Lockwood & Co.
Book 5

The Empty Grave

By

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I.

The Tomb

1.

Want to hear a ghost story? That's good. I know a few.

How about the one of the sightless blue face, pressed against the cellar window? Or the apparition of the blind man holding a cane made of children's bones? What about the evil swan that followed me home through the lonely, rain-washed park, or the giant disembodied mouth seen opening in the centre of a concrete floor? What of the milk jug that poured blood; or the empty bath from which choking gurgles sounded after dark? What of the orphan's spinning bed, or the skeleton in the chimney; or the vile spectral pig, all bristles and yellow tusks, glimpsed snuffling through the dirty glass of a shower-room door?

Take your pick. I experienced them all. They represent a typical month's work for Lockwood & Co. during that final desperate summer. Most of them were written up in our casebook by George the mornings after the events concerned, in between sips of scalding tea. He did this in his boxer shorts, incidentally, sitting cross-legged on the floor of our living room, a sight which was frankly more disturbing than all the hauntings combined.

Our Black Casebook has since been copied and filed away in the National Archives in the new Anthony Lockwood gallery. The good news about *that* is you don't have to negotiate all the crushed crisps in the pages of the original if you want to know the details of each job. The bad news? Not all of our cases are in there. There's one that was simply too terrible to be written down at all.

You know how it ended. Everyone does. The city was full of it already on that last cruel morning, with the rubble of Fittes House still steaming and the remains of my dear ones not yet cold. But the beginning? No. That's not yet public knowledge. For the hidden story of murder, conspiracy, betrayal – yes, *and* ghosts – you need the account of one who survived it. For that, you have to come to me.

My name is Lucy Joan Carlyle. I talk with the living and the dead, and it sometimes gets so's I can't tell the difference any more.

Here it is, then: the beginning of the end. Here's me, two months ago. I'm dressed in black jacket, skirt and leggings, with heavy-duty boots suitable for staving in coffin-lids and scrambling out of graves. My rapier's at my belt, a holster of flares and salt-bombs is slung across my chest. There's a spectral handprint on my jacket and my bob's cropped shorter than before, because a ghost had recently grasped at it, turning the hair-tips white. Otherwise, I look the same as ever. Kitted out, ready for action. Doing what I do.

In the outside world, the stars were out. The day's warmth was folded up and done. It was shortly after midnight – the time when spirits wandered and all sensible folk were tucked up safe in bed.

Me? Not so much. I was shuffling round a mausoleum with my bottom in the air.

In my defence it has to be said that I wasn't the only one doing this. Elsewhere in the small stone-clad chamber, Lockwood, George and Holly were also on hands and knees. We had our heads low, our noses near the flagstones. We swept our candles close to walls and floor. Occasionally we stopped to press fingertips into suspicious nooks and crannies; otherwise we worked in silence. We were looking for the entrance to a grave.

"Do you lot *have* to bend over like that?" a voice asked. "It's making my eyes water."

A thin, red-haired young man was sitting above us on a granite block in the centre of the room. Like the rest of our raiding party he wore all-black – in his case, whopping big boots, skinny black jeans and a roll-neck top. *Unlike* the rest of us, he had an enormous

pair of bulbous goggles clamped across his face that gave him the look of a startled grasshopper. His name was Quill Kipps. He was readying our tomb-cracking equipment, laying out crowbars and coils of rope on the surface of the stone. He was also keeping watch, blinking through his goggles at the shadows all around.

"See anything, Quill?" That was Lockwood, dark hair hanging over his face. He picked with his penknife at a gap between the flagstones.

Kipps lit an oil lamp, tilting the shutters so the light stayed low. "With you in that position, I've seen *plenty*. Particularly when Cubbins hoves into view. It's like watching a beluga swimming by."

"I meant ghosts."

"No ghosts yet. Apart from our tame one." He tapped a large glass jar perched alongside him on the block. Green light flared evilly in the jar, and a spectral face of unusual hideousness materialised, moving closer through a vortex of ectoplasm.

"*Tame?*" A disembodied voice that only I could hear spoke in indignation. "*Tame?! Let me out of here and I'll show that scrawny idiot how tame I am!*"

I sat back on my heels, brushing my fringe out of my eyes. "Best not call the skull tame, Kipps," I said. "He doesn't like it."

The face in the jar bared teeth like a dog's. "*Too right. Tell that boggle-eyed fool*, *Lucy*, *that if I was out of this prison I'd suck the flesh off his bones and dance a hornpipe with his empty skin. You just tell him that.*"

"Is it offended?" Kipps asked me. "I can see that horrid mouth moving."

"*Tell him!"*

I hesitated. "Don't worry," I said. "He's fine, really. He's cool with it."

"*What? No, I'm not! And where's he get off tapping my glass like I'm some kind of goldfish? I swear, when I get free of this, I'm going to catch Kipps and pull off his—*"

"Lockwood," I said, tuning out the ghost, "are you *sure* there's a trapdoor in here? We haven't got much time."

Anthony Lockwood straightened; he was kneeling in the centre of the floor, one hand holding his penknife, the other running distractedly through his hair. As usual, he was impeccably dressed. He had a dark jersey on instead of his long coat, and soft-soled pumps instead of his normal shoes; these were his only concessions to the demands of breaking and entering a national monument.

"You're right, Luce." Lockwood's pale, slim face was as relaxed as ever, but his brow had an elegant kink in it that told me he *was* concerned. "It's been ages, and there's still no sniff of it. What do you reckon, George?"

With a scuffling, George Cubbins levered himself up into view from behind the granite block. His black t-shirt was dirty, his glasses skewed, and his pale hair spiked and matted with sweat. He'd been doing the exact same thing as the rest of us for the last hour, but somehow he'd contrived to get completely covered in a layer of dust, mouse droppings and cobwebs that no one else had even seen. Such was George's way. "All the accounts of the burial mention a trapdoor," he said. "We're just not looking hard enough. Particularly Kipps, who isn't looking at all."

"Hey, I'm doing my job," Kipps said. "The question is, have you done yours? We're risking our skins tonight because *you* said there was a way in."

George unwound a cobweb from his glasses. "Of course there is. They lowered her coffin through the floor into the crypt. A silver coffin. Nothing but the best for *her*."

It was noticeable that George didn't care to mention the name of the person whose tomb this was. Noticeable too that even the *thought* of that silver coffin gave me a hollow prickling in my gut. I got the same feeling whenever I glanced at the shelf at the far end of the chamber and looked what was sitting there.

It was an iron bust of a woman in late middle age. She had an imperious and austere expression, with hair swept back above a tall forehead. The nose was sharp and aquiline, the mouth thin, the eyes astute. It was not a pleasant face, exactly, but strong and hard and watchful, and we all knew it very well indeed. It was the same face as the one on our postage stamps and on the covers of our agency manuals, a face that had shadowed us all from early childhood and entered all our dreams.

Many remarkable things had been said about Marissa Fittes, the first and greatest psychic investigator of us all. How, together with her partner, Tom Rotwell, she had devised most of the ghost-hunting techniques that operatives such as we still used. How she had improvised the first rapier from a snapped-off iron railing; how she'd conversed

with ghosts as easily as if they were her flesh and blood. How she'd created the first psychic detection agency and how, when she died, half of London came to watch as her coffin was carried from Westminster Abbey to the Strand, with the streets strewn with lavender flowers, and all the agents in the city marching along behind. How the bells in every church had rung as she was interred beneath her mausoleum, which was still maintained by the Fittes Agency as a special shrine.

Remarkable things…

The final one was we didn't believe she was buried there at all.

The Fittes Mausoleum, in which we stood, lay at the east end of the Strand in central London. It was a compact, high-ceilinged chamber, roughly oval in shape, built of stone and swathed in shadow. Apart from the big sarcophagus-sized block of granite in the centre of the room (which had the single word 'FITTES' carved into the top), the place was empty. There were no windows, and the iron doors that led to the street were closed and tight.

Somewhere beyond these doors stood two sentries. They were only kids, but they had pistols and might have shot us had they heard us, so we had to go carefully. On the upside the place was clean and dry and smelt of fresh lavender, and there weren't any obvious body parts lying underfoot, which instantly made it preferable to most of the other places we'd been that week.

But equally, there didn't seem to be anywhere for a trapdoor to hide.

Our lanterns flickered. Blackness hung over our heads like a witch's cloak.

"Well, all we can do is keep calm, keep quiet and keep looking," Lockwood said. "Unless anyone's got a better suggestion."

"I've got one." Holly Munro had been zealously combing the floor at the far end of the room. Now she got to her feet and joined us, light and silent as a cat. Like the rest of us, she was in stealth mode: she had her long dark hair clipped back in a ponytail, and wore a zip-up top, skirt and leggings. I could go on about how well the all-black get-up suited her, but why bother? With Holly, that was a given. If she'd gone around wearing nothing but a dustbin suspended from her shoulders by a pair of spotty braces, she'd have somehow made it look svelte.

"I think we need a fresh perspective," she said. "Lucy, can't the skull help at all?"

I shrugged. "I'll try, Hol. But you know what mood he's in."

Over in the jar, the translucent face was still talking animatedly. I could just see the old brown skull clamped to the base of the glass behind it.

I let myself tune back into what the ghost was saying.

"*…and eat them. Then I'll freeze his toenails off. That'll fix him*."

"Oh, you're not *still* going on about Kipps?" I said. "I thought you'd finished ages ago."

The face in the jar blinked at me. "*Weren't you even listening?*"

"No."

"*Typical. I went into all kinds of grim, inventive detail just for you*."

"Save it. We can't find the entrance. Can you help us out?"

"*Why should I? You'll disbelieve everything I say.*"

"That's not true. It's because we *do* sort of believe you that we're standing here right now."

The ghost snorted rudely. "*If you took my word in any conventional sense, you'd be sitting at home with your feet up, rotting your innards with tea and chocolate biscuits. But no. You have to 'double-check' my story.*"

"Are you surprised? You told us that Marissa Fittes isn't dead, but is actually alive and well and walking around in the shape of her supposed grand-daughter, Penelope Fittes. The same Penelope Fittes who is head of the Fittes Agency and probably the most powerful person in London. That's quite a claim to make. You'll forgive us if we need to check it for ourselves."

The face rolled its eyes. *"Piffle. Know what this is an example of? Skullism.*"

"What nonsense are you spouting now?"

"*You've heard of racism. You've heard of sexism. Well, this is skullism, pure and simple. You're judging me by my outward appearance. You doubt my word simply because I'm a skull, lurking in a jar of slime-green plasm. Admit it!*"

I took a deep breath. This was a skull known far and wide for its outrageous whoppers and virtuoso fibbing. To say it sometimes stretched the truth would be like

saying George sometimes stretched the seat of his trousers when tying up his shoelaces. On the flipside the ghost *had* saved my life more than once and – on certain important matters – hadn't always lied. "That's an interesting point," I said, "and I look forward to discussing it with you later. In the meantime, help me out. We're looking for the entrance to a crypt. Do you see a ring or handle?"

"*No.*"

"Do you see a lever?"

"*Nope*."

"Do you see a pulley, winch or any other mechanism for opening a hidden trapdoor?"

"*No. Of course not. You're getting desperate now*."

I sighed. "Okay. I get the message. So there's no door here."

"*Oh, of course there's a* door," the ghost said. "*Why didn't you ask me? It's obvious enough from up here.*"

I relayed this to the others. Holly and Lockwood acted as one. They vaulted up onto the block beside Kipps. Lockwood grabbed one of the lanterns and held it out in front of him. They both rotated, scanning the floor, faces locked in concentration. The light washed slowly over the flagstones like water, spilling up against the base of the walls.

"*This is pitiful*," the skull said. "*I saw it straight off, and I don't have an eyeball to call my own. Well, I'm sorry, but you're not getting any more clues from—*"

"There!" Holly grasped Lockwood's arm. He held the lantern steady. "There!" she said. "See that little flagstone set *inside* the bigger one? The big one *is* the trapdoor. Pull up the small stone and we'll find the ring or handle hidden underneath!"

George and I ran over, bent close to where she pointed. As soon as she said it, I knew that she was right.

"Brilliant, Holly," Lockwood said. "That *must* be it. Tools ready, everyone."

It was in moments like this that Lockwood and Co. was at its fluent best. Knives were brought out, and the cement around the smaller stone cut free. We levered it up with crowbars; Lockwood pulled it aside. Sure enough, a hinged bronze ring lay beneath, set into the larger stone. While George, Holly and I loosened the edges of this stone, Lockwood and Kipps tied ropes around the ring, testing the knots and double-testing them, making sure they could take the strain. Lockwood was everywhere at once, softly giving orders, helping with every task. Energy crackled from him, spurring us all on.

"*Isn't anyone going to thank me?*" The skull watched disgustedly from its jar. "*Thought not. Good job I'm not in the business of holding my breath*."

Within minutes we were in position. Lockwood and Kipps stood at the first rope: they would lift the stone. On the opposite side, the second rope hung slack. George and I held this: it was our job to support the flagstone once it was lifted, and help lower it quietly to the ground. In the centre, by the ring, Holly knelt ready with the crowbars.

The room was still. Up on the wall our lantern light quivered on the iron head of Marissa Fittes. It was as if she watched us, the eyes glittering with malevolent life.

Lockwood grinned round at us. At moments of maximum tension, he made it his business to be the calmest of all. "Everyone ready?" he asked. "Right – let's go."

He and Kipps pulled. At once, smoothly and without noise, the flagstone moved. It lifted up as if on oiled hinges, and a waft of chill air rose from the crack beneath.

Holly pushed the crowbars under it in case the others faltered, but there was no need. With surprising swiftness, Lockwood and Kipps pulled the flagstone upright. Now it was the turn of George and me to support its weight. Our rope went taut; we took the strain.

The hinged slab wasn't nearly as heavy as I'd have guessed – perhaps it was some special hollow stone. Slowly we began to lower it again.

"Set it down gently!" Lockwood hissed. "No noise!"

We eased the flagstone down. It met the ground with a sound like a mouse sighing.

Now we had a square hole in the centre of the floor.

When Holly shone her flashlight into it, we could see a flight of stone steps leading steeply into utter blackness. Beyond the steps the light was swallowed utterly.

A damp, dark earthy smell rose invisibly around us.

"Deep hole," Kipps whispered.

"Anyone see anything?"

"No."

There was a brief silence. Now that we had gained access to the crypt, the enormity of what we were about to do fell over us. It was like the darkness hanging above our heads

had suddenly, silently, shifted lower. The face watched us from the wall.

We all stood quiet, using our Senses. None of us got anything. Our belt thermometers showed a steady twelve degrees, and we detected no supernatural chill, no miasma, malaise or creeping fear. There was no immediate likelihood of an apparition.

"Good," Lockwood said. "Collect your things. We'll proceed as planned. I'll go first. Then George, followed by Holly and Luce, with Quill at the back. We'll have torches off, but carry candles. I'll have my rapier; the rest of you have other weapons ready. Not that we'll need them." He gave us his best grin. "We don't believe she's there."

But a nameless dread had stolen up on us. In part it was the power of the iron face, and of the name inscribed in stone. And it was also the feel of the dank air rising from the hole. It coiled around us, entwining us with unease. We gathered our things slowly. George passed among us, flicking his lighter, igniting our candles. We lined up, hefting rapiers, clearing throats, readying our belts.

Kipps vocalised his thoughts. "Are we *sure* we want to do this?"

"We've got this far," Lockwood said. "Of course we do."

"We can't bottle out now," I said.

Kipps looked at me. "You're right, Lucy. I'm being overly cautious. I mean, it's not as if our tip came from an evil talking skull that probably wishes us all dead, is it?"

Everyone glanced over at the open backpack I was carrying. I'd just put the jar inside. The ghost's face had gone now; only the skull was showing. Even *I* had to admit that its death-black sockets and leering toothy grin weren't completely reassuring.

"I know you set great store by this skull," Kipps went on. "I know it's your best mate, and all the rest of it, but what if it's wrong? What if it's simply mistaken?" He glanced up at the wall. His voice dropped to a whisper. "*She* might be waiting for us, down there."

Another moment and the mood would have shifted irrevocably. Lockwood stepped between us. He spoke with crisp decision. "No one needs to worry. George, remind them."

"Sure." George adjusted his spectacles. "Remember, all the stories say that Marissa Fittes gave orders for her body to be encased in a special coffin. We're talking iron inlays and silver trim. So, if the skull's wrong, and her body *is* there, her spirit won't be able to bother us," he said. "It'll be safely constrained."

"And when we open the coffin?" Kipps asked.

"Oh, that'll only be for a second, and we'll have our defences in place by then."

"The point is," Lockwood said, "no ghost is going to attack us on the way down. Right, George?"

"Right."

"Good. Very well, then." Lockwood turned to the stair.

"Obviously there might be a few traps," George said.

Lockwood paused with his foot hovering above the top step. "Traps?"

"Not saying there are. Just that there might be some." George pushed his glasses up his nose and gave an encouraging flourish with one hand. "Anyway, Lockwood – the stairs await! Off you go."

Lockwood did a sort of reverse swivel. Now he was facing George. "Hold it," he said. "What traps are these?"

"Yes. I'm quite interested in this too," Holly said.

We all were. We gathered around George, who did something with his shoulders that was probably meant to be a casual shrug. "Oh, it's just silly rumours," he said. "Frankly I'm surprised you're interested. Some say Marissa didn't want grave-robbers interfering with her tomb, so she took precautions." He paused. "Some say these precautions might be… supernatural ones."

"*Now* you tell us," Holly said.

"When was *this* little fact going to be mentioned?" I demanded. "When a Spectre put its fingers around my neck?"

George made an impatient gesture. “It’s probably nonsense. Besides, it would have been a distraction earlier. It’s my job to distinguish between solid fact and rumour.”

“No, that’s *my* job,” Lockwood said. “Your job is to tell me everything so *I* can make the judgement.”

There was a heavy pause. “Do you lot *always* argue like this?” Kipps asked.

Lockwood gave a bland smile. “Usually. I sometimes think incessant bickering is the oil that lubricates our efficient machine.”

George looked up. “You reckon?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, are you going to pick me up on that as *well*?”

“I thought you *liked* some bickering! You just said—”

“I don’t like anything *that* much! Now, can everyone please shut up?” Lockwood gazed round at us. His dark eyes locked into ours, holding our attention, steadying our collective purpose. “Traps or no traps,” he said, “we can handle this. We have two hours to check the tomb, close it up and be ready to go. Do we *want* to learn the truth about Penelope Fittes and Marissa? Of course we do! We’ve worked wonders to get here, and we won’t panic now. If we’re right, there won’t be anything to worry about. If we’re wrong, we deal with it, as we always do.” He smiled round us all. “But we won’t be wrong. We’re on the verge of something big here. It’s going to be good!”

Kipps adjusted his goggles dolefully. “Since when has anything good happened in a crypt? It’s going to be ropey by definition.”

But Lockwood was already heading down the stairs. Beyond him, light flickered on the iron face. Its thin lips smiled as we descended into the dark.

2.

Okay, let’s just pause a moment, while we’re still at the top of the stairs. Nothing nasty’s jumped out at us. No traps have been sprung. We’re all alive and well. That makes it a good time to consider just how the five of us (five and a bit, if you include the skull) came to be there at all, descending illegally into the most famous tomb in London.

I don’t mean the mechanics of *how* we got inside the mausoleum, though that’s a story in itself: the long nights George spent watching the movements of the guards, the weeks Kipps spent shadowing the sergeant with the key; the stealing of the key (this a masterpiece of timing, with Holly distracting the sergeant while Lockwood pinched it from his jacket, took a wax impression and returned it, all in thirty seconds flat); finally the forging of a replica, thanks to an underworld contact of our disreputable friend Flo Bones. I don’t even mean how we snuck in during the changing of the guards.

I mean why we took the risk at all.

For the answer to *that* we have to go back five months, to a walk that Lockwood and I made through a dark and frozen landscape. This little stroll completely shook up how we operated, and changed the way we saw ourselves.

Why? Because five months before, entirely unexpectedly, Lockwood and I stepped out of our world and arrived in another place. Where was this place? That’s hard to say. Some call it the Other Side; I guess it has other names too, which people in the old religions and the ghost cults use. But from what *I* saw it wasn’t a heaven or a hell; just a world very similar to our own, only freezing cold and silent and stretched out under a black sky. The dead walked there, and it was their home – while Lockwood and I were the interlopers. *Ours* was the unnatural presence in their endless night.

We had ventured there by accident, and only just managed to escape, but we discovered there were other living souls who had deliberately chosen to explore that forbidden path. One was no less a person than Mr Steve Rotwell, head of the giant Rotwell agency. He had been carrying out experiments, sending employees (protected by iron armour) through a gate or portal to the Other Side. His exact purpose we could not discover: when he attempted to silence us, our confrontation ended with Rotwell’s death and the destruction of his secret research facility. The repercussions of this were far-reaching. For a start, the Rotwell company was taken over by its arch-rival, the Fittes agency, headed by the formidable Ms Penelope Fittes, who swiftly set about establishing herself as the most powerful woman in England.

But there were darker consequences too. Our experiences had indicated that there was a strong connection between the activity of spirits – in particular their keenness to return to our world – and the presence of living persons on the Other Side. It seemed that when the land of the dead was invaded, the dead became active, and much more likely to invade the land of the living. This discovery was of vast importance. For more than fifty years, the Problem – the epidemic of ghosts infesting Britain – had spread and worsened, confounding all attempts to understand or halt it. We held in our hands a clue to the possible cause, and we itched to spread this news to the world.

Only we couldn't. Because we'd been forbidden to do so.

This edict had come from none other than Penelope Fittes herself. She didn't know about Lockwood's and my strange journey (we had told nobody but our friends) but she knew something of what we'd discovered at the Rotwell Institute, and she wanted no word of it getting to the ordinary population. It wasn't a friendly piece of advice either, more a coolly delivered threat. We were under no illusions about what would happen to us if we chose to give up our silence and go our own way.

This, by itself, was outrageous enough: the woman at the heart of the fight against the Problem was telling us not to explore its possible cause. But there was something else, something more disturbing still; and for that insight we had the skull in the jar to thank. Long ago, it had spoken with the great Marissa Fittes; now it had seen Penelope, and it had big news for us. Penelope *was* Marissa – they were precisely the same person.

However much we might distrust Penelope Fittes herself, it was clearly not easy to establish the truth of this extraordinary claim. But we *could* check one thing.

We could see whether Marissa was in her grave.

The stairs were steep and narrow. We descended slowly, step by careful step. Lockwood was at the front, then George, with Holly and me following. Kipps made up the rear. Each of us held a candle raised at head height, and so our circles of light fused together, making a little radiant worm or caterpillar inching its way into the earth.

Behind us, the dim grey cone of lantern light seeping through the trapdoor faded from view. To our right was a wall of neat stone blocks, shiny and gleaming with damp. To the left was an open, unknown space, which our candlelight did not penetrate. Lockwood risked a brief flick of his torch, revealing a shocking well of black that made us all flinch towards the right-hand wall. Then, disconcertingly, *this* wall vanished too, and we were descending with an abyss of darkness on either side.

Your head did weird things in such a place. Your legs shook; you no longer had full control over your muscles. You kept feeling you were about to lurch aside and plunge into oblivion. The problem was compounded by the need for high psychic alert, the fear of something rising towards you out of the dark. Every couple of steps we had to stop and use our Talents, and this straining against the silence made your head spin even more.

It didn't help that the skull in my backpack insisted on doing a running commentary, constantly adding little reminders of the peril we were in.

"*Ooh, this is a nasty bit,"* it said. "*Careful you don't suddenly step sideways and plunge horribly to your death.*" And: "*What's it like, falling in pitch darkness, I wonder?*" Or simply: "*Crikey, don't trip now!*" And so on, until I threatened to toss it over the edge.

The wall returned, and at that point the steps veered abruptly to the left, going down with no less steepness. The green glow at my shoulder flared with sullen light. "*I'm bored*," the ghost said. "*It's Lockwood's fault. He's such a dawdler*."

"He's being sensible. He's checking for traps."

"*He's like an old granny crossing the road. I've seen algae move faster.*"

It was true that Lockwood was taking it steadily. Down beyond the heads of the others I could see him, on the fringe of the candlelight, stooping, peering, patiently checking each slab before treading on it, inspecting the wet stones of the wall. That was where he always was – at the forefront of the group, standing between us and the darkness. How poised and graceful he was. His presence gave me courage, even in a place like this. He couldn't see me, of course; it didn't matter. I smiled at him.

"You all right, Lucy?" That was Kipps at my shoulder. "Got wind or something?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Just saw you grimacing there. Tell you what, my goggles are sweating up. Wish we'd get to the bottom of this wretched vault. Lockwood's taking his time."

"He's doing what he has to," I said. We both fell silent. Down we went, with the coils

of candle smoke binding us together, and Lockwood calm and tireless at our head. For a while there was nothing but stone and smoke and silence, and the shuffle of our boots in the dark.

"*HURRY IT UP!*"

That was the skull roaring like a howler monkey in my ear. The sudden psychic outburst made me scream with fright. I jerked forwards, jabbing my candle flame directly into Holly's neck. She screamed too, and barged into George; George stumbled and kneed Lockwood in the backside. Lockwood, who had just been bending over to inspect the step below, lost his balance entirely and tumbled down the stairs, falling head over heels, bump, bump, bump. He dropped his rapier, his candle disappeared over the edge. He finished upside-down, long legs waving in the air.

Dead silence. Everyone stood frozen, listening for the creak of moving traps, for shifting stone, for the rustling of grave-cloths. Personally all I could hear was the raucous cackling of the skull. Nothing happened. Lockwood got stiffly to his feet. Picking up his rapier, we cantered down to join him.

"*I don't know what you're so fussed about*." This was the skull, a few moments later. We were clustering round the jar, bog-eyed and livid, while the face grinned out in high delight. "*You know me*," it said. "*I'm excitable. Can I help it if I get caught up in the action?*"

"You imperilled us all," I snarled. "If Lockwood had triggered a trap…"

"*But he didn't, did he? Let's be positive! We now know those last twelve steps are safe because Lockwood's bum tested them for us.*"

Oddly, when I passed on these words of wisdom, they didn't go down too well.

"It's gone too far this time," Holly said. "I vote we take it to the Furnaces tomorrow."

"Oh, don't be so harsh," Kipps said. "I'm grateful to the skull. That was one of the funniest things I've ever seen. I'll treasure the memory on my death-bed. Anyway, I assume you haven't brought the ghost along for its personality. The best thing is to put it to good use."

There was sense in Kipps's words, and reluctantly we all acknowledged it. I moved to the front of the group, just behind Lockwood, with the ghost peering from my backpack.

"*This is great*," the skull said. "*The best seat in the house. With luck I can watch Lockwood trip over his own feet again. So, fill me in. What do you want me to do?*"

I took a deep breath. "Scour the rest of the stairs for snares, levers, wires, flip-stones, ghost-traps, and anything else that might threaten us. You see something, you let it rip. Otherwise keep silent. Not another word. Agreed?"

"*Okay.*"

"Then let's g—."

"*STOP!*"

The skull's scream was even louder than before. I cursed. "What now?"

"*Hey, relax. Just doing my job. There's a trap on the next step, I think you'll find*."

And sure enough, when I stabbed my torch on, I could see a thin wire stretched across the step below us, just at ankle height.

"Trip-wire," George breathed.

"Yes, and maybe something more than that." Lockwood indicated where the wire disappeared into a small groove cut into the wall. He lifted his candle; one of the stones above was larger than the rest, and seemed less well embedded, too. "Think this might drop on our heads after we'd tripped and fallen?" he asked. "It's possible."

Holly swallowed audibly. "Tell you what, let's not find out."

One after the other we stepped down over the wire. The evident but unknown malice of the trap sent a chill through all of us. Lockwood wiped perspiration from his brow.

"We owe the skull for that, at least," he said. "Let's keep on. It can't be far to go."

We continued down the slowly curving stairs. The skull remained silent. There were no more dangers to be seen. At last our questing candlelight bent and folded against the carved stones of wide, almost semicircular archway. The stairs passed beneath the arch, and ended at a paved expanse of floor. It was very silent and very cold.

No one spoke. We were all on high alert. We used our psychic senses, probing ahead of us into the dark. Nothing was seen or heard. I ran my fingers over the walls, too, in

case Touch might conjure something, but the stone was blank. Our thermometers showed a temperature of seven degrees: chilly, but not exceptional. It gave no cause for concern.

That didn't mean we were putting our rapiers away. Lockwood and I set down our candles and switched on our torches. With weapons at the ready, we walked slowly beneath the arch into a large stone room.

The burial chamber of Marissa Fittes was a high, domed space, with an oval outline that echoed that of the mausoleum far above. Our torch beams crossed and re-crossed it, picking out the same curved walls of closely fitting blocks, the same clean flagged floor. There were no doors, no niches, no alcoves to be seen. But in the middle of the vault—

Our beams speared inwards to meet at the central point. This was a raised, rectangular plinth of smooth grey stone, a couple of feet high, with bunches of dried grey lavender propped against it. It had the word FITTES inscribed along the side.

On top of the plinth, glinting coldly in our torchlight, was a silver coffin.

The coffin had been covered with a magnificent silver drape, emblazoned with the famous Fittes symbol – a rampant unicorn.

"Don't want to rush to any conclusions," Lockwood murmured, "but I think we might be there."

George too spoke in a whisper; it was not a place for noise. "That's the special coffin in which she supposedly lay in state. Three days in Westminster Abbey, with mourners filing by. Then they brought her here."

"If she *is* here," I said. I was Listening again. No, it was okay. Everything was still.

"That's what we're here to find out." Lockwood walked purposefully across the vault. In the briskness of his movements, he was counteracting our unspoken fears. "Won't take five minutes, then we're gone. Do it like we practised. Chains at the ready."

Time and again, in the peace and comfort of 35 Portland Row, we'd gone through this part of the operation. We'd known it was the crunch point, when fear might make us forget essential things. So we'd rehearsed on a sofa in our living room, circling it with iron chains, looping their ends carefully, sewing salt and iron filings on the ground, setting up lavender candles at regular distances all the way round. Good protective measures, carried out swiftly and well. In moments we had the plinth surrounded in this manner, sealing in the coffin – and whatever it contained.

We stood ready, just outside the chains.

"All right," Lockwood said. "Now for the coffin. George?"

"As predicted, it's an Edgar and Soames special edition, lead-lined, silver trim, double clasps. Should have a counterweighted hinge, so it opens to the touch." George spoke calmly, but there was sweat running down the side of his face. For all that it was so cold, all of us were clammy with nerves. Holly's face had blanched; Kipps looked as if he was trying to chew off his own bottom lip. Even the skull at my shoulder had gone quiet, the green glow dulled almost to nothing.

Lockwood took a deep breath. "Okay, so this is my job." He looked round at us. "Old Marissa started everything – the agencies, the fight against the Problem. That's her legacy, which everyone takes for granted. But we know something else is going on. And part of the answer lies inside."

"Move fast," I told him.

He smiled at me. "Always."

George and Kipps held their candles ready. Holly and I unclipped magnesium flares.

Lockwood stepped over the iron chains and approached the plinth.

The coffin was at waist height. With a delicate touch, like he was pulling a blanket off a sleeping child, Lockwood took the unicorn drape and drew it to the foot of the coffin, where he let it fall to the floor. The top of the coffin was pristine, shimmering with silver light. It had two double clasps. Lockwood flicked them open – one, two – each falling against the coffin side with a clink that set my heart juddering.

This was the moment. If the skull's story was true, the coffin would be empty.

Lockwood took hold of the lid and pushed it upwards. In the same motion, he jumped back beyond the iron chains.

George was right: the lid must have had some kind of concealed counterweight, because it continued to open, smoothly and soundlessly, of its own accord. It tipped up and up and over – and came to a gentle halt, hanging back at an angle.

The interior of the coffin was a slot of thick darkness, black to the brim.

Kipps and George lifted their arms. Light from their candles scooped out the slot. Now we could see that the interior was upholstered in red silk—

And filled by something. Something long, thin and covered in white linen.

For a few seconds, no one spoke. Holly and I had our arms raised, flares cupped in our hands. The others were likewise frozen, rigid, breath rasping between bared teeth. We stared at the shrouded shape. It had an awful kind of gravity that held us all transfixed.

"Well, *somebody*'s at home," Holly said in a small voice.

Kipps swore under his breath. "So much for that skull's promises."

This was a point. I came to life, rapped on the ghost-jar. "Skull!"

"*What?*" Faint green light flared sullenly within the glass. "*This had better be good. I can't hang around. There's too much silver here for me.*"

"Never mind that! Look in the coffin."

A pause followed. "*Oh, well. Could be any old corpse in there. Might be a pile of half-bricks wrapped in sacking. I can tell you one thing, it's not Marissa. Uncover the face and see*."

The light faded. I told the others what the skull had said. None of us much enjoyed hearing it.

"Suppose we *had* better take a look," I said.

Lockwood nodded slowly. "Right… Well, it's easy enough."

The body of that quiet someone in the coffin was not wrapped tightly, but instead concealed by a loose cloth. Whoever pulled back the drape would have to step inside the chains, reach in close to the shrouded thing.

"Easy enough… Lockwood said again. "It's just a dead body, like any other, and we've all seen plenty of *those*."

He looked at us.

"Oh, very well," he sighed. "*I'll* do it. Stand ready."

Without hesitation he stepped over the iron chains, reached into the coffin, took hold of a corner of the cloth and, with a fastidious movement, flicked it away. Then he jumped back. We all flinched with him. As Lockwood said, we'd seen enough decomposed bodies not to want to be as far away as possible when the dreadful sight was revealed.

And it *was* dreadful. Only not in the way expected.

It wasn't decomposed at all.

Long grey hair lay thick and lush across an ivory pillow. It cradled a gaunt white face, the skin flowing like wax beneath our candlelight. It was the face of a woman; an aged wrinkled woman, bony, with a nose curved thin and sharp like the beak of some bird of prey. The lips were closed tight, the eyes too. It was recognisably the same face as on the iron bust upstairs, only older and frailer. What was awful about it was that it didn't appear to be long-dead, but only sleeping. It had been miraculously preserved.

No one spoke. No one moved. At last a blob of hot wax from his candle dripped on Kipps's hand. His yelp broke the spell.

"Marissa Fittes…" George breathed. "It *is* her."

"Close the lid!" Holly said. "Close it quick, before—!"

She didn't finish the sentence, but we knew what she meant. *Before Marissa Fittes's spirit stirred.* I had the same thought too. But I also felt a rush of anger that we'd risked so much for nothing. "That wretched skull!"

Quill Kipps cursed. "What fools we are! We've risked everything for this!" He gestured wildly around the tiny vault. "We've got to get out sharpish. *She* won't be happy we've desecrated her resting-place. Come *on*, Lockwood! We've got to get out."

"Yes, yes…" Of all of us, Lockwood had been the least affected by the dead woman in the coffin. He bent forwards over the chains, gazing at the pallid face. "She seems relaxed enough so far," he added. "In fact she's positively chilled. How did they keep her like this, I wonder?"

"Mummified," George said.

"Like the Egyptians? Reckon people still do that?"

"Oh sure. You just need the right herbs and oils and natron, which is a kind of salt. Dunk her in that, it dries her out, though you mustn't forget to cut out the intestines, and pull the brains out through the nose. It's a messy business. Imagine one of Luce's worst head-colds: *that's* the amount of gunk you're dealing with. After that, you'd stuff her various cavities with—"

"Right, so mummification is *possible*," Kipps interrupted. "We get the idea."

George adjusted his spectacles. "Few details never hurt anyone."

"All the same," Lockwood said, "I've never heard of a mummy looking quite like this…" As he spoke, he stepped across the iron chains.

"Lockwood," I said, "what are you doing?"

"It's like she died yesterday." He reached in, put his fingers to the side of the face.

"Well, don't *touch* her!"

"Ak! *Lockwood!*"

"Ah, yes…" There was a softly noxious peeling sound, as of skin coming away.

Holly put her hand over her mouth; George made a noise like a throttled cat. Kipps clutched my arm.

Lockwood stood back. He had the old woman's face dangling between his fingers.

"Look," he said. "It's just a mask." He smiled round at us. "A plastic mask… And check this out…" His other hand came up. The grey-white wig hung heavy in his hand, matted and shapeless like something that had been teased out of a bathplug. "A mask and wig," he said, laughing. "It's fake. Everything's just fake… Everyone okay?"

To be honest, that might have been stretching it. For a moment none of us moved. Then our shock and relief spilled over. Kipps began laughing. Holly just stood there, shaking her head, hand still over her mouth. I realised I'd been holding my flare ready all this time. My fingers hurt. I put it back in my belt.

"Lockwood," I said, "that is *so* icky. That is the ickiest thing I've ever seen you do. Which is saying something."

"It's not really icky." Lockwood considered the thing lying in the coffin. "It's just a dummy. Come and see."

We all stepped over to the coffin. Sure enough, shorn of its coverings, the head resting on the red silk pillow wasn't human at all. It was made of wax. It had the correct dimensions, with a rough nose shape, and shallow indents where the eyes would be, but there were no real features, just the bubbles and pits of yellowish wax, smooth in places, rough in others.

"What a con!" George bent over the coffin, holding his spectacles as he stared quizzically at the dummy. He pulled the shroud further away, uncovering a wax torso, and the rough, spindly wax arms crossed over the breast. "Life-size, and probably the correct weight, so no one guessed when they were carrying it. The mask was there just in case anyone looked in. What a con…"

"She's not there," Lockwood said. "This whole mausoleum is built on a lie."

"Unbelievable." Kipps was still laughing softly to himself. He reached into the coffin and struck the waxen chest with his knuckles, making a hollow tapping sound. "A dummy! And we were all so frightened…"

I wanted to laugh, too. It was the sheer release of the tension that had been building up all night. Everyone felt it. Holly got out some sticks of chocolate, began offering them around. Thermos flasks of coffee were located. We leaned back against the plinth.

"We've got to go public with this," George said.

Lockwood frowned. "Maybe. It's only half the story, don't forget."

Tap, tap… Behind us, Kipps rapped out a jaunty little rhythm on the wax. "A dummy!" he said. "We can't keep this quiet. We show the mask, tell DEPRAC, get the press down here." He reached out for the chocolate. "Thanks, Holly. Don't mind if I do."

Holly handed out the last stick. "The difficult thing is knowing who to trust," she said. "Half of DEPRAC's in Penelope's pockets."

"Barnes is okay."

"Yeah. *He* is. But how much influence does Barnes have now?"

Tap, tap…

"Decisions for tomorrow," Lockwood said. "Thing to do now is get back topsides,

before the guards change again."

Tap, tap, tappety-tap…

"Okay, Quill," I said. "Maybe you can stop that now. It's getting a little irritating."

"I *have* stopped," Kipps said. "I'm eating my chocolate, same as you."

Everyone looked at Kipps, leaning against the plinth beside us. He held up both his hands in confirmation. The tapping noise continued. We stared at one other. We swallowed our chocolate in unison. Then we looked behind.

Something protruding from under the rumpled grave clothes was striking the side of the coffin, making the tapping sound. It was a cupped wax hand, twitching and jerking in silent spasms. As we watched, the trembling extended up the arm, and all at once the whole wax dummy was shaking, as if in protest at the coils of ghost-fog now rising from the grave.

