what? They were out of options. Suddenly, there was a voice in the mist.

‘Wase?’ said the deep voice, scaring Phil and Lillian almost to death—again—with its sudden unexpectedness.

“Who’s there?” Phil asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

‘*O’ hola sina?*’ was the reply in the same voice. Clearly, it was speaking to them, but in a language they’d never heard before.

“We, er, don’t understand you,” Phil said, trying to keep the shaking in his voice to the barest minimum.

‘*English?*’ The voice said, sounding curious, dismissive yet threatening at the same time.

“Yes, well, Lillian’s English, I’m Ameri—” Phil began.

“What are you doing here?” the voice demanded loudly in strangely accented English, pronouncing each word and syllable with emphasis.

“Er, we have a message for Mama Ruth, do you know her?” Phil asked, looking around them to try and spot who was speaking, while keeping tight hold of Lillian’s hand. Suddenly the mist about them coalesced and resolved into the figure of a man. He was well-built and had the broad nose and luscious lips of an African. He glared at them through eyes that were opaque yet seemed to burn them like fire. His heavily muscled frame stood seven feet in his huge, bare legs, and he stood before them without a stitch of clothing, arms crossed and glaring.

“You are here for Mama Ruth? Who has sent you?” the misty man demanded of them.

To Phil’s surprise, Lillian pushed past him and went to stand toe to toe with the man. He was much taller than her so she could not look him directly in the eye, but she gave back as good a glare as she got. This seemed to amuse the man, and a reluctant smile tugged against his lips.

“You have that arse backwards, tosser. The question is, ‘Who are you and wot do you want with us?’” she demanded. Phil’s heart expanded, trying to contain all the love he had for her. He knew how afraid she really was, but she came from a neighbourhood where it didn’t pay to show fear. So here she was, totally faking it. Phil suppressed his smile.

The man stared at her as though stupefied, and then he opened his mouth and bellowed with laughter. The trees about them shook with agitation, and the rustling of things scurrying away through the grass could be heard all around them. Somewhere, not too far away, an owl hooted.

“Come,” the man said at last, once he’d stopped laughing, and dissolved again into the thick mist that surrounded them. Phil and Lillian’s eyes met in trepidation. Was this one of the mercenaries they’d been told of? The mist moved off, pulling them along with it such that they had no choice but to follow.

“Where are you takin’ us?” Lillian shouted, but there was no reply. They walked deeper into the dark forest, with no notion of how far they were or how long they took to get there. Suddenly, the mist around them dissipated and they found themselves in a clearing. In the middle of it was a fire, similar to the one they had made at the hospital. There was a crowd of people sitting around the fire, and they turned as one, to look at them.

“*Wenya si?*” one of the circle asked them.

“*Wamanya lugha tawe*” the mist with the deep voice replied.

“What are they saying?” Phil asked the Mist Man.

“They are asking why you are here. What is it that you want?” he replied.

“We told you, we want to speak to—” Phil began.

“How do you know Mama Ruth?” the Mist Man interrupted. At the mention of her name, everyone began to speak at the same time. Phil opened his mouth several times to answer but there was too much noise. He and Lillian eyed each other, and then Lillian rolled her eyes. She put two fingers in her mouth and let off two shrill bursts of sound. This was enough to cut everyone off, and silence reigned in the clearing.

“That’s better,” she said with satisfaction. “Now, let’s begin at the beginning. Hi, I’m Lil, from London, England, recently deceased. This is Phil, from right here in le Marais, also recently deceased. And you all are ...?” she inquired politely.

“We are slaves. We have been waiting here to be set free for three hundred years. Why are you looking for the Ageless One? Wolf-spirit she is called. A dangerous one, and not to be trifled with,” the Mist Man replied.

“Well, I have some good news for you then. Slavery ended. About two hundred years ago, so ... yay!” Lillian finished weakly. There was a ripple of sound that went through the crowd but no one said anything. They just stared at her.

“We have a message for Mama Ruth. From a gatekeeper,” Phil said to fill the silence that was quickly becoming oppressive.

This statement seemed to agitate them again and they broke into sound again, discussing God-knew-what in the strange language they spoke.

“You must be careful of gatekeepers. Their spirits are not always good,” the Mist Man said. “It was a gatekeeper who imprisoned us here,” he continued.

“Imprisoned you? Why?” Lillian asked, letting go of Phil’s hand as she forgot her fear in concern.

“He wished us to perform a service for him that would have seen the death of the line of he who can save us. The one they call the Child of Destiny. We refused. He condemned us to be prisoners here until this Child should be born, and maybe, save us.”

“Child of Destiny, you say?” Lil asked thoughtfully, “Well, our message to Mama Ruth—” she began.

“LIL!” Phil shouted at her, making her stop in astonishment. Phil came up to her, whispering urgently in her ear, “Remember we’re not supposed to tell anyone.” Lillian started visibly.

“Oh sorry! I forgot,” she said with a grimace.

“Right. So, if you would kindly point us the way to Mama Ruth, we’ll be out of your hair,” Phil said, turning to the Mist Man.

“You do not find the Ageless One. She finds you,” he replied, turning away.

“She *called* us. Told us to come,” Lillian called after him desperately.

“Then she will find you,” The Mist Man said. The drumbeats started up again, like a heart replete with adrenaline. The mist grew so thick they could not see their own hands in front of them. They clung to each other, praying to heavens knew who. The haze vanished just as suddenly as it had started, and they found that the clearing was empty except for a white wolf that stood just outside the circle, behind a tree. It stared at them, and they stared back.

“Do wolves see ghosts?” Lillian whispered to Phil, hoping that if the wolf couldn’t see them, maybe it wouldn’t *hear* them either.

“I don’t know, but it seems to be looking directly at us,” Phil whispered back, clutching her hand so tightly it might have bruised if it was solid.

The wolf turned away from them and began to walk away. After a few paces, it turned to look back at them, as if waiting to be followed. Lillian and Phil looked at each other, then shrugged and began to follow.

“It’s not like we have many choices, is it?” Phil whispered to Lillian. She shook her head in agreement, and they crept after the wolf. The forest sounds seemed to fade this deep in the dark, and soon there was no rustling underfoot or overhead. No owls hooted; it seemed like this part of the forest was uninhabited by man or beast. Except for the wolf they followed.

“I feel like Hansel and Gretel,” Lillian said wryly to Phil. She could not sustain the levels of fear she was experiencing indefinitely; she found herself relaxing inadvertently. Whatever they were facing, they would just have to face it. There was no option now. The fatality of this attitude steadied her, and she began to lose her fear.

The wolf disappeared down a ravine, and as they came up to it, they wondered how they would descend it if it was really steep.

“You just project the thought of where you want to go, and you will find yourself there,” a soft voice said from the bottom of the ravine, startling them quite badly. They peered over the edge, and where the wolf had gone, they could not tell. There was a woman, though, standing at the bottom of the ravine, which, it turned out, was quite steep.

“Come down,” she told them.

Phil and Lillian clasped hands, looking at each other for support then simultaneously thought themselves at the bottom of the ravine. They felt off balance for a minute and discovered they were at the bottom of the ravine, swaying slightly though there was no breeze.

“I am Mama Ruth. You have a message for me,” the woman said. It was more a statement than a question. Her black eyes surveyed them calmly. She stood maybe five feet tall, with long, grey-streaked dreadlocks. She seemed to be of mixed race, though there was nothing about her features that could distinguish what she might be. Her hair was the same colour as the white wolf’s pelt and her eyes the same black. She stood with her hands at her sides, presenting no threat to them, yet they were frightened, as if facing a predator.

“Y-yes. I-if you’re really Mama Ruth, we have a message for you,” Lillian said, stuttering slightly in her fear.

The woman simply smiled and beckoned for them to come along. Lillian sighed and followed. She was beginning to feel like she’d been going round following people her entire life. And would continue to follow them forever.

Chapter Eleven: Portals

Mama Ruth led them to a cottage that sat in the middle of the Bayou. It was a quaint little house that looked like it had been transported whole from “Little House on the Prairie” and set gently down on the Louisiana Bayou atop a ramp of logs that seemed to keep it afloat. Lillian wondered why it didn’t just float away, but apparently the little bridge that connected the house and the forest kept it anchored or something. They walked tentatively after Mama Ruth as she led them across the bridge and into the house.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” she said, sharp teeth shining in the moonlight as she smiled.

“Oh grandma, what big teeth you have,” Lillian murmured inaudibly to Phil when she saw them. She started when Mama Ruth burst into a howl of laughter.

“It’s been a while since I heard that one,” she commented, still smiling. “Never mind, my teeth cannot hurt you anyway. You’re already dead, right?”

“Right,” Lillian said, inching closer to Phil.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to an old sofa that looked like its better days had seen better days. Phil and Lillian moved as one toward it, and sat down simultaneously.

“So,” Mama Ruth said, perching on a stool in front of them, disconcertingly close, “You have a message to deliver.”

“Yes,” Lillian managed to say.

“What is it?” Mama Ruth asked, tilting her head inquiringly to the side.

“Keep watch. Mercury and Neptune align. The child of destiny approaches,” Lillian said, repeating Emily’s words verbatim.

“Hmm,” Mama Ruth said, the sound coming out as more of a low growl. “That is all?”

“Yes,” Lillian said.

“No time frame? Location? Birth parents?” Mama Ruth persisted.

“N-no. That was all I was told to tell you,” Lillian said shakily, wondering what Emily had gotten her into.

“Hrmm,” Mama Ruth said again, sounding more and more like a turbo engine about to go full throttle. “Well,” she said, standing up abruptly and heading for the fireplace. She took a snuff box that sat atop the mantle and pinched some of the stuff that was in it, lining it up on her hand like it was a hit of cocaine. She then proceeded to inhale it through her nose like it was indeed that drug. She stood still for a moment and then sneezed mightily. Lillian wasn’t sure whether or not it was coincidence, but as she sneezed, a fire lighted in the grate, burning bright and hot like it had been going for hours. Mama Ruth pointed with her hand and a cauldron came flying through the air to land with precision on the three stones between which the fire was burning. A liquid began to fill the cauldron of its own volition and soon the room was covered in mist.

“*Spiritus invoco te. Responde mihi,*” Mama Ruth intoned in a voice like the spirit of the Bayou itself. Lillian and Phil shrank back on the couch. The mist cleared and a giant head emerged from the cauldron to hang over the room like a malignant black cloud.

“*Etiam Lupus Spiritus?*” the head said, looking only at Mama Ruth.

“*In Child of Libatis propinquat. Quae tua mones?*” she asked it.

“*Praeparate porta,*” the head said, and disappeared.

Mama Ruth continued to stare at the place where the head had been, seemingly deep in thought.

“What—” Lillian tentatively began.

“We must prepare for this child,” Mama Ruth said briskly. “The gatekeeper who sent you was supposed to prepare a portal as well as deliver the message. As they have failed to do so, you will have to do it in their stead.”

“Prepare a portal?! That was not part of the deal!” Phil seemed to have found his voice again.

“Besides, we got no clue how to do that!” Lillian added.

“Don’t worry, I will show you,” Mama Ruth said calmly.

“But ... we have to get back! For to get our vouchers so we’re safe from the mercs and—” Lillian protested. Mama Ruth stopped her by letting out a roar that shook the room.

“Do you think the mercenaries of Met Kafu and his ilk would *dare* to mess with me and mine?” she asked them, eyes blazing.

“Well ... we don’t know, do we?” Lillian said quietly, “It’s not like we know who you are anyways. Them slaves what we met in the forest called you the Ageless One but neither Emily nor Armand said anything to us about you not being like ... human and what not. We thought you was just a witch.”

“*Just* a witch?” Mama Ruth asked incredulously.

“Meaning no disrespect or nothing, ma’am,” Lillian added quickly.

Mama Ruth stared at her for what seemed like forever, then she burst into a guffaw that made Lillian’s skin crawl.

“Never mind me. I am oversensitive. You have nothing to worry about from Met Kafu and his henchmen as long as you work for me,” she said.

“And, er, how long will we be working for you?” Phil asked.

“As long as it takes,” Mama Ruth said ambiguously, flashing her sharp teeth at them in what they assumed was a grin.

“So what do you wish us to do?” Phil asked.

“For now, what we need is information. Where, when, how, who. When we know that, we will know what,” Mama Ruth said, rather obtusely in Lillian’s opinion.

“And how do we suss this information out?” she asked sceptically.

“You go back to the hospital, find the gatekeeper. Find out who gave the message. That is your first step. From there, it’s just connecting the dots.”

“And we’re safe, you say? From the mercs and shit?” Lillian persisted.

“I’ve said so, have I not?” Mama Ruth replied impatiently.

“What if Emily won’t talk? She wasn’t very forthcoming when she sent me here,” Lillian asked. Mama Ruth stared at her, unblinking for a minute.

“You are right. Kampwanna can be stubborn sometimes. But he has one weakness and you can use it against him. He is proud.”

“You got the wrong end of the stick. Emily’s a bird,” Lillian hastened to correct her.

“Is she? What makes you think so?”

“Well, I saw her, didn’t I?” Lillian replied.

“You saw an image. The gatekeepers like to choose how they appear to others. When you went the first time, was she not a he?” Mama Ruth asked.

“Well yeah, but that was Jones. He left see, ’cause his shift was over.”

Mama Ruth smiled at her in a rather patronising manner, she thought. “There are no shifts for gatekeepers. They hold their posts for as long as the fates decide. Jones and Emily are two sides of the same creature: Kampwanna. When he was of earth, his name was Hitler and he was just as disturbed then as he is now.”

Lillian and Phil goggled at each other, mouths open in stupefaction, “*Hitler?!?*”

“We are fucked,” Lillian said to Phil.

Chapter Twelve: Adolph

Mama Ruth sent them back, giving them enough papyri to write a novella, should they choose to. She also gave numerous assurances that they were safe from any mercenaries that could be lurking about.

"I have placed my mark on you. You are under my protection now, as Papa Legba is my witness," she had told them seriously.

Whoever this Papa Legba was, clearly, he was an entity to swear by. So they took the papyri and left, unable to stop feeling a slight trepidation at the prospect of confronting "Hitler".

"You know this name?" Mama Ruth had asked them, when she saw their reaction to her announcement.

"Who doesn't?" Lillian replied.

Mama Ruth stared at her as if she wasn't sure whether Lillian was joking or not. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"I have a lot more on my mind than the doings of men, and we did not get newspapers here for a long time. This 'Hitler' then, is famous for being a wicked man?"