3.

Ten minutes earlier, it would all have been fine. Even five minutes earlier would have been okay. We were so keyed up when we came into the vault, the first apparition to show its face would have been impaled by five rapiers simultaneously. As for the coffin, anything jumping out when we opened the lid would have been diced and dismembered before it knew what was happening. But the extreme shock – and subsequent anticlimax – of finding the wax mannequin had fatally distracted us. We had allowed ourselves to switch off. This in turn had lured us into committing the three cardinal sins of psychic investigation: we'd stopped using our Talents, we'd stepped beyond the chains, and we'd turned our backs on an open coffin. Even the rawest seven-year-old trainee knows to avoid *those* mistakes. Rookie errors, every one.

So it was that when we saw the mannequin moving and the coils of ghost-fog looping towards us, we were – for a crucial moment – stunned and frozen. It took our brains a split second longer than normal to react.

This delay was enough. We lost control.

So thick was the mist, it was as if the coffin were filling up with white liquid. It pooled around the edge of the body in the shroud, lapping at its contours, swirling and spiralling as if being stirred by unseen hands. And the stiff, yellow figure was infected by the movement. It juddered into life. Cupped fingers hooked over the lip of the coffin. There was a cracking sound, as of wax breaking. The mannequin thrust itself upwards into a sitting position.

"Back! Back!"

It was Lockwood's cry. As one, we threw ourselves off the platform, away from the coffin. But panic breeds panic; mistakes escalate. Lockwood was fine: he was already twisting as he jumped, whipping a flare from his belt. He landed on bent knees, the other side of our iron chains, his right arm pulled back and ready to throw. The rest of us? We didn't possess such finesse. We were just tumbling every which way, crashing down on hands and knees. I knocked over a candle, arched like a cat to avoid the ring of chains, then rolled unglamorously through a mess of salt and iron. Holly and George fared even worse. Both careered straight into the circle, twisting the links violently out of position.

Looped ends came away from each other; the circle was broken.

A cold wind blew outwards through the gaps and across the vault.

I finished my roll in a crouch, and spun on my heels, grappling for a flare. As I did so, Lockwood's canister flashed over me. It arched down towards the coffin, where a thin and faceless figure now sat, wrapped in grave-clothes, its smooth, misshapen head slowly turning in our direction.

The flare struck the edge of the coffin lid, just behind the figure.

Everything on the plinth disappeared in a bursting orchid of bright white fire.

I don't know whether it was the acoustics of the vault we were in, but the explosion was more than usually loud. Brighter, too. I looked aside. Kipps cried out: he'd been

closest to the burst. My ears rang; a ring of heat buffeted me for a second, then expanded past me and away. It was cold again.

I opened my eyes. White-hot iron was fountaining down like a rain of needles, fizzing and bouncing on the flagstones. The coffin interior was a coronet of fire. Fragments of its red silk lining waved and stirred like seaweed, dancing in the centre of each flame.

A dark shape stood above the fire, stiff, bent-backed, enveloped in a burning shroud.

"The chains!" I was scooping for the loose ends, trying to push them together. The others did the same. But the cold draught that blew from the coffin caught the iron links, skittered them apart. And the mist was already spilling over the edges of the burning coffin, pouring silently down in thick white ropes that uncoiled towards us on the floor. It pushed us back as we fumbled for the chains. We couldn't repair the circle without the mist brushing against our skin. It wasn't your usual ghost-fog, which is harmless. This was thicker and too viscous; you couldn't risk it touching you.

"Forget the iron," Lockwood shouted. "Move back! Hit it with your flares!"

The shape in the coffin moved, abruptly, awkwardly, as if it didn't know how to use its limbs. It gave a lurch, toppled forwards out of the coffin and landed headfirst on the floor of the vault in a spreading plume of ghost-fog. A moment later it vanished in a double explosion of magnesium fire. Two flares had struck it, almost head on. A third (I guessed George's) had missed completely, exploding against the far wall of the room. The noise buffeted us; we were scoured by a sunburst of violent silver light.

"What *was* that thing?" Kipps stumbled round to join us, one ear bleeding, his jersey a ragged colander of magnesium burns.

"A Revenant," Lockwood gasped. "Got to be."

"But the wax—"

"Its bones are hidden in the wax shell. The ghost is able to make the bones move, and that animates the wax." He took a canister from his belt. "Quick! Help me salt the floor."

Nothing moved in the silver flames, but Lockwood and the others threw salt-bombs onto the ground, lacing the stones in front. I didn't help them. I stood motionless, my flare still unused in my hand. Up until this point my psychic Senses had been numbed with shock. Now, as the echo of the explosions died away, they'd suddenly kicked in. And I could hear a voice, harsh and hollow as a crow's caw. It was calling out a name.

"*Marissa Fittes*…" it said. "*Marissa*…"

"Fall back to the stairs," Lockwood said.

We retreated towards the arch, watching the flames. They were dropping swiftly, revealing a prone and broken figure on the floor.

"Maybe we got it," Holly breathed.

"No," I said. The hollow voice was still echoing in my ears.

"I think we have," Kipps said. "Yeah… we have. We got it for sure."

The shape lifted its head, began to rise with stiff, appalling deliberation.

"How's it *doing* that?" Kipps cried. "That's not fair! The Greek Fire should have been enough!"

"Maybe the wax protects it," Lockwood said. He gestured at us to keep going; we were almost at the foot of the stairs. "Protects the bones and plasm. But that can't last. As it moves, it has to break the wax. Look – it's already cracking apart."

And sure enough, the smooth contours of the figure were fracturing. A broken line ran around the centre of the neck like a flaked and feathered ring. At the shoulder joints, the knees, and where the legs fed into the hips, the surface had disintegrated entirely. As it got to its feet in painful, jerky movements, small shards of wax fell into the coiling ghost-fog. It began to limp towards us across the stones.

"*Marissa*…."

The sorrow and fury in the voice made me gasp. A burning wave of dark emotions flooded my head.

"It's calling out," I said. "Calling for Marissa."

We were through the arch, gathered at the foot of the stairs. George brushed magnesium flecks off his glasses. "Really? Think the bones belong to someone who was murdered? Think Marissa killed him, put him here?"

"Don't know. The thing's certainly not happy."

"*I'd* be grumpy if I'd been killed, coated with wax and buried in a coffin with an old woman's mask strapped to my face," Holly said.

"Interesting…" George looked back into the chamber, where the limping, shambling figure seemed to be speeding up. "I wonder who this is…"

Kipps had thrown himself to a halt against the wall. "Yes, fascinating as the identity of the ghost is," he panted, "I'm more concerned about the fact it's angry, it's right behind us, and we've a booby-trapped staircase still to climb."

"You're right," Lockwood said. "Torches on. Single file. Fast as you can, but watch for the traps. Especially you, George." He drew his rapier. "I'll go last."

Kipps and George didn't need telling; they were already scurrying up the stairs. Holly hesitated, then obeyed. Only I held back.

"You too, Luce."

"You're going to do something stupid," I said. "I know you. I can tell."

He brushed hair from his eyes. "That makes two of us, then. What's your daft plan?"

"The usual. I was hoping to talk to it and calm it down. Yours?"

"Thought I'd slow it up by cutting off its legs."

I grinned at him. "We're so similar."

We pressed close together. The mannequin wasn't far away now; and it was certainly getting faster, its joints entirely free of their wax surround. You could see nubs of bone working at the hips and ankles. Toes protruded at the ends of lumpen feet. There was something pathetic about it. It rolled and stumbled like a seasick sailor, colliding with the arch as it passed through.

"Suppose you'd better go first," Lockwood said. "It won't be very calm in a minute, when it's trying to drag itself up the stairs. I'll give you twenty seconds." He flashed me his brightest smile. "No pressure."

"You spoil me." I took a deep breath, and listened anew to the lonely, empty voice that rattled, echoing, across the crypt. I quelled my fear, opened my mind in psychic welcome. "Who are you?" I asked. "What did Marissa do to you?" Then, when the figure didn't answer or slow its course: "We can help you. What's your name?"

I waited, giving it time to adjust. The dummy was in a pretty bad way. In places the wax surface glistened where it had been partially melted by the fire. Thin droplets ran down the torso, striping it, leaving it pitted and gouged. One side of the head had been staved in, either by the fall from the coffin or by the flares. You could see a jawbone inside the hole, a few teeth imbedded in the wax. Basically, it was a mess. And the ghost inside would be no better off, maddened by its physical prison and by its unknown resentments. I reached out to it, offering what I could, which was pity and understanding.

"We can help you…" I said again.

The broken thing shuffled nearer. The eye hollows were filled with pooling wax.

"We can avenge you. We are enemies of Marissa."

"*Marissa*…"

"Last chance, Luce." Lockwood, at my side, held his rapier ready. "I think you're being way too subtle. It doesn't understand. Move away."

"I've got to try. It's so desolate…"

The stiff arms and wax fingers were outstretched, as in an attitude of love.

"Move away, Luce!"

"*Marissa*…"

"Just one more sec— Ow!"

Lockwood barged me aside, just as the shape lunged forwards with a crack of bones and wax. It moved with sudden swiftness; Lockwood had no time to direct his rapier at the legs. The blade struck the centre of the torso, plunging in deep, where it was instantly wedged fast in stiff, thick wax. The rapier was torn from Lockwood's hands. Cold air crashed around us, numbing our senses. Flaking wax fingers grappled for my throat. I cried out, tried to pull free. Then Lockwood was with me, grasping one stiff arm, avoiding the swipe of another, wrenching the fingers loose. He kicked out at the figure, sending it crashing back against the wall, the sword still embedded in its chest. Great gobbets of wax fell away. I caught a flash of ribs and spine.

"Go, Luce!" Lockwood grabbed me by the hand and hauled me up the steps. As we

ran, he snatched his torch from his belt, directed the beam up the stairs. "*That* was no good," he gasped. "You and your ghost-talking. You almost got yourself killed!"

"Well, you were going to cut off its legs! How did that part go?"

"I lost my best rapier was how it went. Apart from that it was a wild success."

"Maybe we bought ourselves some time." I glanced over my shoulder. "Oh. No… No, we didn't."

Behind us there was a clacking on the stone. The thing was on all fours now, elbows out, throwing itself up the steps like a rabid dog. Wax dropped from it like sloughing skin. Where the bone showed through, you could see the gleam of ectoplasm.

"Doesn't matter," Lockwood said. "It's quick, but we're quicker. We can still outrun it, as long as there's no hitches up ahead… Oh, hell," he said. "*Now* what?"

Because our bouncing torchlight had picked out Kipps, Holly and George, stumbling back down.

"What are you *doing*?" I shouted. "Turn round! It's right behind us!"

"There's one up ahead too," Holly cried.

"What? How?"

"George triggered the wire. Stepped right on it. A stone moved – a ghost came out."

"*Another* ghost? George!"

"Sorry. I was thinking about something else."

"We're running for our lives up a haunted stairway and you're thinking about *something else*?" Kipps roared. "How can that be possible?"

"Where's this new ghost?" Lockwood pushed past the others. "Come on, we've got to go up. Going back is not an option."

It didn't take long to reach the step with the tripwire. Above it, a hollow stone hung open in the wall. A faint figure was hovering above the stairs a few feet further on. It had the faint form of an old woman. She had a knee-length skirt, a shirt and jacket, long grey hair, and an unpleasantly smiling face. Everything about her was grey, except for her black and glittering eyes.

Lockwood shook his head. "A little old lady? Terrifying. You've got rapiers, haven't you? Why aren't you using them?"

George gestured at the edge of the steps, at the dark void beyond. "We tried…The thing raises some kind of wind – nearly blew us over the side."

Lockwood cursed. "What are we, Bunchurch and Co? Give me that sword." He snatched the rapier from George's hands and leapt over the tripwire. The ghost's hair came to sudden life, flaring out about its head: cold air swept down the steps, pitching Lockwood sideways; he scrabbled desperately, and just avoided careering off the edge into the shaft. Battling the gust, he fought his way back towards the wall.

A lazy green light flared at my shoulder. I sensed the skull's presence return. "*So*," its voice said casually. "*How's it going?*"

"How does it *look* like it's going?" I said. Lockwood was edging towards the ghost, leaning into the spectral wind.

"*Let's see… I've only been gone five minutes, and you've managed to trigger two ghosts and get sandwiched between them on the edge of a crevasse. By any standards that's poor. I suppose you'll be wanting a clever solution to your problem.*"

I looked back down the steps. Round the curve of the wall came the glow of other-light, the shadow of a crawling figure with a rapier through its chest.

"Well, if you've got any suggestions…" I said lightly.

"*Always. But I want an answer. When are you going to let me out?*"

"Now is not the time to discuss this."

"*It's the perfect time*."

"Never on a case. I told you. We'll talk at home."

"*Ah, but you never talk to me at home. You ignore me. I get stuffed in a corner with all the salt and iron and the rest of the equipment. Well, maybe* I *should ignore you now*."

"We'll discuss it, I promise! Tomorrow! Now, about that advice…" The Revenant on the steps was clawing close. The wax on the fingers had fallen away; I could hear the clack, clack, clack of bones as it clutched the stone. Above us, Lockwood was swiping at the second ghost, its white shape veering and distorting to avoid his blade.

"*It's so simple as to be embarrassing. I hardly like to mention it. The spirit behind us carries its Source with it: you can see the bones. But what about the spirit up ahead? Where's* its *Source?*"

I scowled round me. "Well how do *I* know where—?" But even as I said this, I saw the hollow stone hanging open above the stairs, the dark recess behind it. I gripped my torch between my teeth. Launching myself close, I clambered up the stones and peered inside. There was a tiny cavity, lined with beaten silver. Sitting in it was a set of dentures, the plastic gums glinting pinkly in the torchlight.

"False teeth? Who has false teeth for a Source?"

"*Who cares? Get rid of them.*"

I was already clutching at the horrid things, wincing at their glassy smoothness and icy cold. Without pause I jumped back to the steps and hurled them out into the void. They disappeared into the dark, falling without a sound. At once the Spectre of the old woman was dragged abruptly sideways, distorting round the middle as if a rope were slicing through it. It held firm only for a moment, black eyes blazing – then it was gone, sucked down into the hole, following its Source. Lockwood was left swinging his sword against nothing; the spectral wind died. We were alone on the stair.

Apart from the ghost rearing up on the steps below us. Lockwood's rapier was still wedged into its chest. On the arms and legs the wax had entirely gone. In our swirl of desperate torchlight, the Visitor was revealed as a mess of jangling bones, held together by strings of plasm. The fingers were bony now – with the wax gone, they would deliver fatal ghost-touch. The head of wax and teeth grinned up at us.

It lunged: George shouted, Kipps screamed. Holly was there: she swiped sideways with her sword. The tip cut into the neck, lopping through it in a swift, clean movement. The head hung in place, then fell against the wall and bounced away down the stairs.

We paused, willing the rest of the body to follow it. Instead, it remained standing. A ghostly head, faint and cobwebby, was superimposed where the skull had been. It was a man, I thought, with a long, lined face and wild hair.

"It's not *still* coming?" George groaned. "Give me a break!"

But we were already scrambling away from it, up the stairs. George was at our head, and I was at the back, the rucksack bouncing against my shoulders.

"*Remember!*" the skull's voice said in my ear. "*Tomorrow! You promised!*"

"If I *see* tomorrow…"

Up ahead, the trapdoor to the mausoleum showed as a cone of faint grey light. My legs felt like stones; it was all I could do to lift them.

"*Marissa….*" Close behind, the hollow voice was calling. "*Marissa….*"

"*It* really *wants to get to you*," the skull remarked. "*The plasm's breaking free. If you're not careful, it'll leave the bones behind entirely. Better speed up, Lucy.*"

"I'm trying!"

Something snagged at my rucksack, sought to pull me back down. I cried out, threw myself forwards, barging into Kipps. He was almost on top of Lockwood, who was shoving Holly and George ahead of him. For one awful moment, we were all of us stumbling, about to fall. Somehow, in a flurry of flapping elbows, we stayed on our feet. We leapt up the final flight, ghostly fingernails clicking on the steps behind.

Up into the Mausoleum's dim-lit space. We burst through, one by one; I was the last. I jumped through, turned, saw the white face swimming up at me, out of the dark.

Lockwood and Kipps already held the corners of the hinged flagstone. They were hauling it up. As I rolled aside, they practically threw it shut. It slammed into position. Lanterns flickered. The building sang with the noise.

Lockwood winced. "The guards…"

I hurled my rucksack away from me. It lay on the floor, steaming. Three jagged claw-marks scored the back.

We sat around the edge of the stone, wheezing and gasping like defective barrel organs.

"Made it," Holly breathed.
"Made it," Kipps said. "Thank God."

In its jar, poking from the top of the rucksack, the skull nodded amiably. "*Nice one. Shut that just in time…*" It left a significant pause. "*So the inside of that flagstone's lined with iron, is it? Lucky!*"

Right then I could barely speak. "No, no iron…"

"*Or silver, then?*"
"No…"
The skull chuckled. "*Of course – silly idea! Far too expensive. Must be* some *kind of barrier, though.*" It grinned at me. "*Or…*"
Or… *Oh*. "Lockwood…" I said.
I was already shuffling backwards. Threads of white-blue ice were spreading from the centre of the flagstone. As one, we retreated in all directions, bottoms bouncing, swords scraping on the ground. At the same time – it was as if we were pulling it on invisible strings – the ghost rose slowly through the stone. It had left its bones on the other side. First came the line and cobwebbed head, the bare teeth gleaming; next the skeletal neck, then a spiralling shroud of ghost fog. As it came, its other-light spread across the floor, fixing us where we crouched like bugs or beetles exposed by the lifting of a log.
Somewhere near me, Holly was trying to get her rapier clear of her belt (and failing: she was sitting on it). Lockwood, on his knees, had found a flare from somewhere. What was *I* doing? Continuing to retreat, because it seemed the ghost's attention was fixed entirely on me. So I shuffled ever back, and the ghost rose ever higher, its linen-covered arms held tight at its side.
"*Ee, he's a big one*," the skull said. It had a tone of mild scientific interest.
My back bumped up against the cold edge of the vault.
The shape quivered. At once, like a shark shooting forward with a twitch of the tail, it was above me.
The face of dirt and cobwebs lowered to my own. I smelt wax and grave mould, tasted the loneliness of existence underground. One emaciated arm stretched out, spectral fingers cupped toward me.
Someone was shouting, but I paid no attention to it. I listened to a harsh voice, calling from far away.
"*Marissa Fittes…*"
"Yes!" I croaked. "What about her?"
Behind the ghost, Lockwood stepped into view. He had a flare ready in his hand.
"Lucy!" he called. "Roll out of the way!"
"Wait."
Still I stared into dirt and cobwebs…
"Lucy! Move!"
"*Marissa…*" the ghost said. "*Bring her to me!*"
At once, the figure blinked out of existence, vanishing as if it had never been. A great pressure left the chamber; I jerked forwards, my hair swinging back against my face. In the same moment all the remaining lanterns went out, and we were plunged into solid darkness.
Someone shone a torch across the room. Flakes of dust were floating down around me. Cobwebs lay scattered across my knees.
"Lucy?" Lockwood was bending at my side.
"I'm all right."
"What did it do to you?"
"Nothing. Lockwood…" I didn't quite know how to put this. "Have we ever had a ghost client before?"
He stared at me. "Of course not. Why?"
I let my head fall back against the stone. "Because I think we've just been given a job."

II.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci

4.

Thirty-five Portland Row, the home and headquarters of Lockwood & Co., was a very special place. Whenever the old black front door shut behind me, and I saw the welcoming glint of the Aztec crystal skull-lantern on the key table, the weight of the world was lifted from me like a conjurer snapping a cloak up into the air. I'd toss my rapier into the umbrella stand, hang my jacket on the peg, and walk up the hall past the shelves with their odd collection of pots and masks and painted gourds. If it was daytime I'd peep into the living room to see if anyone was resting or working there; by night I'd check the library, which was where we tended to crash after a case. If all was quiet, I'd stroll past the staircase to the kitchen, where the lingering smells of toast (Lockwood) or teacake (George and Kipps) gave clues to who might be home. Occasionally, if the tin of dried green tea had been opened, or one or two sunflower seeds lay scattered on the worktop, I knew Holly was around and probably working in the office. You couldn't always tell, though; she was the tidiest of us, and rarely left such clues. Most rare of all, an odour of stale kippers and traces of dried river-mud kicked off by the back-door gave certain proof that Flo Bones had recently called by.

The house was our sanctuary, a refuge from ghosts and other, darker things. And the happiest times of all were the breakfasts we enjoyed after a case, with the blinds open on the garden, and the sunlight streaming in.

On such an occasion, the morning after our visit to the Fittes Mausoleum, Lockwood, George and I were sitting at the kitchen table. Holly had gone out to Arif's stores to fetch further supplies; the surface of the table was littered with open jam jars, egg cups, butter dishes and toast crumbs, but we were all still hungry. At one end of the table, the ghost-jar was striped by sunlight coming through the blinds. We all had mugs of tea. George, who had eaten well, was sat in his chair with a hideous wooden mask propped in his lap. He was using a damp tea towel to wipe the dust from it. Lockwood had a pen and was doodling on a corner of the Thinking Cloth, while simultaneously glancing at a newspaper leaned against the ghost-jar. In the jar itself the ghost was dormant; the plasm stirred lazily in the late morning sun, like green water in a deep and weedy pool.

I sat quietly next to Lockwood, enjoying the companionable silence. My muscles ached, my head was clothy. Lockwood had a scrape to the left temple, and the lenses of George's spectacles were soft with grave-dust. Our exertions hung heavy on us. But we had not yet spoken of the night before.

"Lots of news this morning," Lockwood said, indicating the paper.

I opened an eye. "Good?"

"No."

"Bad?"

"Baddish *and* bad. Two things, and neither particularly great for us."

"Let's have the baddish one first," George said. "I prefer my misery to come at me in stages, so I can acclimatise on the way."

Lockwood reached out for his mug of tea. "The baddish one is just the usual. Dullop and Tweed this time. They've agreed terms with the Fittes Agency. Old Mr Dullop is retiring, and the company's being absorbed into Fittes, effective immediately."

"What does Tweed have to say about it?" I asked.

"Nothing. He got killed by a Solitary years ago."

I frowned. "Another small agency swallowed up…" I looked towards the window, where bright blue sky shone above the houses at the bottom of the garden. "There aren't many of us left."

"Adam Bunchurch is still holding out," George said. He was dabbing at the teeth of

the wooden mask. “Did you hear about last week? They gave him quite a decent offer to close down, but he went berserk and threw the Fittes guy out on his ear.”

“Didn’t think he had it in him.” Lockwood sat back in the chair and gave a tentative stretch. “Not sure he’ll last long with open rebellion like that. Ahh… my back is *killing* me this morning. I blame your skull, Lucy.”

“He’s not *my* skull. I just talk to him. You mentioned some bad news.”

“Oh. Yes. Guess what? They’ve let Winkman out.”

George lowered the tea towel in shock. I opened my eyes wide. “*Julius* Winkman?” I said. “I thought he got ten years.”

“He did!” George cried. “For selling illegal psychic relics! And incitement to violence! And desecration of burial sites! He’s only been in 2 years! Where’s the justice in that?”

This was George all over. True, justice *was* important, but it wasn’t what *I* was worrying about. It was our testimony that had put Julius Winkman away. And Winkman was a vindictive man.

“Out early for ‘good behaviour’, allegedly,” Lockwood said. He flicked the paper with a fingernail. “Says here he was met outside the prison by Adelaide, his wife, and Leopold, his darling little son. Then he drove away, swearing to turn over a new leaf and never be a naughty black-marketeer again.”

“He’ll be after us,” George said. “He wants us dead.”

Lockwood grunted. “Him and all the rest. Maybe he’ll lie low.”

George turned the mask over dubiously. “Doubt it.”

We all fell silent for a time. But it was a clear, bright morning, and our fierce satisfaction from the night before still lingered, burning away our doubts and fears. “What’s that you’ve drawn, Lockwood?” I asked, eying the Thinking Cloth. “Looks like a piece of angry broccoli.”

“What? Are you insulting my excellent sketch of a wild-haired ghost?” Lockwood threw his pen down. “I suppose drawing’s not my strong suit. I was trying to capture the face of that Revenant. I got a good look at the end, when it broke clear of the bones. Thought George might figure out who it was, if he has a visual aid to help him.”

“If he uses *that*, he’ll end up doing his research in the greengrocer’s.” When I shut my eyes, I could see the ghost’s livid form hovering over me. “It was a man in late middle-age,” I said, “with a very lined, lived-in face. Long grey hair. That’s all *I* can remember – it was his words that struck me more. You off to the Archives again, George?”

“In a bit. We’ve got a client coming in an hour.” George set the wooden mask on the table between the butter dish and the Corn Flakes. It was clean now and brightly coloured; exotic feathers plumed from its top like frozen smoke. “What do you think of this baby?” he said. “Polynesian shaman’s mask. Got it from Jessica’s room.” He glanced across at Lockwood. “I opened a new crate yesterday. Hope that’s okay.”

Lockwood nodded. “Fine. Anything else good so far?”

“Maybe. Some things I want to show you, actually, after our second breakfast.”

I was gazing at the shaman’s mask, at its beetling brows and ferociously snarling mouth. “Think this has any power?”

“Might be worth you taking a look later, Lucy. I think there’s some psychic energy in it, but I’m not as sensitive as you.”

“Sure.” I took a breath. “Lockwood, George,” I said. “What are we going to *do?*”

They both knew what I meant, of course. Our visit to the mausoleum was telling on us all that morning. It comes to something when being chased up a staircase by a disintegrating Revenant isn’t the most memorable thing about a job, but that was certainly the case here. The missing occupant of the tomb preyed on our minds.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lockwood said, “and I believe all we can do is go on as before. We keep our discovery to ourselves. It’s too dangerous to make public yet. We keep our noses clean, do ordinary cases, stay out of trouble. Meanwhile we follow all lines of

enquiry. In particular, George carries on researching the history of Marissa, Penelope and the Problem."

George nodded. "The three are intimately linked, I can feel it. And regarding our waxy friend from last night, I'll look at some newspapers from Marissa's last years while I'm at the Archives. It's just possible I'll get wind of an associate of hers who disappeared around that time. The ghost definitely knew her, you think, Luce?"

"It knew her," I said, "and it was very resentful."

"Someone close to her, then. Someone betrayed and murdered."

"To be honest," Lockwood said, picking up his mug again and frowning at the cold tea inside it, "that ghost is just a side-show. Our priority is to find out what happened to the woman who's supposed to be in that tomb. Who's supposed to have died twenty years ago. Lucy, try to get some sense from that stupid skull. We're following its lead, after all. I still feel it's the key to all this."

"*Someone mention me?*" A ripple ran through the murky depths of the jar. The ghost's face materialised beyond the glass. Never exactly pleasant, today it seemed more than usually repulsive, like a damp corpse that had been stepped on.

I glared at it. "Can't you look less foul for once? You're making the milk go sour."

"*So I'm a bit the worse for wear*," the skull said. "*I was up all night, wasn't I? As were all of you. You look knackered, Lockwood's black and blue, and Cubbins has some vile disease that leaves yellow blotches on his chin.*"

"George has recently been eating egg," I said. "But none of that's important. You and I need to discuss Marissa."

The eyes narrowed. "*Wrong. We need to discuss my freedom. We had a deal*."

I hesitated. "Not here," I said at last. "Not now. I'll talk with you later."

"*Later? What's that mean? Six weeks? A year? I know your feminine wiles.*"

"Oh, God. In a few minutes."

The face scowled. "*Sure, I've heard* that *before. Meantime there'll be some new crisis that distracts you, and I'll still be stuck here, tapping my fingers in this glassy prison.*"

"You don't have fingers," I growled, "and I don't believe time is of much relevance to you, being dead. And anyway, nothing's going to come up to distract me in the next few minutes. So stop complaining!" I looked up. "Hey, Holly."

There had been sounds in the hall. Holly Munro appeared at the door, carrying her cotton shopping bag. She surveyed us briefly, running a hand through her long black hair.

"Get the doughnuts, Hol?" George asked.

"I got them." Her voice sounded odd. She passed us, and began to set the groceries out on the sideboard. She moved swiftly, forcefully, clattering everything down. Her face was set, her lips pressed tight together.

"You all right, Holly?" I said.

"Not really." She crumpled the bag on the counter and took a glass from the drainer. "I met Sir Rupert Gale out there. He was waiting for me by the store."

At once we all focused on her. Sir Rupert was an associate of Penelope Fittes, a master swordsman and a dangerous man. He was a fixer, someone who got his hands dirty on her behalf, and he was known to put pressure on her opponents. He had crossed paths with us before.

"*Here we go*," the skull said. "*Cue crisis*."

I shut the lever on top of the jar. "What was he doing there, Hol?" I asked.

"He was waiting for me." Holly filled the glass from the tap and took a long drink, as if to wash away an unpleasant taste. "Eurgh! He is *so* foul!"

Lockwood was very still in his chair. "Did he threaten you?"

"Not in so many words, but the implication was there. You know what he's like. Stands too close to you, all pink and smiling, with too-strong after-shave. He was just checking up we weren't 'over-stretching' ourselves – that's what he called it. 'Keeping to safe projects' and 'simple hauntings'. Not investigating Penelope, in other words."

"Oh, we're being *very* good, of course," Lockwood said. "What else did he say?"

"It was all a coded warning. How if we took on anything too 'difficult', it would end badly for us. 'We wouldn't want anything unpleasant to happen to our favourite little agency.' Gah!" She set the glass down by the sink. "Oh, and he wanted to know where we were last night."

Lockwood and I exchanged glances. "What time last night?"

"After midnight. He says he has information we weren't in."

"They're spying on us again," I said. "What did you say?"

"I said I didn't know, that I'd already gone home," Holly said. "He caught me by surprise, I'm afraid."

"That's all right," Lockwood said easily. "We've got our story ready, remember? We'll say we were in Kentish Town, dealing with a couple of really boring Stone-knockers. George can forge the paperwork."

"Already done," George said. "Holly, you look upset. Crack those doughnuts open."

"Thanks, I'll have an apple."

George shook his head sadly. "You've got to learn that when you're stressed, an apple doesn't cut it… I feel quite shaken myself, come to think of it." His eyes flitted to the sideboard.

"Yes, grab the plates, George," Lockwood said. "We'll all have one."

And we all did, even Holly. George was wise in such matters: a doughnut was a good corrective and almost made the world seem right again. Almost, but not entirely. Because the world *wasn't* right. And Holly's little encounter wasn't an unusual one at all.

Traditionally, the activities of all psychic detection agencies were overseen by the Department of Psychical Research and Control, or DEPRAC, which operated out of Scotland Yard in central London. DEPRAC had the power to punish misbehaviour and ensure high professional standards. Sometimes fines were levied and, in rare cases, companies shut down. But generally the department concentrated more on researching the Problem than bothering agents in the field.

Since Penelope Fittes had taken command of the Rotwell agency, however, things had begun to change. Ms Fittes now controlled three-quarters of all agency activity in London, and she had at once set about bringing the rest to heel. Fittes personnel began to occupy many senior posts at Scotland Yard. New rules came into force. Henceforth, independent detection agencies, with their limited resources, had to confine their efforts to small-scale hauntings. Not only that, they had to submit to regular DEPRAC inspections to ensure they were acting professionally. Any firm in breach of these rules would be immediately closed down.

As the smallest agency of all, Lockwood & Co. found itself the centre of official attention. We were stopped in the street and asked to show papers to prove what jobs we were on. And we were *followed* too, as we went about our work. There weren't spies standing outside our doorway all the time. Instead, we were forever looking over our shoulders and finding nothing – until, one day, with grim inevitability, there *would be* a smirking boy trailing us to Marylebone Tube, or a man in a trilby standing outside Arif's Stores, brazenly watching as we trooped by. Sometimes several such incidents happened in a week; other times a fortnight would go by with nothing. The casualness was part of the intention. It reminded you that they thought you *almost* worth ignoring. Almost, but not quite.

In all this we sensed the hand of Penelope Fittes. She wanted to keep close tabs on us. Still, it was Lockwood & Co. she was dealing with. We weren't easily cowed.

When the random DEPRAC house-calls happened, for instance, the scene they found at 35 Portland Row would be as follows. George would be at the sink in the basement trying to scrub ectoplasm out of his jeans. Lockwood would be in his dressing-gown, hair ruffled, palely sipping a cup of tea and making notes on the Visitors disposed of the night before. Holly and I might be slowly sorting through a mess of kit, or stacking Sources ready for transport to the Furnaces. In short, it was a picture of weariness and discipline;

of a tiny agency functioning successfully, but at full stretch. The representatives would ask to look at our casebook, take copies of our recent invoices, ghost-records, and client reviews and, after accepting tea and biscuits, and a boatload of Lockwood's tousled charm, head on their way.

Once they'd gone, we'd shut the door, lock it, and get on with the things we were *really* doing. Outwardly, we kept up a façade of ordinary, small-scale cases. Beyond that, we had an agenda of our own. This double life had its challenges, and each of my colleagues coped with it in their own way.

Holly Munro met it as she did all obstacles, with brisk efficiency that looked a problem in the eye and didn't blink. Whether it was breaking into the Fittes mausoleum, or standing up to interrogation in the street, she always maintained her trademark Munro cool. It was hard to imagine her ever losing this quality, and somehow that made me confident, despite everything, that nothing really dreadful could or would happen in this world. Her unflappable demeanour used to make me seethe, yet now I found it a source of reassurance. Come what may, I knew Holly's hair would swish like gossamer as she walked; her clothes would flow effortlessly round her curves; her skin would glow with that same coffee-coloured lustre that spoke of close association with mineral water and green-bean salads, and contrasted, reprovingly, with my famous burger-and-biscuit complexion. No, Holly would always be the same, and that made me happy.

George's steeliness was of a different sort. To strangers, it might have seemed that he had none. He was too soft, too scruffy, too dishevelled. If he'd ever knowingly shared a room with a hairbrush, there was precious little sign of it. His doughy, featureless face lacked signposts to a personality, let alone a strong opinion. Even those enemies who knew his fame as a researcher saw this quality as something negative. They thought him a passive absorber of information, a shuffler of papers; someone better wedged safely in a study chair than facing supernatural terrors in the field.

In this, as in everything, they were entirely wrong. George's researching prowess, his ability to tramp from library to library, spending endless dusty hours hunting for the smallest clue, was based on ferocious determination and an iron will. If he hunted for something, he found it; if he found something he clung on like a terrier and shook it until all the relevant facts fell out. He was remorseless. He took the epidemic of ghosts as a personal affront, and the more pressure the Fittes Agency exerted to stop us investigating it, the deeper George dug in. He would *not* be denied.

And then there was Lockwood. Lockwood, most of all.

He was the centre around which we revolved – all of us, even Kipps, who acted as an associate, rarely coming to Portland Row itself; even Flo Bones, the terror of the tide-line, one of the most outstanding relic-women of the city, at least in terms of smell. Mostly unnoticed among the ghost-filled streets of London, Kipps and Flo both went about quiet errands on our behalf – and they did so because Lockwood asked them to, and that was enough.

The secret to his pull, and of his resilience in the face of the Fittes Agency's spying and intimidation, was his combination of enormous energy and otherworldly calm. Few things fazed him; he remained coolly detached, absorbing pressure with a tilted eyebrow and a small, wry smile, before translating it into swift, sure action. Ghosts had always felt the brunt of his forcefulness; now he brought the same qualities to bear on his living enemies. In so doing he galvanised his friends, even as he kept us all at one remove.

Or perhaps not everyone.

Of all of us, he confided most in me. We'd always been close, but since my return to the company five months earlier, we'd become closer still. We spent more time with each other than ever before. We worked together, we laughed a lot. I felt comfortable in his presence, and he in mine; it was clear to both of us, I think, that we found greater peace and pleasure in each other than in anyone else. That was the good news.

The bad news? I wasn't quite sure *why*.

Our journey through the frozen land of the dead, shielded by a single spirit cape, had marked us both forever. No one else could properly imagine it. Memories of it disturbed both our nightly dreams. So overwhelming had this journey been that it cast a shadow over everything that came afterwards. And it was sometimes hard to know, while standing in that shadow, what was actually *caused* by it, and what by other things.

So: the way Lockwood gazed at me, the flashes of vulnerability in his eyes, the looks we shared, quietly, when the others' backs were turned – on what, exactly, was that intimacy based? On us, pure and simple? On who we *were*? Or on the aftershocks of one overwhelming event, on the *experience* we'd shared?

It made a difference.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad we had it. I'd just have liked a bit of clarity, that's all.

Why did I care? Why was Lockwood so important to me? It didn't help that, being Lockwood, he never talked about these emotions much. It didn't help that, being me, I never saw an easy way to broach the subject either. And it certainly didn't help that we were always so busy, dealing with ghosts, with DEPRAC, with the ongoing mystery of the Problem.

And also with clients who came knocking on our doors half an hour before their scheduled appointments, bringing fresh terror into our lives.

5.

We'd only just finished eating our doughnuts when the bell rang on the path outside. The echoes died away.

Lockwood frowned. "They're hellishly early. Are we ready for them?"

"Cake's on the coffee table," Holly said. "But the living room is a tip, as usual." She got up, made for the door. "George, get the kettle on again, please. Lockwood, Lucy – you've got thirty seconds to make everything presentable."

We were well practised at this; thirty seconds later, cushions had been plumped, salt bombs put in cupboards, and the living room window opened to admit the sunny air of early autumn. In the kitchen George was making appropriate sounds with crockery. Lockwood and I stood waiting by the coffee table as our visitors came in.

They certainly made an immediate impression. The elder of the two was a short, stout person in a startling yellow-checked jacket, not overly new, with leather patches on the elbows. He wore a grey waistcoat, pushed out to bursting by his protuberant belly, and a checked white shirt, behind the open V of which grey-white chest-hairs played and spilled like summer brambles. His cord trousers were a vigorous deep red. His face was also red; it suggested too close an acquaintance with the wine bottle. He had an impressive crop of very curly grey hair, wedged beneath a worn green felt hat; a snub nose; a wide, elastic mouth, and a pair of small, bright eyes that seldom stopped moving and never properly met your gaze.

Beside him was a thin youth of scrawny, malnourished appearance. He wore old jeans and a baggy jersey that emphasised rather than concealed his lack of width. His nose was large and rather hooked, and beneath a shock of unruly black hair, his skin had an alarming bone-white pallor. His face was utterly expressionless. In contrast to his companion, he stared out straight ahead. He didn't seem to focus on the room at all.

"This is Mr Lewis Tufnell," Holly said. "Mr Tufnell and…" She looked at the boy.

"And Charley Budd," Mr Tufnell said. "Come along, Charley."

Mr Lewis Tufnell loped to meet us, with much gregarious nodding and winking and touching of his hat; as one in a trance, the boy shuffled at his side. They were an odd-looking pair, but it was only when they were halfway across that I noticed what was amiss.

The man was holding the lad on a chain.

As chains went, it was discreet and clean, with lots of neat, bright links, but that wasn't the issue. It was a *chain*. It ended in a loop of rope tied fast round the boy's wrists.

I glanced at Lockwood to see if he had noticed too. One look told me that he had. He wasn't alone. George, coming in with the tea things, had halted, open-mouthed. Holly, following on behind the visitors, was gesticulating furiously at us behind their backs.

Our clients reached the coffee table. Without waiting for an invitation, Mr Tufnell settled himself into the sofa. At first the lad remained standing; by placing a hairy hand

on his shoulder and applying pressure, his companion encouraged him to sit. There was a gentle clinking of chains, then silence.

One after the other, we sat too.

Lockwood cleared his throat; he was still rather taken aback. “Er, good morning,” he began. “I’m Anthony Lockwood. Now, Mr Tufnell—”

“Call me Lew!” the gentleman interrupted, with a flourish of his worn green hat. “Plain Lew Tufnell! That’s how I like it. No airs and graces about *me*, I hope. Proprietor of Tufnell’s Theatre, not to mention Tufnell’s Marvels and Tufnell’s Travelling Fairground of Astonishment and Delight. More to the point, I’m also a man at his wit’s end, for my establishment is cursed by an evil spirit that threatens me with ruin.” He gave an extravagant sigh, then noticed Holly’s seed cake on the table. “Ooh. Is that little morsel for me? Smashing!”

“Well, we were *kind* of hoping to share it out between us,” George said.

Lockwood raised his hand. “Before we deal with cake *or* curse,” he said, “there’s one thing we need to discuss…” He paused significantly, hoping the visitor would get the hint. “Well,” he said finally, “we can’t help noticing the chain...”

Mr Tufnell gave a little start as of mild surprise; a weak and liquid smile sloshed across his face. “What, this chain here? *This* chain? Oh, *that’s* just for Charley Budd’s own safety. Don’t go worrying on your own account.”

Lockwood frowned. “I’m not. But—”

“He won’t hurt *you*, not poor Charley.” With his free hand, Mr Tufnell ruffled the lad’s hair. “Only, he isn’t so particular about himself, if you take my meaning. See that cake knife there? If I weren’t vigilant, he’d be on it in a trice. Bury it in his own heart, he would, and spoil your lovely carpet.”

We looked at the carpet, and then at the cake knife, and then at the boy, who sat quietly in a world of his own.

“He’d stab himself?” I said.

“Assuredly.”

Holly had perched herself on the arm of George’s chair. She said, “Surely, Mr Tufnell, if he’s… if he’s ill, he should be in hospital. He needs doctors who—”

“Doctors can’t help him, Miss.” Lew Tufnell shook his grey head sadly. “Doctors? Medics? Pah! I’d like to see *them* try. They’d drug him and truss him up and what have you, and all the while his life would drain away regardless, till in a day or two he was just another corpse what’s spirit’s gone a-roving. Waste of time, *doctors*. No, Miss. We need you. That’s why we’re here.”

There was a silence. In the kitchen we could hear the kettle boiling. “I’m sorry,” Lockwood began. “I don’t understand, and I’m not sure what we can do to help this boy. Now, if you say there’s an evil spirit in your establishment—”

“It was the ghost what done this to Charley,” Mr Tufnell said.

We gazed at the lad again; at his stillness, his passivity, his unseeing eyes.

“Ghost-touched, you mean?” George asked.

“Not touched *physically*,” Mr Tufnell said, “though it was a close-run thing. But his heart’s snared. She’s pulling his spirit out of him, making him weaker. I give him another night, maybe two, then he’ll cross over after her.” Just for a moment the man’s eyes stopped their furtive wandering; he gazed directly at Lockwood. “If you can destroy her, maybe it’ll break the link. Maybe he’ll come back. I dunno.”

Lockwood crossed his long legs in a resigned, business-like way. He still wasn’t happy about the chain, but had come to a decision. “You’d better tell us about it.” he said.

I got to my feet. “I think first we should all have some tea.”

“And *I* think,” George said, springing to my side, “I should bury this cake knife where it belongs.”

“That’ll be splendid,” Mr Tufnell said. “I love cake. Nothing for Charley Budd, though. He don’t eat no more.”

I went to the kitchen, did the honours with kettle and teapot. George took care of the seed cake, casting concerned looks at our visitor's healthy midriff as he did so. As he waited, Mr Tufnell's gaze flitted ceaselessly between us all. I noticed it lingered longest on me and Holly.

"Well," he remarked, as I handed him his cup, "you're a bright little shower, and no mistake. Scrubbed and shiny and pleasing on the eye. I could find jobs for one or two of you in my shows, if this agency lark doesn't work out." He smiled his washy, ingratiating smile, displaying an array of teeth like broken biscuits. "Couple of little dresses, a few sequins, twinkly tassels in appropriate places… You'd fit right in."

"That's nice to know," Lockwood said. "George will bear it in mind. Now, how can we help you in our present capacity as professional psychic investigation agents?"

"Tell us about this evil spirit." Holly spoke crisply; she turned a page of her note pad and held her biro ready. "What it is, how it appears – and how it's affected this poor boy."

Mr Tufnell balanced his plate of seed cake on one worn knee. "It's not just Charley who's been affected. There's been a death, too. The theatre and fairground ain't a safe place for young lads no more, thanks to *her*." He took an enormous mouthful and chewed mournfully. "I'll be brief. I'm a busy man; I can't sit around all day munching cake, even if you can. Well, the background's quickly told. You'll have heard of Tufnell's Travelling Fairground, no doubt. Been in the family a hundred years. My old dad now, Frank Tufnell, he used to take it up and down the country, but what with the Problem, travel's not so easy now. So, the last twenty years, we've taken root in Stratford, East London. There's an old theatre on the site – the Palace Theatre, it's called, been there a couple of hundred years itself, they say – and we use it for magic shows and circus entertainments, as well as housing Tufnell's Marvels. The fair's set up permanently around it. A tenner gets you entry for the whole shebang, and for that, my friends, you have a feast of wonderment that never ceases or runs dry. Plus a free hot-dog for kids on Sundays. Now *that's* what I call value."

Lockwood had been gazing out of the window. "Indeed. You mentioned something about a ghost."

"I did. It walks the theatre corridors by night in the guise of a cloaked woman, fair of shape and radiant, yet with an evil heart." Mr Tufnell heaved a great shuddering sigh. "One of my lads she's done away with," he said, "and Charley Budd won't linger long. Whatever young man she meets, never lives to speak of it. They call her—" He leaned forwards suddenly, his voice descending to unguessed-at depths. "They call her… *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*."

The echoes of his whisper died away, and all at once the chained boy at his side, little white-faced Charley Budd, who had hitherto been as one carved from stone, uttered a long, low moan. There was something so quavering and frightful about the sound that I felt the hairs rise on my arms.

Mr Tufnell tightened his grip on the chain, but the boy did not move again.

We sat a moment in silence.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci…" Holly breathed. "'The Beautiful Lady Without Mercy'…" They call the ghost that?"

"They do."

"On account of its deadly feminine allure?"

"No. Because it's her name. We know who the apparition is, see? Didn't I mention it? La Belle Dame Sans Merci. She was an actress, of a kind, at the turn of the last century. Great star in her day, and a wicked and beautiful woman she was. Now it seems she's left the grave and is walking again. Here, take a gander." From an inner pocket of his jacket he drew, much creased and greasy-looking, a large and yellowed piece of paper. It was folded, but evidently of some age. He passed it across the table in a covert motion. "For Gawd's sake, don't let Charley Budd see that," he said.

Lockwood took the paper and opened it. I leaned in close. George and Holly left their seats and came round the coffee table to look over our shoulders. We regarded the paper.

It was a theatrical flyer, printed in black, white and gold. It showed an illustration of a blonde woman posing languorously amongst rolling clouds of golden smoke. She wore a glamorous outfit that was hard to describe, partly because there was so little of it. It had a faintly eastern feel. It was all plunging necklines, cunningly positioned slashes, and

tightly fitting curves. It looked both impractical and chilly. The woman's long slim arms were festooned with bracelets; she had a tiara on her head and her fair hair billowed behind her, merging into the smoke. Her eyes were half-closed, and entirely hidden behind enormous black lashes. She had her head thrown back, and her lips parted in a way that was either enticing or half-witted, or both. Beside her, written in eerie letters in the smoke, were the following words:

La Belle Dame Sans Merci
Mistress of Illusion
in
The Sultan's Revenge

At the bottom of the flyer the name and address of the Palace Theatre were given, along with a date of more than seventy years previously.

Mr Tufnell had taken the opportunity of helping himself to another slice of cake. "La Belle Dame. Legendary beauty, as you can see."

"Yup," said George.

"Looks a bit over-ripe to me," Holly said. "Wouldn't you say, Lucy?"

"Definitely."

The impresario grunted. "She was a cruel woman in life, they say. Her looks gave her power over all who saw her, and that's the power her ghost has too."

Lockwood was frowning at the paper. "And she's the one haunting you… How can you be sure, Mr Tufnell? How do you *know* it's her?"

"Because La Belle Dame met her gruesome end on stage in that very theatre. She was an escapologist, see? People came from all over London to see her perform marvellous illusions in which she narrowly avoided death. Her most famous stunt was that very one you see there: the Sultan's Revenge. She was shut in an upright casket like a coffin, which was hung about with chains. Men then impaled it with swords, with her screaming from inside. Of course, it was all fake. Really, she'd dropped through a trapdoor in the base of the box, escaped under the stage and was ready pop back up when the swords were withdrawn. Easy. Until the night it all went horribly wrong…"

Mr Tufnell paused and swallowed. He had spoken with passion and dramatic eloquence; also with his mouth full. The gentle rain of cake crumbs that had accompanied his account now stopped pattering on the coffee table. "Some say it was sabotage," he whispered, "the vengeful act of one of her scorned admirers; others that the lad charged with flipping the lever had downed a skinful and simply forgot his cue. Either way, La Belle Dame did not drop through the floor. She was still in the box when the swords were driven in. The shrieks on stage that night were real."

"A nasty way to go," I said. "Nasty for the audience too."

"To begin with," Mr Tufnell said, "no one in the theatre understood what had happened: they thought the torrent of blood was part of the act. But it just went on and on…" He took a sip of tea. "I hope I'm not distressing you."

Lockwood was eying the damp crumbs on the table. "Only a little. Right, fine. That's the story of how she died. Tell us about the ghost."

Our client nodded. "We do an afternoon matinee performance in the theatre. No evening event, naturally; everyone's out before the sun goes down. It's an old-school circus variety show – trapeze artistes, jugglers, clowns and acrobats on the stage. Most are adults, but I've got kids who clean up after the show. A couple of them came to me reporting that they'd seen a woman walking at the back of the theatre, as they swept the stage. Late afternoon, that was. They'd thought she was a punter, strayed in somehow, but when they went to find her, she'd gone. Few days later, another kid was walking past the main dressing room, just before lock-up. Out of the corner of her eye she saw someone in a black dress standing there. When she stepped back, the room was empty."

"All a bit ominous," Lockwood said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. We weren't *in* the building after dark, were we? This was in daylight. I thought we'd be safe enough… until what happened to Charley and poor Roy Morrison." Mr Tufnell sighed with feeling; he ran his hand through his nest of curls.

"What happened to Charley, Mr Tufnell?"

"It was late afternoon, three days ago," our client said. "The ghost-lights were just coming on outside. Sarah Parkins, our stage manager, had forgotten her coat; she went back in to get it, and saw Charley Budd walking down a corridor, all smiling and blank-

eyed, like he was in a trance. She looked, saw something with a woman's shape beckoning to him from the end of the passage. Says it was all dark around the shape, though the lights were on everywhere else. He was walking straight towards it." Mr Tufnell looked at us. "Well, Sarah didn't waste time. She just upped and rugby-tackled Charley, brought him crashing to the floor. As she did so, she says the darkness at the end of the passage kind of flared, then went out, and all the lamps were on again. And Charley was still alive – but in the condition you see here."

"The stage manager was very brave," I said.

"Yes." Mr Tufnell nodded. "Sarah's a strapping lass like you. Not willowy and pliant like this young lady here." He flashed his broken teeth at Holly.

"Lucy and I can both handle ourselves very well," Holly said.

"So," Lockwood said, "it was a close shave for Charley. And now we get to poor Roy Morrison."

The impresario's shoulders dropped; he studied his hands. "Roy was our magician's apprentice. Late yesterday afternoon he was on-stage, setting up equipment for today's show. One of our girls, name of Tracey, was down in the auditorium, sweeping the floor. All at once she felt cold. She looked up and saw that Roy wasn't alone. There was a woman with him. The woman was sort of facing Tracey, but she couldn't make her out; it was like she stood in shadow, even though the lights of the theatre were on. As she watched, the woman glided back into the dark of the wings. She didn't walk or turn, but just sort of flowed backwards, Tracey said, and Roy walked after her. Not running, but not hesitating neither. He disappeared between the side curtains."

"Did Tracey call out or try to stop him?" I asked.

"She says she wanted to speak, but for some reason couldn't. As soon as Roy was gone, she found she could move again; she ran to the steps at the side of the stage and headed between the curtains. It ain't pretty, this next bit."

"Oh, *do* get on," Holly said. "Do you *know* how many ghosts we've dealt with? *Please*."

Mr Tufnell accepted the reprimand without complaint. His voice was soft, his earlier ebullience gone. "Tracey went into the wings, and there she saw the woman and Roy again. It was like they were embracing: at least, the woman had thin arms around him, and her face was in his neck. The horrible thing is that Roy's a big lad, but it was like he was all limp and boneless, and the woman was holding him up. And sure enough when she let go – her arms didn't loosen, but sort of passed in *through* Roy's body and were withdrawn that way – he just collapsed to the floor all shapeless like a pile of dirty rags. He was quite dead, and when Tracey turned him over he had a terrible smile on his white, cold face."

Lockwood tapped his fingers on his knee. "What about the ghost woman?"

"Vanished before poor Roy hit the floor."

"You've been slow coming to us. Too slow. When Charley had his narrow escape __"

"I know." Mr Tufnell inspected his hands like they had somehow disappointed him. "I know. It's just – if this got out… Who would come to see us? The show would fold."

"Better that than further deaths," Holly said, scowling.

"What sort of boy *is* Charley?" George asked, after a silence. "When he's himself, I mean."

"Quiet. Not what you'd call *healthy*. Has a lung condition that prevents him doing full work. Most people wouldn't give him house-room. Me, I'm generous. I keep him busy."

"Was Roy sickly too?"

"Not at all. Strapping. Prime of life. He was a prestidigitator."

A silence. Lockwood nodded. "Ah, yes. Was he? Interesting. Good for him."

"You don't know what that means, do you?"

"Not the foggiest clue."

"Means he was a conjurer, clever with his hands. Strictly speaking, he was only an apprentice, but he was hot stuff at the close-up work. Roy's specialities were card tricks, disappearing coins, that stuff. He'd go among the crowds, making eggs appear out of ladies' ears, ripping up £20 notes and pulling them whole from gents' sleeves. Smooth,

quick, plenty of nice patter. Lubricated the crowd, like. *That's* what he was good at – least he was until he fell in love with one of our Russian trapeze artists."

"Why, what was the problem there?"

"She didn't return the feelings. I tried to persuade her that it was in the best interests of the company, but she was having none of it. Roy was lovelorn. Spent weeks moping under the window of her caravan. Stopped sleeping. Stopped eating. He was wasting away. His skills suffered too; he broke the eggs, dropped coins, sent cards spinning every which way. Hopeless. I'd have fired him if he hadn't died."

"Well, he saved you a job there, anyway," Lockwood said. He tapped his fingers again. "This Russian trapeze artist. What's her name?"

"Carole Blears."

"She doesn't *sound* very Russian."

"White Russian on her maternal grandmother's side. Or so she says. *I* don't know. She's got thighs that can swing a grown man ten foot through the air, and that's good enough for me. Now, this here cake's gone down a treat, I can tell you. If no one else is going to join me, I'll happily take the last slice." Ignoring a croak of protest from George, Mr Tufnell did so. "So, can you help me?" he said. "This ghost's killing Charley here, not to mention giving me ulcers and scaring my punters away."

Lockwood was staring at the ceiling. "Mr Tufnell – how long has this trouble been going on?"

"The ghost or the ulcers?"

"The ghost."

"Two weeks, maybe three."

"I see. And who has actually witnessed the ghost, aside from Charley Budd here, Roy and the two women you mentioned?"

"Some of the usherettes, Vanessa the make-up artist; I think an ice-cream girl."

"And they all survived?"

"They live with the horror to this day. Vanessa's hair turned grey."

"So in other words, La Belle Dame's victims are all male?" Holly asked.

Mr Tufnell nodded. "Not one of them could resist her charms. In death as in life. You and Mr Cubbins would need to beware, Mr Lockwood."

Lockwood chuckled. "Oh, I think George and I could handle whatever La Belle Dame might throw at us. Wouldn't you say so, George? Very well, Mr Tufnell, we'll look into this for you. Give us twenty four hours to research the case. If you think that gives Charley enough time?"

Our visitor looked at the chained boy, motionless and blank-eyed at his side. "I would hope so, Mr Lockwood… But for pity's sake, don't delay too long."

I was glad to see our clients go: I disliked one, and pitied the other. In short, their presence disturbed me. I led them to the door.

As I opened it and stood aside to let them pass, Mr Tufnell bowed to me. As he did so, he let the chain go loose in his hand. At once, Charley Budd pulled sharply to the side, tearing the chain free. He fell against the opposite wall, beside the big chipped plant pot with its umbrellas and rapiers. Hands still bound together, he grasped the hilt of Lockwood's second-best sword and wrenched it up, out of the pot, so the blade shone in the morning light. Then he thrust it down and inwards, seeking to drive the tip deep into his stomach. His arms were too short, the blade too long. It stabbed into the leather of his belt and caught there.

While he struggled to free it, I was on him, grappling at the blade. Mr Tufnell caught his arm, pulling at the chain. The youth fought back frenziedly, desperately, with frightening strength. We collided with the coat-rack, then the key-table. He made no sound. For several silent seconds, we wrestled back and forth, his pale face next to mine, our eyes locked together. Then Mr Tufnell clouted him hard on the side of the head and I pulled the rapier away.

Like a switch had been flicked, Charley Budd was placid again. His face was calm and expressionless; he allowed himself to be led out of the door and into the sun.

"I'm so sorry," Mr Tufnell said, turning at the gate. "You see now how finding the ghost really is his only chance? Please do everything you can to help us."

With that he raised his battered felt hat, tugged at the chain and led the boy away along the road.

6.

If we had been largely unmoved by Mr Tufnell – his combination of sleazy theatrical bombast and slippery evasion wasn't wildly attractive – the evident plight of Charley Budd affected us all. According to Lockwood, who knew such things, it was a rare example of psychic enchainment, in which the victim's mind was snared.

"It's like ghost-lock," he said, "but it's not the *body* that's been trapped this time, but the intelligence. The will to live just seeps away and the victim is pulled towards death. Tufnell's right – destroying the ghost is probably the only way to sever the connection."

"Poor boy." Holly was tidying up the mess left in the hall. "How awful to want to do that to himself."

"His eyes were empty," I said. "When I fought him, there was nothing there."

"And did you see his blank, inexpressive face?" George added. "Eerie."

"Well, it's clearly a formidable spirit that's snared him," Lockwood said, "and there's no way I'm facing it until we're properly prepared. Can you look into the story when you're at the Archives, George? I'll order more equipment; we left half our stuff in the mausoleum."

"Lots to do," George said. "Marissa, the Problem, *and* La Belle Dame Sans Merci. I'd better get off. Before I do, I wanted to show you the stuff I found in your parents' crates, Lockwood. Mind if I quickly do that now?"

We followed him upstairs to the first floor. It was a place where the representatives of DEPRAC, checking on our activities in the basement office, never thought to go. Which was lucky for us, because it contained a dark and terrible wonderland, filled with things that threatened one's health and sanity, and I'm not just talking about George's bedroom. There was another room there that had once belonged to Lockwood's sister, Jessica – the room she'd died in. Here her death-glow hovered perpetually above the stripped-back bed, and stacks of crates lined the walls, each stamped with faded export permits from foreign lands. And set out on the one clear area of floor, surrounded by a circle of iron chains, were selected items from those crates: items strange, dangerous and forbidden.

There were masks, fashioned in the shape of wild animals and monstrous spirits. There were cloaks, one covered in feathers, one in moulting fur. There were peculiar constructions of bone and feather and strings of animal gut, threaded with multicoloured iron beads, that Lockwood said were Javanese ghost-catchers. And there were pots, sealed with lead and wax. These in particular we treated with extreme caution. It was in the breaking of one of these that Jessica Lockwood had lost her life eight years before.

It was quite a haul. The tweedy, placard-waving ghost-cultists, who paraded through Trafalgar Square most days, would have fallen on their knees before the items on display. Fittes researchers would have sold their grandmothers to have seen them. Rich collectors would have fought each other for them tooth and nail, while relic-men would have cut our throats and pinched them while we slept. Inspector Barnes of DEPRAC would simply have arrested us and confiscated the lot. So it was that we took care to ensure that the collection remained secret, known by nobody except us, Kipps and Flo.

We stood at the door, looking in. George indicated a row of dusty looking green-glass bottles set out inside the chains. "These are what I found yesterday," he said. "Spirit bottles. Places to trap annoying or unwelcome ancestors. The old shaman would pop a Source inside – it was generally a bit of bone – and seal it up: presto, the ghost's contained. The interior's lined with iron, of course. Basically they do the same job as the skull's glass jar, only they're superior in a way, because you don't get the horrid visuals."

"Same sort of thing as the pots, then?" Lockwood asked. He pointed at a group of red-clay pots, inscribed with strange characters. I'd have thought they'd have remained

indecipherable for a hundred years, but I hadn't reckoned with George. He'd figured them out during a wet afternoon at the library.

"Pretty much," George said. "You know, I'm beginning to think that *everything* your parents brought back has some kind of psychic significance. Even the stuff hanging up downstairs. They were very good researchers. Think I'd have liked them."

"I'm sure you would."

I was watching Lockwood's face. His face was calm, but his eyes were curiously unfocused; he was staring out at nothing, or perhaps into the past.

Celia and Donald Lockwood had been researchers into the folklore of ghosts, and their speciality had been the beliefs of far-off countries. Not only did they travel there – but they had shipped back many items of interest in giant packing crates. Some of this material had ended up on the walls of 35 Portland Row, but much remained in boxes, having arrived in Britain after their unexpected deaths. We had only begun to investigate these recently, and had at once unearthed two marvellous feathered cloaks, or spirit-capes, that had been worn by Indonesian shamans while conversing with their ancestors. Lockwood and I had discovered that the protective properties of these capes were not mere legend: they had shielded us when we walked the icy paths of the Other Side. Without them, we would certainly have died.

One of the capes was lost; the other remained with us, locked in the storeroom in our office basement, next to our supplies of coke and beans and crisps. It was to find out what else the crates might hide that we had begun operations in Jessica's room.

"The thing is," George went on, "half these bottles are cracked. We need to be *very* careful with them for obvious reasons." He glanced at Lockwood. "If you want we could take them to the Furnaces. Might be the safest thing to do."

"No…" Lockwood said. "They may come in useful. If they're kept inside the chains they should be safe enough."

"Well, don't sneeze near them," George said. "That's my advice. It's a mini-cluster we've got right there. Imagine if they all got out."

"Yes, imagine…" Lockwood's glance lingered on the death-glow hovering above the bed. Then he turned the light off and closed the door.

We didn't have any jobs scheduled in that evening. This was a good thing, as we needed to get ready for the Belle Dame case the next day. Through the afternoon I restocked our belts; Lockwood rang Mullet's, and ordered more rapiers and chains. Then he and Holly did paperwork for recent cases. George was off at the Archives and didn't return. At teatime I fixed a hurried meal, re-heating one of George's old stews from the freezer. We ate it in the basement office. Holly went home. George was still out. It was just Lockwood and me at Portland Row.

I was tidying up in the kitchen when Lockwood peered round the door.

"I was just nipping out, Lucy. I wondered if you'd like to come along."

"On a case?"

"Of a kind."

"You want to go now?"

"If you're not doing anything important."

I so wasn't. In seconds I'd joined him at the door. "You want me to get my kitbag?" I said. "I can easily nip down."

"It's okay. Your rapier should be fine."

So it wasn't a tough ghost, then. We set off up Portland Row. "Are we going far?"

"No. Not far."

We walked east a couple of blocks, then turned north towards the Euston Road. I wondered if we were going to hail a cab at the depot there, but before we reached the intersection Lockwood halted beside the rusted girdle of iron panelling that surrounded the Marylebone Cemetery.

"Here?" I said. It was a small abandoned cemetery, heavily salted, and well-encased in iron.

"Yes."

"I hadn't heard about trouble here."

He smiled slightly. “If you put your boot in the ivy just beside you, you’ll find a post you can stand on. Then you can catch hold of the top of the panels and swing yourself up. There’s a brick wall behind the iron. We can climb down it. Look, I’ll show you.”

In moments he was standing, crouched and cat-like, just beyond the top of the panelling. “Think you can do that? If you reach out, I could help pull you up.”

My only reply was a snort. And I may not have been quite as nimble, and my scrambling might have been accompanied by a *tad* more swearing, but I was soon beside him, ten foot above the pavement, looking down into the dark green amphitheatre of the overgrown cemetery.

We were standing on the top of the original stone wall, concealed from outside by the iron panels. Away to our right burned the dull lights of the Euston Road. Below us, silence and shadow held sway. It was an old-style inner city graveyard, where space had been at a premium. The headstones were set almost on top of each other, and were largely submerged beneath a thicket of brambles, with the tallest urns and angels cresting the foliage like boats on a turbulent green sea. Fingers of ivy clung to the inside of the boundary wall. Here and there, old yews emerged like melting candles, joined to the thicket below by strings of ivy and trailing vines. The ground was choked. The cemetery had evidently been abandoned for some time.

It looked a melancholy patch of ground, not particularly threatening. Equally, it was not an easy place to swing a sword. “What kind of Visitor is it?” I asked.

A cool wind was coming along between the houses, and Lockwood’s coat fluttered at his back as we stood together on the wall. He didn’t seem to have heard me. “Getting down’s easy enough,” he said softly. “The wall’s crumbling here. It’s almost like a staircase, as long as you don’t skid. Shall we go?”

“Lockwood,” I asked, as I eased myself after him. “How do you know about all this?”

“I’ve been here before,” he said. “And now,” he added, as I landed in a clear strip of grass with waist-high brambles all around, “we just nip along there.” He pointed to what looked like an animal trail running off between the stones.

I let him lead the way, keeping my head low to avoid the thorns arching above. The track wound among the gravestones and soon opened into a small cleared space where the foliage had been crushed underfoot, and the ivy chopped back with a sword.

Two headstones stood in the centre of the space. One of the last rays of sunlight was shining on them. They were made of grey stone: modern, sharp-edged and unsullied by wind or rain. Neither was ornate, but the one on the left was larger. It was crowned by a carving of a beautiful, sad-faced woman in a hooded cape. On the plinth below, in strong clear letters, was written:

Celia Lockwood
Donald Lockwood
Knowledge sets us free

The second stone was just a simple slab, inscribed with two words only:

Jessica Lockwood

“Oh, Lockwood,” I said.

He stood beside me in the dark, face almost lost behind the raised collar of his coat. “I sometimes wonder what it’s all about,” he said. “Why we do what we do. When we have nights like last night, for instance – why we put ourselves through all that. Or when twerps like Tufnell come bleating and blustering in at our door, and we have to sit there humouring him. When I get that kind of thought, I sometimes pop in here.”

My heart was too full to say anything. I stood and gazed at the stones. I’d sometimes wondered where they were, his missing family. But I’d never dared ask him. And now he was sharing this most private of places with me.

“This is what the Problem means,” he went on. “This is the effect it has. Lives lost, loved ones taken before their time. And then we hide our dead behind iron walls and leave them to the thorns and ivy. We lose them twice over, Lucy. Death’s not the worst of it. We turn our faces away.”

On the far edge of the tiny clearing an older headstone had toppled almost to the horizontal. Lockwood went to it; he sat cross-legged on the stone, with brambles spun close about him. His dark clothes merged with the shadows; his smile floated palely in

the half-light. “I usually perch on this,” he said. “Belongs to a sadly deceased person called Derek Tompkins-Bond. I always wonder about him.”

I turned slowly from the graves. “Whether his spirit will object to you sitting here?”

“More what his parents were thinking. I mean, if your surname is Tompkins-Bond, it’s rather a pity to call your son ‘Derek’, don’t you think? Anyway, he doesn’t seem to mind me being here, old Derek. At least, he’s never showed up to tell me so.” He patted the stone beside him. “Come and join me if you want. But watch out for that rail.”

I looked down. Sure enough, I’d almost tripped on a black metal rod, no higher than ankle height, that ran through the grass at my feet. I knew what it was: a boundary rail, used in cemeteries to mark the edge of a plot. I hadn’t noticed it before, but now I saw that the Lockwood headstones were set in their own railed-off family plot. And I noticed too that while the parents’ stone was set in the centre of this space, and Jessica’s stone was to the right, there was an empty area on the left-hand side.

I looked at this bare patch of grass. And when I did so everything faded out – the beating of my heart, the whisperings of the wind as it worked its way through the holes and hollows of the ivy, the sound of distant night-cabs on the Euston Road.

I gazed at it. At the unobtrusive patch of ground, at the empty, waiting grave.

It took me a moment to realise Lockwood was still talking. “They’d already shut the cemetery when my sister died,” he said. “There was some controversy about putting her here. But when there are family plots, where it’s the clear intention that people should be buried together, it’s considered correct to honour the wishes of the dead.”

He didn’t need to say why. Keep the dead happy. Don’t give them a reason to come back.

I stepped over the rail, crossed the grass and sat on the stone beside him.

“It’s nice, don’t you think,” Lockwood said, “keeping the family together? Anyway,” he added, after a pause, “I come here sometimes.”

I nodded. I was looking at the stamped, sliced foliage, chopped and broken and savagely hacked back. “Thanks for bringing me here,” I said.

“That’s all right.”

We sat in silence for a time. At last I was emboldened. “You never told me how it happened.”

“My parents?” He paused so very long that I thought he was refusing to talk of it, as he had so often before. But a strange relaxation had laid itself upon him in that place. When he spoke, his voice was soft; it carried no barbs or warning signs. “Funnily enough,” he said, “it wasn’t far from here.”

“What? In Marylebone?”

“On the Euston Road. You know where that underpass is, a bit further along? There.”

I stared at him. “You never told me.” The underpass was a short, ugly, concrete tunnel where the Euston Road ducked underground to avoid intersecting with another important street. Night-cabs drove us through it all the time, Lockwood and me. He’d never given me the slightest inkling. “So it was a car accident?” I said.

He drew one knee up, clasped it with his hands. “Quite a spectacular one. It was when I was [four]. My mother and father were setting off to Manchester to give an important lecture. It was meant to be a summary of all their researches, all their findings. But they never even reached the station. In the underpass their cab was struck by a lorry carrying a load of animal fertilizer, which ignited along with all the spilled fuel. It took almost an hour for the fire to be put out. It was so hot they had to re-lay a portion of the road.”

“My God, Lockwood…” I reached out in the dark and touched his arm.

“It’s all right. It was a long time ago. I barely remember them.” He smiled at me sidelong. “It’s odd, but what saddens me most sometimes is that their lecture was lost too. I’d have liked to have read that, somehow… Anyway, what with the fire, it took ages for identifications to be made. So it wasn’t until late that police officers came to our door. I remember looking down from the attic window, seeing their armoured vehicle blocking Portland Row, with all the lights flashing and the agents who protected them standing on the pavement while they spoke with Jessica and our nanny. They were Fittes agents, incidentally. I remember being fascinated with the colour of their silver-grey jackets.”

A long pause. Dusk deepened about us; leaves merged. I didn't say anything.

"So they told Jessica then," Lockwood went on. "But no one told *me* till the following morning – which was completely pointless, as I'd listened to it all from the top of the stairs. Pointless twice over, because I'd known about it hours before anyone, when I saw my parents' Shades watching me in the garden."

I wasn't surprised. He'd told me that once before. They were his first ghosts. I squeezed his arm. "You knew they were dead?"

"Not exactly. Maybe deep down. Turns out I saw them at the exact time of the accident… Anyway, that was how *that* happened. My sister's story, you already know. And now there's just me." A sudden burst of energy seemed to pass through him, like an electric charge. He sprang up from the stone. "Well, there's no good talking about it. We should be getting back."

I drew in a long breath. In the same way that the graveyard was choked with the winding weeds and brambles, my head felt full now, choked with Lockwood's memories. It was no different from the sensations I got when I picked up psychic feedback through the power of Touch. They didn't *feel* like second-hand emotions. It was like I'd been there, like I'd lived them myself. I got up slowly. "I'm so sorry, Lockwood," I said. "What an awful thing."

"Like I say, coming here helps remind me what it's all about." He frowned into the dark. His mood had altered, become suddenly brittle. "Everything comes back to the Problem, doesn't it? My parents die while out searching for a solution to it. A ghost kills my sister. While we're still here, we have to fight against it too. There's nothing else we can do."

"'While we're still here?'" I said softly. He was looking towards the family plot again, and at that little patch of empty ground.

Lockwood shrugged. "Well, it's all so random, isn't it? Everything about the Problem is so stupid and arbitrary. That Charley Budd we saw today. Why was *he* snared, and not someone else? Why wasn't Tufnell taken? Why did my sister die and not me? There's no meaning to any of it. We can't choose the manner of our passing, can we? All we can do is try to make it count. Come on. If you're ready, we should go."

He took a few paces across the clearing. I didn't follow him. I stood between him and the headstones, arms on hips, seeking to block them out.

"But there *is* meaning, Lockwood," I said, raising my voice. "We just have to find it. If Marissa's at the heart of all this, we need to expose her – make her pay. There are answers, Lockwood. We *know* there are. We just need to keep on searching."

He turned back to me. His sword glimmered in the half light, but his form was almost lost in the surrounding press of thick, dark green. When he spoke, his voice carried its old, easy ring. "You're quite right, Luce," he said, "and I think we're almost there. Let's hope George has something good for us tomorrow. But now we should get some rest for whatever awaits us at that haunted theatre. I've kept you out too late. Are you coming?"

"Yes, of course I am." But I was looking back at the waiting grave.

7.

"*So, how's it going with Lockwood? Pretty well?*"

I was first down to the kitchen next morning. The ghost-jar had been on the table all the previous day, its lever shut, its plaintive pulsations ignored. We'd been too busy to humour it; even so, I did feel slightly bad that I'd neglected it all that time. I flicked the lever in the top of the jar, took a mug from the cupboard, and put the kettle on. Slice it how you like, if you're going to have a haunted skull talking to you before breakfast, you need a cup of tea.

"Yeah," I said. "No different from normal."

"*It's just I sense developments. I saw the pair of you slinking off alone last night.*"

"Spying on us again? You should get a different hobby." I tried to look stern, disinterested and scathing all at once. "Anyway, what do I care? We were on a case."

The face nodded. "*Oh, you were on a case?*"

"That's right."

"*Okay. I buy that*." The ghost looked placidly at me. "*Let's talk about something else.*"

I hesitated, then cleared my throat. "Um, okay… Well—"

"*If you're looking for a clean teaspoon, there's one by the sink*."

"Thanks."

I opened the fridge to get some milk. As I closed the door the face in the jar gave a sudden theatrical start that almost made me drop the bottle. The rubbery eyes looked wildly in all directions; the nostrils flared, the mouth contorted in alarm. "*Ooh, I smell something burning... Wait, wait, it's your pants! Your pants are on fire, you massive liar! You* so *weren't on a case!*"

"We were too! We went to a graveyard, and—"

"A graveyard?" The ghost chuckled low and long. "*Say no more! In my experience graveyards can be used for* lots *of activities, not just ghost-hunting*." It gave me a slow, atrocious wink.

"I don't know what you're talking about." But I could feel my cheeks flushing.

The evil face grinned knowingly. "*There, I* knew *I was right. And don't try to tell me you were scrapping with lots of different ghosts. I counted all your equipment out, and I counted it all back again: you didn't use flares or anything.*"

"We had our rapiers!"

"*I can tell when there's ectoplasm on a blade and when there isn't. No, you and Lockwood went for a cosy chat, didn't you? And came back with brambles in your hair*."

I spoke as lightly as I could. "Well, it was very overgrown."

"*I bet it was*."

My snort of disdain was fierce enough to keep the ghost quiet while I finished making my mug of tea. I threw the spoon in the sink and sat in the half-dark at the far side of the table, keeping clear of the jar's halo of green other-light. I glared intently at it, pondering my next move. How much to give, how much to seek. It was always a subtle and infuriating business, bargaining with a skull.

This main Talent of mine – psychic Listening – had long been considered the rarest and most imperfect of an agent's arts. Mostly it was just about ominous sound effects:

picking up the thud and drag of a body being hauled along a landing, for example, or hearing the scratches of broken fingernails along a cellar wall. Informative as these might be they weren't revealing in the same way as actual *words* spoken by a spirit. But traditionally such words were often impossible to fathom. The famous refrain of the Dire Maid, a spectral waif carrying a butcher's knife that had haunted Covent Garden market in the early years of the Fittes agency, was fairly typical. As Marissa Fittes had written in her *Memoirs*, there wasn't *that* much you could take from 'I skinned him and diced him', repeated over and over. Sure, you got the basic message, but that was about it.

With most ghosts, snippets of sound like this were all you could hope for. They were echoes of memory, rather than evidence of active intelligence. But Marissa, the most famous Listener of all, had *also* encountered certain Visitors that *truly* communicated with her, by which she meant full conversations. She classed these entities as 'Type Three' spirits, and since her death (real or faked), no one else had come across them.

No one except for me.

In recent months I'd experienced a gradual unfurling of my Talent, a slow, sure flowering in dark places. It had made me realise that many spirits had the ability to communicate, even if they couldn't chat. That Revenant in the crypt, for instance: it had got its point across. It could still express the desire that drove it. The secret was Listening *without fear.* Of the barriers separating the living and the dead, natural terror was the hardest to shake. But if you managed it, connection *could* come.

Still, it had to be said I'd met nothing quite like the skull in the jar. He definitely *was* a Type Three, and in many ways, most of them dubious, remained unique. Marissa had never mentioned how *annoying* wicked spirits could be.

Though his mortal career was steeped in mystery, one or two facts *were* known about the skull. As a nameless youth, he'd lived in the late Nineteenth Century, when he'd helped the occult doctor Edmund Bickerstaff create the first recorded window onto the Other Side. This object, a so-called bone-glass, had been dug up in Kensal Green cemetery a year or two ago, and had since been destroyed. Bickerstaff himself had been

killed soon after the creation of the bone-glass, but the youth had escaped. His later activities were unknown. At some point, however, he had clearly come to a bad end, since his next recorded appearance, half a century later, was as a skull dredged up in Lambeth sewers. The Fittes Agency, recognising his potency as a Source, had trapped him in the jar, and the ghost had languished there ever since. Marissa Fittes had spoken with him, albeit briefly. After that no one had done so – until me.

That counted for something. The ghost needed me just as much as I needed it, loudly though it might deny it. I stared at the jar through the blue-grey half-light. The spectral face stared back at me.