Lillian and Phil looked at each other in shock.

"Oh, he only killed about six million Jews and other miscellaneous people, no biggie," Lillian replied, unable to keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

"Oh? That is unfortunate. Why did no one stop him?" Mama Ruth asked, though she did not seem really interested in the answer, but seemed to be talking to keep them busy as she mixed a number of ingredients in a bowl.

"Well, there was a war and such fought over it. I mean, I guess you were young at the time or summat, but didn't everyone know about that?" Lillian asked, puzzled at this supposedly great witch's ignorance.

"Kampwanna is but a shade under five decades old. I am *old*, and this century has been busy. I have not had time, as I said, to pay attention to everyday happenings. That is about to change, however. It is time for me to take a hand again, in what men do," she said, smiling as she poured a hot liquid into the bowl of ingredients. The contents bubbled and popped, invoking visions of toads in a swamp in Lillian's mind. Mama Ruth turned suddenly and swung the contents of the bowl at them, so they were covered in the green slime it had become.

She cut off their indignant protestations with a wave of her finger.

"You are marked. Go in peace, and find what we need," she said.

"How do we get back?" Lillian asked her.

"There is a boat on the river. It will take you where you need to go," she said, ushering them to the door. For sure, there was a boat on the river. They weren't sure if it was misty or the boat itself presented an extremely blurry outline. However, as they tentatively stepped onto it, it held steady, so they assumed it was solid enough for their purposes. They were just settling down, wondering what next, when a tall figure appeared at the head of the boat, hooded and cloaked, with a long paddle in one hand. Phil shouted with surprise and Lillian almost fell out of the boat.

"Oh my God! Who are you?" Phil asked the figure.

"Got your voice back, have you?" Lillian replied grumpily as the figure continued to row silently.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Phil asked belligerently.

"I did almost all the talkin' in there!" Lillian complained.

"Yes, you did. But you almost always do most of the talking. Haven't you noticed?" Phil said with a smile.

Lillian glared at him, wondering if he was taking the mickey out of her. His eyes were affectionate, so she reluctantly let it go.

"What do we do about this goo, though?" she asked him, examining the green streaks of slime that dotted her clothes.

"Let's leave it on for now," Phil replied, looking around at the trees that loomed over the bayou on each side, seeming to watch their progress down the river. They did not seem friendly at all, and Mama Ruth had said her mark would protect them. He reached out and caught hold of Lillian's hand.

"You know, if I have to spend eternity with anyone, I'm glad it's you," he told her, smiling. She regarded him thoughtfully for a minute.

"What do you mean, 'have to'?" she demanded.

Phil sighed in resignation, "There's no winning with you, is there?" he said wearily. Lillian stared at him a moment longer, then turned away with a "humph!" Phil thought she was this super-confident bitch. She kept waiting for him to wake up and realise he wasn't interested in her because she was too boring or stupid or something. Yet he kept looking at her with that soft look in his eyes, like she shat gold bricks or something. It made her a bit nervous, to be honest.

Phil came up behind her, taking her by the shoulders and gently leaning her back against his spare frame.

"I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. Scared shitless ... if I had any shit, that is. But look at the bright side. At least we don't have to worry about mercenaries or evil spirits or this Met Kafu, whoever he is. He sounds bad. We're under the protection of a powerful witch, and all we have to do is get some info out of Hitler," he finished with a shrug.

Lillian giggled reluctantly, reaching behind to put her hand atop his on her shoulder, "You always make me laugh. I guess that's why I fell in love with you."

"Well, good, because I intend to keep you laughing for a looong time," Phil whispered seductively in her ear, making her giggle even more.

"You promise?" she asked in between giggles.

"You can bet your lovely arse on it," Phil replied, making her burst into loud laughter.

The boat slowed down. Lillian and Phil stopped talking, remembering their fear. The rower came to a halt at the side of the river, and for the first time, turned to face them.

"Severin! What are you doin' here!?" Lillian exclaimed, "I thought you left!"

Severin shrugged. "I did leave. I'm not a housekeeper anymore."

"Wha ... well ... why haven't you 'moved on', then?" Phil asked, utterly at a loss for words.

Severin shrugged again. "I wanted to see this out. I feel ... responsible."

"See what out? Responsible for what?" Phil persisted, bewildered.

"You'll see. If you step onto the landing, you will find yourself back in the hospital. Goodbye," Severin said, gesturing for them to step off the boat.

Lillian opened her mouth to protest but found that she had exactly nothing to say. Phil took her hand and they stepped off the landing, finding themselves in the reception area of the hospital as their feet touched the landing. Doctor Ross was standing at the reception desk, looking at patient files. Behind him sat a new ghost, staring at the doctor like he was an alien who had appeared suddenly in front of him. Phil nudged Lillian, who was busy looking back at the place Severin had been not seven seconds before. She turned around to look at him inquiringly and he inclined his head toward the new ghost.

"A new one," Lillian whispered, as though afraid to startle him with her loud voice.

"Yeah. I think it's the guy from the ICU? The one Severin was waiting for," Phil whispered back.

"Oh yeah! What was his name?" Lillian asked, snapping her fingers forgetfully.

"Uh ... John? Peter?" Phil said, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Derek!" Lillian shouted in sudden remembrance.

"Yes?" the figure behind the reception turned to look at them. His eyes were intensely, piercingly blue. Phil took a step back in startlement, almost stepping on Lillian behind him.

"You're the newbies," Derek said, staring intently at them.

"*We're* the newbies?" Phil said with a slight smirk. "I think you've got that backwards, fellow."

"No, he ... the little boy, he told the other person sitting in mid-air ... that *you* were the newbies," Derek said tonelessly. His eyes displayed no emotion at all. He seemed unmoved and unaffected by his status as a ghost.

"You *saw* us? When we came to your room?" Lillian asked, surprising Phil. He hadn't reached the point of wondering about how Derek knew them yet.

"Yes. My spirit used to leave my body quite a bit. I was on the ceiling at the time." Derek answered in the same monotone.

"So, are you dead or is your spirit travelling again?" Lillian asked, approaching him curiously.

"No. I think I'm dead now. I tried to go back in, but I couldn't. And the noise from the heart monitor is no longer there," Derek told her, staring intently into her eyes, like she was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked him.

"Feeling?" Derek asked, wrinkling his brow in puzzlement.

"Yeah, you know, about bein' dead and all," Lillian said with sympathy. Derek shrugged, seeming extremely surprised at the question. That was the first emotion Lillian saw in him.

"I'm dead, aren't I? Am I still supposed to feel?" he asked her in consternation. Lillian smiled wryly, shrugging her shoulders.

"One thing I've realised about the afterlife: 'supposed' is not a concept that seems to fit much."

"Yeah, well ..." Derek replied, shrugging his shoulders too, to show he knew *exactly* what she meant.

“Well, this has been nice, but we need to get going.” Phil came forward and pulled at Lillian’s arm. She started a bit, having forgotten he was there.

“Right. Adolf,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t suppose we could just—”

“No. We can’t,” Phil replied sternly to her unspoken plea.

“YOU’RE BAAACK!” Andy came running down the hall, screaming at the top of his voice, his arms held wide open. Lillian stepped into his embrace hugging him back with equal fervour.