"We were going to talk about Marissa," I began.

"*We were going to talk about my freedom*."

I watched the steam rise from my mug, twisting, coiling like liberated ectoplasm. "Oh, you don't want that," I said. "What does freedom even mean? You'd still be tied to your mouldly old skull, wouldn't you, even if you did escape the jar? Say I let you out. What would you do?"

"*I'd flit about. I'd stretch my plasm. Might strangle Cubbins. Carry out a spot of casual ghost-touch, now and again. Just simple hobbies. It would be a darn sight more fun than sitting here.*"

I grinned at it. "You make your case so well," I said. "See how I'm itching to break the jar. Even if I could trust you, which I clearly can't, you wouldn't want it anyway. Who would you talk to if you hadn't got me?"

"*I'd talk to* <u>you</u>. *I'd stick around, help you out from time to time*."

"Oh, sure you would. While strangling my friends."

"*I'd strangle your enemies too. I'm not fussy. How's* <u>that</u> *for a tip-top deal?*"

"Absolute rubbish," I said. "Tell you what: you want a deal? I'll make you a proper one. You give me more information on Marissa Fittes, information that helps us get to the bottom of this whole mystery – and perhaps sheds light on the causes of the Problem – and I'll figure out some way to set you free. It'll be a way that doesn't involve George's untimely death, or anyone else's, but I'll see what I can do." I took a sip of tea.

The face looked unconvinced. "*No deaths? Doesn't sound much fun. Anyway, we've gone over this ground before. What more can I possibly tell you?*"

"Ah!" Frustration bubbled up within me. I banged the mug down on the table, sloshing brown splashes onto the Thinking Cloth. "That's the whole point! You never tell me anything! Not really! About Marissa, about you and who you really are, about the nature of the Other Side! All insults, no facts – that's the way it is with you!"

"*When you're a ghost*," the skull said blandly, "*you find facts are over-rated. You sort of leave them behind with your mortal body. It's all emotions and desires with spirits, as I'm sure you've seen. 'I've lost my gold!' 'I want revenge!' All that old hokum. Know what* <u>my</u> *desire is?*" It flashed a sudden grin at me.

"Something foul, no doubt."

"*To live. To* <u>live</u>, *Lucy. That's why I talk with you. That's why I turned my back on what waits for us on the Other Side*."

"So what *does* wait for us there?" I spoke lightly, but my hand gripped harder on my mug. This was more like it; this was the kind of detail I was after.

As ever, I was disappointed. "*How should I know?*"

"Well, you're dead. I should think that helps."

"*Ooh, we* <u>are</u> snarky *today. You've been to the Other Side too. What did* <u>you</u> *see?*"

I'd seen an awful lot of darkness, and awful lot of cold. A place that was a terrible and freezing echo of the living world. I'd thought about it a lot, lying in bed, dreaming the dreams that made me cry out and lie awake till dawn.

"*Hear any celestial trumpets, did you, while you were there?*" the skull prompted.

I'd heard nothing. It had been a ferociously silent place.

"I was too busy trying to survive to take a proper survey," I said primly.

"*Yeah, well, me too,*" the ghost said. "*That's my story too for the last one hundred and ten years. And if it wasn't for my cuddly Source here—*" With this it sort of surged back lovingly around the brown skull at the centre of the jar, so that for a moment you could glimpse the face as if would have been in life, less rubbery, wrapped neatly on the bones — "*I'd have been a wanderer in the dark world like all the those other dumb idiots. Agh! No thanks! That's not for me. I keep myself turned towards the light, and it isn't easy, I can tell you, particularly when the living insist on asking stupid questions*."

"What questions did Marissa ask you?" I said. My hopes weren't high, but it seemed

a decent moment to move in.

Dim lights flared in the ghost's eyes. "*It's so long ago… Similar ones to you, I think. About the Other Side, about the nature of spirits, what we do and why… Also she was very interested in ectoplasm.*"

"Ectoplasm? Why?"

"*It's fascinating stuff.*" The face distorted, reversing into itself so that the nose and brow ridges were pointing backwards into the jar. "*It listens, it communicates, you can mould it into funny and obscene shapes. How'd you think I spent the last fifty years? Want me to show you some of my favourites? I call this one the 'Happy Farmhand'.*"

"No, thank you. And I certainly don't see why Marissa would be interested in *that*."

"*She wasn't, to be fair. Cheeky origami wasn't her thing. But the thing about plasm is it represents the part of you that survives – that passes through from one side to the other. You can call it your essence, your life-force, whatever you want. It doesn't decay. It doesn't die. It doesn't really change. That's why I know Marissa and this Penelope Fittes woman are one and the same person,*" the skull said. The face pressed close to the glass. "*Because their essence is exactly the same.*"

"Even though they look so different?" It was one of the things that had puzzled us about the skull's claims. Penelope Fittes was glossy and glamorous, a raven-haired woman in early middle-age; Marissa, in later years at least, had been a gaunt and shrivelled creature, prey to the frailties of age.

"*Looks?*" the ghost said. "*What's that got to do with anything? It's superficial. Outward appearance doesn't interest me at all. Why do you think I hang about with you?*" It chuckled. "*Insult aside, that's just one way in which I'm superior to every one of you, apart from Cubbins.*"

I blinked. "What? Why? What's George got to do with anything?"

"*What a person looks like doesn't bother him over-much, or hadn't you noticed?*"

There was a scrabbling at the door. I turned in my chair, to find George himself tottering into the kitchen in the first throes of wakefulness. He switched on the light, scratching industriously at a crevice in his pyjamas. "What's that skull saying? Something about me?"

"Never mind. It's not important." I turned the lever shut on the jar. "You want tea? How did you get on yesterday?"

"At the Archives? Oh, I found plenty. I'll tell you more presently. Can't think straight before I have my breakfast."

"Nor me." Especially not today. My head was spinning from the ghost's conversation, and it wasn't yet eight in the morning.

Lockwood was down later than usual, long after Holly had arrived and the day's work had already begun. He seemed in good spirits; we smiled at each other, but didn't refer to our expedition to the cemetery. We turned our attention to the business of the day.

We had agreed to arrive at Mr Tufnell's establishment at 5 o'clock that evening, when there was still an hour or two of daylight left, and we could properly look over the Palace Theatre and the surrounding fair. Before that happened, Lockwood had a new rapier and other supplies to pick up from Mullet's Store in Bond Street, and there was plenty of DEPRAC paperwork to get through. A delivery of fresh iron was expected, too, and Holly and I were keen to try some new techniques in the rapier practise room. In short, there was plenty to be done, but – as always before a major new case – George's briefing came first. We gathered in the basement office to hear him.

"Just a quick one first about the whole Marissa thing," George said. He had a pile of notebooks with him that he'd taken from his battered leather case. "As you know, I've been looking into the beginnings of the Problem, and the way in which Fittes and Rotwell started out. I had to nip off to the Hardimann Research Library yesterday to follow up a lead, and it might be something tasty. I'll fill you in when I learn more."

"Isn't the Hardimann out of bounds?" Holly asked. As part of DEPRAC's new edicts, certain occult libraries had restrictions on them, ostensibly for the public good.

"Strictly speaking," George said, "I shouldn't go there without a permit, but the curator's a friend of mine. It's not a big deal. Anyway, more on that later. I was mostly in the Archives, looking into the history of the Palace Theatre. And I had some success there too, as you'll see…"

George sat back in his chair; he spread out his notebooks in front of him, and

unfolded a yellowed theatrical handbill, similar to the one Tufnell had given us, smoothing it out with his palm. It showed the same blonde woman in another chilly-looking pose, this time with the words 'The Hangman's Daughter' written alongside. The 'D' was formed of an ominous-looking noose.

Lockwood angled the handbill round approvingly. "Aha, so you found out something more about our glamorous ghost, La Belle Dame?"

"Her real name would do for a start," I said.

"We've got it here." Lockwood pointed to a corner of the handbill. "See? 'Featuring our sinister star, Marianne de Sevres.' Classy. She must've come straight from Paris."

"Or possibly Luton," George scratched his ear. "Turns out Marianne de Sevres was only her stage name. Her real name was Doris Blower. She's first heard of at an end-of-the-pier show in Eastbourne a hundred years ago. Within five years she's packing out audiences at the Palace Theatre in Stratford. Tufnell was right: she was a big star of her day, and it was all based on a certain kind of act – one that combined glamour, sensation and the threat of violent death." He glanced round at us. "That pretty much summed up her off-stage life too."

"Mr Tufnell said she was a cruel and wicked woman," Holly said, "who wrapped men round her little finger. Or that was the implication."

"It's pretty much accurate," George said. "The popular papers of the day were full of stories about the rich married men who'd fallen for her, and all the wives she'd wronged. At least one attacked her in the street. She never stayed with anyone long, but discarded them like sweet wrappers. It's rumoured that more than one man killed himself for love of her. When she heard about it, La Belle Dame laughed and said it was life imitating art. All her shows involved that kind of story too."

"Charming woman," I said.

"And now a charming ghost." George consulted his notes. "Well, it's not surprising she's shown up at the Palace Theatre, because that was her base for years. She performed many illusions there, all of which were set up as little dramas or playlets. Each one ended with a staged death that was acted out with the utmost precision. The one she actually *died* in, 'The Sultan's Revenge', was a story about a faithless queen who did all sorts of naughty things behind her husband's back. When he found out, he had her sealed up in a massive coffin and run through with fifty swords." George pushed his glasses up his nose. "Guess that's entertainment for you."

Holly gave a snort of disgust. "What a foul story. Who'd want to see that?"

"Lots of people. It was the sensation of the age. Another of her hits was the 'Captive Mermaid'. They built a great glass tank on stage, and filled it with water. La Belle Dame went splashing about with a fish tail; she played an innocent mermaid who was caught by a jealous rival and horribly mistreated. At the end she was tied to lots of weights and—"

"Pardoned, I hope," Holly said tartly.

"I'm going to guess 'thrown into the tank to drown'," I said.

"Points go to Lucy there," George said. "Yes, it was a famous illusion. She thrashes around at the bottom of the vat for ages, goes limp, and finally a black curtain is drawn round, concealing her from view. Then – presto – the mermaid reappears from off stage, alive and kicking. Well, not exactly *kicking*. She's got a tail."

"And people came to this?" Holly folded her arms.

"It was very good show-business. It's said that everyone came – the men to adore her, the women to cheer on the hangman, the drowning pool, the executioner's knife." George sat back with an air of finality. "How much more do you want? There was the celebrated routine called 'the Hangman's Daughter', about—"

I held up a hand. "Don't tell me. About a beautiful girl who hanged herself for love?"

George consulted his notes. "Hey. Got it in one. You *are* good."

Holly scowled. "Did any of these women in her shows get to live at all?"

"Not so's you'd notice. They were mostly drowned, stabbed, poisoned, or thrown from a height. The point is, they all *seemed* to die – then La Belle Dame would spring back on stage, alive and well and taking the wild applause of the crowd." He blinked at us doubtfully. "So I suppose in a sense they all lived in the end."

Holly snorted. "Not in my book, they didn't. What an appalling creature."

"And now," Lockwood said, "she's come back as a malignant ghost with vampiric

tendencies. We'll have to tread carefully tonight."

"Yes, I've been thinking about that," I said. "I reckon you should let Holly and me tackle this one."

Lockwood gazed at us. "Alone? While George and I twiddle our thumbs at home?"

"Why not?"

"Not a chance. It's far too dangerous."

"I agree with Lucy here," Holly said. "Clearly La Belle Dame has particular power over addled young men. Lucy and I would be far less vulnerable than you."

"Oh, I don't think that's true. George and I have dealt with attractive female ghosts before…" Lockwood chuckled fondly. "Remember the Hoxton Bathhouse, George?"

George took off his glasses and inspected them. "Do I? Not half."

"Besides, there's no mystery about the two victims so far," Lockwood went on. "Both Charley Budd and Roy Morrison displayed classic patterns of psychic vulnerability."

"That's right," George said. "Didn't you notice? According to Tufnell, the kid who died was totally lovelorn, practically starving himself through romantic misery. If a dustbin in a dress had rolled past him, he'd have gone scampering after it. As for Charley Budd, he was sickly and in some pain. It may be he subconsciously wanted release: that's why he followed the ghost. In other words neither of the victims was physically or mentally strong."

"I don't get it," Holly said. "You mean the ghost could sense their weaknesses?"

George nodded. "Exactly. We all know Visitors sense anger and sorrow. They're attracted to people who give off strong emotions. Perhaps they're also drawn to weakness and despair. These two were enfeebled in different ways… in one way or another they both had weak connections to life. Both were clearly vulnerable to some cut-price supernatural glamour."

"Which we aren't," Lockwood added. "End of story. George and I will be fine. Won't we, George?"

George nodded. "Yep, we're cold-eyed professionals. Can I have that handbill back, Lucy? I want to stick it in my casebook as a fold-out spread. Thanks, that's fine."

With that the meeting broke up. Lockwood went off to Mullet's; George did

paperwork. Holly and I practised with our rapiers until we were hot and thirsty and the straw dummies hanging in the practise room were full of holes. Motes of straw floated in the air. Outside Portland Row the afternoon drew on. The first stars showed in the sky.

8.

To get to the Palace Theatre, Stratford, in the east end of London, required taking the underground trains, which ran until almost nightfall. Shortly before four, George, Holly and I put on our work-belts and snapped our rapiers into position. We locked up Portland Row and walked to Baker Street station, carrying our bags of iron. The ghost-jar, sealed and silent, was in my backpack. Lockwood was still at Mullet's, and would travel separately. We would meet him at the theatre door.

It had been a pleasant early autumn day, heavy with warmth that piggybacked on six weeks of hard, hot weather. The streets were still busy, but with that faint electric charge that always builds up as dusk approaches. The people moved ever more quickly, their faces set, intent on getting their jobs done. The sun was low now. Slanting rays sliced the houses into triangular slabs of light and shadow.

As we neared the Euston Road, we passed an alley long abandoned by the sun. From among the bin bags piled in its mouth a misshapen figure rose; it lurched towards us, arms out, rags fluttering, carrying with it the smell of waste pipes and carrion.

Holly jumped; I reached automatically for my rapier.

"Hullo, Flo," said George.

Although it wasn't instantly apparent to the casual observer, the apparition was female and possibly not much older than me. She had a roundish, mud-flecked face from

which piercing blue eyes blinked shrewdly. Her hair, lank, dirty and yellow, was scarcely distinguishable from the ragged margins of her wide straw hat. She wore rubber boots and a long blue puffer jacket that never came off, whatever the weather. What might lie beneath it was the stuff of whispered legend.

This was Ms Florence Bonnard, aka the notorious relic-woman, Flo Bones. Relic-men and women were professional scavengers, many armed with decent psychic abilities, who loitered around cemeteries, refuse tips and other places on the margins of society, looking for Sources that had been overlooked by normal agents. They then sold these on, to ghost cults, to black market collectors, even to DEPRAC itself; basically to whoever offered the best deal. Flo's patch consisted of the murky, mud-flecked banks of the Thames, and this she roamed with a sinister hessian bag that contained God-knew-what damp horrors. She liked liquorice, George and Lockwood, in a somewhat unclear order, and just about tolerated me. Along with Kipps, she was an important, if unofficial, associate of Lockwood & Co.

"All right, Cubbins," Flo said. She grinned briefly at George, showing exceptionally bright white teeth, and – as a reluctant afterthought – nodded curtly at Holly and me.

"Haven't seen you at ours for a bit," George said. "Been busy?"

Flo's shrug cracked the dried mud on the shoulders of her coat. "Nah. Not really."

Though Flo *did* sometimes appear at 35 Portland Row, it was an uncomfortable experience for her, venturing into a dry, roofed world. She preferred living under stars and bridges, with water lapping at her wellingtons, in an isolated and amphibious

life. There was a moment of silence, in which it became clear that Flo was focused on George, and that George was watching her expectantly. Holly and I looked from one to the other and back again.

"Well, so I got it, then," Flo said. She scrabbled in the shadows of her puffer jacket, and brought out an oilcloth package, tied up with grubby string.

"Brilliant. Thanks, Flo." George unzipped his coat and tucked the package inside.

"'S all right." Flo rubbed at the side of her nose. "So you're all right, are you?"

"Yes, fine… What about you? "

"Fine."

"Great."

How long this breathtaking dialogue would have continued is uncertain. At that moment there was movement on the pavement a little further on. Flo glanced behind her. "Oh, hell," she spat. "Not *them*." With that she ducked away, and was gone into the alley; the sound of running wellingtons faded in the gloom.

Four men had come out of a side-road and were looking in our direction. At a signal from the slimmest, they sauntered over. We drew ourselves up. We knew who they were.

The leader was a young man with short fair hair and a moustache; he wore a greenish tweed suit, and moved with fluid ease. Even at a distance, the eye was drawn to him; close proximity made for warier fascination, as one might regard a wolverine slinking nearer through a wood. There was an aggressive jauntiness about him; a certainty of violence – not now, necessarily, but soon. The mark of that hung at his belt. Swords were forbidden to anyone who was not an accredited operative. Sir Rupert Gale was officially of no agency at all, but he carried a rapier anyway, glinting in the sun.

The three men with him wore the silver jackets of the Fittes agency. They were big, muscled and impassive. At some point they had traded in their personalities for a simple air of threat.

As always, Sir Rupert was smiling. He had a lot of teeth. "It's Lockwood's charming little helpers," he said, "out on an evening job. But what was that foul creature with you?" He glanced down the alley. "A beggar, I suppose? You didn't *know* it, did you?"

"No," I said. "A beggar, as you say."

"I can still smell its stench. If it was pestering you, you should have kicked it, sent it packing. The only mercy is that it won't survive long out on the streets, the way the Problem's going. One of these mornings we'll find it in the gutter, staring at the sky." He was gauging our reaction, watching us closely with his poacher's gaze. None of us said anything. "So where's your precious Lockwood?" he went on. "I hope *he's* not dead. Don't tell me he's gone the way of his accident-prone family."

My hand hovered at my sword-hilt. I couldn't trust myself to speak. George was likewise bristling; I could feel insults incubating furiously behind his glittering glasses.

But Holly was good in these situations. She remained impeccably polite. Her smooth, unflustered beauty seemed to have been turned up a notch. As she gazed from under half-lowered lids, her cool demeanour subtly radiated disinterest and contempt. By contrast, Sir Rupert's expensive tweed jacket suddenly appeared loud and shabby; behind his yellow moustache, his face was florid, sweaty and much too eager.

"He's off tackling a Spectre at a theatre in Stratford," Holly said. "We're going to meet him now. Thank you so much for taking an interest in our work."

"Hmm, a Spectre? You really need four agents for that?" Beneath his moustache, Sir Rupert sucked at his teeth. "Do you have the relevant papers?"

Holly nodded. "Yes." She made no move to get them out.

"Could you show them to me?"

"I could. It would certainly be possible."

Sir Rupert's lips twisted slightly. "Then please do so."

"Or you could just take our word for it, Gale," George said, as Holly slowly opened her bag. "But probably that's a concept you wouldn't know much about."

"You know the new rules, Cubbins." Sir Rupert took the papers and turned them over in gloved hands. "Agents must have their client agreements when out on a job. There've been far too many unregulated agencies running about, endangering the decent people of London. It's been anarchy. Not a week goes by without rapier cuts and salt-burns being reported. As for the damage Greek Fire can do…"

"Don't look at us," George said. "We haven't burned anyone's house down for ages."

"Once a plump, bespectacled pyromaniac," Sir Rupert said, "always a plump, bespectacled pyromaniac; that's my philosophy. Well, I suppose these seem in order." He handed the papers back to Holly. "Good luck with your very dangerous mission. Oh, one more thing," he added as we moved to go. "You were seen near the Hardimann Research Library the other day, Cubbins. Not trying to do a spot of illicit research, were you?"

"Me? No."

"Because you haven't got the relevant permit. Has he, Belcher?"

The officer to his left was particularly large. If you hung a uniform on a section of concrete pipe leaning against an outhouse wall the result would have possessed more intellectual zip. "No, sir."

"Even Belcher knows," Sir Rupert said, "and he scarcely recognises his own name."

"I did pop in," George said, "while researching this Stratford case we're on tonight, but I was turned away, because – as you rightly said – I don't have the correct permit. Right now," he went on, "I'm carrying lots of heavy chains and I'd appreciate getting them to the theatre, rather than being held up talking to flea-bitten chancers like you."

There was a slight pause in which the hidden mechanics of the night moved slowly, silently towards disaster. "Chancer?" Sir Rupert Gale said. He stepped closer. "Flea-bitten? Maybe I'm getting deaf in my old age, but—"

"Holly," I said brightly, "wasn't our appointment in Stratford for 5 p.m. exactly? We should be going."

Holly had the jolly tones of a mother who had just discovered her toddler eating cat-food on the floor of a friend's kitchen. "Yes! Quite! Come along, George!"

George seemed reluctant to move.

"Did you want to expand on your statement?" Rupert Gale said.

"I could," George said, "but why expend the energy? We all know what you are. You know it yourself." He took off his spectacles, and rubbed them on his jumper. "Behind all the flounce and swagger, your moral shabbiness fascinates and appals you. You can't take your eyes off it. Which is why you're so crashingly dull. Oh, and I know the DEPRAC rules as well as you, and if you pick fights with accredited agents off about their appointed task, Barnes will have your tweedy backside hauled over hot cobblestones to Scotland Yard. So why not go off and hassle someone else?" He held his glasses up towards the dying sun and tilted them, checking that any conceivable smudge had been removed. "Good. Sometimes I see so clearly, it almost frightens me." He put them back on and bent to his bag. Lead on, Holly. Stratford, here we come."

We walked away. The skin on the back of my neck prickled as we went; probably that was Sir Rupert's gaze brushing against it. I kept expecting him to call out after us to stop, but the order never came.

None of us spoke for a full two blocks. Holly and I walked casually enough, rapiers swinging, but we moved either side of George, like warders leading a condemned prisoner to a cell. We crossed a silent square, where fallen leaves lay on the paths. When

we were in the open, where no one could be listening, we stopped.

"What do you think you were *doing*?" Holly hissed. "Do you *want* us to be arrested?"

"Do you *want* us to be beaten senseless?"

George shrugged. "He didn't arrest us. He didn't beat us."

"No thanks to you!" I snarled. "He's only looking for the slightest excuse."

"Right, and we didn't give him one," George said. "What we *did* do was warn him off, which was something that needed to be done. I'm just alerting him that if he messes with us, he won't get it all his own way." George looked at us as if that settled the matter. "Besides, did you hear how he spoke about Flo? Come on, we're running late. If we peg it we can just catch the train."

Tufnell's Fairground was a short walk east of Stratford Station. Five minutes before we got there, we could hear faint hurdy-gurdy music, and smell hotdogs on the wind.

Perhaps, as Mr Tufnell had asserted, his business *was* doing well. But in the late afternoon, with the shadows lengthening, it didn't radiate prosperity. The Palace Theatre itself was a hulking construction, standing by itself on the edge of a stretch of waste ground. At one time it must have been impressive: it had a columned front, reminiscent of a Roman temple, with carved figures above the pillars depicting both tragic and comic scenes. But the concrete in the columns was cracked and broken, with metal cables showing through, and half the carvings had gone. The main doors were boarded up. Entry to the building appeared to be from the field alongside, where many tents of faded colours, their canvas soughing and snapping in the wind, lay interspersed with flimsy wooden towers and structures of obscure purpose. A makeshift iron fence, in which snack-food wrappers fluttered like trapped insects, surrounded the compound. A siren played a chintzy melody; this was the cue for closure of the fair. The last few sad-faced punters, their draggled sticks of candyfloss held out before them like lepers' bells, were shuffling homeward through the rusty gates.

Lockwood was standing just inside the gates, with Quill Kipps beside him.

"Isn't it fabulous?" Kipps said, as we joined them. "I've seen internment camps that look jollier than this."

"Didn't know you were with us on this one, Quill," I said.

"Nor did I. Bumped into Lockwood at Mullet's. He said you might need help, and I didn't have anything particular to do, so…"

I nodded, smiling. "Sure."

Circumstances hadn't been kind to Kipps, who had been ostracised by some of his former Fittes colleagues for helping us out once too often. This, combined with his naturally downbeat temperament, meant that a thin vein of resentment still ran through him, like a layer of bitter chocolate in one of George's raspberry cakes. In addition, he had lost his Talents as he crossed into his early twenties; despite the pair of goggles we'd given him, which allowed him to see ghosts, he knew the deprivations of age. These experiences had mellowed, even humbled him. Which, given that he was still as abrasive as a pair of wire-wool underpants, showed how insufferable he'd once been.

"Isn't it good that Quill was free?" Lockwood said. "It's the more the merrier on this one." He grinned round at us, radiating energy and anticipation. As so often at the start of a night, he was in excellent spirits. The hunt was up and his sense of purpose was at its sharpest, keen as the new rapier hanging at his side. The quiet, reflective boy who'd sat beside me in the cemetery was nowhere to be seen. "Come on up to the theatre," he said. "We'll get someone to show us around."

We passed striped tents and a helter-skelter, and crossed into the shadow of the building. Posters and banners festooned its massive brick-lined wall, advertising *Tufnell's Marvels*, *Tufnell's Magic Show for Children Young and Old*, and similar entertainments. A pair of double doors hung open. A sour-faced girl in an usherette's uniform was just in the process of shutting one of them, applying iron bolts and chains.

The girl regarded us. "Show's over for the day. I can give you tickets for tomorrow."

"We're not here to see the show," Lockwood said. "Is Lew Tufnell available, please?"

He'd given her his best smile, which normally had the melting effect of hot water poured on ice. But the girl's expression did not change. "He's up on stage." She hesitated,

hands toying with the iron bolt. “It’s not a good time. You shouldn’t go in.”

“I’m sure he’s very busy. But he *is* expecting us.”

“I’m not talking about him. It’s not a good time to be here, this time of day. *She’ll* be walking the corridors soon.”

“You mean La Belle Dame?” I asked. “Have you seen her too?”

The girl shivered, glanced over her shoulder. Before she could answer, a familiar voice hailed us from the dark; Mr Tufnell came in sight, checked shirt rolled up, waistcoat bulging. “Come in, come in!” His face was redder than ever, his grey curls pearled with sweat. “I’m just helping the stage-hands. We’re short-staffed now, what with Charley, Roy and Connor. Look alive there, Tracey! Don’t block the door, girl! Let them by, let them by!”

We filed through into a makeshift foyer, smelling of popcorn, cigarettes and damp. There was a ticket booth, and a stand selling chocolate bars and cans of drink. The girl had stood aside to let us pass. She was a slight, pale-skinned thing with reddish hair, perhaps a year older than me; she looked very tightly wound. I tried to catch her eye, but she did not look at us, and at once slipped out into the field, leaving the door ajar.

Mr Tufnell bobbed and bowed and shook Lockwood by the hand. “Honoured that you’re here! Come along, I’ll show you the stage. We’re readying it for tomorrow.”

He led us along a broad passage, low ceilinged and dimly lit, with cheap gold tracery decorating the walls. It went deep into the building. Other passages led off on both sides. One, labelled ‘Tufnell’s Marvels’, was cordoned off by a frayed gold rope.

“How’s poor Charley Budd?” Holly asked, as we went.

“Alive,” Mr Tufnell said, “but not, I fear, long for this world. I’ve got him locked in my caravan. He started screaming this afternoon, disrupting Coco the Clown’s toddler party in the main tent. I’m sorry to say it meant more refunds.” The impresario gave a mordant sigh, then glanced aside at us. “I’ll need to see to him shortly. I’m assuming you won’t mind if, once it gets dark, I don’t remain inside? I’d like to, of course, but…”

“That’s not a problem,” Lockwood said. “Mr Tufnell, did I understand you right just now? Have you just lost another member of your team?”

Tufnell had reached an impressive pair of doors, lined with scarlet plush. He paused. “Connor? Yes, he fell from one of the boxes. Landed on the stage. Broke his leg, fractured his skull.”

“Was it the ghost?”

“He’s in no condition to say. All we know is that he was up there, tidying after the show. Suddenly he hopped over the rail and threw himself down. Very nearly died.”

“Who saw him do it?”

“Two of the usherettes, Rosie and Tracey. They said it was an inexplicable act. Whatever it was *he* saw, they didn’t see. Happened this time yesterday.” Tufnell looked at his watch. “Speaking of which, it’s getting late. I’ll show you the stage.”

He pushed open the doors, and we walked through into the auditorium.

As a general rule, Lockwood & Co. didn’t hang out in theatres much. True, back in the summer we’d once chased a Spectre up an alley next to the London Palladium and blasted it to atoms with a flare. As far as I knew, the theatre wall still had the outline of a startled gentleman in a top hat smudged across it in soot. Then we’d gone for a kebab. This was as close to high culture as we typically got, so I wasn’t prepared for what we saw inside.

The auditorium of the Palace Theatre was a world away from its dismal exterior. It was a vast dark space, twinkling with points of light; a cavern of gold. We stood in the deepest velvet black, down amongst the stalls. Above and behind us, electric candles shone along curved balconies, ranged with incredible steepness to impossible heights. To the sides, golden candelabras picked out the ranks of individual boxes, rising three storeys high. Ahead of us, rising above the central aisle, the stage was white and spot-lit,

flanked by blood-red curtains. A number of youths were moving here, sweeping the boards, shifting brightly coloured cubes and baskets around. They worked in silence, but I could hear their hurried breathing. The acoustics were excellent – even whispered noises carried to the far end of the auditorium.

Tufnell led us up the aisle, our boots pattering on the wooden floor. High above, several long ropes hung down from the dark, some ending in trapeze bars, others tied to rings fixed into the balconies. I imagined them in motion, with hurtling bodies in temporary flight. The idea made my palms sweat. It was hard to get over the scale of the place. Far from giving clarity, the dozens of little lights merged together, flummoxing the eyes. You couldn't pick out the details of the balconies without squinting. The ceiling was lost in the warm gold haze.

We climbed steep steps at the side of the stage, and walked out into the light.

"This is it, Mr Lockwood," Tufnell said. "This is where La Belle Dame met her end." He waved his arm at the youths, who had stopped work and were watching him. "All right, you lot can go. Straight outside, no dallying. You know the reason why."

The stagehands trooped away. We dumped our bags and rucksacks in the centre of the stage. Ranged at the edges were wooden cubes of varying sizes, brightly coloured, with hinged lids and little doors. At the back sat an enormous blue crash-mat, knee-high and very broad. Otherwise the surface of the stage was bare, marked by tape and scuffs of decades.

Lockwood was gazing about him, eyes narrowed, face calm. I knew he was using his Sight now, hunting for death-glows or other signs of psychic disturbance. "What's the crash mat for?" he asked. "And these boxes? Part of the show?"

Tufnell nodded. "We start with the trapeze act. They do their thing, then swoop down on the mat. The boxes are for the magic show. The props are in there; you know, caged doves, metal hoops, that stuff. Lots of hidden cubbyholes. Our stage manager designed them. She's very good. But you'll be wanting to see where Roy died? It's stage left, in the wings."

"Thank you," Lockwood said. "We'll start there."

They moved away towards the curtains. I remained in the centre of the stage. Once, long ago, the sultan's casket had sat here, pierced by swords, blood pouring out onto the boards. I looked at my feet, at the bland, smooth wood. I looked out into the golden dusk, imagining the packed house, the stunned silence, the first appalling screams…

No time like the present. I crouched, put my fingertips to the floor. I closed my eyes and Listened…

As if I'd opened a sealed door, I was at once surrounded by a strange and papery rustling, an expectant murmur. It was the sound of an audience making itself comfortable in a thousand seats. The noise rose and fell like the breathing of a giant. I waited, but it did not change.

I stood slowly. The noise was still there. And somewhere underneath it, muffled as if from far away, I could make out Tufnell's voice, as he spoke to Lockwood in the wings. The two sounds did not collide, but ran through each other, being separated by a century of time.

I turned slowly towards wings, started walking after the others. At that moment a chill ran up my spine. I stopped and looked out into the wider dark.

What with the stage lights, and the auditorium's soft haze, it was difficult to make out anything clearly. Nevertheless, as if drawn by a magnet, my gaze moved towards a seat at the back, not far from the door through which we'd entered.

Hard to be sure… Was that a person sitting there?

I blinked; my eyes hurt with straining. I glanced across to see if any of the others had noticed anything. But they were out of view.

"… she pushed the curtains aside," Tufnell was saying, "and saw him here, locked in the ghost's embrace. When she ran forwards…"

I looked back out across the stalls. There was the shape again, so very dark and still. It was impossible to make out any details, except—

I opened my eyes wide.

The shape was not in the same seat.

It was two rows nearer the stage. Not only that, it had moved diagonally towards me across the space.

"…alas, too late. He lay like a rag doll! She had drained him of his life!"

I pulled my rapier clear of its Velcro clasp. I stepped to the edge of the stage.

The murmur in my head grew loud, turned to sudden wild applause. It came from all around me, starting in the stalls, then rippling in a wave across the balconies and boxes. I looked up, scanning the hazy reaches.

At once the sound cut out.

And now: nothing. It was as if the theatre held its breath.

When I looked down again, the shape was no longer sitting in the stalls. But there was an object in the central aisle, directly opposite where I stood. It stood far back under the shadows of the balcony, squat and rounded, almost like an urn or barrel. Darkness enfolded it. I could see no details.

Except…

Something was slowly extending from it along the aisle. A dark, thin line; a thread of black. Another followed it, and then another. They slowly unspooled out into the light, trickling down the gentle slope towards the stage.

I gripped my sword. The threads glistened and shone darkly under the gold lights. They linked and separated, lacing the ground. Longer and longer they grew; faster and faster they came. There was no end to them. I found myself frozen on the lip of the stage. I couldn't take my eyes off the rivulets of blood that ran towards me between the stalls.

9.

"She's here!" My shout echoed out across the hall. "Lockwood! She's here!"

With that, I leaped from the stage, out over the pooling blood, my sword flashing under the lights. I landed on a seat in the front row, crashing heavily, almost falling; then I was up and jumping from back rest to back rest, arms outstretched to keep my balance, chair-hopping my way along the rows. There was no way I was going to touch the floor. On the aisle to my side, the lines of dark liquid flowed past like there would be no end to them. Ahead of me, darkness billowed; I could no longer see the object in the aisle, but cold beat against my face.

From chair to chair, across the empty theatre; to where the seats were swallowed by the shadow of the balcony overhead.

There in the dark! A woman's form, striding towards me.

No time to think, no time to react. With a savage cry, I adjusted my final leap and sprang towards it, rapier aloft and swinging round—

"Are you quite mad?" A tall girl came out into the light. She wore jeans, trainers and a bright blue hoodie, and there was a smaller girl behind her. That was about all I took in as I jerked desperately aside, dropping my rapier and landing inelegantly beside them in the aisle. Which was now entirely empty of blood. Cigarette ends, yes; gum wrappers and crisps – in fact all manner of audience leftovers. But the rivulets of red had gone.

I stood up slowly, breathing hard. I recognised the second of the girls. It was Tracey, the usherette we'd met at the entrance. I didn't know her companion. The aisle behind them was empty as far as the Exit doors. It wasn't that cold now either. The Visitation had gone.

With a clatter of boots, the others joined us, Lockwood at their head. He put a hand on my arm. "Lucy—"

"It's all right," I said. "She was here. She was here… I saw the casket! Did none of you see the blood?"

Kipps picked up my sword and handed it to me, hilt-first. "We saw *you*, playing hopscotch on the chairs."

"But La Belle Dame—" I rubbed my forehead and glared at the girls beside me. "Were either of you sitting at the back just now?"

Little Tracey shook her head. The tall girl regarded me coolly. "Not me. I just came

in.”

“And you saw nothing odd here, in the aisle?”

“Just you.”

She was a tall young woman, broad of shoulder and square of chin. Her blonde hair was tied back in a rough plait. She was very large and cross and real.

“The ghost was here,” I said. “I acted on it. That’s what I do.”

“No one’s doubting you, Lucy,” Lockwood said. He flashed his smile at the two girls. “You’re Tracey, aren’t you? Nice to see you again. And you—?”

Mr Tufnell had been slowest to make it from the stage. The effort had left him gasping. “This good lady,” he wheezed, “that your friend almost decapitated is Sarah Parkins, our stage manager. She’s the one who saved Charley Budd the other day.”

I scowled at her. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Charmed.” She curled her lip at me. “I came in to tell you, Mr Tufnell, that Charley Budd’s started howling again. He’s upsetting all the other employees. You’re going to have to come out, try to soothe him.”

The theatre owner was dabbing at his curls with a vast lace handkerchief. “Bless me; if I live another night, it’ll be a miracle. Yes, yes, I’ll be out directly. Mr Lockwood, I must leave you to your work. Tracey, you stupid girl, I don’t know what you’re doing back in here hanging on Sarah’s skirts. Haven’t you chores to do outside?”

The girl had flinched at his words; she spoke sullenly. “I was frit out there, what with the screaming. Sarah said I could come in—”

“Against my express instructions! Do it again, you’ll feel the back of my hand.”

“Actually,” Lockwood said smoothly, “I’m glad they’re both here. I was hoping to ask them some questions. They’ve each seen La Belle Dame: they’re both witnesses to the ghost.” He smiled at the newcomers, bathing them in the warmth of his attention. “Is there anything you can tell us about the apparition? Where you saw it? The way it made you feel? Anything might be useful, no matter how small.”

“I told you the relevant details,” Tufnell said. He was looking at his watch.

“Tracey?” Lockwood went on. “You saw it most clearly, I believe. On the stage – and in the wings. You saw it with poor Roy Morrison.”

The girl’s face was grey, a haggard light burned in her eyes. “Yes.”

“The Spectre was beautiful, I understand?”

“It was *awfully* beautiful.” She looked away. “I’m glad it didn’t notice me.”

“But when the other boy fell from the box—” Lockwood pointed up at the gilded openings high above us on the wall— “The ghost wasn’t visible?”

“Not to me. But Connor saw it, I reckon.”

“Hold it.” This was Kipps, who had been listening with mounting impatience. “We can all save a bit of time here by popping back and burning the stage right now. Or tearing it up, piece by piece.” He gestured at it. “That’s where La Belle Dame died. It was saturated by her blood. Call me a genius by all means, but surely it *has* to be the Source.”

Mr Tufnell gave a moan of dismay. “Destroy my lovely stage? No! The *expense*…!”

But Sarah Parkins was shaking her head. “It’s not the Source, I’m afraid. Because it’s not the original stage. After the terrible incident all those years ago, the bloodstained stage-boards were ripped out and burned. Same with the actual sultan’s casket, of course. That was destroyed after the original inquest, too.”

We looked at her. “How do you know all that?” Holly said.

The tall girl shrugged. “I’m stage manager. I look back at old techniques, get ideas for scenes and set-pieces. I read it up in books on theatre history.”

“So you’re a bit of a researcher too?” George adjusted his glasses. “I like your style.”

“Ah, she’s a clever girl, Sarah is,” Mr Tufnell said. He was visibly shifting from one foot to another, eager to be gone. “And committed to Tufnell’s, despite our recent troubles. Though I says it as shouldn’t, she was fond of poor Roy in particular. I’m much obliged to her for carrying on in such tragic circumstances. Ain’t I, Sarah? But now we really should go.”