“Never thought I’d be glad to see *your* nobby head again,” she said, rubbing his hair in affection.

“Yeah, that makes two of us,” Andy replied, trying for casualness but grinning from ear to ear in spite of himself. “Where to now?”

Lillian turned him around by the shoulders and put her arm around him so they could walk together. “Well, did you know Adolf Hitler works here? He’s the gatekeeper,” she told him casually.

“No shit!” Andy replied looking thoroughly thunderstruck. “What, ol’ Jones, you mean?”

“Or ‘Emily’ or whoever he is today,” Lillian replied.

“Huh. I did read somewhere that that guy had MPD,” Andy volunteered in explanation.

“MPD, PHD, OCD ... who cares? The bloke’s definitely barking or I’m a dwarf. And we gotta talk to him and make him tell us who gave him the message he give us,” Lillian replied.

“Ooh. And you’re planning the direct approach?” Andy asked sceptically.

“Yeah,” Lillian replied, a little more nonchalantly than she felt.

“With Hitler?” Andy persisted.

“Yeah,” Lillian said, a little more uncertainly.

“Why? What do *you* suggest?” Phil asked as he walked on the other side of Andy. Derek trailed them behind, not as if he was following them, more like as if he was going in that direction anyway and they just happened to be in front of him.

“I suggest we sit down and come up with a plan,” Andy said definitely.

“I agree,” Derek stated from behind them. They turned around to look at him and found that he was staring at a painting of a rubber chicken pecking at nuts that hung on the wall of the corridor.

“What plan?” Phil asked Andy, while still staring curiously at Derek.

“A plan to trick him into telling us what he knows,” Andy replied in a super-spy voice.

“Trick who?” a voice asked from behind them and they all jumped.

Casper.

“I see you’re back,” he stated without enthusiasm. Just then, he spotted Derek and went up to him.

“Casper Bruin at your service,” he said, reaching out a hand to shake Derek’s. Derek subjected him to a piercing stare before reaching out his own hand to be shaken.

“Welcome to the afterlife.”

“Er, thank you,” Derek replied awkwardly.

"I'm the housekeeper," Casper continued, as if it was a speech he had prepared. "I keep the peace between the living and the dead, make sure there are no untoward incidents and such like. Keep things neat and tidy."

"Oh, I thought that was the blonde, green-eyed guy," Derek said, looking confused.

"That was my uncle. He's passed on now," Casper informed him. Lillian opened her mouth to tell him this was not quite accurate but Phil put his hand over her mouth and shook his head at her. She looked at him questioningly but he just shrugged and shook his head again. She wiggled her brows to signal her agreement if not understanding, and he removed his hand from her mouth. Casper was going on about how Derek might want to exact revenge for his accident but there were things he could *not* do for the sake of everyone. Derek continued to stare at him like he was speaking a foreign language.

"What things can't we do?" Lillian interjected in his monologue.

"Oh, you know, just things that would upset the balance. Attempting to resurrect one's body, or create zombies, suchlike things," he replied vaguely.

"You can create zombies?" Derek seemed to perk up suddenly.

"Haven't I just said it's not allowed?" Casper replied irritably.

"But, it's possible?" Derek persisted.

"Well, no, it's not," Casper said, quickly adding as he turned to the rest of the group, "You were saying something about tricking someone?"

Everyone began to speak at once, protesting that he was mistaken about what they had been talking about.

"Yes, well," Casper tried, raising his voice over all of theirs, "if you need some tips?"

A second round of protestations followed this offer, making Casper look extremely disappointed in turn.

"Well, if you change your minds, you know where I am," he said dejectedly, literally disappearing down the hall. They watched him go then stood around for another ten minutes, listening for they knew not what.

"Okay. I've had an idea," Andy said at last.

"Wot?" Lillian asked him eagerly. Andy gestured to them to gather round.

"Sidebar," he whispered as they formed a circle near the wall. "You, Derek. The gatekeeper hasn't met you yet, has he/she?" Andy asked him.

"I don't think so," Derek said uncertainly. He looked like he wasn't sure how he'd come to be a part of this circle.

"Good. Because the plan depends on it. We need Armand for this next part. He knows magic," Andy said.

"And why would he help?" Lillian asked bleakly, much to Phil's surprise. He had thought she worshipped the ground Armand walked on. Not that he walked much.

"He has a stake in the answer you seek, I think," Andy said. "Or at least he seemed to imply that he did. All we can do is ask," he finished decisively.

"So, attic?" Phil asked sceptically.

"No. ARMAND!" Andy bellowed.

"No need to shout, Andy," a voice answered out of the dark. "Here I am," it continued, as a tall, dark-haired figure clad all in white made its way out of the shadows. His shirt

was artfully ripped and his Levis fitted him like a glove, ending right over the white Nike sneakers that adorned his feet.

“My dear,” he said, brushing Lillian’s cheek with his lips and making Phil stiffen.

“Phil, Andy ... and you are Derek, correct? Pleased to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand. Derek shook it in bemusement.

“I don’t know you,” he said.

“My name is Armand. I am sorry for your loss,” Armand replied.

“M-my loss?” Derek asked, even more confused.

“Just because it is you who has died does not mean you don’t feel the loss, does it?”

Armand asked him, meeting his piercing gaze look for look.

“N-no, I suppose not,” Derek finally said, being the first to drop his eyes. “Er, thank you,” he added, clearing his throat in confusion.

Armand turned to the group at large. “Now, what new plots are we weaving?”

“We need to get the gatekeeper to tell us something. Did you know he/she is Hitler? Of course you did, what am I saying? So can you help us?” Andy finished breathlessly.

“I would have to know what you need help with before I assent or refuse, wouldn’t I?” Armand said with an elegant lift of his brow.

“Sidebar,” Andy said as he gathered the five of them in to listen to his plan.

Chapter Twelve: Eye of the tiger

“Hermes?” Jones frowned in puzzlement, though Derek couldn’t really see his eyes behind the Chanel shades he was wearing. All he could see were the resulting frown lines on his forehead. Derek was covered from head to toe in a black cloak. He towered over Jones because his feet did not touch the ground, thanks to Armand’s magic, but hung a full two feet from the floor. His aspect had been darkened and thickened, except for his piercing blue eyes, and what could be seen of his skin was covered with tattoo-like markings.

“Yes. I am Hermes, collector of souls, and I have a message for you from one who says she knew you in your earthly form,” Derek told Jones, his piercing eyes lending truth to his words.

“Where did you get this message?” Jones asked him suspiciously.

“From Charon, the ferryman of the dead. This Josephine—she said her name was—had no coin to cross. But she claimed that you would pay for her, if Charon could get a message to you.”

“J-josephine?” Jones whispered, his already pale face losing all colour, becoming almost transparent in his distress.

“Yes, that’s what she said her earthly name was,” Hermes said.

“So, where is she now? Does she wander?” Jones asked in distress.

“No. Charon took her head, and bade her work on the bridge, fixing the slats of wood for all eternity,” Derek told him, staring fixedly at the Chanel sunglasses. Jones made a sound of distinct distress, covering his eyes with his hand and bending over double, as though dealt a mortal blow.

“What is the message?” he whispered, not getting up.

“All messengers are null and void,” Derek said in a monotone.

“What?!” Jones asked, straightening up in startlement.

“All messen—” Derek began again.