“All right,” Lockwood said. “If there’s nothing more—”

“It’s not just the *stage* you need to be looking at,” Sarah Parkins said, as they turned

to leave. “I can tell you that at least. The thing appears all over. I saw it up in the dressing room corridor. Girls have seen it walking on the balconies, and down in the basements… Never know where it might show up – or who it might focus on next.”

“So it’s been seen all across the theatre?” I stared out at the dim, silent reaches of the auditorium.

“Yeah. Most everywhere. I don’t think anywhere’s safe.”

Mr Tufnell and his employees departed into the gathering dusk, leaving the door onto the field propped open. We were left to ourselves. As we always did in a haunted building, we set off on a careful inspection, and we immediately discovered that the Palace Theatre was a complex and sprawling structure. It had three distinct areas, interconnected by a variety of stairs, passages and confusingly positioned doors; and each area, as Sarah Parkins had intimated, gave some cause for psychic concern.

At its heart was the auditorium itself, with no less than three levels of seating – the stalls on the ground floor; the first floor balcony, or lower circle; and the steeply inclined upper circle, or ‘gods’ level, up near the roof. The individual theatre boxes near the stage were reached by passages running at circle and gods levels. We did a number of psychic readings on every floor, and detected traces of supernatural activity: fleeting chills, subtle miasmas, a pervading sense of unease that came and went almost at random.

The second main area was the ‘front of house’. This included the entrance foyer on the ground floor, two sets of main staircases, and two other public spaces directly above, on circle and gods levels, from which the balconies were reached. The stairs were lined with faded plush carpets, muffling all sounds. One of these seemed colder than the other, for no discernable reason. Next to the foyer on the ground floor was the dark, narrow exhibition space containing ‘Tufnell’s Marvels’, which turned out to be a collection of mechanical devices, or automata, that moved and chimed if money was put into them. We treated this area with extreme caution, as we’d encountered haunted automata before, but despite the presence of several mechanical clowns, which so often cause trouble, the room seemed psychically quiet.

The third and final area of the theatre, and one we were particularly interested in, was the ‘backstage’ region, comprising the stage, the wings, the dressing rooms and basement stores. There was a cold spot on the stage, which roughly corresponded to the place where I’d heard the sound of the audience from long ago. It was four degrees cooler than the rest of the auditorium. Lockwood ordered an iron circle to be set up near to this, and we equipped it with magnesium flares and salt bombs. We also paid close attention to the dressing room corridor beyond the wings, and to the musty basement beneath the stage, which was filled with racks of costumes, broken scenery and unidentifiable debris. No further cold spots were discovered, but we fixed up circles in both these locations too.

Once, while walking across the first floor foyer, I thought I heard a peal of far-off laughter, but other than that the place was utterly still.

At last Lockwood gathered us into a huddle on the dim-lit stage. Faint glows studded the auditorium’s expanse. We’d turned the lights everywhere to their lowest setting. It was too big and complex a place to risk wandering completely in the dark.

“We’ve had a good look round,” he said softly. “Anyone got any thoughts?”

“Still think the stage is the place,” Kipps said. His goggles hid his eyes; with his red hair spiked above it, he somehow looked like a mad balloonist. “It’s got to be the focus. It’s where Roy Morrison died.”

“You may be right,” Lockwood agreed. “Certainly Roy’s death glow is still there, very faint and fragile, in the wings. No sign of La Belle Dame’s death glow, though. It’s long gone. Stands to reason, I suppose, if they renewed the stage.”

“She definitely roams around,” Holly said. “Lucy saw the sultan’s casket in the stalls.”

I nodded. “Yes. Emitting prodigious amounts of blood.”

“Sounds as if we may need waders when we track her down,” George said. “Well, there’s no mystery what we need to achieve. We have to locate the Source, find out how the thing’s managed to come back.”

Lockwood was staring out into the auditorium. "It's not just a question of *how*. It's a question of *why*… What's the motivation?"

"La Belle Dame is a malevolent and manipulative spirit," I said. "That'll do for now, surely."

"Yes," Lockwood said. "Only I'm not necessarily thinking about the ghost…" Whatever train of thought he was following looped him back into the present; he turned to us. "It's early yet. I think, for the present, we can each follow our noses. Stay here, if you want to—" He looked at Kipps— "or roam around. See if you can pick up any traces. Anything happens, if you notice so much as a drop of blood or the flash of a ghostly ankle, shout out and we all come running." His smile broadened. "Let's see which of us can next draw La Belle Dame's attention…"

It was risky, yes, but splitting up like this was a standard tactic; the kind of thing done when a haunting covered a wide space, and the ghost's ultimate vanishing point wasn't yet known. We were spreading out to hunt for it, but we were also acting as bait. The plan was to lure the apparition out into the open by being just a *little* bit vulnerable. In the long run this was better than sitting twitchily in one random place for hours, hoping the Visitor would simply drop by.

At such times the skull in the jar, annoying though it inevitably was, provided a sense of company for me. Letting the others go where they would, I drifted out across the stalls towards the front of house. When I reached the foyer, I opened my backpack, turned the tap at the top of the jar, and was instantly engulfed by a tide of resentful psychic chatter that had been bottled up since breakfast.

"*What kind of bosom friendship is this*," the skull cried, "*where you go merrily shutting me up for hours on end? You never plug Lockwood's mouth with a giant cork, or stick a gym shoe in Holly's gob to keep her quiet. Which is a crying shame, because I'd pay good money to see both those things.*"

"*They* don't keep distracting me with nonsense," I growled. "And *you* need some peaceful thinking time. Have you solved the Problem for me yet, while you were in there?"

"*No! With all this silver-glass, it's all I can do to eavesdrop on your private conversations right outside my jar.*" The skull's light flared indignantly. "*Hey ho. Still, I manage. From what I've overheard, I take it we're mid-case?*"

I gave a brief account of events, while checking for psychic traces in the foyer. It was very still; the temperature was a bit low near the ticket booth and snack bar, but that was probably a draught from the entrance door. From somewhere far-off in the night, I heard a maddened howling.

"*So this ghost shows up full strength out of nowhere after almost a century,*" the skull mused, when I finished. "*Interesting. Anybody round here with a grudge?*"

"Lots of spirits suddenly become active for no reason," I said.

"*True, true. This Tufnell… Popular cove, I suppose.*"

I couldn't imagine *anyone* liking Tufnell much. "He wasn't very kind to Tracey."

"*Was that the small one?*" The voice from the jar took on a sudden unexpected note of menace. "Yes*, I wouldn't be surprised if she* was *up to something, the nasty, whey-faced little runt. Reminds me of the girl who killed me. Well, this foyer's clear. No nasty ghosts hiding behind the Coke machine. Let's move on.*"

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and made for the stairs – then paused, mid-stride. "Hold on, rewind just there!" I said. "Tell me about this girl."

"*What girl?*"

"The one who killed you!"

"*Oh, her. I barely recall. Memory's a funny thing. So much is flushed away, yet every now and then a few dark nuggets come bobbing to the surface. That was one of them.*"

"You put it so beautifully. I should think you might remember your own death."

"*I don't hold a grudge about it, if that's what you mean. I'd have done the same to her. In fact I was* trying *to, when she crept up with a knife and got me in the back. It's quite an amusing story, in some ways… Aren't we hoping to catch a ghost?*"

We were. We got on with it. The skull didn't seem disposed to tell me more.

For more than an hour I walked the soft, carpeted landings of the Palace Theatre. The

world beyond the windows turned black, except for a few lights far off across the field where Mr Tufnell and his employees skulked in their caravans. Once or twice I caught the distant sound of feverish applause that made me rush to the balconies and look out over the auditorium. Always, when I got there, the place was dark and still. I saw some of the others from afar: Lockwood striding purposefully across the stage; Holly taking readings high in the gods. Sometimes, when climbing the long, curved stairs, I had the sensation I was being followed, but whenever I looked back, saw nothing but the electric candles flickering in the sconces, the frozen laughing faces on old posters on the walls.

The skull kept more or less silent, but I could feel its surveillance alongside mine.

"*It's a fierce one,*" it said at last. "*I can sense it out there, flitting in the dark. Fierce, but not strong... Its weakness angers it. It envies the living their vitality.*"

"If it catches someone, it sucks the life force out them," I said.

"*Makes sense. It's trying to restore itself, fill itself back up. Only it can't, because it's dead and gone and full of holes.*" The skull chuckled unpleasantly. "*I could tell it not to bother. You suck the living dry, and the goodness just flows right through you and out the other side. 'Course, you get a kind of buzz, I won't say you don't, but it's empty calories. Ultimately a waste of time.*"

"You are so disgusting. You killed people that way?"

"*Only one or two. Ooh – did you feel that?*"

"No. What?"

"*She's made her move.*"

My heart double-thumped against my chest. The glee in the ghost's voice was palpable. "I don't—"

"*Patience. Patience… Wait for it… Ah yes, there you go*."

A sound rose out of the bowels of the building. It was strange, piercing and of several parts, and it took me a moment to realise what it was. No wonder: it was something I'd not heard before.

Three of my colleagues screaming.

I found George and Lockwood at the front of the stalls, just below the stage. George was sitting down, his notebook in his lap, with Lockwood crouched beside him. As I careered up the aisle, I saw Kipps bursting in from one door, Holly from another. Both had rapiers out, both were shouting fit to burst.

"I saw her!"

"Me too!"

"Hold it," Lockwood's face was pale, his eyes bright. He quickly appraised them. "Are either of you ghost-touched? No? Then can we please panic in an orderly manner, one at a time? Quill first."

Kipps had ripped his goggles off; he pointed to the open door that led to the scenery storerooms at the back of the stage. "There! There! In the tank! Do you see her? The poor drowned girl!"

We all looked back through the door. "There's no tank there, Quill," Lockwood said. "It's just an empty space."

Kipps took a deep breath. He passed a pale hand across his forehead. "I know that. Of course I know that. But I saw it, and I saw the body floating in it. Her head was underwater, her arms all limp and dangly, her long hair stretching out like weeds…"

Lockwood nodded impatiently. "Did she leap out and attack you?"

"No, she didn't as it happens. But she was very white and pasty, and also very dead."

"Sounds nasty," Lockwood said. "Now, Holly. Your turn. What did *you* see?"

Holly bit her lip. "I was at the back of the stage, behind the crash mats, where there's that gap in the wooden backdrop. It's dark there, and at first I thought the thing I saw was one of those weights they put on the ends of ropes to help pull up the scenery. But it was too long, and thin, and white for that. And too high off the ground. I shone my torch up and… And it was a woman hanging there. Hanging by the neck, and spinning slowly round. Her dress all lank and still, and her legs as thin and white as candles—."

"You're as bad as Kipps," Lockwood said. "Everyone's getting poetic today. Well, it *does* sound horrid. Did you see her face?"

“Do you know what,” Holly said, “I’m *so* glad I didn’t.” She shuddered. “I couldn’t even if I wanted too. There was too much hair.”

“All right.” Lockwood’s eyes met mine. “What about you, Lucy. You’re okay?”

I shook my head crisply. “I’ve seen nothing since earlier.”

“Good. So that means it’s just Quill, Holly – and George.”

“George!” In all the excitement I hadn’t paid him any attention. “What did you see?”

George was hunched in the chair, grey-faced, and his hair was slick with sweat; even so, he’d been scribbling in his notebook, listening carefully as the others talked. “Oh, I had a nice spectacle reserved for me. I was over there below the balconies, when I heard an odd little winching sound. I looked round and saw a full-size guillotine, with the blade just rising. A girl was fixed in the stocks below, crying piteously for help. There was a basket below her, and when the blade fell…” He waved a hand. “Anyway, I’m pretty sure I saw the climax from La Belle Dame’s French Revolution extravaganza, ‘The Fair Tricoteuse’. Holly, you had the ‘Hangman’s Daughter’, while Kipps had the ‘Captive Mermaid’. Yep, it looks like La Belle Dame’s giving us her full repertoire. It’s like a Greatest Hits album.”

“That’s right,” Lockwood said. “And we’ve got to remember this. It’s all just an act – or not even that: it’s the *echo* of an act. The ghost’s messing with our minds. The problem is – she’s covering a wide area. Where’s she going to crop up next?”

I glanced behind me at the dark expanse of seats, then back at Lockwood. “Have you seen anything?”

“No.”

“You’re the only one who hasn’t.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I’m just resistant to these things. Right, if everyone’s happy, we stick with the plan. It’s clear that she’s got the run of the whole theatre. We’ll keep making wide sweeps of it. Her Visitations so far have been fleeting. Sooner or later, she’ll hang around long enough for us to react. Then we’ll deal with her. Any questions?”

No one had any. Chocolate was shared, and drinks taken. We began our rounds again.

Hours passed and bled into each other; outside was darkness, inside, the theatre’s soft gold glow. The ghost appeared to have exhausted its resources with its three concurrent visions. Even the sporadic phenomena of the early evening had petered out to nothing. I began to think we’d exhausted the activity for the night, and grew a little bored.

At an unknown point the skull and I found ourselves (for the second or third time) in the room of automata, known as *Tufnell’s Marvels*. It was a dark, winding corridor, with brightly coloured mechanical toys arrayed in glass cases on either side. Some were simple figures – hinged bears and clowns and grotesque policemen that could move or dance; others were complex little scenes showing real life tragedies, such as The Great Fire of London, that would come to brief, cog-driven life if you put your money in.

First thing I did, as always, was check the temperature and use my Senses. As always, I got nothing. I peered at the exhibits, and as I did so, a memory came unbidden to my mind. “I used to see these things at the country fairs,” I said, “when I was a little kid. My sister Mary gave me the money to make one go once…”

“*Didn’t know you had a sister*,” the skull said.

“I’ve got six of them. Ooh, look at this.”

At the far end of the room, near the exit to the exhibition, was a square glass box. In it was the most intricate toy of all. It took the form of a traditional traveller’s caravan, with bow roof, large wooden wheels, and sides gaily painted in red and gold. The model stood on a field of fake grass with dark trees and a full moon behind. There was a window along one side, with net curtains drawn across it. I could just make out the shape of someone hidden inside. Above the caravan was a sign: ONE POUND. YOUR FORTUNE TOLD. There was a slot below, and a silver hatch beside it.

I looked at it. I had a pound.

“*Go on*,” the skull said. “*You know you want to. What harm can it possibly do?*”

“It’s just a silly machine.”

But I was bored. I took the backpack off and set it on the floor, with the skull's jar peeping out. Then I took the pound from my pocket and sent it clinking into the slot.

At once, a light came on inside the caravan, illuminating a hideous witch-like silhouette, all pointy nose and chin. There was a deranged cackling. With rhythmic jerks, the side of the caravan swung back. Lights disguised as candles hung from the ceiling; these sprang into flickering life, revealing a badly painted crone hunched over a table, a crystal ball clutched between gnarled hands. As I watched, a milky brightness flared in the ball. The cackling came again. The hands moved across the surface of the crystal. A mechanical cat chased a mechanical mouse around the back of the fortune teller, and a mechanical crow on her window-sill cawed loudly. The candles flickered; cupboard doors opened and closed, revealing concealed skulls and demons. The light in the ball flared and went out. A tinny bell rang somewhere, and something rattled into the hatch at the front of the cabinet. Cogs whirred and spun. The caravan began to close.

I put my fingers in to the hatch. Whether it was a glitch or not, two pieces of paper had emerged instead of one. I took them out and read them in the light coming from the fortune-teller's window.

The first read:

He will go into the dark.

The second:

He will sacrifice his life for you.

I stared at the papers for a moment, then crumpled them abruptly in my hand. What kind of fortune was that? That wasn't a fortune. It was stupid. It was a stupid machine.

"*What did it say?*" the skull asked. "*Bet it was something terrible.*"

"Oh, shut up. Why don't you ever shut up? You're always on at me."

The skull said nothing. I waited. Nothing. Even in my anger and disquiet this struck me as slightly odd. When I glanced down at the jar, I saw that the ghost's face was indeed animated, the bug-eyes rolling, the mouth moving urgently. Yet I heard nothing. Then I noticed that the lever at the top of the jar had swung closed, blocking the psychic contact.

I hadn't turned the lever.

A breeze ruffled my skirt against my legs; chill air parted my hair and brushed around the contours of my neck. A soft white glow extended out across the floor, sparkling on the glass of the cabinets like the light of a cold new dawn. It was a gentle light, and the face of the smiling woman standing close behind me was gentle too. As I turned, I'd been scrabbling for my sword, but one look at that radiant lady was enough to make me recognise how silly and inappropriate such an action was. I let my fingers hesitate on the hilt; hesitate, then fall away.

10.

The woman was all fair and shimmery, with a pearlescent wasp-waisted dress that flowed down tight against her legs before spilling out like plunging foam. Her shoulders were bare, her long slim arms as white and sweet as sugar. She did not stand still, but swayed gently side to side – her arms and body stirring separately, like reed fronds in an underwater current. Her pale hair fell in waves around her neck, cascading over her shoulders, moving, always moving as if to secret music. And how sweet the face was! I wasn't especially sickly, or a lovelorn boy, so I frankly wasn't La Belle Dame's target audience, but even so I felt the tug of longing as I looked into those fathomless dark eyes.

What was it that made me yearn to walk across? What was it that made me want to give myself to her? It wasn't just that she was exquisite. Sure, you had the gently smiling mouth, the sweet full lips, the set-square straightness of that lovely nose. I could take or

leave all of *that*: you could see similar blandly beautiful young people in any edition of *London Society* or other fashionable magazines. But she was *flawed* too. That was the brilliance of it. There was a homeliness in her, something ordinary in the lines of the face that made her feel accessible. It was the flash of Doris Blower behind Marianne de Sevres. You felt that deep down she understood what it was to be weak and unspectacular. She understood your need for love.

"*Come*…" a soft voice said. "*Come with me*."

I stood and gazed at the ghost. As if frightened by my scrutiny, it drifted back a little like a startled deer. I felt a plucking in my heart, the need to follow it wherever it might go. I took a stumbling step towards her.

"Well, *she's* a disappointment and no mistake."

I blinked, looked round. George had come into the exhibition room from the foyer, and was standing there beside me. He had cobwebs in his hair and a salt bomb in his hand. He was frowning through his glasses, and a little spear of anger went through me to see him like that – so silly and scruffy and making stupid faces at such an important moment. I didn't want him there. "Meaning what?" I said. My voice sounded odd and thick. "What are you talking about?"

"After all that build-up," he said. "I was hoping for the real deal when we met her. Little bit of glitz, bit of high-end razzle… At the very least I was expecting some decent psychic glamour. But not this."

I looked back to the far end of the corridor, where the ghost swayed and waited, sad and slender as a winter willow, her head tilted on one side.

"She's not good enough for you?" I said.

"Not good enough? She's a sack of pus and bones, Luce. That's below even *my* pay grade."

The woman was gazing at me, the long dark eyelashes beating in time to the rhythm of my heart. Again I felt the tug of longing, again a jarring anger at the vulgarity of George's words. I laughed harshly. "What rubbish are you talking, George? Pus?"

"Well, okay. The technical term is 'clear, translucent ichor, manifested into a semi-solidified corporeal state'. But when it's all melty and icky and dripping off the bones, I think we can go with pus. The *effect* is much the same."

"Shut up, George."

"Pus, Luce."

I could have punched him. "Just shut *up*."

"No. Look at her, Lucy. *Really* look at her."

And as he said that he stepped forward and clasped my arm, rather harder than I thought necessary. It pinched, in fact, and made me squeak – and with that brief, sharp discomfort, the glamour that had cloaked my brain was momentarily dislodged, like a curtain blown sideways in the wind.

And behind it – what was the shimmering, shining dress?

Ectoplasm swirling in a void.

Those lissom arms? Blackened spikes of bone.

That rounded hip? Dark flesh, shrivelled and pierced with many holes.

That gentle face? A naked skull.

I blinked. The curtain blew back into position. The wise, sweet woman stood there, beckoning.

I stared at her. Outwardly I stared at her just as before. But this time, I was willing myself to *see*.

Even so it was hard. Again the mesmeric swaying of the figure sought to lull my guard; again I felt the pull on my mind and body. But now my focus was on myself, on my own solidity and weight and scepticism, not on the shimmery, undulating thing.

"*Come with me*," the voice said again. "*Come up on to the stage*..."

I could only croak it out. "No."

It was like snipping a cord with scissors. At once, like a cover falling from a statue, like a cloak being cast aside, the vision fell away, leaving in its place only the grinning, twisted corpse that surged towards me. I pulled out my sword and held it before me; the thing at once fell back, mouthing and champing, beckoning me with obscene gestures.

George was at my shoulder. “Want me to pinch you again?”

“No.”

“Can do. Arm, leg, buttock, anywhere you fancy. Just name the spot.”

“No. It’s okay. It’s okay now. I see it.”

He nodded. “Then perhaps you won’t mind if I do this?” He tossed the salt bomb across the room. It burst at the apparition’s feet, showering it with bright green sparks and making it hiss and spit with pain. It drew back, retreating to the shadows of the passage beyond, where it hung a moment, fizzing, steaming. I could see its pinprick eyes glinting in the dark as it watched me; I felt its malevolence pounding in my head. Then it was gone, and the pull of its glamour with it, leaving me suddenly bereft.

“Wonder where it’s off to now?” George said. “Why don’t you come back into the foyer with me a moment, Luce? We need to regroup, consider what to do.”

The foyer was a good place to go. Its chipped gold plasterwork and distinctive popcorn-and-cigarette odour was about as far from spectral enchainment as it was possible to get. George took a chocolate bar from the kiosk and ate it. I leaned back against the ticket counter, water flask in hand, my rucksack at my feet. The ghost inside was staring at me in mute reproach. I could hardly speak. I was light-headed with self-loathing. Finally: “Thanks, George.”

“Sure.”

“Next time I do anything like that, don’t waste time with words. Just hit me.”

“Okay.”

“Hit me anywhere. The harder the better.” I kicked my heel against the wall. “God!”

George shrugged. “Don’t let it get to you. That’s what spectral glamour does. Anyone could have been taken in.”

“*You* weren’t.”

“No. Not this time.” He shrugged. “I hardly think you were *really*, Luce. You’d have thrown it off without my help, you know.”

“I hope so.” I took a sip of water. I didn’t know anything much, just then.

“Definitely you would. Right, the good news about La Belle Dame is that I don’t think it likes being up-front aggressive. What it wants is a passive victim. As long as we all stay strong, it’ll keep its distance. What’s not so hot is that it seems to have the run of the place. There’s no saying where it’ll show up next.”

The full shock of my encounter had dwindled, leaving behind a dull agitation – the kind you get when there’s something on your mind, and you can’t quite think what it is. “Reckon the whole theatre is the Source?” I said. “That’s possible, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. She was clearly at home here. But it’s odd that it’s never shown itself before now. I suppose new ghosts are always popping up…” George took another chocolate bar thoughtfully. “Doesn’t have to be anything suspicious about it.”

“The skull reckoned there was foul play afoot. But then, it would.”

“Lockwood does too,” George said. “So it may be that something that’s been brought into the theatre recently has triggered the haunting. Something connected to La Belle Dame’s gory end. It’s been hidden somewhere, and that’s allowing the ghost to wreak havoc every night. If we find it, we can halt her in her tracks…” Chewing swiftly, he came to a decision. “The most likely places are those old storerooms below the stage. I’m going down to have a proper rummage. What about you? Want to come with me?”

I almost said yes. There was something about George’s staid matter-of-factness that was particularly reassuring that evening. But the agitation that I couldn’t put my finger on was forcing its way to the forefront of my mind.

“Think I’ll check on the others,” I said. “Warn them what happened to me.”

“Oh, they’ll be all right.” George was already pottering off towards the auditorium. “We’re a resilient lot in Lockwood & Co. Even Kipps. Mind you, with those bog-eyed goggles, any ghost would run a mile from him.”

He vanished down the passage. I was moving too, heading for the stairs. I shared George’s confidence, of course I did, and yet I found my heart was pounding hard as I climbed up the carpeted steps to the mezzanine floor. It wasn’t the exertion, either.

Before George had intervened, the ghost and I had shared a psychic connection. I’d passively opened my mind to her. Which meant she knew my thoughts. She knew what I cared about.

I remembered my final glimpse of her eyes, the way they’d glittered at me in the dark.

I knew her intention.

I knew what she was going to do.

The mezzanine foyer was empty, the electric wall-lights burning deep and low. When we'd last met, Lockwood had said he'd patrol the upper regions, the balconies and boxes. He'd be somewhere near… But there were so many interconnecting levels, so many stairs and passages… Perhaps I'd start in the gods, work my way down. But as I reached the next flight of stairs, I saw Holly coming down.

"Where's Lockwood?" Holly said.

I stopped. "What? *I* don't know. I was going to ask you."

"Well, did he say where he was going?"

"When?"

"When you were with him just now."

I stared at her. "I haven't been with him. I haven't seen him for ages, Hol. Not since we all met in the stalls when you saw those horrid visions."

Something in her face had slackened and dropped; she looked at me with wide, dark eyes. "But… you were on the first-floor balcony with him. You *were*." Her voice sounded accusatory, but I read the shock in it, and the sudden fear. "I was *sure* it was you," she said. "The way you beckoned. He was following you towards the door."

"Not me, Holly."

We stared at each other. Then I pulled my rapier from my belt. Holly did likewise. We were already running, slamming open the balcony door.

"When was this?" I snapped. "How long ago?"

"Only a minute or two… I was up in the highest boxes. I saw you both below…"

"Yeah, only it *wasn't* me, was it? Why did you think it *was*, for heaven's sake? Did it look like me? Face? Clothes?"

"I – I didn't see your face. *Its* face. Or clothes. It was dark-haired, I think… or maybe that was just the shadow."

I gave a curse. "Jeez, Holly."

"There was just something about it. The way it stood, or made its gesture. It was *so* like you."

Well, the thing *had* been an actress, of a kind. We were out onto the steep steps of the lower balconies now, and the great soft silence of the auditorium closed round us again. Lights glimmered on the balcony railings below, with the trapeze ropes hanging in the shadows and the dim white stage gleaming across the gulf beyond. We spun round, scanning the sloped seats, looking for Lockwood's reassuring shape. But there was nothing.

"He could have gone out one of the other exits," Holly said, pointing. "Taken different stairs down. This place is *such* a maze."

I didn't answer. I damped down my panic, cleared it from my mind. Holly was right. The theatre *was* a maze. There was no use just running about hoping to strike lucky. Lockwood could be anywhere. *It* could be anywhere.

Or could it? Though the thing had manifested in many random locations around the building, there *was* a pattern when it came to its attempts at psychic enchainment. It had been leading me towards the stage. Charley Budd had been rescued walking towards the stage door too. The victim who had thrown himself down from a box – he'd seemingly wanted to get on stage too.

And Roy Morrison, the only one who had actually *been* on the stage?

Much good it had done him. He'd died there.

That was where she wanted us. Why not? It was where *she'd* died too.

I ran down to the railings, looked down from on high.

At first I saw no one, and when you considered how many of us there were, wandering the theatre that night, it made you realise how successful La Belle Dame's diversionary tactics had been. One by one, she'd drawn us all away from the place where the action was. We were scattered, helpless. Holly and me up high; George in the basement; Kipps, heaven knew where. And Lockwood—

There he was now, walking slowly up the aisle. His movements were smooth enough, but there was something placid about them, too unhurried. I thought to see a wisp of shadow just ahead, moving at the same pace, leading him on.

I called his name. I screamed it. Holly, crashing down beside me, did so too. But where the acoustics from the stage were so good, here the space just swallowed up the

sound. Lockwood didn't turn his head. Perhaps the wisp heard; it seemed to dance more avidly as it led him towards the stairs.

"Quick, Luce!" Holly was dragging at my sleeve. She'd made the same deductions I had. "We've got to get down there!"

"Yes—" But even as I said it I knew we had no time. Too many stairs, too many doors and passages to be negotiated. We had no time. "No, *you* go," I said. "Run as hard as you can."

"But what are you—"

"*Run*, Holly!"

She was gone, leaving only a waft of perfume in her wake. She was too good an agent to argue, though she must have been desperate to interrogate me, find out my plan.

I hardly knew what it was myself.

Or rather, my *conscious* brain didn't. If it *had,* I'd have been crawling, cowering under the nearest seat. But the unconscious bit, that was *way* ahead. It had made the calculations. With Holly sent packing, I turned my attention to the railings on the balcony.

Far below, Lockwood was clambering, step by step, up onto the stage. His sword was at his belt, his hands hung limp beside his coat. If he was fighting the compulsion, there wasn't any sign of it. How slim he was, how frail he looked from here. Under the lights, the haze of shadow that I knew was still ahead of him was harder than ever to see, but I wasn't bothering about it now. I was clambering onto the rail, beside where the trapeze ropes hung. There were several of them, ends tied to a jutting metal frame. Each rope looped out and downwards across the awful space, before extending up towards the distant roof.

I seized the frame, steadying myself, refusing to look down at the stalls far below. The nearest rope looked likeliest: its outward curve was very large. Tufnell had mentioned the way the trapeze artists started the show, so I knew the leap was possible.

That didn't mean it particularly bore thinking about.

Far away, on the hard white stage, Lockwood had reached the centre. Something shimmered into existence a short way ahead of him: something in a long white dress with flowing hair. It was radiant and lovely; it cocked its head at him. A slim arm beckoned. I heard a husky voice, whispered on the air.

"*Come to me*."

And Lockwood moved forward.

Know what? *That* made me mad. I picked up the rope with my left hand, pulling it towards me. It was heavy, rough and fibrous; I gripped it, winding my wrist and arm tight round. Then, with my free hand I slashed at the knot below; the rapier point cut it as easily as a flower stalk, and I had the rope's weight pulling on my arm.

I leaned back, and gave a small jump upwards. Gravity did the rest.

Don't make me tell you what it was like, looping down through the air. *Down* being the key word of that horrific descent. I was basically falling, leaving my stomach somewhere in the region of the balcony, and with the stalls below leaping up to receive me like rows of rabid dogs. Then I was passing over them at ferocious speed, so close I might have kicked the hats off people sitting there; rushing with my arm nearly pulled from its socket and my fingers burning on the rope, and my outstretched sword flashing under the lights. And now up again, with the stage opening in front of me, and the ghost woman standing, swathed in other-light, and Lockwood walking towards her outstretched arms.

"*Come…*"

You know me. I love to obey an order. I swung up and over the stage, passing directly in between them, flashing through a zone of ice-cold air that burned my skin. And the tip of my rapier flashed through something too: namely the neck of that whispering, simpering woman, slicing through it neatly, side to side. Then I was up and beyond her, flying over the top of the crash-mats, which was roughly the point I thought it advisable to let go.

The next bit, landing painfully on my bottom and doing a super-fast reverse somersault with my ankles around my ears, I'm not going to dwell on. It wasn't gainly and it wasn't soft, but I broke nothing, and it didn't last long. Almost before I'd landed, I was savagely tearing myself upright and leaping back down to the front of the stage, teeth clenched, breathing like a bull.

There was Lockwood, standing where I'd seen him. Arms at his side, relaxed and

passive. If he'd noticed me swing past his nose like a mad woman, it hadn't affected him greatly, but he was no longer walking towards the shape. My discarded rope was just flashing back the way it had come, and it almost bowled him over. He gave it no heed.

And there, nearby, the headless woman. Or not *exactly* headless – the head was still frowning at me from mid-air. It was almost in its correct position, but clearly disjointed from the torso. Its long fair strands of hair coiled round it, slapping against the lacy dress, seeking to bind it back to the stump of the neck.

Even now, she wasn't done. The lips twisted in a parody of a smile.

"*Come…*"

"You know," I said, "a lot of trouble would be avoided if people like you just lay down and accepted they were dead."

I threw a canister of iron, which shattered against the boards; countless filings went racing beneath the ghost's feet. The nearest particles ignited, surrounding La Belle Dame with a circle of green flames. The figure leapt and jumped in agitation, knocking the head aside. Coils of hair grappled urgently at the bare white shoulders, and with spidery movements resumed hoisting the head towards the body.

Didn't bother me. I had plenty of canisters. I chucked another one, setting more plasm alight. The apparition shivered, lost its focus. Its set smile began to fall away.

Somewhere far off, a door banged. That would be Holly, not far behind.

The woman held out her hands. "*Come…*"

"Oh, get lost."

Maybe I shouldn't have used the magnesium flare, but I'd had enough of the ghost by then. It was too selfish, too needy, too vacuous; I didn't want to share psychic space with it a moment longer, and I was aware of Lockwood's absence at my side. Besides, Tufnell could always get himself a new stage. The explosion hit it directly from below: flames went right through its body, blowing the head like a kettle lid high into the air. Half the plasm was vaporised instantly in the blast; the remainder was frail and faint, the merest outline, the ghost of a ghost. I watched it as it fled away across the stage, diminishing as it went, the head pulled after it on strings of plasm. As it went, the bright dress dwindled, the white limbs shrivelled up; the open sword wounds in the body glinted like black stars. It dived at one of the big wooden cubes, merged into the wood and vanished.

"Where is it?" Black hair streaming behind her, Holly raced across the burning stage. "Where is it? Where's it gone?"

I didn't look at her. "That yellow box!" I said. "The Source is there! Find it! Seal it up!" With that, I cast the ghost from my mind. I stood in front of Lockwood, looking up at him. How pale and cold his skin was when I took his hand. His eyes were almost blank; almost, but not quite. I could see his consciousness like a twist of smoke, drifting in the depths.

"Lockwood!" I slapped him hard across the cheek.

Somewhere behind me came a series of violent crashes. That was Holly, getting to work on the box.

"Lockwood… It's me."

"Luce!" That was Holly too. "I found something! I've got my silver net…"

I spoke softly now. "It's me. It's Lucy…"

I like to think it was just coincidence that Holly laid the silver net on the Source right then. I like to think it was the sound of my name that brought him back. Who's going to tell me otherwise? Either way, the twist of smoke rose up and up, and bloomed out across the surface of his eyes. Intelligence came with it; intelligence and recognition – and something more than that. He smiled at me.

"Hey, Luce…"

I slapped him again, sharply and on both cheeks. Take it from me, that's a hard thing to get right when you're crying.

III.

A Body in the Street

11.

It was afterwards said that at the very moment that Holly wrapped the silver net around the bloodstained tiara hidden in the box, at that very moment out in Tufnell's caravan on the far side of the field, little Charley Budd stopped howling, sat up and asked for chicken soup. So the theatre people knew instantly that we'd done the job, and that the ghost was gone. Their subsequent emergence into the auditorium, step by cautious step, was nicely timed, as we were just battling to extinguish the fire I'd started on the stage. All hands came to help. By dawn, the fire was out, the theatre safe, the tiara wrapped ready for destruction in the Furnaces; and Sarah Parkins, the stage manager who had built the secret compartment that concealed the Source, and who had promptly admitted to putting it there, was locked in her trailer under the watchful gaze of two of the burliest trapeze artists, awaiting the arrival of the DEPRAC vans.

For Mr Tufnell, it was a satisfactory end to the affair, though he groaned to high heaven at the magnesium burns in the centre of the stage. Sarah Parkins's guilt had likewise dumbfounded him. "To think she should be the cause of all this!" he cried, his face beetroot with emotion. "Such betrayal! Such malice! I treated her like a daughter!"

"Actually, it wasn't about you," Lockwood said. Seeming none the worse for his recent psychic enchainment, it had been Lockwood who had identified the culprit and invited her to confess. He had subsequently spent half an hour talking with her in the caravan. "Sarah's told me what happened. It was originally about Roy Morrison. You mentioned yourself, Mr Tufnell, that Sarah had been fond of him, but by your own account he'd fallen head over heels for that Russian trapeze artiste with the thighs. Sarah was left rejected, and her heartbreak became hatred. She wanted revenge. It so happened that in her work clearing out the prop stores, she'd discovered a relic of La Belle Dame's last performance – the tiara she'd worn for The Sultan's Revenge. It had been kept for all those years in an iron box, which must have suppressed the ghost. Without knowing its psychic significance, Sarah got it out. Subsequent sightings of the Spectre – and its particular interest in young men – made her realise its potential. She hid the tiara onstage and awaited developments. It wasn't long before Charley Budd was snared, but Sarah didn't want *him* dead: that's why she saved him. Roy Morrison, a day later, wasn't so lucky."

"Hold on," Holly asked, "why didn't she remove the tiara after his death? Why risk other people's lives?"

Lockwood shook his head. "It's hard to say. Even Sarah wasn't sure. I think her private misery had morphed into a dull hatred for the world in general. Or perhaps she found she simply liked the secret power… But that's a matter for Inspector Barnes, not for us. Here he is now. I'll fill him in."

Looking at Lockwood in that moment, as he strode across to meet the DEPRAC contingent, coat flapping behind him, so confident and self-possessed, you'd have been hard pushed to realise that an hour or two before he'd been a ghost's plaything. His smile was as bright as ever, his energy lit the stage. A little crowd gathered about him. Old Inspector Barnes, crumpled and hangdog as ever, listened to his every word. George and Kipps were there too, standing on the sidelines, luxuriating in everyone's goodwill.

Only Holly and I hung back. In my case this was partly because of exhaustion, partly a delayed shock at what I'd recently had to do. I simply didn't feel like joining in. Holly was in better shape, but she could see the state I was in, and wanted to keep me company.

I watched Lockwood through a fog of weariness. From the moment he'd awakened, he'd seemed his normal self. But I knew what I'd seen when I'd first looked in his eyes.

They'd been no different from those of Charley Budd. And what had George said about Charley – him and the other victims? *They had weak connections to life.* Enchainment worked on those who, one way or another, were already somehow looking to the next world. The ghost had tried it on me, too. I'd wavered, I'd felt the pull. But Lockwood? He'd fallen for it, big time. It didn't matter how sprightly he seemed now. For a few short minutes, he'd been back in that overgrown cemetery with his family. He'd been walking towards that empty grave.

Dawn came. We were standing at the gates to Tufnell's Fairground, waiting for the night-cabs to take us home. Kipps had got hot teas from a bearded lady who seemed to like him. He, George and Holly were huddled together, sipping from plastic cups. I stood slightly apart, coat wrapped tight round me, looking out over the rooftops. You could just see the Thames from here, glinting in broken shards beyond the factory chimneys. It was a cold morning.

Lockwood came to stand beside me. We stood in silence, shoulders touching, watching the grey city grow sharp and definite, hardening into a new day.

"I haven't said a proper thank you," Lockwood said.

"It's all right."

"You were amazing, Luce. Holly's told me. Kipps too – he saw the part from when you landed on the crash-mat."

"Oh, he didn't see *that* bit, did he? God."

"You saved my life."

"Yes, I did."

"Thank you."

I wiped my nose with a gloved hand, sniffed at the coldness of the air. "We shouldn't have split up, the way we did, Lockwood. And you shouldn't have been there at all. I told you and George before we came."

He hesitated. "Yes, you did."

"You were vulnerable to that thing."