“What kind of message is that?” Jones interrupted irritably.

“This is not your first message,” Derek said simply, staring fixedly at Jones.

“So?” Jones countered rudely.

“So you have received other messages. They are null and void. You must give them up,” Derek told him.

“I had just one message, and it is already on the way to being delivered. Assuming the ghosts I sent make it, that is,” Jones said desperately.

“You already sent a message?” Derek said in alarm.

“Yes!” Jones replied in even more distress.

“Who sent you to deliver it?” Derek asked urgently.

“It was the magus. Abramelin is his name,” Jones said reluctantly.

“A magus!” Derek replied, adding censure to his voice.

“I ... He ... I ... He said he would help me to serve out my time faster if I delivered the message, but I could not leave my post, and I hadn’t found the right people to deliver it until these ghosts came the other day. They are determined, and resourceful, even if they are new. How was I to know ...” Jones finished sadly.

"It's okay. I will take Charon your news. He will know what to do," Derek said, putting one hand behind his back and opening and closing it three times to indicate he was through. In a huge blast of green smoke and red fire, Armand made him disappear. Jones stood staring desperately at the spot where he had been, waiting for heaven knew what. Josephine, perhaps.

Up in the attic, Phil, Lillian, Andy, Derek, and Armand held a conference. The main item on the agenda was identifying who exactly Abramelin the Mage was. Lucky for them, Armand was a student of magic. He informed them that Abramelin had been a great, 15th-century magician.

"Is Charon real?" Lillian asked, when there was a pause in the conversation.

"About as real as we are," Derek replied irksomely.

"So, yes or no?" Lillian asked in puzzlement.

Derek shrugged. "Isn't the important thing that Jones believed it?" he asked her.

"Well, yeah, I guess. It'd just be good to know what to expect, you know?" she replied with a shrug of her own.

Derek shook his head at her, clearly not comprehending her distress. Phil was staring lovingly at her. He held out his hand and took hers in it. When she turned to look at him, he smiled at her with understanding, making her sit up straighter and smile back.

"We need to get a message to Mama Ruth," Phil said, still looking at Lillian. "Armand, can you get us fire?"

"You don't need fire. Write what you need down on one of the parchments she gave you. She will get the message. You are her servants now, so you are linked," Armand replied lazily.

"We're no servants!" Lillian exclaimed, making Armand smirk at her with a knowing look, but he wisely kept silent.

"Where are the papyri?" he said instead.

"I have them here," she said, extracting them from her breast.

"Ah. Write," he said, handing her a quill that he seemed to have conjured from nowhere.

Hi Mama Ruth,

Awright? Hitler got the message off of a magus called Abramelin. Apparently, he's a magician from the 15th century. Do you know him?

Lil.

That's what she wrote on the parchment. They all stared at it, waiting for something to happen.

"Maybe you're supposed to write it in specific language," Phil suggested, after nothing exciting had happened for fifteen minutes.

"Wait." Armand replied, not moving.

Writing began to appear below Lillian's message.

You must keep watch on the Andrewes. Matia and her granddaughter, Mya. I will tell you when to move.

The message was unsigned.

“How do we do that?” Lillian asked the parchment in bemusement. To her surprise, she got an answer.

Matia will come to the hospital in the morning. You will follow her home. Keep watch.

“What are we watching for?” she asked the parchment again.

You will know it when you see it.

Thus was the prompt reply.

“I don’t—” Lillian began, then closed her mouth like she wanted to glue it shut. Phil opened his mouth to ask her what the matter was but she put her fingers to her lips, pointing at the papyrus. Obviously, she didn’t want Mama Ruth to hear whatever it was she wanted to say. She stood up, went to the corner of the room and stowed the papyri in a drawer. She came back and sat down, looking not at Phil but at Armand.

“What’s happenin’?” she asked him.

“The Andrewes are descended from Abramelin, the Mage. Obviously, your message pertains to them,” Armand replied with no hesitation.

“So, what now?” she asked him.

“Now, you do what Mama Ruth says, and keep watch,” he said, standing up and walking away. Then he suddenly stopped and turned back. “Good luck,” he said, giving Lillian first a long look, and then Phil. He nodded once and disappeared.

Chapter Thirteen: Fifteen months later

“Looks like Mya has a new mate,” Lillian told Phil as they followed her home from school. “That’s nice, innit? She spends too much time alone.”

“Yes well, unfortunately this town still has some racial prejudices. Plus, to be fair, she does wear some outlandish clothes,” Phil replied. “But ... did you get her name? The girl?”

“Which one? Queen pin of Trump Mountain? Or one of her minions?” Lillian asked, a little derisively.

“The queen pin,” Phil said absentmindedly. He was not usually one to condone insults to people, but he was clearly distracted.

“Why, who is she?” Lillian asked curiously.

“Remember when Severin was waiting for Derek Argent to die? He said that he’d been hit by a car. A girl named—”

“Charlotte le Carre!” Lillian finished for him.

“Exactly.”

“Oh my fucking God!” Lillian exclaimed. Phil opened his mouth to ask her not to curse but then closed it again with a shrug.

“Exactly,” he said again, “Should we tell him?”

“Damn straight!” Lillian replied indignantly.

“But, what if—” Phil began.

“No ‘what if’, Phil. What if she’s all that’s keeping him here? Doesn’t he deserve a chance to make his peace?”

Phil sighed in resignation. “So now what?” he asked her.

“Now we report this development to Mama Ruth, then we go see Derek,” Lillian said decisively. They walked on in silence for a while, then Lillian laughed.

“It’s funny, though, her boyfriend. Queen Pin,” she clarified at Phil’s puzzled look. “It’s Leo Devereux. I wouldn’t have thought she was his type.”

Phil’s brow almost reached the roots of his hair. “Jealous?” he asked, only half-jokingly.

“No! Why would I be?” Lillian asked, a little too emphatically for Phil’s taste.

“Oh, I don’t know. He has the look of Armand about him,” Phil replied, looking intently at Lillian as he said it. They hadn’t seen Armand since the night he’d wished them luck and vanished.

“You’re right,” Lillian exclaimed to Phil’s surprise. He had been expecting her to deny it. “That’s who he reminded me of!” she continued, laughing.

Their plan to go see Derek after reporting to Mama Ruth was foiled by the Ageless One herself. She seemed to find this development extremely interesting and exhorted them to stay closer than ever to Mya.

“The stars are aligning. The time is close,” she told them urgently.

“Right,” Lillian murmured so that only Phil could hear, a split second before she remembered how acute Mama Ruth’s hearing actually was.

“Well, off with you!” Mama Ruth said, shooing them away. Severin was waiting to take them downriver. He still didn’t say much, but every time they saw him, he looked

more despondent. As they drew up to the pier, which led this time not to the hospital but to Mya's house, Lillian went forward and touched Severin's arm.

"Hey Severin, could you do us a favour?" she asked him tentatively.

"I don't do favours," Severin replied.

"Oh. Okay," Lillian said, letting go of his arm. She and Phil stepped off the boat and turned to leave. Behind them, Severin sighed deeply.

"What is it?" he asked in a resigned tone.

"Would you tell Derek about Charlotte le Carre?" Lillian said, instantly turning back to the boat.

"Before this business is done, he will definitely know about her," Severin said cryptically and left it at that. Lillian and Phil stared after him as he disappeared into the evening mist.