"Well…" He let out a long, slow breath. "It may have *seemed* that way. But I probably wasn't *that* far under, was I? It's all a bit of blur, to be honest, but it's *possible* I'd have come out of it in time…"

The London skyline lost its allure. I stared at him. "No," I said. "No, Lockwood, it isn't possible. I've never seen anyone so far gone. You were completely snared. At the end I even chopped the bloody thing's head off and you were still mooning over it."

Lockwood's mouth tightened. He pulled his collar up against the chill. "I know you're angry with me. But weren't you almost snared too, from what I understand? George saved you, didn't he?"

"He helped me, yes."

"So it could have happened to anyone."

"Maybe."

"I'm sure of it."

"Are you?" I folded my arms. "How nice for you. I'm not."

We watched the DEPRAC vans come out of the gates and pull away, lights flashing. There was Barnes in the passenger seat. He waved a lugubrious hand.

"That doesn't mean I'm not grateful to you, Lucy," Lockwood said, after a silence. "I know what you did for me."

"Swung down on a bloody trapeze was what I did, Lockwood."

"I know."

"I hate heights."

"I know that."

"I hate trapezes."

"Yes."

"Don't ever make me have to do something so ridiculous and dangerous again."

"Lucy, I won't. I promise."

Which was all he could say and all I could ask of him. I left it there. I wanted to believe him. I really did.

Back at Portland Row, normality was resumed, which meant arguments about who paid

the taxi fare, three helpings each of breakfast, and George hogging the hot water in the bathroom. Kipps and Holly had gone to their respective homes; mid-morning saw George, Lockwood and me all sleeping late and long. When I woke up again, sometime after noon, the first thing I saw was the ghost-jar, still protruding from the top of my backpack where I'd slung it on my bedroom chair. It was tilted at an angle, thanks to a fair-sized pile of dirty washing; and the spectral face inside was staring at me like I'd just shot his grandmother.

Strangely, it was a reassuring sight. I flicked the lever, and sat blearily at the end of the bed, tousled and comatose, letting the shrill complaints flow over me.

"*I* didn't shut you off this time," I said, when I could finally get a word in. "It was the ghost."

"*So? It's still your fault! You can't let any old ghost woman go around fingering my jar. It's your responsibility to look after it. I can't do it, can I? I'm in your care. I call it negligence, pure and simple.*"

"You're not a child. Get over it." I scratched at my hair; the white parts at the front were showing no sign of growing out. Maybe I'd have to dye them. "Skull," I said suddenly, "I'm worried about Lockwood."

The ghost seemed taken aback. "*Lockwood?*"

"Yes."

"*Hey, you know me. I love him like a brother.*" The face adopted an expression of unctuous fake concern. "*What seems to be the problem?*"

I stretched my legs out in front of me, rocking on the edge of the bed. I thought of Lockwood in the cemetery, and of him walking towards the ghost. I thought of another spirit that had worn his face, many months before, and predicted his demise. I sighed. "I don't understand what drives him," I said. "Mostly he seems absolutely fine, but underlying it all… I'm not sure what he's really looking for. It might be something that's not… that's not that healthy…" I let the effort peter out. It was no good. I couldn't say it.

"*Well, thanks for that,*" the ghost said, after waiting to check I'd really finished. "*A probing analysis. And about as* c*lear as a bucketful of mud*."

I shook my head, suddenly annoyed with myself. What was I thinking? I couldn't talk to a haunted skull about Lockwood's parents or the graveyard. The idea was absurd. "I know you don't care," I said, "but I just wondered if you'd noticed anything…" I got up, reaching for a towel. "Forget it. It's not important."

"*I mean, it's not as if I'm renowned for my empathy, anyway*," the ghost said. "*It's a long time since I've been alive. I've forgotten what it feels like, having mortal motivations. And of course I hardy know Lockwood at all.*"

"It's all right. It's not a problem."

"*Apart from his recklessness, his deep-rooted feelings of personal loss, his mild self-absorption, his obsession with avenging his family's loss, and his obvious death-wish, I couldn't tell you anything about him. You and me, we're just as clueless as each other, eh?*" the skull added. "*Ah, well."*

I paused with the towel in my hand. "What did you say? Don't be ridiculous. He doesn't have a death-wish."

"*Fine, you're not comfortable with it. I understand that. We'll let it drop.*" The skull began humming a light tune. "A*ctually, no we won't. It's surely obvious to everyone. He's always had it. It's practically his middle name. And maybe it's more pronounced than ever now, thanks to what happened to you both. Don't forget, you've both been to the Other Side. That'll have had its effect too, you know.*" The face grinned at me, eyes narrowing to slits. "*Why do you think La Belle Dame tried her luck with you last night? You're not noticeably a boy*."

I hadn't thought of it that way before, but it was true. Of all her potential victims, I'd been the only girl. Still, true or not, somehow the skull's insights always made me angry. "I should have known better than to try to talk with you," I said, bending close to the jar. "Lockwood's got plenty to live for. Plenty."

The face regarded me. "*Has he? What would* <u>that</u> *be, I wonder? Give it a name.*"

It did something to the light inside the ichor, so that it dimmed and went opaque, and I found myself staring at my own distorted face in the side of the jar.

"*Care to comment?*" the ghost said.

I cursed and walked away. “No! I don’t need to explain myself to a tatty bit of old bone! And I certainly don’t need to second-guess Lockwood’s motivations!”

“*You so do*,” the skull called. “*It’s your favourite hobby! And think about it, if you ever actually freed me, you’d never have to talk to me again!*”

Its words bounced off the closing bathroom door.

George and Lockwood were in the library when I came downstairs. Lockwood’s long limbs were draped across his favourite armchair as he read the newspaper. George was hunched nearby, inspecting a small sheaf of papers; on the floor at his feet lay a piece of unfolded oilcloth and a length of filthy string. Funny, in all the immediate flurry after our encounter with Sir Rupert, the packet Flo Bones had given George had never been mentioned again. He hadn’t brought it up, and I’d forgotten to ask him.

I threw myself into a chair. The library being chilly, the fire was lit and blazing.

“More news,” Lockwood said, from behind the newspaper.

“Bad or baddish?”

“Baddish, bad *and* interesting. Sometimes in combination.”

“Oh, just tell me what it is.”

“Remember the other day, George mentioning old Adam Bunchurch?”

“What, getting all furious with the Fittes agency for trying to close him down?”

“That’s right. Well, he’s in hospital.”

“Ghost-touch?”

“No. He was attacked last night. Exactly what happened is unclear. He was on his way home from sorting a Lurker case in Rotherhithe. Walking alone. Someone lay in wait for him. They beat him up and left him for dead. It was only by chance that a night-cab drove by and saw him lying in the street, otherwise he wouldn’t be alive at all.”

I glanced across at George. “No clue as to who did it, I suppose?”

Lockwood didn’t speak for a moment. “When Bunchurch wakes up, maybe he’ll be able to say something. Maybe the police will make an arrest, I don’t know.”

I didn’t comment. It didn’t seem particularly likely.

“The next thing to tell you is also fairly ominous.” Lockwood tossed the paper aside. “We got an official letter this morning from DEPRAC. All the heads of the small independent agencies are requested to report tomorrow evening to Fittes House, where Penelope Fittes is going to make an announcement. Six p.m.” He glanced across at me.

“Closing us all down?”

“It doesn’t say.”

“Things are happening,” George said. He was still engrossed in his papers.

“They are,” Lockwood said, “and speaking of which, I’ve been meaning to tell you both. At the theatre this morning Inspector Barnes came up to me and shook me by the hand.”

“Doesn’t sound like him,” I said. “Was he ill?”

Lockwood glanced at his palm and wiped it on his knee. “I do hope not. No, he was thanking us for our sterling efforts. But that’s not all. He gave me something too.”

He leaned his arm back and handed me a piece of roughly torn paper. On it were the words:

17 Alma Terrace, NW1, 5 pm tonight

"He wants a meeting?" I said.

Lockwood grinned. "A secret assignation! Might be a bit more hush-hush if it wasn't scribbled on official DEPRAC notepaper, and in Barnes's own spidery handwriting, but there you are."

"So are you going?" I asked.

"I think we all should. What do you think Barnes wants, George?"

"Mm?" There was a gleam behind George's spectacles as he looked up. His eyes were bright, but his mind was focused on something far away. "Oh, he'll be telling us to keep out of trouble, stop poking our noses into things that don't concern us, I expect…" He inspected the document in his hand. "Well, too late for that now."

"Okay, what *are* those, George?" I said. "And how come Flo gave it to you?"

"She's been doing a little bit of research on my behalf, here and there. I'm not always able to gain access to some of the libraries, but Flo knows people who are surprisingly well connected… As for these, they're death certificates." He scratched his nose.

"Is this to do with your research on Marissa Fittes?" I said. "What have you found?"

George hesitated. "I can't talk about it now. Still thinking. Ask me again tomorrow."

Alma Terrace, the location for our meeting with Inspector Barnes, turned out to be a soot-stained row of narrow houses in north-west London. A few old rusted ghost lamps lined the northern side, flashing vainly at the coming dusk. We walked between them, from light to dark to light again, looking for Number 17.

Net curtains hung in many of the ground-floor windows, lit by warm interior light. The blinds weren't yet drawn, and you could sometimes make out hazy images of people moving in the rooms. Already, in their evening domesticity, they were detached from us. The curtains kept agents like us at one remove.

Inspector Montagu Barnes was waiting for us outside the gate of Number 17. It was a dark part of the street, midway between ghost-lamps; we could see his crumpled form flashing dimly on and off as we approached. The house behind him was little different from the others, except for the neatness of its tiny garden. It featured grass and gnomes.

"Evening, Inspector," Lockwood said. "Sorry we're late."

"Didn't expect anything else," Barnes said. "In fact you're only half an hour later than I requested. Nice one. I'm honoured."

There followed the usual awkward interlude while we smiled at him in our young and perky fashion, and he regarded us with middle-aged distaste. There seemed something slightly odd about him tonight. What was it? Not his general bearing. As ever, his moustache drooped as if shouldering the sorrows of the world. Then I realised I had never previously seen Barnes without either his raincoat or his tie. Tonight both were absent. He had his shirt sleeves rolled below his elbow, and his collar was undone.

"So… here's Number 17." George surveyed the building. "It's a sinister-looking place. You can bet your boots something awful's happened here."

"Yes. You carrying out an exorcism or something, Mr Barnes?" Lockwood asked. "Might be simpler just to knock the old pile down…" He hesitated. "Why are you glaring at us like that?"

"Because this is my home, isn't it?" Barnes gave a heartfelt sigh. "Well, I suppose you'd better all come in."

Barnes held the door ajar for us. It didn't look so much a gesture of welcome as more a preparation for slamming it hard on George's head. We slipped through as quickly as possible. Before closing the door, the inspector took a good look up and down the street. The ghost-lamps flashed on and off in the quiet dark; no one seemed to be near.

Barnes led us down a narrow hallway and into a cramped dining room, centred on an oval table of dark wood.

"Nice cosy little spot," Lockwood remarked.

“Yes, really lovely brown carpet,” George said. “And that row of ceramic ducks on the wall… I believe that kind of ornament has become quite hip again, hasn’t it?”

“All right, all right,” Barnes growled. “You can save your breath. Sit down, make yourself at home. I assume you’ll all be wanting tea.” He stomped off to the kitchen.

One by one, we sat around the table. The chairs were upright, uncomfortable and clearly little used. There was a patina of dust on the table top. Aside from the ducks, there were photographs on the walls of soft green hills, misty valleys, tumbledown cottages, expanses of air and nature. They reminded me of my childhood, far from London.

A kettle boiled in the distance; spoons clattered; Barnes returned with a heaped tray. To our surprise chocolate digestives were included in the offering. The usual ceremonials were completed. We sat in silence, with our cups and biscuit plates, facing the inspector at the head of the table. It was an intimate setting, laced with ambiguity; we might have been about to join in prayers, or play cards for money, or do anything in between. The combination of drab formality and general awkwardness gave it the taste of one of those suburban séances, where middle-aged women tried to summon ghosts.

“I do honestly like these photographs, Mr Barnes,” I said. “I didn’t know you enjoyed the countryside.”

Barnes regarded me. “What, did you think I’d have pictures of truncheons or handcuffs on my wall, maybe? I do *have* other interests, you know.” He shook his head sourly. “Anyway – yes, I do. But I didn’t ask you here to discuss my photos. I wanted to give you a warning.”

There was a silence. Lockwood sipped his tea. “A warning, Mr Barnes?”

“That’s what I said.” The inspector hesitated a moment, as if even now he feared to commit himself; then he sat back decisively in his chair. “Everything’s changing,” he said. “You know that, don’t you? DEPRAC, the agencies, how it’s all controlled. The big outfits are running the show: the Fittes Agency, the Sunrise Corporation – the people who make a lot of money from the Problem. Independent operations like you are being squeezed out. I don’t need to tell you this. There’ve been plenty of announcements to that effect this summer.”

“There’s another one tomorrow, I believe,” Lockwood said.

“Yes, at Fittes House, and I doubt it’ll be any better for you than any of the others. Still, it’s a general meeting, so whatever new rules they come up with won’t be directed solely at you. However, something’s come to my attention that *is*.” Barnes’s shrewd eyes scanned us each in turn. “I’ve heard, through the DEPRAC grapevine, that certain prominent people are losing patience with you.”

“Certain prominent people?” Holly said.

“You mean Penelope Fittes, I suppose?” George asked.

Barnes pressed his lips tight together so that they both vanished under his moustache. “I leave it to your judgement who I’m talking about. It’s not necessary for me to say.”

“Oh, it is. It is. Go on, say it,” George said. “There’s no one listening, is there, unless they’re hiding in the teapot.”

“Thank you, Mr Cubbins. You’ve illustrated my point before I even made it.” Barnes looked round at us all severely. “It’s precisely that sort of irreverent, incautious attitude that’s leading you into trouble. Whatever you may think about the new rules we all live by, there’s no doubting the fact that we’re all being observed far more closely than before. It pays to keep a low profile. And Lockwood & Co. keeps being noticed. That’s all I’m saying.”

Lockwood smiled. “What can anyone object to? We’re not stepping out of line.”

“Aren’t you?” Barnes said. “If that’s the case, why are DEPRAC officers being commandeered to watch your place on Portland Row? Why is that popinjay Sir Rupert Gale so interested in you? Why does Penelope Fittes ask for regular reports on your activities? ”

“She does?” Lockwood said. “We’re honoured.”

“No. You’re not. You’re at risk. You may have heard about Mr Bunchurch’s little accident. There have been others, too. I don’t want to see the same thing happening to you. Whatever it is you’re doing, stop it. That’s all I’m saying.”

“We’re not doing anything untoward, inspector,” Lockwood said. “We pay our taxes. We take proper precautions. We leave most of our clients alive.” He flashed his brightest smile. “Think about last night at the theatre. We do good work.”

Barnes nodded grimly. “Bunchurch did good work too.”

“Well, not *very* good work,” George put in. “He was actually a bit useless, wasn’t he?”

“That’s not the point!” Barnes gave a sudden roar. He banged a hairy fist on the tabletop, making his cup jerk in its saucer. A gout of dark strong tea splashed across his plate. “That’s not the point! He crossed them, and they left him bleeding in the street!”

We sat there, Barnes breathing hard, the rest of us in shocked silence. Even George looked stunned.

“You’ve spilt your tea, inspector.” Lockwood handed him a handkerchief.

“Thank you.” Barnes mopped at the table. His voice was quieter now. “You know I’m not in charge at DEPRAC any more,” he said. “There are still good men and women there, and plenty of them, but we don’t have any say in wider operations. I stamp forms, issue orders, go through the motions on a day-to-day level. I can’t influence what’s going on. But I see things clearly enough. Just as I see you’re lying now. It’s in your eyes. It’s in the way that Cubbins sits there, all smug and self-important, puffed up like a frog. *I* see it, plain as plain. And if I can, you can be sure other people see it too.”

He finished dabbing with the handkerchief and gave it back to Lockwood.

“Mr Barnes,” Lockwood said hesitantly, “all we’ve been doing is – just a little research, here and there.”

He glared at us from under hairy eyebrows. “I don’t want to know about it.”

“It’s important. Seriously, it is.”

“I don’t want to know. Mr Lockwood, you’ve impressed a lot of people over the years. Personally, I expected you all to be ghost-touched long ago, but your agency has flourished. Impress me again now.” Barnes touched the handle of his cup with a stubby finger, rotating it gently in the saucer, side to side. “Keep your heads down. Let them forget about you.”

We sat in silence around the table in the dark and dusty room.

“Let them forget about you,” Barnes repeated. “Even now, it’s probably not too late.”

12.

Whether Inspector Barnes’s warning made any impression on George was doubtful. The following morning, as I made my way downstairs, his bedroom door hung open. For reasons of hygiene it was never wise to venture inside, but even from the landing the rumpled, empty duvet and strew of papers on the bed told their own tale.

In the kitchen, a scrawled note had been left on the Thinking Cloth:

Need to check something out. Back lunchtime. BE HERE!!

But George was back even before lunch. Holly, Lockwood and I were in the basement office when a crash from the kitchen sent us scurrying up the iron staircase. George stood at the table. He had swept the fruit bowl off it and dumped a great pile of documents in its place. He had a pen between his teeth; with ferocious speed he was swapping papers, selecting maps, spreading the pile around.

"Um, are you ready to chat about things?" Lockwood ventured.

George made a flapping motion with one hand. "Not yet! Just a couple of things to sort! Give me an hour!"

"Do you… do you want a sandwich?" Holly asked.

"No! No time." George was peering at a photostat of an old newspaper article. He frowned at it, cast it aside. "Oh, but Lockwood—"

"Yes?"

"Can you get Kipps over? He should be here too. One hour."

"All right. We'll leave you alone till then."

George didn't answer. He was in his own world, buoyed by the thrill of discovery. At such times a physical transformation seemed to come over him. His weight dropped from him; he was swift of movement, light on his feet; Lockwood at his most panther-like and predatory moved with no greater velvet grace. His spectacles shone with light from the garden; in just such a way, one felt, the goggles of a fighter pilot would catch the spark of the sun as the plane performed miracles of flight high above the earth. Even George's hair crackled with new energy, swept back from his pale forehead like that of a racing driver negotiating switchback bends. It was as if the sinewy intelligence that lay concealed behind his doughy frame was suddenly laid bare; its quick workings transferred into the deftness with which he organised his papers, flipped from one file to another, danced around the kitchen table, pausing only occasionally to scribble something down upon the Thinking Cloth. As Lockwood later said, it was like watching an artist at work; you could have taken tickets for his exhibition on that sunny morning.

In the end Holly volunteered to hunt out Kipps. While she slipped out, Lockwood and I retreated to the rapier room, where our straw dummies, Floating Joe and Esmeralda, hung on their chains. Lockwood rolled up his sleeves and practised moves on Esmeralda. I did the same with Floating Joe. Excitement rose in us, expectation at what George might reveal. We left the dummies swinging and began duelling with each other, grinning as we circled, feinting, dodging, making ornate patterns with our clashing blades.

The hour passed. Hot, sweaty and in need of tea, Lockwood and I went back upstairs. In the kitchen, the table and most of the surfaces were invisible beneath a sea of papers. George sat waiting. He looked sweaty too.

"I'm ready," he said. "Put the kettle on."

Up on the sink, documents lapped at the base of the ghost-jar. The skull's face rolled its eyes at us. "*Thank goodness you're here. He's been like a plump whirlwind. And there was a most distressing glimpse of pink flesh when he bent down to pick up a paperclip. I'd have feared for my life if I wasn't already dead.*"

While we were organising the tea, Holly returned with Kipps. All our essential team was there. Lockwood shut the door to the hall and drew the blinds at the windows. The light in the room became blue, dim and conspiratorial. We drew up our chairs. In the jar, the face grew faint and unobtrusive; even the ghost seemed keen to listen. Our cups were filled, some biscuits handed out. It was time for George to begin.

"First things first," he said. "Take a look at this." With a dramatic flourish, he produced a photograph and set it on the table. "Recognise our friend here?"

It was a black-and-white shot of a middle-aged man in a dark suit, with a raincoat folded over his arm. He was pictured just coming out of a car; other people stood around him. But it was his face that transfixed us: it was marked by deep and distinctive lines, and framed by a shock of long grey hair. One side was lost in shadow, and the eyes were almost hidden under shaggy brows. It didn't matter. We had seen that face before.

"The Revenant in Marissa's tomb!" Lockwood said. "The one who chased us up the stairs and spoke to Luce! It's him for sure! Isn't it, Luce?"

"It's him." When I closed my eyes I saw the wild-haired ghost rising through the mausoleum floor. I opened them – and there was this staid and sombre gentleman. No doubt of it. They were the same.

"You're a marvel, George," Lockwood said. "So who is he?"

George grinned round at us. "This," he said, "is a certain Doctor Neil Roberts. Not much is known about him, but he was personal physician to Marissa Fittes, and he tended to her in her last illness. It's he who signed her death certificate, and he who confirmed her cause of death in a report to the media." He picked up the documents Flo had found for him, and squinted at them through his glasses. "According to Dr Roberts, Marissa died from 'a wasting disease that affected all the organs of her body, and which had all the aspects of premature old age'. Sounds nasty, but Marissa was cared for up at Fittes House. She didn't go to hospital, and only Dr Roberts had access to her." George put the papers down. "I've been hunting around, but after her death he fades from the records and isn't heard of again."

"Not surprising, really," Holly murmured. "Since he was lying in her tomb."

Lockwood whistled. "Marissa didn't die. And the person who *knew* that, who'd faked the official records, was silenced immediately afterwards."

"No wonder he's so livid," I said. I still heard an echo of the whispered voice: '*Bring her to me*.'

George nodded; he set the photograph aside. "That takes care of our friend in the tomb. The next question concerns how Marissa reappears as Penelope. I take it we all agree that this is what happened?"

There was a hoot from the jar. "*You ought to by now!*" the skull cried. "*I've been telling you long enough! Honestly, those digestive biscuits have higher IQs than you.*"

"Shut up," I said. "Not you, George. The skull." I glared at the indignant ghost.

"In fact," George said, "I haven't quite got to the bottom of Marissa's transformation yet, though I've got a terrific lead that I'll tell you about in a moment. What's known is that after the old girl's death, her daughter, Margaret, takes over the agency."

He produced another photograph, this one of a young and dark-haired woman. She was officiating at some official function, and didn't seem to be enjoying it. Her face was pale and sad.

"Margaret was head of Fittes for just three years," George said. "She was a quiet, retiring person, by all accounts not well suited for running a big company. Well, she didn't have to do it long, because she died too."

Holly frowned. "How did *she* die?"

"It's not known. I can't find any proper death certificate. Then Penelope pops up. I've got birth certificates for her. Hospital records, all the rest of it. Everything seems correct and above board. But it isn't. It can't be. It must all be forged. Because we know she's Marissa. Somehow a terrible transformation has been made."

George eyed us all over the top of his glasses. We waited. Even Kipps had paused with his mug halfway to his mouth. With careful deliberation, George selected another sheet of paper.

"I found an article in an old Kent newspaper," he said. "It's from the time when Marissa and Tom Rotwell were just starting out as a psychic detection team. Back then almost nobody believed in ghosts, crazy as that sounds. They were considered complete eccentrics. The Problem hadn't yet begun to spread. A journalist interviews them, makes lots of cheap jokes at their expense. But listen to this—" He adjusted his spectacles and read the following:

> Marissa Fittes is a slim, bony girl with short, cropped hair and an attitude of unusual intensity. In clipped, confident tones she tells me of their strange supernatural experiences. The dead are among us, she said, and they bring with them wisdom and secrets of the past. She ignores my scepticism and tells me she has already written a monograph on the substance of spirits, which she terms 'ectoplasm'. It is the immortal stuff that is inside all of us, she says. Understanding it will bring great benefits to humanity, and perhaps give us power over life and death. At present, her ideas fall on stony ground. Having been unable to find a magazine that would accept her piece, she has had it printed at her own expense.

George took a sip of tea. “See? Even then, right back at the beginning of her career, Marissa is interested in getting power over life and death. I think, somehow, she’s succeeded.”

Lockwood frowned. “There’s nothing about any of that in her published writings, is there? She doesn’t talk about plasm being ‘immortal stuff’, as far as I can remember.”

“No,” George said. “She goes all quiet about that. Which is why I’m particularly keen to track down this missing ‘monograph’ of hers. It’s taken me months to get so much as a sniff of it. But today, I think I cracked it.” He smiled round at us with a look of triumph. “Today, in a remote library, I found reference to something called ‘*Occult Theories*, by anonymous’. It doesn’t have Marissa’s name attached to it, but it was privately printed in Kent at about the correct time, and I bet it’s the one. Only three copies are known to exist. One is in the Black Library at Fittes House, one was bought by our old friends at the Orpheus Club for their private reading library, and one went to the Spiritualist Museum in Greenwich. The first two are obviously inaccessible, but I reckon I could blag my way into the last. In fact, I intend to, later this afternoon. If I can find this paper, it might just piece a few mysteries together.” George sat back in his chair. “I’ll try, anyway.”

There was a general buzz of congratulations at this news. The only exception was the skull in the jar, which yawned and blew its cheeks out in cruel mimicry of George, but no one paid any attention. We all took more biscuits.

Lockwood opened another pack of digestives. “This is great,” he said. “If we can complete our picture of what Marissa’s been up to, we can go back to Barnes – or the newspapers – and make everything public. All we need is concrete proof.”

George nodded. “And we also need to connect it to the wider Problem. I think I’ve cracked that too.” He chuckled. “It’s a story of forbidden acts that takes us back more than fifty years.”

“Pass me a pillow,” Kipps said. “This is going to take hours. I can feel it.”

George pushed his glasses up his nose. “Oh, well, if that’s the way it is, Kipps, I can certainly keep it short and sweet. Here’s my analysis: I think Marissa Fittes and Tom Rotwell are to blame for the Problem. There. That’s it. The end.” He gathered up his papers and tapped them into a neat pile.

Lockwood grinned. “All right, George. I’m sure Quill didn’t mean to sound so wearily contemptuous of all your hard work. *Did* you, Quill?”

“No. It was purely coincidental.”

“There. See? Everyone’s happy. George, have another jammy dodger and fill us in.”

“Okay,” George said. “Well, I’ll keep it short and sweet. We all know that Fittes and Rotwell started out as two psychic researchers in Kent. I’ve been through all the local papers. They’re first mentioned sixty years back, doing investigations here and there. As we’ve seen, no one took them seriously at first. Ten years later, that had changed.”

“Because of the Problem,” Holly said. “It had begun to spread.”

George nodded. “Yep, and here’s the critical detail. The way you read it in Marissa’s *Memoirs*, the Problem was suddenly on the march, and Marissa and Tom were the only ones fighting against it. Gradually their methods became accepted. Salt, iron, rapiers… The whole range of agency techniques started with them.”

“Some famous cases,” I said. “The Mud Lane Phantom, the Highgate Terror…”

“Precisely. The whole Fittes myth begins here.” George sat back in his chair. “But there’s another way of reading the data too, and to do this I had to map out all the places where Marissa and Tom were at work. What it shows is that those famous outbreaks – in other words, all the new ghosts that started cropping up – *follow* Marissa and Tom’s movements. If the two of them are active in a certain area, new hauntings tend to be reported soon *afterwards*. And that can’t be a coincidence.”

“So you think they were doing things to stir the ghosts up?” Holly said.

“Yep.” George regarded us. “And what do we know for sure *really* stirs ghosts up?”

I looked at Lockwood; a shadow had passed over his face. “Visiting the Other Side,” I said softly. “You think Marissa and Tom were doing this, all those years ago?”

“Yes, though maybe Marissa found it easier than Tom. I’ll tell you why later.” He tapped one of the folders on the table. “As Lucy says, everyone knows the famous cases they investigated. They were a team for four or five years. But then – very suddenly and acrimoniously, they split. No official word on why. Almost immediately, Marissa starts

her own agency. A couple of months later, Tom Rotwell starts one too. And their companies have been rivals ever since."

"Until now," Lockwood said, "with Penelope in charge of both."

"We met Rotwell's grandson a few months back," George said. "What was he doing? He was making a gate to the Other Side. Remember all the paraphernalia he used? The stolen Sources, the clumsy armour the Creeping Shadow wore… It must have been years in the planning. It was big scale stuff – big, but awkward too. It smacks of someone who knew what he was about, but was doing it the hard way. I think he was trying to copy something that his grandfather and Marissa had once done."

"Visit the Other Side?"

"Right. Rotwell knew the theory, but he was having problems with the technique. On the one hand he was struggling to make a secret gate big enough – we know he created one under the Aickmere department store a year or so back, and by using it started the Chelsea Outbreak; after that, he built one out in the countryside, which immediately caused the ghostly infestation of the local village. Sadly for him, we put an end to both experiments."

"We're annoying that way," Lockwood said, grinning.

"Yes, and the armour his bloke used to protect himself on the Other Side – that was pretty hopeless too," George said. "Just compare it to the spirit-capes that you and Lucy wore. You were far lighter on your feet. And those capes were mostly made out of feathers. It's safe to say Rotwell was playing catch-up, but I'll tell you someone who isn't."

"Marissa?"

"Precisely. She's got some other system, and I think she's been quietly using it for years and years without anybody noticing. She does it somewhere that's nice and private, but also in the middle of things – and the epidemic's been rippling outwards from it all this time." He took off his glasses with an air of finality. "No prizes for guessing *where* I think she's doing it. You're going there tonight."

"Fittes House," Lockwood said. "Right by Trafalgar Square, the centre of London."

"I would say so."

"But *why*?" Holly cried. "That's what nobody's been able to explain to me! Why take the risks? Why stir up the ghosts? If they know the terrible consequences, why do they keep on doing it?"

"Whatever she's up to," George said, "I think it's helped her to stay young."

I got up to refill the kettle. Standing at the sink, I had a sudden desire to check that the garden was empty, that no one was listening to us. I peeped through the blinds at our overgrown lawn, at the houses opposite, at the old apple tree by the wall. I had a sudden image of little Lockwood seeing his dead parents standing beneath it, many years before. There was nothing there now, just long grass, a few rotten apples in the shadows of its boughs. The garden was quiet. No one was near.

"A moment ago, George," Lockwood said, when our cups were full again, "you said that Marissa might have always found it easier to visit the Other Side than Tom Rotwell. Why do you say that?"

"She's a Listener," George said. "One of the two best there is." He looked at me.

I frowned. "What's *that* supposed to mean? I don't go waltzing off to the Other Side."

"No. Though you *have* been there. Thing is, I've been puzzling over it, what advantage Marissa might have had, and again, the answer's obvious, really. I woke up in the night, realizing. She talks with spirits. We know what that means: it brings you closer to them. After all, who, out of all of us, is closest to ghosts?"

Everyone slowly turned their heads. Everyone looked at me, Lockwood, Holly and Kipps – not accusingly, exactly, but with thoughtful contemplation. It was deeply irritating. Even worse, the face in the jar was winking at me and nuzzling up against the glass in a decidedly over-familiar way.

"*It's like I've always said*, *Lucy*," the skull said, "*you and me, we're a team. Hell, we're more than that. We're an item*. *Everybody knows it*."

"We are not," I growled.

"*Are so*."

"In your dreams." I glared at the others. "Don't ask me what he just said. It's not relevant to anything."

George adjusted his glasses. "Case in point. Marissa talks to ghosts much the way you do. Only maybe in her case it's not just lovers' tiffs. Who knows what secrets they've

given her, what mysteries of life and death."

I shook my head. "If so, she was lucky. This skull wouldn't know a mystery of life and death if it walked up and sat on him."

"*Hey, I give you plenty of good stuff! It's just you haven't the wit to understand it.*"

"Oh, be quiet."

Lockwood had been watching the skull in silence for some time; now, he stirred. "I'm glad our friend's feeling lively today," he said. "I'd like to ask him something." He regarded the jar. "So, skull: you've often told us how you talked with Marissa, all those years ago…"

The face rolled its eyes. "*Yes, yes, I chatted with her once. I've said so enough times, haven't I?*"

I passed on the essentials. "It says it did."

Lockwood nodded. "Just to be clear: you both spoke? It was a full conversation?"

"*That's right, bub. Like this one, only more interesting*."

"Yes, it was a full conversation."

"So how come Marissa didn't keep you?" Lockwood asked.

The face in the jar gave a start. "*What?*"

"It says, 'What?'" I said.

"As in it didn't hear me? Or didn't understand?"

"More like it was peeved. You definitely hit a nerve there, Lockwood."

"*He so did not!*"

I nodded. "The skull's sore about it. Definitely sore."

"*I'm not sore*!" the ghost said. "*Not in the slightest. I simply don't understand the relevance of the question.*"

I relayed this. "Well," Lockwood said, "whenever I read Marissa Fittes's *Memoirs*, I see she makes great play of having spoken with Type Three spirits. She goes on and on about how rare and fascinating it is." He smiled at the ghost. "Which makes me wonder, skull, why you ended up in a jar in the cellar for fifty years, after this one conversation."

"No need to wonder about that," I said feelingly. "I've long been tempted to do the same."

"But you take my point. She knew the ghost's value. It could have told her any number of secrets about the Other Side. Yet she chose to ignore it. Why?"

"Skull?"

"*Search me.*" The face still seemed annoyed; the light in the eyes dwindled to a bright green ember. Then, as if from far away, it said, in a small, affectless voice, "*I will say that she didn't seem surprised at my being able to speak. At my robust language, yes. At some of my choicer suggestions about what she could do with herself, also. But at me actually speaking? No. It was old news as far as Marissa was concerned*."

I repeated all this, as best I could. Lockwood nodded. "Remember that quote George read out just now. What did Marissa say? The dead bring with them the secrets of the past? She'd been chatting to another Type Three."

"*It's possible*." The ghost gave a grunt. "*How it could have been any more fascinating or informative than me, I can't imagine.*"

"Well," George said, "maybe the mysterious little book *Occult Theories* will shed some light on that. I'll let you know tonight, when I get back from the library." He began gathering up his papers. "That's it for now," he said. "I hope you thought it worth waiting for."

"George," Lockwood said, "you've done wonders. I don't know what we'd do without you."

13.

Penelope Fittes, director of the great Fittes Agency, was not a publically minded person. Despite her celebrity, she mostly confined herself to her apartments in Fittes House, the headquarters of the company on the Strand. True, occasionally she emerged for important ceremonies, such as the annual service for fallen agents at the tombs behind Horse Guards Parade. And she was sometimes glimpsed, black hair pinned back, dark glasses

on, driving through the capital in her silver Rolls Royce, on her way to appointments at the Sunrise Corporation or Fairfax Iron. But that was about it. Invitations to meet with her in private were not normally forthcoming. So the summons to Fittes House to hear Penelope speak on agency matters that evening was not one to be ignored, even if you weren't interested in her. And we *were* interested, very deeply.

Even so, only Lockwood and I attended, since George was busy at the library. "We'll compare notes tonight," he'd said as he departed. "I'll be back later, hopefully with the book. Meanwhile, you go and look at Penelope – or Marissa – or whoever she is. Look her in the eyes, and tell me what you see."

What we saw when we arrived at the great grey building on the Strand were streams of operatives from our fellow agencies arriving in the dusk of early evening. There they all were: the pea green jackets of Grimble, the buttercup yellow ones of Tamworth, the striped pink blazers of Mellingcamp and the rest. They congregated by the flower beds where ranks of lilies had been planted in the shapes of rampant unicorns; they filed slowly through the etched glass doors. Traditionally, herding so many agents together would have been like shovelling a dozen tom-cats into a sack and expecting them to cuddle up and keep the peace. Rivalry between companies was deeply engrained, a function of their independence; in the past, chance encounters in the street often led to arguments and even duels. Tonight, with that independence threatened, the mood was different, wary and subdued. Doors were held open for old enemies; muttered greetings exchanged. Under the watchful gaze of many silver-jacketed Fittes agents, we shuffled through reception, and into the conference hall.

As the venue for her announcement, Ms Fittes had chosen this mighty room, the Hall of Pillars. It was one of the most famous meeting places in London, a grand and gilded space, where marble floors and decorated ceilings showcased the wealth and history of the agency. Nine sturdy silver-glass pillars stood like birch trees at the centre of the hall. Each contained an artefact of historic significance, a powerful psychical Source collected by ghost-hunting pioneers Marissa Fittes and Tom Rotwell during the infancy of the Problem. By day, electric lamps illuminated the relics for the wonderment of visitors; by night, the trapped spirits swam silently within the pillars. With the light failing outside, they were just beginning to stir.

Lockwood and I took glasses of juice from silent attendants, and meandered to a location on the fringes of the crowd. We studied the room. On a wall at the far end a banner had been raised. It had the words 'THE FITTES INITIATVE' written on it in assertive black. Below stood a lectern on a little raised platform; this was covered with a drape, emblazoned with a silver unicorn. It was almost identical to the one we'd found lying on Marissa's coffin, in the crypt just up the road.

Soon attendees had arrived from all the independent agencies (even Bunchurch & Co., which in the absence of their leader was represented by two frightened-looking youths). The hall was almost full. The doors were closed, the lamps turned low. Within the glowing pillars, shadowy forms flared and darted like deep-sea fish. Servants entered, bringing canapés on silver trays.

Lockwood took a petite spring roll and munched it cheerfully. "Forget Tufnell's place, Lucy," he murmured. "Look at this. This is a proper bit of theatre, right here."

I knew exactly what he meant. The room was perfect for its purpose, which was to overawe and subdue its guests. The crowd of agents was a vast and colourful array – their jackets resplendent, their rapiers glinting under the light of the chandeliers – and yet compared with the solid, unchanging majesty of the great gold hall, which effortlessly swallowed them all, they seemed somehow tawdry and fleeting, of little consequence. High above our heads ceiling paintings showed legendary early agents, great martyrs of Fittes House. The pillars were like the treasure houses of a king.

"Better take your bag off, Luce," Lockwood said. "Set it on the floor here, give it a decent view."

Unlike other companies in London, Lockwood & Co. had never bothered with a uniform, and we stood out again tonight. Lockwood was smartly dressed as usual in his suit and coat, while I wore my normal working outfit. I'd have preferred to go smarter, but I had to account for the large kit-bag I carried on my back. If anyone asked, I was to say I was on my way to a case, which was in fact true. We had two quick jobs in Soho to attend to on our way home.

I shrugged the bag down. The top flap was left subtly loose, leaving a dark but

inconspicuous gap beneath.

"*Coo,*" the skull's voice said in my mind. "*This is a bit posh, innit? They've done it up since I was last here. Used to be a couple of tatty display cases and an old settee. Where's Marissa, then?* That's *not her. It's a spotty bloke scoffing a sausage roll. I'd have thought even you could see that.*"

"I *know* she's not here yet," I muttered. "We're still waiting. See that lectern? That's where she'll be." I nudged the bag forwards with a boot and turned to Lockwood. "The ghost's talking nonsense even more than usual," I said. "He's edgy. And so am I."

"No need to be," Lockwood said. "We're among friends."

He nodded his head in the direction of a nonchalant figure in a vile green suit, leaning against the wall near the lectern. Sir Rupert Gale was idly surveying the crowd of agents; as I watched he caught my gaze and gave a little wave.

"We ought to run him through and have done with it," I growled.