"That man is very strange," Lillian told Phil.

"Aren't we all?" Phil replied, taking her hand to lead her to the house. Matia Andrewes was cooking gumbo. They could smell it from where they were.

§
Matia Andrewes suffered from hypertension. Every month or so, she went to the clinic for a check-up. Phil and Lillian would go with her so they could see Andy and Derek, maybe catch a game of craps with Bernard and reminisce with all three about Armand, and wonder where he was. Mya Andrewes did not know about her grandmother's illness because her grandmother didn't want to worry her. This upset Lillian a little because as her only living relative, she felt Mya had a right to know. They came across an Andrewes ancestor now and then, checking on their live kin or "helping" with a particularly difficult spell. Their great aunt Mairie Belle, who was Matia's grandmother, was the most common. Abramelin himself appeared to stare fixedly at them the day after Mya's meeting with Charlotte le Carre. Others flitted in and out like the ghosts they were, but the live Andrewes seemed unaware of them.

On Matia's next hospital meeting, they went at once to look for Derek.

"Hi!" Lillian said to him a little too brightly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, giving her the thousand-yard stare.

"Nofink," she replied in an artificially high voice. "Just wanted to see how you were doin'," she said, her accent thickening perceptibly.

Derek transferred his deep stare to Phil.

"Okay, we saw Charlotte le Carre a couple of weeks ago," Phil said in resignation.

"I see," Derek said quite calmly, except for the fact that the intensity of his stare increased tenfold. "Where?"

"She's a student at Mya's school. They just made friends," Lillian chimed in.

"I see," Derek said again, transferring his stare to the middle distance, his mind definitely far away.

"W-what are you goin' to do?" Lillian asked, a little fearfully.

"I don't know yet," Derek said, his gaze returning to them from wherever it had been. "Excuse me," he said, walking away from them and toward the attic. Andy drifted over.

"What did you say to him?" he asked in an accusing tone.

"Nofink. Just that we saw Charlotte le Carre," Lillian said defensively. Andy sucked in his breath.

"You've done it now. He's probably off to consult Met Kafu or whoever he speaks to in the attic," Andy told them.

"He speaks to ...?" Lillian asked incredulously.

"Well, he speaks to *someone*," Andy conceded. "I haven't been able to find out whom," he added reluctantly.

"That must be a first for you," Phil teased.

"Humph!" Andy said, stalking off as well.

"Well, now that we've upset everyone, shall we?" Phil asked Lillian, gesturing back toward Matia.

"Might as well," she replied with a shrug.

§
"I hadn't realised that that Leo kid was so rude, and such a snob," Lillian said as they sat in the cafeteria, a table away from the table Mya shared with Charlotte le Carre, Leo Devereux, and a bunch of other students. Mya was off to the side, eating quietly by herself, while Charlotte fawned over Leo, who ignored Mya but was pleasant to everyone else. Charlotte seemed to find Mya entertaining to have around.

"Why does she continue to sit with them?" Lillian asked Phil. "Obviously, they don't like 'er. And she's so much better than them anyway!"

"I don't think she feels she has a choice," Phil said, watching Mya. "And that Charlotte is very forceful when she wants something," he continued thoughtfully. "Apparently, she wants Mya to sit with them."

"I wonder what Derek is planning to do with her," Lillian said with an anticipation she couldn't quite hide.

"What makes you think he's planning anything?" Phil asked curiously. Lillian shrugged a shoulder.

"Call it a hunch," she said.

§
Matia left for New Orleans in early August, nearly nine months after Mama Ruth had told them to keep an even closer watch on the Andrewes. Mama Ruth was sure that whatever was going to happen, it would take place in le Marais, so they let the grandmother go off to New Orleans and concentrated the watch on Mya. They could see how her stress levels were rising when dealing with Charlotte.

"Why doesn't she just leave her?" Lillian said irritably to Phil.

"Probably for the same reason we all stay in toxic relationships," he replied philosophically. Lillian gave him a look, and when he looked back at her, she lifted her brow in inquiry.

"Because we don't know how to leave," he finished, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"She's going to start losing all that hair if she's not careful," Lillian commented.

The hair in question was being combed in an attempt at being tamed, not very successfully. Mya's hair rose like a black, curly cloud around her head, surrounding her like a halo. It was too long to be termed an afro, but not too long to stand straight up. She

looked like Diana Ross having a bad hair day. There was some sort of gathering at Charlotte's house, and if Mya could get herself together, that was where she was going.

"Psst! Lil, Phil!" a voice called from downstairs.

They left Mya to her dressing and went downstairs to see who could be calling them. Derek stood in the foyer, the light shining in from the late summer sun making him seem translucent.

"Derek! How did you get here?" Lillian asked.

Derek shrugged off the question impatiently. "Never mind that. I have a message for you. It's time to open the portal."

"It's time to open the portal?" Phil repeated puzzled.

"Yes," Derek said. "Come on, we must get going."

"Where to?" Phil asked, resisting him.

"To the garden. To open the portal," Derek said, trying to budge him unsuccessfully.

"Why?" Phil asked, still not moving.

"For to ... to let the Fates through. Didn't Mama Ruth tell you?" Derek asked urgently.

"No, she didn't. Did she tell you?" Phil asked.

"No! Armand did. He says it needs to be done NOW! Hurry!" Derek said, letting go of Phil's hand and trying to drag Lillian instead.

"You spoke to Armand?" Lillian asked, earning a side-look from Phil.

"Oh! Not now," she answered his look. Turning back to Derek, she said, "Derek. Talk."

"Armand came to me last night. He said he was trapped in a vortex, and he couldn't get out. The thing what trapped him in there, Met Kafu, it's called, is coming for the girl, Mya, upstairs. Armand must protect her, but he can't. But if the portal is opened, the Fates will come through and protect her," Derek finished breathlessly.

"Oh," Lillian said thoughtfully. "Well then, I guess we should go. How do we open this portal? Shouldn't we talk to Mama Ruth? She said Met Ka—"

"There's no time!" Derek shouted, "Can't you listen to me?"

"Okay, okay, calm down! We're coming." Lillian looked at Phil and he looked back at her, shaking his head sceptically. She took his hand and pulled.

"There's no time," she said. "We must protect Mya."

As they left the house, they saw Severin on the river. He was leaning on his staff, staring at them. Lillian lifted her hand in a small wave, but he didn't seem to notice. Suddenly, they were flying through the air.

"Derek! When did you learn to fly?" Lillian asked in awe.

"It's easy. Anyone can do it," he replied, a bit evasively, Phil thought.

They descended into a beautifully landscaped garden with a huge fountain standing at the centre of it, water spouting from the mouths of two black flamingos. The water ran down the side of the fountain and into a channel of running water shaped like a mini-stream that run into a good-sized pond that stood at the edge of the garden. The effect was electric rather than peaceful, and Lillian was left wondering why the pond didn't spill over. She opened her mouth to ask Phil this but just then, they landed with a surprising thud on the ground.

“Now wot?” she asked instead.

“Now, you open the portal,” Derek said with a “don’t be an idiot” look at her.

“We ‘open the portal’?” she repeated, lowering her eyes like she was his eighty-year-old grandmother, wearing bifocals, and wondering if he had taken leave of his senses.

“Yes!” he replied impatiently, gesturing at the pond.

“We don’t know how to do that,” Phil said, as Lillian opened her mouth to say the same thing but much ruder.

“You don’t ...” Derek trailed off, looking at them disbelievingly. “Mama Ruth didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Phil said, looking intently at Derek. Something else was going on here. He could feel it in his bones, or what had been his bones before they were buried in the ground.

“So, what was the plan exactly?” Derek asked in an exasperated tone.

Phil shrugged nonchalantly, just to aggravate him further. Perhaps he could annoy him into revealing what they were *really* doing here. Lillian was looking around at the gate. Phil looked where she was looking and saw Mya walk in. A light bulb went off in his brain.

“This is Charlotte’s house, isn’t it?!” he exclaimed loudly. Mya paused in her walk to the house and look toward them, like she’d heard something.

“Shh!” Lillian said urgently.

“We’re ghosts. No one can hear us,” Derek said, a bit sadly.

Phil grabbed him by the collar, bringing his face right into Derek’s. “Derek, what are we doing here?” he asked, quite menacingly for such a little man.

“Saving Mya’s life,” he said, looking right into Phil’s eyes. Phil let him go reluctantly and stood thinking.

“Okay, clearly we need to get in touch with Mama Ruth so she can tell us how to open the portal. Lil? Papyrus?” Phil asked, taking command of the situation.

Lillian reached into the smock she was wearing and pulled one out.

“Quill?” Phil said, looking at the parchment, only to look up and see Lillian already handing it to him. They exchanged a private smile and look and then Phil dropped on his behind, sitting cross-legged on the ground as he wrote.

“You know you don’t have to sit on the ground, right?” Derek asked sardonically as Lillian shoved him and told him to shut it.

Phil ignored them both, finished writing, and set the parchment on fire. It disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

“Now, we wait,” he said, looking up at the other two. He held out his hand to Lillian and she thought he wanted her to pull him up. Instead, he pulled her down onto his lap. She squirmed about until she was comfortable, then settled with a contented sigh, head on his shoulder. Derek paced impatiently up and down, now and then casting them suspicious or impatient glances. Finally, a reply appeared.

To open a portal, you must make a rip in the fabric of time. You need to find the seams in the fabric. Bodies of water are always a good source of seams. Get near

enough to the body of water and “look with your mind’s eye”. You will see a thin line just running above it. Take hold of it with your mind’s hand, and rip it open.

“Wow, this is some complicated shit!” Lillian said, being the first to finish reading. She moved away from the other two, who were still bent over the papyrus, frowning over the writing. She walked to the pond and stared intently at it, trying to see something, *anything*. She stared until her eyes watered but nothing even remotely resembling a seam showed itself to her. Phil came to stand beside her to stare at the air above the water, too, but he seemed to be having even less luck than her. Suddenly the smell of weed filled the air.

Lillian turned around to see Derek holding a large joint out to her.

“Here, try it with this,” he said calmly, handing it to her.

“We’re dead, dummy. We can’t get high,” she said, reaching out for the joint anyway.

“Just try is all,” Derek replied, obviously trying to suppress his impatience. Lillian took a hit, and then passed it to Phil. He looked at it like it was pile of excrement she was handing him but took it anyway, and tentatively put it to his lips. He took a very shallow puff and handed it back to her. She took a deeper hit, holding the smoke in her lungs for a minute before exhaling. She didn’t even remember to wonder how she was doing it, seeing as technically, she had no body.

A rip in the seam

“There it is!” Lillian shouted so close to his ear that he started in shock.

“Inside voices, darling,” he told her, clutching his head. That weed was making him feel really weird. He wasn’t one for altering his body with chemicals and he was a bit surprised at what an experienced hand Lillian seemed to be at weed smoking. He felt like he’d known her forever, but every day, she managed to surprise him. Perhaps that was why he was so addicted to her.

Lillian rushed forward, staring intently at a spot. Suddenly the sun disappeared, and darkness enveloped them, darker than any night Phil had ever experienced. This blackness was not benevolent, and despite himself, Phil found that he was trembling. Derek ran forward and shouted something incomprehensible, and suddenly the world was filled with light. Not sunlight though; this light had all the colours of the rainbow about it, and swirled around them like *Aurelia borealis*. Phil was fascinated and terrified at the same time. He stood frozen to the spot, unable to move or speak. Lillian was mouthing expletives he could see, but he did not know if he had lost his hearing or she was voiceless.

An exclamation rent the air, and a whole group of people came boiling out of the house and toward the lights. The living people could see it, too! Mya hung back, clearly suspicious, exhorting everyone else not to come too near. Charlotte, of course, was at the forefront of the group.

“Oh My God! What are they? They’re sooo pretty!” she exclaimed happily, clutching her cheeks in excitement. Phil looked at Derek and caught him staring at Charlotte, a look of complete malice on his face. She reached out her hand to touch the lights, and Phil tried to shout at her to stop, but his voice was still not functioning. As her hand touched the lights, they closed around her and pulled, plunging her into the pond.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared, the darkness disappeared and the day was sunny and bright once again. Everything appeared fine, except that Charlotte had disappeared into the pond.

“*What did you do?!*” Phil demanded of Derek, getting up in his face. Derek pushed him away absently.

“My work here is done. I must go,” he said vaguely. He seemed to be looking off into a distant scenery that no one else could see.

“Derek?” Lillian called to him tentatively.

Derek turned to them suddenly, “It was nice to have met you both,” he said.

There were approaching footsteps, as if a person was walking at a casual but fast clip toward them. The person was large, judging by the heavy-sounding nature of the tread, and not far away. They could not see anyone coming, though Derek was looking toward the sound of footsteps like maybe *he* could. Phil went to Lillian’s side and held her close. The kids were shouting in confusion, calling for Charlotte. Mya hung back, staring at the pond. One other person was not agitated: Leo. He glared at Mya as she stood on the porch, looking like he was waiting for her to do something.

A great, man-shaped entity appeared as the footsteps came to a stop. The shape was more of an impression than fact. It was fear and pain and loneliness incarnate, but also

power. It enveloped Derek with a raise of an arm, and he disappeared from their view. The thing turned and looked directly at them, one eyebrow raised in apparent inquiry. Phil and Lillian clutched even more tightly at each other. The thing turned away, disappearing just as rapidly as it had appeared, and apparently, taking Derek with it.

“Is that what we have to look forward to, when it’s our turn?” Phil asked shakily.

“Fuck knows,” Lillian replied.

Author's note

The Phil and Lillian story is a standalone ghost story, but it's also the prequel of the Leo and Mya story that begins exactly where this one ends. Phil and Lillian were given the option to "go on" by Mama Ruth, but they decided to stay. They did not give reasons.

Outtake

Harpreet slammed the door of the nurse's lounge then winced at the sound. She hadn't meant to be so loud but her hands were trembling and she was dizzy.

Her first brush with death...

And it had to be *two* dead bodies, who died ugly and painful on the hospital gurneys; as much from willful negligence as the poison coursing through their veins.

And what was with that old lady who appeared? Krishna preserve her from things she didn't understand!

She didn't know what to do with herself. She wanted her mummy now. She glanced at the wall phone, wondering what the hospital policy was on calling international numbers.

"Harpreet?" a voice called from the other side of the door.

She opened her mouth, trying to answer but nothing came out. The room was suddenly *very* cold.