Lockwood smiled. "Yes, but it would only spoil this nice clean floor." He took a fresh glass of juice from a passing attendant. "Want another drink, Luce?"

"No. I don't know how you can be so relaxed."

"Oh, we have to go with the flow, make the most of being here." Lockwood's body language was as chilled as Sir Rupert's, but his eyes were never still, scanning the boundaries of the room. "Let's move a bit closer to the pillar, shall we? We can lean against it and doze, if Penelope's talk goes on too long."

It was the pillar furthest from the lectern, at the margins of the crowd. It glowed with a pale blue light. On a steel rack inside the glass hung a wicked-looking knife with odd serrations, the very knife with which the Clapham Butcher Boy had worked his horrors fifty years before. If you looked closely and at the correct angle, you could see just the ghost of the Boy himself floating above and around the weapon. He wasn't the most active of the nine trapped spirits in the hall, but he always caused particularly loud shrieks among parties of touring school children, his eyes having been put out by the lynch-mob that had finally run him to ground.

From somewhere came the bang of a door. The noise of the crowd dropped, became a nervous rustling murmur, soft and dry as fallen leaves.

Sir Rupert was looking towards the side of the room. He gave a nod.

The sound of high-heeled shoes echoed through the hall.

"*Uh oh*," the skull's voice said. "*She's coming*."

At once, Lockwood was at my elbow. "Listen carefully to what she says, Luce. I don't want to miss anything."

"Why, what will you be—?"

But now Penelope Fittes was walking into the hall.

She crossed from a far door, out under the lights, a slim, tall woman with long black hair loose around her shoulders. She wore a dark green, knee-length dress that moulded round her body in a business-like sort of way. It was glamorous, yes, but functional; she moved with calm precision. I'd been building up the moment so much, to be reminded of her very ordinary human scale surprised me. Then she climbed the platform, stepped behind the lectern, gave her flashbulb smile – and spoke.

"Hello, everybody."

Yes, that voice: deep, authoritative, unmistakable. With the sound of it, everything clicked into place. There she was: Penelope Fittes, chairperson of the Fittes agency, associate director of the Rotwell agency, and de facto head of all psychical investigation operatives in London. For months she had been the focus of all our energies, all our thoughts and fears, our dreams and plans. Everything extended from her, from her power and her mystery; everything led back to her, for she was near the root of the Problem.

Just by stepping through the door, she had at once become the focal point of the room. All eyes were on her, she was reflected in a hundred wine glasses, in the curving sides of the nine silver-glass pillars, in a thousand teardrop crystals of the ceiling's chandeliers. Did the ghosts within the pillars turn to watch her as she strode to the curved wood lectern? I wouldn't have been surprised. Certainly the Fittes employees previously standing at the side of the hall were now rigid with attention: one or two even saluted. My fellow agents did *not* salute, but they were very still. The room had become silent. Only Sir Rupert Gale maintained his louche and tolerant posture, but he too had eyes only for Penelope; his gaze remained locked on her as she took a sip of water, adjusted her paper and smiled gleamingly at the silent crowd.

"It's very good of you to come along this evening. I know how busy you all are." She was looking at us all, the grizzled old supervisors, the green young agents, sizing us up, taking our measure. "Indeed, that's really why I've brought you here. But before I go on, may I just thank the heads of DEPRAC for inviting me to host this occasion. This Hall has seen so many important nights. My grandmother Marissa often used it to—"

Her grandmother… Even from a distance Penelope was clearly in radiant shape. She certainly didn't *look* eighty plus years old.

"Skull," I whispered, "do you see her?"

"*It's so difficult from down here. My view's partially blocked. I'm looking through people's legs. And there's one agent there who keeps jiggling about with her particularly enormous*—"

"Can you see her or not?"

"*Yes. It's her. It's Marissa. Clear as day*."

I shook my head in doubt. I turned to Lockwood. "What do you think?"

But I was alone by the pillar. Lockwood had gone.

"I say I know how busy you all are—" Penelope wasn't wasting time. She was already coming to the nub of the matter. After fruitlessly looking for Lockwood at the back of the room, I slowly, reluctantly returned my attention to what she was saying. "But 'busy' isn't really strong enough, is it?" she went on. "'Over-worked' would be nearer the truth. We are all of us struggling to keep afloat in the supernatural flood that threatens to drown our great country." A slender arm was elegantly out-flung. "See these pillars here? These famous pillars, from the earliest days of our battle with the Problem? Nine notorious relics! When my grandmother subdued such ghosts as Long Hugh Henratty and the Clapham Butcher Boy, she thought she was winning the war. When she compressed the Morden Poltergeist into its silver teapot, she never imagined that two generations later such feats would be a nightly business for so many brave and selfless youths. All of us might fill a hundred such pillars, and there would still be no end to the terrors we face. And at what cost!"

Another sip of water; a toss of her long black mane. She had some kind of gold necklace on; laced with diamonds, probably. It sparkled in the spotlight. Everyone waited. We knew what was coming.

"We all remember the difficulties of the Black Winter," Penelope said, "the longest and worst in the history of the Problem. Mortality rates spiked – particularly among operatives in smaller agencies, where resources were so tight." The dark eyes flashed at the silent crowd. "Think back just for a moment. How many of *your* young heroes perished in those months, trying to make our country a safer place?"

"None of *ours* did," I said, under my breath. "Lockwood and Co. was just fine, thanks." I glanced round; Lockwood had not returned.

"A new winter is coming," Penelope Fittes went on, "with forecasts suggesting that it will be no better than the one before. Do any of us want to see a whole new line of little tombs behind Horseguards Parade? Do you want any of *your* employees to lie there? Of course not. And you're quite right. Such mortality rates can't be permitted again. But I am pleased to report that DEPRAC has been giving the matter some thought, and they have come to a decision." Penelope Fittes glanced up at the banner at her side. She waved a gracious hand it its direction. "Yes, they are calling it *The Fittes Initiative*. Rather than let DEPRAC close you all down, I have agreed that each small agency, for the duration of the winter, will come under the protection of the combined Fittes and Rotwell Group. We will provide extra manpower, money and resources, and oversee difficult operations for you. The arrangement will start at the end of October and last until March, when it will be reviewed to see—"

So that was the crux of it. Like it or not, we were coming under her control. It wasn't hard to imagine it becoming a permanent arrangement at winter's end.

A movement at my side caught my attention. Was it Lockwood? No. It came from within the silver-glass pillar. Looking round, I was disconcerted to see the round translucent face of the Clapham Butcher Boy pressed right against the glass, jowls wobbling, slack mouth gaping. The thing would have been staring straight at me, if the eyes hadn't been plucked out. I jerked back in consternation.

"*Hey, find your own human, you fish-faced has-been!*" the skull's voice called. "*You* do *attract them, don't you, Lucy?*" it continued. "*Even behind that thick prison, even dumb and sightless as he is, he* knows. *He smells someone who's been to the Other Side*."

I shuddered. “How can he know that?”

“*You carry the taint of it. It can’t be shaken off. It’s with you always. Lockwood too. But neither of you are anything compared to Marissa there. She stinks of it.*”

“The Other Side?”

“*She may look good to you, but whatever she’s been doing to look so young, it isn’t yoga, I can tell you that.*”

“Hey, Lucy.” Another movement: not the Butcher Boy this time, but Lockwood – much as before, but with a touch of pink in his cheeks and sweat beading just beside his ear. He took a sip of juice. “Did I miss anything?”

“Only the whole speech.” Up at the lectern, Penelope had finished her remarks with a few condescending platitudes. She smiled, waved at no one in particular, and left the stage. Click-click-click went her heels as she slipped out of the room. It was all done in dead silence. A few flunkies followed her out; a door closed. She was gone.

Only now did the assembled agents begin to stir. There was a low indignant muttering, swelling into loud complaint. Then the uproar began.

“Everyone sounds predictably happy,” Lockwood said.

“Yeah, it was much as expected.” Scowling, I gave a brief summary. “She’s turning the screw on us again. She had a nerve bringing up all the dead agents. It’s nothing to do with size of organisation, is it? It’s all about the team. Anyway, we’re coming under her thumb, like it or not. Where have you been?”

Lockwood smiled at me like he was coming out of a dream. He didn’t answer. “What did the skull say?”

“Same as before. Yes, she’s Marissa. Outwardly she’s different. But her essential nature is identical to when he spoke to her decades ago. And the odour of the Other Place hangs strongly round her.”

He nodded absently, as if the information didn’t surprise him. He moved back to let a couple of grim-faced Mellingcamp agents past. A wave of guests was making for the doors. A few stayed to mop up the final remnants of food and drink, but most were desperate to be gone. We remained loitering in the shadow of the pillar, where the sightless ghost hovered, staring at me from its pale blue prison. “What’s so frustrating,” Lockwood said, “is that the answer to everything is so, so close to us right now.”

“You’ve seen something?”

“No. I tried. I didn’t find it.”

“Then how do you know—?”

He made a gesture of impatience. “Oh, because George is right! This is Fittes House! She keeps it all close, that’s how she retains control. She’s not stupid like Steve Rotwell, building weird laboratories in fields, doing crazy experiments where anyone could just break in. *This* is where the action is. It always has been. George worked here once, and Kipps did for years. They both said there are big areas that remain out of bounds to almost everyone – whole levels in the basements, and Penelope’s apartments up top. You’ve seen the Black Library – that was full of secret stuff too. But it’s the upper floors, where Penelope lives, that *I’d* love to see. That’s where we’d find out the truth.” He nodded towards a broad inner door. “The elevators are just through there, in the Hall of Fallen Heroes. Five bronze elevators and a single silver one that’s goes up to her rooms. What I wouldn’t give just to nip up for ten minutes.” He sighed. “But it’s impossible.”

I stared at him. “That’s what you just tried doing?”

“It seemed the perfect opportunity.” He grinned at me. “Penelope down here. Everyone busy, all the Fittes crowd gawping at their mistress. I just strolled out. Had to dodge a few people, take a long-winded detour or two. I got to the Hall of Fallen Heroes easily enough. But it was a no-go. There were whopping big guards posted at the elevators. I had to turn round.”

“Or you’d have gone up in the silver elevator?”

“Of course.”

“Lockwood, you’ve got to be more careful—”

A jovial cry across the room. “Lockwood, you old hound! I *thought* I saw you skulking there.” Sir Rupert Gale was striding towards us; he wore a lime-green worsted

suit and a loud pink tie, and was draining a glass of champagne. “You two still hanging about?” he said. “I’d have thought you couldn’t get out fast enough after enduring Penelope’s little screed.” He gave me a cheery wink. “Were you maybe thinking of scrounging the last few canapés, Miss Carlyle? I could get you both a doggy bag.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “We were on our way out.”

“Yes, perhaps that would be best. We wouldn’t want you to be swept out with the trash. That’s a very big handbag you’re carrying with you, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“We’re off to a couple of cases,” I said. “Perhaps you want to see my papers?”

“No, no. We’ll take it as read this time.” Sir Rupert raised his glass to the bloodstained ghost in the pillar, which was inching round to follow us as we walked past towards the door. “Looks as if *someone* likes you, anyway, Miss Carlyle. Isn’t it nice to have a fan?”

“Didn’t know you could see ghosts so clearly, Sir Rupert,” Lockwood said. “Aren’t you a bit old for that?”

An expression of mild annoyance crossed the man’s face, as of one caught out in some minor indiscretion. “Oh, well,” he said. “I’m younger than I look. The doors are just through here…” With ostentatious courtesy, he escorted us back across reception to the entrance. Outside, the fragmenting host of agents was milling around. Some took waiting cabs, others dispersed in little groups into the night. “Where’s Cubbins?” Sir Rupert asked suddenly, as we started down the steps. “Not off being naughty in some library again?”

“George will be at home, I should think,” Lockwood said easily. “Probably making one of his chicken-and-sweetcorn pies. He’s really very domesticated.”

Sir Rupert smiled approvingly. “Sounds scrumptious. I must pop round to Portland Row sometime.”

“Please do,” Lockwood said. “I’d love that.”

“Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

We pattered swiftly down the steps and set off up the Strand.

“One day,” Lockwood said, “I’m clearly going to have to kill him. Not now, but sometime soon.”

The two Soho jobs turned out to be fairly minor: a Lurker in a flat above a Chinese Restaurant, and a Bone Man in an alley just off Wardour Street. Both were easy to constrain, but it took time to locate the Sources (a jade bracelet and a worn sandstone milepost respectively) and get them safe and sealed. We didn’t get back to Portland Row until shortly before midnight. There was a light showing in the living room window.

“Looks like George is waiting up with his results,” Lockwood said. “Told you he wouldn’t be able to hold it in.”

I smiled. “Let’s go and put him out of his misery.”

We opened the door. Holly stood in the hall by the coat-rack, one hand holding on to the coats as if she needed their support. Her posture was odd, both rigid and subtly out of kilter. She looked at us. She didn’t say anything. Her face was taut, stricken.

We stopped at the threshold. It was suddenly a new night, a different one. We had passed from one to the other, and I didn’t know where I was.

“Holly?”

“You need to come. There’s been an incident.”

A dead weight swung from my spine. My legs were water. I knew.

“George?” Lockwood said.

“He was found in the street. He’s been attacked. Hurt.”

Lockwood’s voice didn’t sound like his at all. “Is he alright?”

“No, he isn’t.” The tiny shake of the head made the world tilt under me. “Lockwood,” Holly said, “it’s bad.”

14.

Some months before, Lockwood and I had stepped together through a gate made of stockpiled Sources, where ghosts screamed in a perpetual whirlwind and the air was deathly cold. We'd stepped through it and out into another world. This was a place superficially the same as ours, but different: a place where normal rules did not apply. The transition had been instant, sickly and disorientating, and the effects were almost fatal.

Those experiences were nothing to the dislocation I felt now.

The hall *looked* ordinary, but the colours were wrong, and the objects in the room kept slipping out of position. Holly was both close and very far away. She was talking; her voice boomed in my head like a ship's horn, but it was also too faint to hear.

George.

George.

George.

"Where is he? What happened?" Someone else was speaking. I thought it was Lockwood, but the rush of blood in my ears was like a floodtide carrying me elsewhere. I fought against it, paddled furiously back into the present moment. Like Holly I needed to clutch at something. I jammed my fingers against the wall.

"St Thomas's Hospital," Holly said. "It was a night-cab driver who found him. You know that guy, Jake, we use a lot? He was turning down the end of Nightingale Walk. Just by chance, Lockwood, he was taking a short-cut. If he *hadn't* been, if he hadn't been there, Lockwood, there'd have been no one with George until dawn. And then—"

"So Jake found him," Lockwood interrupted. "I get that. Where was he? What exactly had happened?"

"He was lying on the edge of the pavement, half in the gutter, and at first Jake thought he was—" she gulped back tears— "was just a pile of old clothes that someone had *dumped* there, Lockwood. A pile of old clothes! Then he recognised George's shirt. And then he said he was sure that he was… At least, there was so much blood, he didn't imagine he could possibly be anything else but—"

"Blood?" I said. My hand was clamped over my mouth. "Blood? Oh no…"

"In what position was he lying?" Lockwood's voice was harsh; he fired the words out, forcing Holly to speak. "Was he face up, face down, what?"

Holly wiped her eyes. "He was face-down, I think."

"He'd been beaten?"

"I – I think so—"

"He wasn't conscious?"

"No."

"Did he regain consciousness at any time?"

"No. He was taken to the hospital. Jake called a night-ambulance. Luckily there was one near. He went with them. George is there now."

"Any word on how he is?"

"No."

Lockwood was moving down the corridor. His face was stricken, his jaw clamped tight. He brushed past Holly like she wasn't there. Then he stopped. "How did you hear about it?" he said. "I thought you'd gone home."

"I had. Jake knows where I live; he's driven me back before now. He tried here first, then called round on me. I came back, waited for you—"

"All right. I'm going to make some calls." He walked towards the kitchen.

"Lockwood," I said, "shouldn't we—?"

"I'm going to make some calls. Wait here."

He was gone; a moment later we heard his footsteps clattering down the iron stairs.

Holly and I were left in the hall. We looked at one another, but it wasn't easy to meet each other's gaze. Hugging was better. That way we could be close, while staring out at nothing. There wasn't anything else we could do.

Even now, when so much else has happened, the events of that dreadful night remain mostly a blur to me. Their sequence is unclear. Time did strange things. I have no idea how long I spent anywhere or in what order – in the hospital; in the hall with Holly; later (it must have been later, after our fruitless return from St Thomas's, with no word on George's condition) sitting with her under a blanket on the sofa, sleepless and silent, waiting for Lockwood to return. For some reason I remember the lights the most: the crystal skull lamp in the hall; the tasselled lantern on the living room cabinet; most of all the truncated strip-lights crossing the ceiling in the hospital reception like a row of minus signs, like centre markings on a road to nowhere, with the iron ghost-wards dangling beside them, moving in the air-conditioned breeze. Lights, always lights; strong, weak, harsh or warm, but always indifferent and always on. It was a night without darkness; you couldn't switch off or look away.

How did I *get* to the hospital? How did I get back? I don't remember. Lockwood was there with me, at least at first. I have a snapshot of him in a car, the white glow of the ghost-lamps (those lights again) flashing across his pale blank face, and me being frightened to talk to him. We did not talk, not then, nor during the endless waiting. We were not permitted to see George. We were not told how he was, or where he was. I have a memory of someone (Lockwood? Me?) kicking a chair across the reception room, but I have no memory of the lead-up to it, nor the consequences, if there were any. At some point, Inspector Barnes was there, and also Quill Kipps, though neither of them stayed long. Then – somehow – I was back at Portland Row with Holly, a bowl of popcorn wedged between us, and the white dawn showing through the messy crack in the half-drawn curtains.

Night bled into morning and Lockwood did not return. He did not come back from the hospital all that day. He sent word through Kipps, who showed up periodically, gallows-eyed and unshaven, with brief accounts of what was going on. What was going on was nothing. Nothing to stop the high, thin noise (too high, too thin to technically be a scream) that rang continuously in my head. George remained unconscious. He had suffered head injuries, and multiple contusions on his back, arms and legs. Lockwood had been allowed to see him, but only briefly. There was no point coming to the hospital. We would only be turned away.

Holly and I stumbled through what chores we could, focusing on insignificant details in an effort to pummel our existence into some semblance of rightness. I cancelled a number of appointments we had for the evening. Holly tried doing some paperwork, but quickly gave it up. Instead we roamed the house. We sorted salt-bombs and refilled iron canisters. Holly went shopping. She bought considerable amounts of doughnuts and cream buns, but somehow neither of us could bear looking at them. We put them in a cupboard. The day drifted on and on like this, and neither of us could sleep.

Whether through some quirk of empathy or (more likely) an acute sense of self preservation, the skull in the jar did not try speaking to me. My head was empty of its psychic interference, which was a relief. In truth, though, it was empty of everything. I was scoured out, waiting.

Towards evening a final message from Lockwood came via Kipps. It bought news that I interpreted as hopeful, in the same way that a drowning man looks favourably at an outstretched twig. George was showing signs of responsiveness for the first time. He hadn't yet woken properly, but there was movement now. Lockwood would remain for a second night. Holly and I were advised to go to bed.

Even then, it took me a long while. You might have thought that after thirty-six hours without rest, I'd find dropping off a doddle. But I was wired into a grid that refused to cut the power. I lay on the bed, staring at nothing, thinking of nothing, and when I *did* doze, I almost as quickly woke again. At some point in the early hours I got up and drove my rapier deep into the bedroom wall.

Eventually, while it was still dark, oblivion must have come, because I was surprised when I opened my eyes and saw sunlight streaming in through my window. The face in the ghost jar watched me silently. My sword stuck out from a jagged crack in the plaster just beside my dresser. It was almost noon. I was still wearing my clothes.

I washed and dressed mechanically and went downstairs. The house was quiet as a church. It looked very clean and tidy. Yesterday Holly had even dusted the ghost-wards hanging on the stairs and landing walls. As I got to the kitchen I could hear her moving

about inside. Little cosy domestic noises, of cutlery and crockery, like messages from a happier time.

"Hey, Holly…"

I pushed open the door and saw Lockwood standing at the window. He wore his usual dark trousers and white shirt, but the tie was gone and it was unbuttoned at the collar. His sleeves were rolled up, showing his slim arms. His hair had not been combed and it was not clear to me that he'd slept at all. Certainly he was as pale as I'd ever seen him, and his eyes shone with a strange, unhealthy brightness. But he smiled as he turned and saw me.

"Hi, Lucy."

It was a moment that probably lasted less than a second, but it felt as if we were standing there for a lifetime. A lifetime of me waiting for Lockwood, waiting for him to say the necessary words.

I spoke fractionally first. "Is George—?"

"George is fine," Lockwood said. "He's fine." He had his long slim fingers resting on a chair back; he stared at them as if they belonged to someone else. Then he left the chair and walked round the table and put his arms around me and pulled me to him. Time did weird stuff. We stood like that, I don't know how long.

"So he's fine?" I said, once we'd drawn apart. "Really?"

Lockwood sighed. "Well, no – not really. Not at all. But he'll live. He's conscious and he's okay."

"He's woken up? He's really talked to you and everything?"

"He's fine. A bit sleepy. Got several types of concussion, but we all know how thick his skull is." He smiled at me. "So you needn't worry. Not only that, he's home."

"*Home*? What? He's here?"

"Not so loud. He's upstairs. In my bed, as a matter of fact."

"Not his room?" I paused. "Actually, no. I can see that wouldn't work."

"No, he'd just get sepsis. It's fine like this."

"Where will you sleep?"

"On the couch, I suppose. Where else?"

"Sure. Lockwood – I'm *so* pleased you're both back."

"Me too. Do you want tea? Silly question. I'll get you some."

"So tell me what happened," I said. "When did he wake? Were you with him? What did he say?"

"He didn't say much – *hasn't* said much. He's too weak as yet. The doctor didn't really want him to leave the hospital, but this morning he had to concede he was out of danger, so…" He stared into space, holding a spoon. "Where do we keep the teabags now?"

"On the shelf, where they always are. Have you had any sleep?"

"Not much. I'm not quite ready yet… What was I doing?"

"You were making tea. Look, I'll do it. Where *is* Holly? She's not yet been in?" Holly had gone home the previous evening, searching for elusive rest, like me.

"Not yet, I don't think." Lockwood hesitated. "How is she?"

"Oh, like the rest of us, I expect." I glanced back at him, as I stirred the tea. "You were very hard on her, you know – when she first told us about George, back in the hall."

Lockwood didn't answer. He took his cup in silence. Then he said: "I wanted every detail. I wanted to see that image of George as if I was there myself."

"It's not your fault, Lockwood."

"No? Barnes thinks it is."

I remembered the inspector, a brown and furrowed presence beneath his raincoat, passing me in a hospital corridor. It was a disconnected image, leading nowhere. There

were no details. “How *was* Barnes when you spoke to him?”

“Civil.”

“What did he say?”

Lockwood sighed. “He didn’t *need* to say anything – his face was eloquent enough. He couldn’t talk openly, anyway – he had several police officers with him. And that doctor was there too.” Lockwood shook his head. “I didn’t trust him. Barnes says he’s worked for both the Fittes and Rotwell companies. He might be okay, but… Anyway, I’m not having George out of our sight from now on. That’s why I brought him home.”

I looked towards the ceiling. “He’s out of our sight right now, if it comes to that.”

He shook his head. “Not exactly. He’s got company.”

“Who? Not Holly. Not Kipps, surely. Or is Kipps here?”

“Flo.”

“*What*? *Flo?* She’s in the sick room?” I stared at him. “Is that even sanitary?”

“She was very insistent.”

“How did she even find out about it?”

“I don’t know. She showed up an hour ago and barged upstairs. She brought some black things in a pot.” Lockwood rubbed the back of his neck. “I hope to Christ they were grapes, but with Flo you just can’t tell.”

I drank my tea, letting its warmth run through me. As so often, the feeling brought me back to the essentials. The moment became simpler, my needs clearer.

“Lockwood,” I said, “I want to see George. I want to see him. Can we go and see him now?”

That’s technically how I phrased it, but it wasn’t really a question.

The bedroom door was slightly ajar, and we were able to push it open without a sound. In the usual way Lockwood’s room was the opposite of George’s, being clean and tidy and sparsely furnished. Not that I went in it much, but I’d always linked it with sunlight and smooth white sheets and with the smell of lavender. The sight of Flo Bones squatting in the armchair like a death-cap toadstool come to life blew such associations into sweet oblivion. She lifted her straw hat up a notch and made stern shushing gestures. The air smelt antiseptic and also somehow stale and muddy, courtesy of Flo; the curtains were part drawn. The bed was dim, the covers rumpled. It was hard to see its occupant at all.

We stole across the carpet. Flo’s puffer jacket rasped as she pulled herself free of the chair.

“Don’t disturb him!” she hissed. “He needs his rest!”

“I know he does,” Lockwood whispered. “How is he, Flo? Has he woken?”

“He’s been muttering all kinds of stuff. He asked for water. I gave him some.”

“I suppose that’s all right, if you’ve washed your hands. Come to think of it, while we’re at it, you could always take your boots off as well.”

“Take it from me, Locky, my socks would mark your carpet worse.” I saw her watching me closely as I moved past her to the bed.

The thing that struck me first was how small he looked, how low and sad the bump was under the sheets. You might almost have missed him, your eye drawn instead to the piled pillows or the rumpled bedspread half on the floor. But no, there were the distinctive glasses set carefully on the bedside table, with a diagonal crack running neatly through one lens. And there, wedged between the pillows – sight of it made me catch my breath – a roundish object, both dark and light. The light part was bandages, the dark part bruises. There wasn’t much in between.

“Oh, *George*,” I said.

The shape stirred feebly, making me jump; it gave a groan and said something unintelligible. An arm emerged and flopped down upon the sheet.

“*Now* look what you’ve done,” Flo hissed. “You’ve only gone and woken him up!” But Lockwood and I were already by the bed, bending close beside him.

“George!”

“Hey, George. It’s me, Lucy.”

George tried to speak. It shocked and horrified me how feeble his whisper was. More even than the sight of that battered face, the shrunken body in the bed, that whisper was an atrocious thing. He tried again: husky, urgent, impossible to hear. We craned our heads near; smelt the lotion, the fresh bandages; also Flo's unmistakable scent. George hadn't opened his swollen eyes. His hand clutched blindly, seized Lockwood's arm.

This time the words came out. "They took it," he whispered.

"What?"

"I had it – Marissa's book. They took the book from me."

Lockwood's expression frightened me, but his voice was light with unconcern. "Oh, don't worry about *that.*" He patted George's hand. "All that matters is that you're here at Portland Row. Luce's here, and me, and you know you've got Flo here beside you too…"

George's hand fell back. "Yes… yes, that's good."

"Yes. So the important thing is that you need to sleep now, George."

The bandaged head erupted from the pillow. We both jerked back. "No! No, the important thing is that I *had* it! I had the evidence, Lockwood! Marissa's theories, her insights… It would have given us what we needed, I'm sure of it."

Flo bustled forwards. "Right. You're exciting him. Time's up."

"No, it isn't, Flo. Who was it, George? Who did this to you? Was it Sir Rupert Gale?

"They hit me from behind; I didn't see their faces. But… you know Gale's after-shave? I think I smelt it, just as I hit the floor." The voice trailed off. "I'm sorry…"

"Nothing to be sorry about, George. Just rest up." Lockwood patted the limp hand; he stood up slowly, straight-backed, looking at nothing. "We're going, Flo," he said. "You'll call us if you need anything?"

She nodded; she was already at the bedside, doing things with pillows. George had subsided amongst them. Once more he was just a small, low mound in the centre of the bed.

We exited the bedroom and softly shut the door.

"I'll kill them," I said. "Lockwood, I swear I'm going to kill them."

He said nothing; he was very still, standing in the shadows of the landing. I kicked out at the banister, hurting my foot in the process. I had to move. I had to strike at *something*. The fury I felt was otherwise too great.

"Sir Rupert Gale and those big bloody henchmen of his! I'm going to take my sword and go out and find them, and make them pay."

"You're not going to do that, Lucy."

"I am. I'm going to kill them."

"You're not."

"Why?"

"Because it wouldn't be you."

"Like I care about that! Like I care…!" The dam burst. I was lashing out in my pain and fury, knocking my fists against the wall, kicking out at anything. Then all at once Lockwood had his arms round me again, pressing me close. Possibly it was an effort to stop me destroying his house, and in this he was successful. He held me till my anger stilled.

"Lockwood," I said at last. "It's *George*."

"I know." I think that's what he said. One of my ears was against his shoulder, and his hand, cradling the side of my face, obscured the other, so his voice was a bit muffled.

"I want you to *do* something about it," I said.

"I will."

I moved his hand. "Sorry, did you say 'I will'?"

"Yes."

"Okay." I put his hand back. We held the same position for a bit. "So…" I said finally. "What *are* you going to do?"

Lockwood let me go at last, so I could see him properly. A shaft of light was coming through the landing window; in its brightness he looked insubstantial, almost like it was shining through him, like he was some figure on stained glass. "Our enemies think we're weak," he said. "Truth is, I've been holding back until now." He smiled at me, his eyes as hard as flint. "Well, all that ends today. We'll strike them where they least expect it. We'll

strike them, Lucy, and we'll take them down."

15.

Lockwood's vow sounded good, especially spoken in that shaft of sunlight and all, but I couldn't help noticing he wasn't spelling out the details. In fact he was damn vague. This didn't bother me particularly, because I knew he'd think of something. I just guessed it would take him a while to figure out a plan.

In this I was quite wrong. Lockwood not only *had* a plan, it was already well under way. In fact I discovered afterwards that he had been devising his response to the attack on George almost from the moment that it happened. During his long vigil in the hospital, his initial shock had hardened into furious intent. He'd had plenty of time to explore his options, take decisions, and set his strategy in motion. But I only began to realise this when Quill Kipps showed up later that morning with a bulging plastic bag in his hand.

"Here you are, Lockwood," he said, pouring the contents out on the kitchen table. "Four black balaclavas, four sets of thin black gloves. Got them from a seedy little shop in Whitechapel. I completely cleaned them out of sinister protective clothing. There's going to be a lot of disappointed criminals in the East End till they get their next delivery."

"Excellent." Lockwood was inspecting a balaclava. "I see they've got mouth holes too, so we can speak to each other easily. Great work, Quill. How's the surveillance been going?"

"Nicely." Kipps tapped his backpack. "I've got photos and everything."

"Superb. Will it be feasible?"

"At the worst, we might have to duff up a few pensioners."

"I think we can cope with that."

Holly and I had been following this exchange like it was a tennis match, heads turning in bafflement from Quill to Lockwood and back again. Now Holly raised a hand. "There'll be some duffing up going on right now," she said, "if you don't start filling us in on this. No ifs or buts, please. Tell us what's going on."

Lockwood grinned round at us. "Certainly. We're going to complete George's research for him. Who's up for a spot of burglary?"

A fly on the wall, lured perhaps by the prospect of one of Holly's cakes, wouldn't at first have noticed anything unusual about our meeting in the living room that lunchtime. So many missions had been planned there – why was this so different? But it was. There weren't any cakes, for starters – it would have seemed wrong to eat anything, with George lying stricken just upstairs. No cake, no tea and no George. And we weren't discussing ghosts, either. We spoke in hushed tones, our faces pale and grim.

Kipps got proceedings going. He took out a packet of grainy, black-and-white photographs and spread them on the table. They mostly showed an elegant black door, with whitewashed pillars either side. A succession of elderly, smartly dressed men and women were coming out of it. One in particular caught my eye.

"I *know* him," I said, pointing to a snap of a man with white hair. He had a big, bulging forehead and a slight stoop; his long black frock-coat was decidedly old-fashioned.

Lockwood nodded. "Yes. The secretary of the Orpheus Society. This is their front door."

The Orpheus Society was a very exclusive club in central London. Prominent industrialists and business-people formed its membership. Its official purpose was to research aspects of the Problem, but we happened to know that this research took a decidedly practical turn. The goggles that Kipps wore, that allowed him to see ghosts despite his advanced age of twenty-two, were Orpheus Society creations. And Penelope

Fittes – or Marissa, as I was forcing myself to think of her – was closely associated with their secretive activity. We had visited their headquarters once, and found a plush and ornate townhouse, festooned with oil paintings, marble statues and quiet, closed doors.

"I don't need to remind any of you," Lockwood went on, "that when George was attacked, he'd got a copy of *Occult Theories*, this important lost book written by Marissa. Rupert Gale took it from him. As far as we know, there are only two other copies in existence. One, in the Black Library of Fittes House, is too well guarded for us to reach. But the other's here at the Orpheus Society, and that's the one I intend to steal tonight. We needn't be embarrassed doing this, because these Orpheus people are definitely in on the whole Marissa thing. Remember that old secretary talking to us when we visited? He said that their main concern was winning a battle – not just against ghosts, but *against death itself*. Which is pretty much what we think Marissa is trying to do."

"She founded the Society in the first place," I said.

"Exactly." Lockwood looked at us each in turn. "Everyone up for this?"

"Of course," Holly said. "Why do you even ask?"

Kipps shuffled forward on his chair. "Okay, so I've been surveying the Society HQ the last two days," he said, "watching who goes in and out, seeing what the security procedures are. It's always locked up at eleven p.m. sharp. After that there's no chance of getting in by the ground-floor windows – they put up iron ghost-grilles after dark. A second snag is that the building's never empty. They seem to stay mainly on the lower floor, but activity goes on there most of the night."

"What kind of activity?" I asked.

"No idea. Could be meetings, weird occult experiments, or maybe they just doze in front of the fire. The members are all pretty ancient. You can see that from these photos I took of them leaving in the mornings."

We inspected the pictures. "They're a bit fuzzy," Holly said.

"If George was here," I remarked, "we'd have floor-plans of the building, a full list of accredited members and a potted history of the organisation."

Kipps stared at me. "Everyone's a critic. Know how I got these? I was dressed as a workman, painting the railings on the house opposite. I had a hidden camera." He shook his head ruefully. "I tell you it's a devil of a job whipping it out of your trousers and pointing it at people without them noticing."

"So I've always been told," Lockwood said. "Hey, I recognise some of these people. Those are the old twins who run the Sunrise Corporation, aren't they? The society has some very prominent members. How many are usually in the building overnight?"

"At a guess, four or five. The secretary always is. He seems to live there."

Lockwood tapped his fingertips together. "Well, it's not ideal territory for a burglar. Still, they're just a bunch of old codgers. If any of them *do* disturb us, we knock them down, tie them up and get on with the operation. It's not the most refined of plans, but frankly I'm not in the mood for anything more sophisticated. Questions?"

Holly raised her hand. "It's just I'm not quite sure how we're getting in," she said.

"Oh, don't bother about that. Kipps has sussed it. Any other questions?"

"What about George?" I said. "Are we happy to leave him with Flo?"

Lockwood nodded. "She's being very attentive. I think he'll be okay."

At that moment a raucous and indescribable sound came from upstairs. I've never heard the noise of a hyena being ritually disembowelled, but chances are this was less attractive. We drew apart in shock.

"I think that's Flo laughing," Lockwood whispered. "Dear God, what a day."

Kipps rubbed a hand across his chin. "What… what can she be laughing *for*?"

"Maybe she's trying to cheer George up." Lockwood gave a heavy sigh. "If so, it's kill or cure, for sure."

*

The district of St James's, where the Orpheus Society had their headquarters, was well-defended against the wakeful dead. By night, ranks of ghost lamps winked and shone along every street, while runnels of water flowed beside the pavements, and braziers of lavender burned before the broad black doors. From the roof-top where we stood, catching our breath after the climb, we could see the purple embers glittering far below us, and smell the lavender on the air. Somewhere far off, a siren howled. Lockwood was standing on a roof crest, staring out towards the west. A gentle wind swept his hair back, set the ends of his coat flapping. His hand rested on his rapier hilt. He looked pensive, even slightly sad.

"*Look at him,*" a voice said disgustedly from my backpack. "*He's just doing that for effect. There's no real* reason *for him to be up there. Bet we're not even going that way.*"

"We are," I said. "These roofs run all the way to the Orpheus Society building. He's just checking the route's clear."

The skull snorted. "*Of* course *it's clear! That's the whole point of being up here, isn't it? Might get a few roosting pigeons, maybe step on a dead cat. Other than that, it's an easy stroll – if we could all stop posing long enough to get on with it.*"

And it *had* been easy, up until that point. We had walked to St James's, almost to the very street where the Orpheus Society was based, then detoured under Kipps's direction to a townhouse that was being refurbished in the road beyond. Its frontage was covered with scaffolding. Ladders took us to the uppermost floor, and a quick scramble got us on the roof. We were in a landscape of moonlit tiles and shadowed gutters, a world of crests and troughs that stretched to the horizon like a frozen sea.

Lockwood beckoned to us; he skittered down the roof on the far side, and reappeared by a chimney further on. Hoisting our backpacks tighter, we followed in silence, boots slipping and sliding, trying to ignore the fearful drop into the street below. There were no pigeons, no dead cats; after a few minutes we came to a place where a twist of blue fabric had been tied round a chimney pot, and a length of rope, end noosed securely around the stack itself, lay in a neat coil. Kipps had reconnoitred the way the night before.

"Here we are," Lockwood said. "We're above the Orpheus building now." He checked his penknife was fastened to his work-belt, and took his balaclava from his pocket. "It's time. Masks on."

Kipps was fiddling with his goggles. "Do you think these should be worn on top of my mask, or underneath it?"

"On top, for sure," Holly said. "Otherwise you'll look more than usually deformed."

"That's what I thought. Need anything else, Lockwood?"

"No." Lockwood's face was hidden beneath the balaclava. He tossed the end of the rope out into space. Now he took its length in his hands and began walking backwards towards the edge. "Keep your eye on the rope," he said. "I'll tug it when it's safe to come down."

He reached the lip of the tiles, and eased himself out over the void. For an instant he hung there, leaning back, his boots planted on the very edge. Then he went on lowering himself, hand over hand. In a few seconds he was out of sight.

We crouched like gargoyles on the roof, faceless, hunched beneath our backpacks, swords glinting in the starlight. Wind blew the tips of Holly's hair where it showed from under her mask. From somewhere came a tiny tinkling of broken glass. We waited; we watched the rope. We didn't move.

"*Bet he's fallen off,*" the skull said. "*Bet that tinkling was him hitting a greenhouse far below.*"

The rope twitched violently, once and then again. I was nearest. As always where heights were concerned, it was a case of not thinking too much. Copying Lockwood's example, I took the rope and lowered myself out and down. I tried to ignore the drag of my backpack, as it hung between my shoulder-blades; also, the surrounding empty space. I focused only on my boots – always seeing them planted safely, first on slate tiles, then on black lead guttering, then rough, dark brickwork, down and down and down.

Presently I saw white wood beneath my boots, and the glass of a raised sash window. There was a glow of a lantern: Lockwood was below me, signalling. Following his

gestures, I walked down the side of the window frame until I reached the opening. His arms caught me, drew me inside.

He grinned at me in the dark. “Enjoying yourself, Luce?” He tugged the rope again. “I had to break a corner of the pane, but I don’t think anyone heard.”