"Harpreet?" the voice said again and she jumped, startled.

"Y-yes?"

"Let me in. There is an old black lady here who says you might need some help."

Harpreet nodded her head vigorously, still not quite able to talk. It was her hostess on the other side of the door. The family she was staying with while she did her internship in America. Katpurtnick or something; she hadn't mastered their last name yet. She liked them though. The mother was a nurse like she wanted to be; and the father did something in real estate. The son, Miles, was still an unknown quantity. Very secretive. And obsessed with that friend of his...what was his name?

Leonardo or something. Veerrry handsome. Harpreet had felt her heart beat faster when he walked in the house. But he wasn't very nice; ignored her the whole time like she wasn't even there. It's not like she wanted him to shower her with kisses or anything. It would just have been nice if he had shown *some* interest in her.

"Harpreet?" Mrs. maybe Katpurtnick said again.

She stood quickly and went to open the door.

"Yes Memsahib. Sorry."

∞

"It's alright...Harpreet are you alright?"

She opened her mouth to say yes but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she shook her head.

"Oh honey...I've called my son okay? He's coming to get you, take you home."

Harpreet shook her head frantically, holding back her tears. Memsahib's kindness was *really* making her miss her mama.

"Yes dear. You need it don't you?" Mrs. K said rubbing Harpreet's arms.

Harpreet found she was nodding her head unawares. Claire Katpurtnick stayed with her until Miles blew into the room, half irritated at having to pick up the exchange student and miss out on whatever he'd planned.

"Come on Harpreet", he said kindly enough though, "I'll take you to Freddie's, get you a nice meat platter."

"I am vegetarian", Harpreet said softly.

That stopped Miles for a second, "No worries. I'm sure there's a salad or something you can eat. They should at least have french fries."

"Okay..." Harpreet hesitated, "Will...your friend Leo be there?"

She just couldn't help herself.

Miles turned briefly, a smile of understanding on her face, "Yeah sure he will", he said.

Harpreet followed him as he led the way out, blushing slightly and thankful that her olive complexion mostly covered it up.

∞

Harpreet was the first female in her family to travel alone for such a great distance. To be alone in a strange land, allowed to stay with strangers...it just wasn't done. But here she was.

The homesickness was the worst.

The lack of familiar food.

The feeling sometimes she got that nobody understood her.

She was a lucky girl and she knew it. Opportunities like this didn't come around every day. And she intended to utilize her time here in the best way possible. It's just that today she'd seen her first two dead bodies. She needed an escape.

She was sitting next to Leo Devereux in the restaurant called Freddie's. Neither he nor Miles was paying much attention to her. Instead they were talking and laughing about things she couldn't understand. Sitting next to Leo was doing funny things to her heart rate but it wasn't enough. She stood up abruptly and they both stopped talking to look at her.

"I..I'm going for a walk."

"Alright", Miles said, "Don't go too far."

"I won't." she replied torn between disappointment that they didn't try to stop her and relief that she could get some fresh air. Freddie's had a permanent barbecue going and the smoke from the grill was making her feel ill with the overwhelming smell of meat.

eo

Harpreet walked down a small side street, not really paying attention to her environment. Le Marais was a small town; there was zero likelihood that she would get lost. She bumped into a solid body in front of her and stumbled backwards before a hand clamped down on her arm and stopped her certain fall.

"Sorry man, didn't see you there", a raspy voice said. She looked up to see a fairly short yet powerfully built gentleman standing in front of her eyes concerned. He had a five o' clock shadow and a cigarette stuck between his teeth. She opened her mouth to say something...probably smoking kills, when he pulled her close, rubbing at her arms.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded her head, slightly nonplussed and he plucked the cigarette from his lips and offered it to her.

"Hey, have a hit. You look like you need it", he said.

She looked down at the cigarette and then back at him. It looked home made, not like a normal cigarette and it emitted a funny smell.

"Go on. You'll feel better. It's herb", he said.

Oh. Herbs.

If it was made of herbs then it couldn't be all bad. She reached out and took the rolled paper slowly, with the man nodding encouragement at her as she placed it in her mouth and inhaled slowly.

"Good huh?" he said holding out his hand, "I'm Jon by the way."

"H-Harpreet", she replied around the cigarette.

"Pleased to meetcha", he said and pointed at the building he was standing in front of, "this is my bar. Wanna come in?"

Harpreet nodded her head.

∞

Jon stepped out of his bar to find a hot Indian chick dithering outside, lookin like she might be lost or searching for something she couldn't name. He took a step toward her, figuring he could help with that. His eyes traveled up and down her body, taking in her petite little bod; flat ass, long legs, perky small breasts...he could work with that.

"Hey babe, what's poppin?" he said to himself before stepping toward her.

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They talked, he offered her a blunt and she took it readily. So maybe the naive look was just that - a look. When he invited her into his bar, she came readily taking a seat on the bar stool he indicated. He lit the homemade cigarette, taking a puff before passing it on to her. She reached out for the spliff, examining it like it was some curious new species she hadn't yet heard about.

"Go on, take a hit", Jon encouraged. His eyes dropped to her bosom again. She would make an excellent honey pot. I mean having that Devereux boy in here now and then had proved pretty profitable. Imagine if he could add this little exotic flower to the repertoire. Jon had dollar signs in his eyes just thinkin' about it. And on top of that, he could maybe hit that. I mean not that he was averse to doing it with the Devereux kid - Fuck knew he was prettier than most girls in this town - but he just didn't swing that way. And as far as he knew, neither did Leo. Harpreet's soft delicate voice cut into his reverie.

"I don't know vhat you mean", she said.

"You don't know what....?" Jon asked totally distracted.

"Vhat do you mean by take a hit. And this is a cigarette? I do not smoke", she had that delicate Indian accent going on and Jon could feel his pants getting tight as she handed the spliff back. So maybe she was as innocent as she looked.

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Bummer.

"Oh...well, can I offer you a soda then?" he asked.

"Do you have Fanta?"

"Er...Yeah I think I have a crate somewhere. Gimme a minute to find it." Jon was wondering if he should just roofie her drink and see what happened or let it go. His eyes dropped to her soft brown bosom again.

Damn.

He reached down, searching for soda. Ain't nobody came to Jon's bar to have a soft drink but sometimes the underage kids wanted to dilute their alcohol...

The door of the bar burst open, "There you are!", a male teenage voice said, "We been lookin' all over for you."

"I am sorry." Harpreet said and Jon could hear her get to her feet. He straightened up to see who had ruined his potential good time and saw the Devereux boy with his friend. The one who was a clear closet case. Mike or something.

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Leo was staring at him, eyes narrowed, "Did he give you anything?" he asked Harpreet. Which kind of surprised Jon. It wasn't like he'd ever tried anything with the boy. Jon was kind of hurt at the suspicion he saw in the kid's eyes. That boy was too old for his age. He needed to calm down.

"No. He is just getting me a Fanta", Harpreet replied.

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"Never mind that. We'll get you a Fanta from the corner store if you really want one", Leo said hand curled protectively around Harpreet's arm eyes still on Jon.

"Yeah", his friend said, "Let's get outta here."

"Okay", Harpreet replied agreeably, following the two boys out of the bar with a wave and a smile at Jon. Jon waved back, watching her go with regret.

'She coulda been a contendah' he thought with a sigh, *'Oh well.'*