His lantern was turned to its lowest setting; even so, I could make out the details of the room in which I stood. It contained an oval table with four chairs, a sideboard with bottles of water and stacks of glasses. A pot of biros sat on the table, next to a small clock. The wall was covered in dark paper, and decorated with framed photographs. There was a strong smell of furniture polish and of lavender. Automatically, I used my Talents too, though I scarcely expected any psychic disturbance. There was none. It was a private meeting room; I’d seen similar in countless offices across London.

I turned back to the window to help Lockwood bring the others in. In moments, first Holly and then Kipps were dangling outside the casement. Nothing went wrong; soon we stood together in the little room, listening to the ticking of the clock.

Lockwood took another rope from his bag and tied it to a leg of the table. “If we have to leave in a hurry,” he said, “we throw this out and go *down*. No messing about trying to climb. But this room is our exit. Okay? If we’re separated, we head back here.”

“So where now?” I said. “The reading room’s on the ground floor, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but that may not be where George’s book is. We’ll search systematically. Above all, keep it quiet. If we can do this without disturbance, so much the better.”

Leaving the lantern burning at the window, we crossed the room, our torches sweeping the wall. The photographs that hung there were mostly assembled ranks of Orpheus Society members taken down the years, grey-haired men and women, straight-backed, serious of purpose. In some of the oldest, Marissa Fittes was also present, a shadowy figure in black, standing a little apart from the rest.

Lockwood slowly opened the door; beyond was a wide, dark corridor running along the spine of the building. It was dark, but lights glowed at the far end, where it opened onto a staircase. Thick red carpets muffled our footfall. From somewhere came the ticking of another clock; otherwise there was no sound in the house.

“Skull,” I whispered. “Sense anything?”

“*Just the flutter of your hearts, the taste of your fear. Is that what you meant?*”

“I was thinking more supernatural activity… Let me know.”

Most of the rooms leading off the corridor had their doors open, and we quickly established that these were other meeting rooms, bathrooms, even a little bedroom. All were smartly furnished, but otherwise unexceptional. But there was one door that Holly tried that was of far more interest. As she swung her torch around the dark interior, she gave a stifled cry and sprang back, ripping her rapier free.

In seconds the rest of us were at her side.

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “It’s just, for one horrible moment, I thought it was filled with *people*.”

Lockwood pushed the door wide; and, despite Holly’s assurances, I couldn’t help giving an involuntary start. Our collective torch-beams lit up what looked like a row of hooded figures standing in line. The Bloody Monks of Ashford, one of our earliest cases, had lined up in a pretty similar way, and they’d shone with the same eerie silver light, except for the bloody bits, obviously. But these weren’t ghosts. Even as your skin was crawling, and your legs begging you to run, your brain was picking out the very ordinary clothes rack, the row of coat hangers on which the set of robes were hung. Elsewhere were boxes, stacked neatly, each bearing the imprint of a Grecian harp, which was the Orpheus Society’s symbol.

It was too interesting a room to bypass, though there were clearly no books in it. The house was quiet. We had time. I went immediately to the rack and ran my fingers over the silver robes. To my surprise, they weren’t made of cloth or silk, but countless tiny scales, light as gossamer and neatly sewn together. They flowed like water in my hands.

“These cloaks, Lockwood,” I said. “Remind you of anything?”

He nodded. “Our Spirit Capes were feathery, but otherwise they might almost be the

same. Look at the way the silver flakes are held to the mesh. No prizes for guessing what *these* are used for." I couldn't see him frowning, but I heard the perplexity in his voice. "They are so*, so* similar, though. It's strange…"

"And look," Kipps said. "More goggles like mine."

He'd opened one of the boxes; inside was a curious helmet, soft and shapeless and also made of silvery scales, with a pair of heavy goggles fixed to it.

"*That's* not so unexpected," I said. "We pinched yours from a member of the Society in the first place. They must wear them on the Other Side."

"These idiots are doing the same thing Rotwell did," Lockwood said. "Meddling with things that shouldn't concern them. Well, we haven't come here for this. We haven't time to spare."

Even so, we lingered. Other boxes contained silver gauntlets to wear on the hands, and mesh boots to protect the feet. Most of the boxes had names scribbled on them, presumably their owners'; some were familiar ones, including heads of industry. Our eyes flashed at each other from within the balaclavas. There was triumph in our looks, but also fear. Our finds had deep significance. Way *too* deep. We could feel an abyss opening beneath our feet. There was a long way to fall.

We left the room and moved soundlessly to the end of the corridor. There was a stairwell there, lit by golden chandeliers. The stairs were carpeted in red; dark portraits of austere, bearded men glowered out at us from inside heavy frames. It was the kind of stairwell in which you could look over from the top to see the hallway, three storeys below. We did so: lamps flickered on the landings below, but otherwise everything was still. Not silent, though. The noise of clocks was louder here. We could hear them ticking deep in the belly of the house. It was a place that seemed very conscious about time.

"We try the next floor, then," Lockwood whispered. "Everyone okay?"

Three nods; four shadows stealing down the steps, pressing close to the wall. We'd travelled light for this raid, keeping our swords and explosive weapons, but dispensing with heavy stuff like iron canisters and chains. The carpet absorbed all sound. Tiptoeing round the curve of the stairwell, we saw the third floor landing before us. It was much the same as the one above. A plaster bust of a heavy-featured woman sat on a plinth, eying us with pop-eyed displeasure. There were ferns in plant pots. Beyond was a corridor, and yet more doors.

Somewhere in the bowels of the house a door opened, releasing smatterings of distant conversation. Just as quickly, the noise cut off and everything was quiet again. We stood frozen on the stairs. Nothing further could be heard. At last Lockwood gave the signal and we padded down onto the landing.

A quick glance showed us that the corridor was just as dimly lit and elegantly furnished as its counterpart above. No one was there. Lockwood moved towards the nearest door. As he did so, a heavy thud sounded behind me. I wheeled round, to see Kipps on his knees, trying to lift the plaster bust from off the carpet.

"You knocked it off?" Holly whispered. "What did you do that for, Quill?"

Kipps gave an angry gesture. "I didn't do it for fun, did I?" he hissed. "I just brushed it with my backpack! Quick, help me get it on again!"

"Oh, oh, her nose is broken off! There's the tip!"

"Forget her tip! Just lift it with me, can't you?"

"Will you both shut up?" Lockwood was standing in the centre of the corridor, head tilted on one side. His eyes flashed in the darkness. "We've got to listen…"

None of us moved. We listened. The house was silent. Nothing stirred.

"Skull?" I breathed. "You get anything?"

"*Apart from the whopping noise that bust made hitting the floor? No. Mind you, the echoes are still descending through the house. It's hard to know what else is going on*."

I reported this to Lockwood. He shook his head. "It's probably okay. Sort the bust. I'll try in here."

The bust was returned to its plinth, the nose dropped into a nearby plant pot. We turned to find Lockwood grinning at us from the open door. "We may not have to look much longer," he whispered. "This is some kind of library."

With the door eased shut behind us, and a lantern held high in Holly's hand, we saw that Lockwood's optimism was justified. It was a broad, rectangular chamber, running along the street side of the building. Two tall windows looked out at the townhouses opposite. Each wall, painted a dark maroon, was inset with white wooden bookcases; between them hung old maps and paintings. Heavy reading tables were dotted here and there, and leather armchairs, each with their own standard lamp. A bust of a dour-looking man in goggles sat on one table. A vast and beautiful globe of the world, made from countless pieces of coloured inlaid wood, hung in a silver frame.

"Got to be in here somewhere," Lockwood said, spinning the globe gently. "So, it's a book called *Occult Theories* that we're after. Let's get looking."

Holly set the lantern on the table; we spread out, scanning the shelves.

It turned out that most of the books had been bound in black leather, with the Orpheus harp imprinted on the front. They also had the name of the author embossed on the spine, and had been arranged alphabetically, but since the author of Occult Theories was officially anonymous, that didn't help much. Time passed; occasionally I went to the door and listened, but everything seemed still.

At last Holly sprang up from a shelf near the window, with a thin volume in her hand.

"Got it!" she called. "*Occult Theories*! This is it for sure."

We gathered round her. "That's it," Lockwood said. "Excellent. George will be pleased."

"He'd have *loved* this room," I said. "So much weird stuff. Look at this one: *Dark London, an Interim Cartography*. What do you think *that* means?"

"I don't know, but—"

"Did you hear something?" Holly said.

We looked at her. "Hear what?"

"Don't know. A clang somewhere."

I was nearest the door. I stole over, opened it and looked out into the corridor. As before, the lights were low, the carpet soft and gleaming. The plaster bust stood impassive on its little pillar. I listened intently; aside from the tick, tick, ticking of the clocks, everything was quiet.

"Seems okay," I whispered, as I came back in and shut the door. "But we should get out while we can."

Lockwood nodded. "We'll study the book at home. Come on."

We picked up our bags, silently scouring the room in case we'd left anything. Holly adjusted the globe so that it was in the same position as before. "No traces," she said, smiling. We gathered at the door.

Except for Lockwood. He was staring at the bookshelf next to him. All at once he darted over, and pulled something out: it was a thin pamphlet, bound in black leather.

"More stuff about Marissa?" I said.

"No…" He held up the spine to show us: the word 'Lockwood' was embossed on it in gold leaf. "It's by my parents," Lockwood said. "Remember last year, when we met the secretary of the society? He *said* my parents had once given a lecture here. This must be a transcript of it." He flipped the pamphlet open to the first page.

There was a vibration in my backpack. "*I hear noises*," the skull said.

"Noises? Noises where?"

"*Somewhere deep. Coming upwards through the house*."

"Lockwood – we've got to go."

"Yes, of course …" Lockwood's voice trailed away. Something altered in his face; the muscles stretched and slackened, his mouth hung open.

"Lockwood?" I said. "Are you all right?"

He didn't answer; he didn't hear. With the turning of the page, it was like a switch had

been thrown. His eyes were round and haunted. He stared at the page.

Kipps was listening at the door. “Got no time for this! I hear weird bangs and clattering, coming up the stairs.”

“Torches off!” I ran to Lockwood and pulled at his arm. “*Lockwood*,” I snapped. “Come *on*.”

“It’s their last lecture,” he said. “The one they were about to give when they died.”

“Well, that’s *great*,” I said. “You wanted this, didn’t you? So take it and let’s go!”

“But the date—”

A great bang sounded in the corridor outside. Kipps and Holly flinched back, but not fast enough. There was an unholy screech, a scream of metal. The door blew open.

16.

Kipps yelled. A hideous figure, deformed and impossibly tall, was ducking through the door. It was a nightmarish vision: grey and shiny and bulbous-eyed. Its legs were insect-like, long and oddly jointed. Its arms ended in enormous claws. It was silhouetted in the light of the corridor beyond. As it entered, it slashed at Kipps with its right hand, shearing through his jacket as he threw himself aside. Its left hand sought for Holly, but she had dropped to the carpet, and only a few strands of her hair, trailing from the back of her balaclava, were sliced away as the claws swiped past.

Lockwood and I stood directly in front of it, as the shape stretched itself to its full height. Pistons hissed, metal squealed. Torchlight wheeled behind it, but the thing was dark. Our brains were trying to process what we saw. Not a ghost – too solid, too much iron for that. Monstrous, yes – but not a monster. At the heart of it, surely, was a man.

“What is it, Terence?” a shrill voice called. “What’s in there?”

“Thieves!” the apparition shouted. “Burglars!”

I knew the voice; and my guess was at once confirmed, for at that moment Lockwood stabbed his torch on, and shone it directly at the shape. The blaze revealed the secretary of the Orpheus Society, long white hair pluming out around a giant pair of goggles, a loose-fitting chainmail suit hanging over his dark frockcoat. His feet and shins were encased in the top of a pair of pneumatic iron stilt legs that adjusted, hissing, as he moved. His hands wore metal gauntlets, their fingers ending in foot-long stiletto claws. He cried out as the torchlight blinded him, raising one arm before his face.

“Thieves!” he cried again. “Thieves in the research library!”

“Then get out of the way, you old fool!” another voice cried. “Let us at them!”

A hiss and a spring; with surprising agility, the secretary bounded aside. Clustering at the door behind him came four other misshapen forms, each one a grey-haired man or woman in old-fashioned evening dress, goggles strapped to faces, silver armour clinking. The two women carried peculiar firearms, black, snub-nosed, with coils of rubber hosing connecting them to chrome bottles fixed to the top of the devices. One of the men had a weapon that looked like a harpoon gun. His companion carried a squarish device strapped to his chest. A long piece of brass tubing protruded from it, looped over his shoulder and ended in a gaping funnel. All these items looked roughly made, with patches of soldering holding them together. Roughly made – but clearly functioning.

The four lined up inside the door, with the secretary of the Society towering beside them. Holly had scuttled to the far corner of the library, beyond the globe; Kipps, one side of his jacket ripped off and flapping around his knees, had retreated to the other. I drew my rapier. I glanced at Lockwood, but his face was hidden, his emotions inscrutable. He tucked the pamphlet inside his coat, and let his hands drop by his side.

For a moment nobody spoke or moved. One of the weapons gave a barking hum, like a vacuum cleaner revving. Otherwise the room was silent.

“Who are you?” one of the women said. She was very short and squarish, and the cut of her green tweed dress and jacket under her silver chainmail made her squarer still. She

was one of those academic-looking ladies whose long grey hair would have looked a whole lot better if it had been short and properly styled. But you wouldn't have pointed this out to her, since her gun barrel was bigger than her head. "Speak up!" she snapped. "Tell us your names."

There was no way we were going to answer *that*.

"Agents!" the man with the harpoon gun spat. "Children! Look at their swords."

The old man on the stilts shifted his position; pistons hissed; steel claws clashed. "Give yourselves up!" the secretary said. "Throw down your swords! If you do, we'll let you live." There was something in the way he phrased the words that made it instantly obvious that he intended us to die. But we could have guessed that on our own. The Orpheus Society had its secrets to protect. They wouldn't casually let us go.

"I'm losing patience," Harpoon Man said. He was quite bald, his skin leathery and lined. I thought perhaps he'd been in one of Kipps's photos, but I couldn't be sure. From memory most of the members looked like him. His male colleague, who by contrast possessed a wild beard that looked like an explosion in a horsehair factory, hefted his brass shoulder-funnel menacingly, taking especial aim at me.

The secretary raised a gauntleted hand. "Not in here, Geoffrey," he murmured. "The books..." He glared at us, flexing the metal claws. "Last chance!" he cried. "Do you have anything to say?"

There was a pause. "Yes," Lockwood said. "Actually, I do."

His voice surprised me. First, because I'd assumed we'd all remain silent – the secretary had, after all, met us before, and might recognise us from our words alone; secondly, because of the way he said it, quietly yet with cold assurance, without fear, without haste, communicating utter unconcern. Where Kipps and Holly were calm as cornered rats; where I teetered on toe-tips, desperate to dodge the inevitable attack, with cold sweat soaking into the mask I wore, Lockwood stood as if he was waiting for a bus. He hadn't drawn his rapier; he'd made no move for any weapon. A few feet away, gun barrels tilted towards him, the harpoon point swivelled; some unseen mechanism fizzed and hummed. Lockwood just stood there.

He said: "You have a choice before you. You can either turn around and leave this room and go back downstairs. Or not. Which do you want to do?"

The second woman, tiny, dark, and wrinkled as a currant, cocked her head in puzzlement. "Sorry – is he talking to us?"

"Giving *us* an ultimatum?" Harpoon Man took firmer grip on the handle of his gun.

"You're elderly," Lockwood said, "and perhaps a little slow. If it isn't clear enough, I can put it another way for you. Get your shrivelled backsides out of here sharpish while you can, or face the consequences. It's pretty simple. Up to you."

The tiny woman's body shook with emotion inside her silver armour; she gave a hoot of rage. Again the bearded man seemed inclined to do something hasty with the shoulder-funnel; Harpoon Man and the tweedy woman both took impulsive steps towards us, too, but were blocked by the stooping figure of the secretary.

"No," he said, swinging a leg forward. "Let me."

"Take his head off, Terence," the wrinkled woman said.

Few non-spectral situations are surely as fearsome as being cornered in a room, with a deranged pensioner on stilt-legs loping towards you, ten steak-knife fingers clawing in your direction. Fearsome, yet also faintly ridiculous; and Lockwood's air of calm defiance had successfully communicated itself to all of us. It had allowed us to take stock, and realise that something the secretary had said had given us an advantage.

While in this room, the Orpheus members were unwilling to use their heavy weaponry for fear of damaging their library.

We had no such qualms.

All of us reached for our belts. Lockwood moved the quickest – too quick for the eye to follow. The first the Secretary knew about it was when the magnesium flare struck him full in the chest, exploding against his chain-mail and sending him toppling backwards

behind a waterfall of cascading silver light. With frantic contortions and desperate footwork, he contrived to remain standing, but my own flare, arriving instants later, propelled him sideways to topple over the back of an armchair. As his legs thrashed at the ceiling, Kipps's and Holly's flares bookended the four figures at the doorway with two blinding bursts of fire, sandwiching them violently together and causing the man with the harpoon-gun to pull his trigger in a spasm, so that his missile shot between Lockwood and me and straight out through the window behind us. It shattered the glass, let the night air in.

After this, things got messy.

Really, it was a pity for the members of the society that they still blocked the way out, otherwise we might have been inclined to leave them like that. It was a pity too that in their shock and rage they forgot their sensible intention of safeguarding their research library, and began to fire their weapons. It had bad consequences for them.

But not immediately. At first, the violence of it caught us by surprise.

The grey haired woman with the tweed jacket raised her gun, and a jag of bright blue electricity suddenly connected its nozzle with the wall beside my head. One moment it wasn't there, the next it was. It cut across the room like a scribble drawn by a giant child. I felt its force, smelt the burning wallpaper. Sparks fizzed on my jacket and stung my cheeks. She turned the gun, scything the light towards me. I threw myself over the table beside the plaster bust and rolled away behind a chair. Behind me something exploded; fragments of the bust cascaded on the floor.

I peered round the chair: both women now were firing their guns; the blue flashes cast everything else into semi-darkness. There was movement everywhere, the flash of rapiers, the rush of forms. Another flare burst; in its light, I saw the secretary getting to his feet. His face was a Venn diagram of black and silver scorch marks. His hair smouldered; one strand of it was on fire.

At my shoulder, the skull gave a long, low chuckle. "*These old geezers are completely mad! I've got to say I like them.*"

A masked figure – Kipps, I guessed – moved past, sword drawn, to be at once confronted by the burly, bearded man. His funnelled apparatus was connected to a concertinaed bladder, like a bellows or squeezebox, strapped under one arm. He jabbed this with his elbow: with a pop, a glass vial shot from the end of the funnel, missed Kipps by inches and shattered on the wall behind. Colourless liquid dripped down; a familiar fragrance filled the air.

"Is that the best you can do?" Kipps called. "Lavender water? Pathetic!"

"*I've have to agree*," the skull said. "*That's the most wussy weapon I've ever seen.*"

I grasped the neck of Kipps's jersey, pulled him sharply down behind the chair. The watery substance was eating into the wallpaper, making it bubble and foam; small bits of plaster dropped in wet gobbets to the floor.

"Possibly a bit of acid in there too," I said.

"*Nice!*" the skull said. "*They're totally insane!*"

Kipps and I took hold of the armchair, driving it forwards, colliding forcefully with the bearded man. He gasped in pain. The funnel popped; a vial of acid ricocheted off the ceiling and burst nearby. Elsewhere in the room, someone screamed. I had time to hope this wasn't Holly. And now here came the tiny wrinkled woman, firing her gun indiscriminately; a bolt of blue stabbed straight through the chair and out the other side. My hands tingled with electrical charge. I dropped the chair. Running low, I rushed the woman, striking her around the waist, bringing us both to the floor. Her grip was loosened on the gun; I sent it flying from her hand.

Shadows moved nearby. I looked up; there was Harpoon Man, struggling to fix another dart into his gun. There too the secretary, vertical at last and bearing down on me. And there was Lockwood, who stood directly in his path, in the centre of the smoking floor. He had his rapier in his hand. The secretary gave a cry; he slashed downwards with his mailed hands, finger-knives raking at Lockwood's head. Lockwood moved balletically aside; his rapier struck them away. He kicked out at the nearest stilt-leg, sending the Secretary skittering away to collide into the other man.

Beneath me, the tiny woman was wriggling frantically, snarling and spitting.

"Criminals!" she shrieked.

"Maybe," I said, punching her in the jaw, "but we're not weird, like you."

And so it was that the members of the Orpheus Society discovered a curious thing. It was understandable they were a little tetchy; what with that, and their superior firepower, they'd probably assumed they'd win the day. But crazed as they were, roused to fury by the damage to their property, they couldn't match the ferocity that now erupted in all four of us. I'd never punched an old lady before; I didn't have any problem doing so now.

In a way, they were unlucky, for it wasn't really to do with them. It was a reaction that had been building in us for days, since George. Our anger needed an outlet, and here were some senior citizens in armour trying to kill us. That pretty much fitted the bill.

During the next few minutes, we notched up many firsts. There was Lockwood, slicing off the secretary's metal fingers, first from one gauntlet, then the other. There was Kipps, grappling with the bearded man, pulling at his whiskers and upending him; as he sought to rise, sticking his rapier straight into the motor of his bulb-gun, so that it exploded in a ball of pulsing light. And there was Holly, dodging the savage blows of the long-haired woman; leaping to the giant wooden globe and shoving it over, so that it pinned her against the floor.

Me, I'd got up, retrieved the discarded electrical gun and switched on the dial. The tiny woman in silver armour had likewise struggled up. She rushed at me, shrieking: I flicked the trigger, sending out a jolt of electric current that blew her straight through the nearest wall in a shower of bricks and plaster.

The bearded man lay insensible beneath the smoking, twisted coils of his brass funnel. Harpoon Man, however, had readied his gun. He levelled it at Kipps. Holly screamed a warning. Kipps ducked; the bolt shot over his head. I hit the man with another blast from the gun that sent him back into a chair and the chair back into a bookcase. It toppled over, burying him.

The skull uttered whoops of glee. "*This is great. You're just as bad as them! Worse, in fact. They don't know what's hit them!*"

And the tide of the battle *was* turning. The grey haired woman had wriggled out from under the globe. She fled for the door. So too the secretary; hissing and clanking on his stilt-legs, swinging his clawless metal hands. They arrived at the door at the same time, fighting with each other to be first to pass through. Lockwood and I walked after them, he with his rapier, me holding the gun. Out into the corridor we went, towards the landing, stepping over the dust and debris and scattered bricks; also the unconscious body of the tiny woman, which lodged half in and half out of the wall.

The fugitives reached the landing, at the head of the stairs. As the woman turned to go down, I caught her with a bolt of electricity that sent her through the banisters and out over the stairwell to land in a chandelier. There she swung, senseless and dangling, in a sorry mess of crystal shards and smoking tweed.

Here too the secretary had his final stand. Perhaps with his stilt legs, he couldn't easily descend the stairs; perhaps his desperation had turned to defiance at the last. Either way, he turned and held his ground, as Lockwood approached, calm and remorseless, rapier at the ready.

"You'll die for this!" he cried. "She'll make you pay!"

He swung out blindly with an arm. Lockwood moved his body to the side, sliced with his sword. He chopped neatly through the right stilt-leg. The secretary toppled against the ruined banisters and carried straight on, out into space. He missed the chandelier; anyway, it was already taken. A moment later there was a heavy impact on the stairs below.

Silence in the house of the Orpheus Society. The gun in my hand was humming gently. I switched it off, let it fall to the floor. The body in the chandelier swung gently round and round.

"*Oh, is that it?*" the skull said. "*I was enjoying that. Bit of senseless violence does wonders for morale. You should break in somewhere every night. There are heaps of old people's homes in London. Let's choose another one tomorrow.*"

Kipps and Holly picked their way among the debris of the corridor to join me on the landing. Kipps eyed the plaster bust of the bulgy-eyed woman, still sitting on its plinth.

"Funny," he said, "that bit of missing nose doesn't seem quite so bad now."

Lockwood had gone downstairs to check the crumpled body of the secretary. A power-pack on the man's back was spurting out intermittent bright blue sparks.

I looked down through the shattered banisters. "Is he dead?"

"No."

"Don't think any of them are," Kipps said.

Below me, Lockwood stood up slowly. He nudged a limp hand aside with his boot and stepped past the secretary without another glance. He ascended the stairs, pale-faced, dusty, torn of coat, rapier in hand. Only on reaching the landing did he fix it to his belt.

"Can we go now, please?" Holly asked in a small voice.

Lockwood nodded. "First we need to stop off at that storeroom upstairs."

It was shortly after two a.m when we arrived back at Portland Row. It was silent in the house; nothing could be heard from George or Flo.

Lockwood held a heavy bag, containing items from the storeroom. He lowered it onto the table, then pulled his balaclava off. There was blood on his face. He scratched at his flop of hair. "Check the front, Hol," he said. "See if anyone's watching the house. Masks off, everyone. Gloves, too. We'll need to get rid of these."

We threw the balaclavas and gloves by the door. Kipps took off his ruined jacket and chucked it on the pile. Holly came back from the living room.

"Can't see anyone out there," she said.

Lockwood nodded. "Good enough."

We stood in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. The smell of smoke rose from our tattered clothes. Our faces and hands were bruised and bloodied, our expressions blank. The same thought was going through all our minds.

"So… think they recognised us?" Kipps said at last.

We all looked at Lockwood. He was very pale and there was a cut on one of his cheeks. He reminded me of a certain apparition I'd seen almost a year before.

"Probably not," he said. "But I'm afraid that they, or Fittes, or Sir Rupert Gale will put two and two together very quickly indeed. They'll know it's us for sure. They'll have to act on it. Which makes it only a matter of time before—"

"Before what?" I asked.

Lockwood smiled at me. "Before the end. But it's not going to happen tonight. I think we'll have a couple of days while they get their act together. Which means we should get some sleep. First rule of any agency – rest when you can."

All very true, but I didn't sleep well or long. I was awake before dawn and walking in the quiet house. I thought Lockwood would be sleeping on the couch in the living room, but the door was open, the room empty.

I looked into the library. The curtains were open and light was coming in, pale white and cold. There was a smell of wood-smoke, but the fire had burned out and the air was chilly. Lockwood sat in his favourite chair, a blanket over his knees. His reading light shone over his shoulder, making a small, harsh circle of redundant brightness in his lap. It illuminated the pamphlet we'd stolen from the Orpheus Society, lying open, face down between his hands. He had his eyes half open, and was staring towards the window.

I sat beside him on the arm of the chair, and switched off the light. "Not been to bed?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I've been reading my parents' last lecture."

I waited. If he wanted to tell me, he would. I didn't ask him.

"*Ghost Lore among the Tribes of New Guinea and West Sumatra*," he said, "'a presentation given to the members of the Orpheus Society by Celia and Donald Lockwood on May 31st [2004].' That's what it says on the frontispiece, Lucy. Word for word. Spells it out nice and clear. It was their calling card, if you like. They wanted to join the society. That nice man, the secretary of the society, even complimented me on it when we went there last year."

I had a vision of that white-haired thing on stilts, the screaming face, the slashing claws. "You know, maybe it's best they never joined," I said. "Not sure they'd have fitted in."

Lockwood moved; he picked the book up gently. "I should apologise to you," he said. "To you, Hol and Quill, for what happened back there, just before those idiots attacked

us. I'm sorry: I let you all down."

"Not at all," I said. "You were—"

"I was frozen," Lockwood said. "I went into shut-down. I'm your leader and that's not on. But I had an excuse," he added, "because I was very surprised by something. No, surprised isn't quite the right word. I suddenly *understood* a whole lot of things. They came in a rush, and rather overwhelmed me. And— well, I can show you what it was." He opened the little book, turned the yellowed pages. "It's two things together, really," he said. "Most of this lecture is exactly what its title suggests. It gives an account of how the people of those countries deal with ancestral spirits. There's lots about how the bones of the dead are stored in special spirit-houses set away from the village, so they're kept out of trouble. And how the shamans or witchdoctors dress up in spirit-capes, like the ones we've got upstairs, and go to the houses to consult the ancestors. That's not so new. They talked about that in other papers, as you know. But then my mother and father home in on what they think is *going on* in those spirit houses…"

He had found the extract he wanted; he knew the piece by heart. He smoothed out the page and, holding it up to catch the frail light of morning, began to read:

> "So the wise men truly converse with the ancestors: that is one point on which they all insist. But there is another point too, even more incredible to the modern ear. When they enter the spirit houses, so the wise men believe, they are no longer in the mortal world at all, but have passed through to another realm altogether. This is the realm of the ancestors, the land of death, where they can meet with ghosts on level terms. How can this be, we asked them; how can your mortal bodies withstand the terrible conditions there (for it is not a pleasant place), and would not the proximity of the dead be fatal to you? 'All this would indeed be true,' came the reply, 'were it not for the stout protection afforded by our cloaks and masks. The precious materials of the cloaks shield our bodies and keep the ancestors from touching us. The bone masks (formed from the remains of shamans of the past) allow us to see the spirits with clear eyes.'
>
> To our mind, these fragile items look scarcely capable of any of this, but the wise men are confident in their power. Yet even so, speaking with the ancestors is not to be taken lightly. The elders regard it as a most dangerous venture to be undertaken only in times of crisis, for the dead are roused to great excitement by their arrival, often following them back into the living world. This is why the spirit houses are built away from the villages, usually across streams.

"You see what they're stumbling towards, Lucy?" Lockwood said. "They're recording the exact same thing that's going on here – the living travelling to the land of the dead. They've spotted *everything*: the way the dead get stirred up, the importance of having lots of Sources piled together to create a door through, the need for bodily protection on the Other Side. It's all there."

I nodded slowly. "The bit about the bone masks is interesting," I said. "You think they operate a bit like the goggles Kipps got?"

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes, maybe. Though I bet the goggles are copying the masks, in just the same way that those silver capes we nicked are close copies of the original spirit-capes. My poor parents go on to describe them in great detail, the way they're made, the types of silver mesh holding them together… This was a gift for the Orpheus gang, Luce. Whatever techniques they were using beforehand won't have been a patch on this. They've been taking a leaf out of my parents' book ever since."

"They've been using their findings?"

"I'm sure of it. And I'm sure of something else too. They may have been delighted to hear all about the clever techniques used by the shamans, but they wouldn't have been at all chuffed about another remark in the lecture." Lockwood flipped forward a couple of pages, to near the end of the little book. "Listen to this," he said. His voice sounded odd.

> "From what we have seen and heard at first hand, both in the New Guinean hill country and the forests of East Sumatra, we are convinced of

> the truth of the wise men's accounts in the matter of their ancestors. More than that, we feel that they have much to teach us about our own problem with *our* ancestors, much closer to home. We all know that the epidemic of Visitors that Britain endures is mysterious and worsening, without apparent solution. Yet could it be that the prime cause of this crisis is somewhere near us, right under our noses? Are we, somehow, disturbing these spirits? Could there be a gate, such as we have described, with mortal traffic going through it? The idea seems absurd, and yet surely it
>
> satisfies the evidence. We feel this theory must be explored. Indeed, we devoutly believe that our researches, made at the other ends of the earth, have the potential to unlock great mysteries near at hand.

"Of course, we *know* there were spirit gates near at hand," Lockwood said. "And we know precisely who's been going through them. My poor mother and father hadn't got a clue. Can you imagine them in that cursed building, giving this talk, with the clocks ticking and those horrible Orpheus people quietly watching them?" He shuddered. "It was the wider picture, the stuff about the Other Side, that interested my mum and dad. The parallels between cultures. They thought, quite reasonably, these ideas might inspire a bit of public interest at home in England. In fact they planned to give that same lecture to a public audience in Manchester a few days later. The thing they *didn't* know, being all excited and eager, and wanting to give their special friends at the society a little preview of their theories, was that it was signing their own death warrant."

His tired eyes looked up at me; our gazes locked.

"The accident," I said.

"Given what they were up to, the Orpheus Society would have been very disinclined to have my parents' lecture heard before the world," he said. "Which brings me to the second thing I realised. The date of this lecture is 31st May [2004]. That's just two days before my mother and father were due to travel up to Manchester. In other words," Lockwood went on, "it's two days before their car was hit in a freak accident and they were killed in a ball of flame. Two days before they, this lecture, and their inconvenient theories were lost to the world forever." He tossed the pamphlet on the floor.

"It wasn't an accident," I said.

"They were murdered, Lucy. Yes."

"And you think that Marissa and the Orpheus Society—"

He held my gaze. "I don't *think* that, Lucy. I know."

IV.

The Siege at Portland Row

17.

Whatever the drawbacks of Flo Bones's nursing techniques – and judging by the state of Lockwood's bedroom when we next looked in, these included a total lack of interest in cleanliness, air quality and the orderly disposal of bloodied bandages – it could not be denied that they produced results. George was sitting up in bed that morning, wedged amongst pillows and living room cushions, with Lockwood's best dressing gown draped over his shoulders and a tray of cakes lying at an angle on his lap. His face was horribly discoloured, with the bluish-purple flush of a soft plum, and there was a white compress taped over his left eye. Somehow he had contrived to balance his broken spectacles on his

swollen nose. He looked like an elderly owl that had recently fallen out with a woodpecker. But his one good eye was open and sparkling with intelligence, and that was enough to have me grinning like an idiot as I sat on the bed beside him.

"Look at you!" I said. "You're alive and awake, and sitting up and everything!"

"Not so loud." George's voice was stronger, but as raspy as a piece of sandpaper scouring out an ashtray. "You'll wake poor Flo. She's done in." He nodded over at the corner of the room, where a still shape in a puffer jacket lay curled up in the centre of a nest of tumbled clothes. Flo's knees were drawn up, her head rested on her hands. She had removed her hat, and her matted straw-blonde hair radiated round her like a deformed starfish. Her eyes were closed. She was breathing long and deeply.

Lockwood blinked. "Wait! Are those my jumpers? And my best shirts tucked under her muddy boots? You've emptied out the contents of my drawers!"

"She needed something cosy to lie down on," George said. "You wouldn't deny her that, surely."

"There are two spare duvets in the airing cupboard!"

"Oh yeah. Didn't think of them. Anyway, keep it down. She's been ministering to me all night. In all honesty, I feel quite caked out…" With painful movements, George set his tray aside. With his good eye he inspected our cuts and bruises. "What's all this, then? You trying to steal my thunder here?"

"We've been out," Lockwood said, "getting something for you." He placed the copy of *Occult Theories* on the bedspread. "Hope it's worth it."

The lower half of George's purpled face parted in a wonky grin. "Christmas has come! Thank you…" He patted the pamphlet weakly. "Which was it, Fittes or Orpheus?"

"Orpheus," Lockwood said. "Speaking of which, if you're no longer almost dying, you might want to get reading pronto. We may not have much time."

That our raid on the Orpheus Society was a turning point, all of us knew without discussing it. First the attack on George, and now our retaliatory expedition: lines had been crossed by both sides now, and there was no possibility of returning to the watchful truce of a few days previously. Consequences were inevitable; the question was in what form they would come. Personally I expected a rapid payback. It wouldn't have surprised me if Marissa Fittes and a crack DEPRAC team had shown up before lunchtime to lead us away in chains.

But nothing like that happened. The day was quiet, and Lockwood took the opportunity to make preparations. Kipps, who had crashed out overnight on our library floor, was sent into central London on a shopping trip, and Flo Bones, once she had finally awoken, was likewise prised from George's bedside and given a job to do.

"I need your ear out there, Flo," Lockwood said, "I need to hear what's being talked about among the relic-men. Any rumours, anything strange that's been heard or seen, particularly if it involves Sir Rupert Gale or any of the Fittes lot. News travels fast in the criminal underworld, and you've got the best antennae of anyone I know."

"What, am I some kind of beetle now?" Flo scowled at us; she was not best pleased at having to leave the sick-room. "George isn't eating right yet. Did you see those pastries he left? He needs someone with him."

"This will help him more in the long run," Lockwood said. "Honestly, Flo. We need you out on the streets again. This is where *George* needs you."

From the expression on her face, I expected a furious Flo diatribe at this point, but she just went all quiet and nodded, which was even more disconcerting. "All right, Locky," she said, as she made for the door. "But you've put your foot in it this time. Really put your foot in it. This is *not* going to end well."

Lockwood watched her stump away down the kitchen steps into the garden. "What Flo says may be true," he said, "but I don't believe in sitting around waiting for bad things to come to us. We've got work to do. Lucy, do you mind nipping up with me to Jessica's room? I want to ask you something."

"Sure," I said. "Why?"

"Just an idea I've got. Call it a final line of defence. It's a bit crazy, but I need to talk it through with you." He looked out at the sunlit gardens, the blank houses, the wind moving on the un-mown grass. "If we're going to do it, we need to start as soon as possible, before anything bad happens."

But nothing bad happened to us all that afternoon.

The skull in the jar, which had been remarkably quiet and self-effacing ever since the attack on George, took note of George's partial recovery and the strange activity now beginning in the house, and flared into psychic life again.

"*Don't tell me*," it said, "*another crisis. Or is sitting knee-deep in dangerous haunted objects the latest craze for all idiot agents? What are you going to do, play 'Pass the Parcel' now? 'When the music stops, the Source explodes and a ghost eats your face.' I can't really see it catching on.*"

Lockwood, Holly and I were indeed sitting on the landing, outside Jessica's bedroom door. In sharp contrast to our normal habit, the door was wide open, and the emanations from the death-glow above the bed pulsed across the landing. We had broken open the final tea-crate and, amid a surf of scattered wood shavings, were unwrapping the objects it contained. There were wooden masks and carven sticks, brightly coloured pottery jars sealed with wax, opaque glass bottles, and – our prize discovery – one resplendent cloak of iridescent feathers, pink and orange and shining in the sun. Anything that had the remotest psychic potential we piled in one corner; the rest we cast aside. It was the same procedure we'd used before when investigating other artefacts gathered by Lockwood's parents, only now carried out in double-quick time.

The ghost was watching us sceptically from a position outside George's door. In Flo's absence, we'd wedged this open so we could keep watch on the invalid. We'd taken the opportunity to fumigate the room too, opening the window and bringing in fresh lavender. Even so, Flo's presence lingered.

"Try and be serious for a moment, Skull," I said. "I was hoping you could help us here. We're separating out all the strongest Sources. Some we're sure of, but others not." I pointed to our 'of interest' pile. "What do you think of these?"

The ghost sniffed dubiously. "*Some are psychically dangerous,*" it said, "*but you've got a lot of tat there that I wouldn't give house-room to. Particularly that pierced gourd Holly Munro is putting her head in – but that's an issue of hygiene more than anything.*"

"That pointy one? I thought it was a shaman's mask."

"*It's worn in tribal rituals, yeah. But those guys didn't put it on their faces, I'll tell you that.*"

"Er, Holly…"

Her voice was muffled from inside the gourd. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. I like the mask! You look good. Keep it on!" I turned back to the skull. "Exact function aside, you're saying it's useless?"

"*Almost certainly. There's no trapped spirit in there. Those sealed pots, though – they're more interesting. They've got the whiff of the grave about them. And that dream-catcher with the bamboo handle? See how the end's been plugged with wax? That means something too."*

"A ghost?"

The face in the jar grinned evilly at me. *"Maybe. Isn't it exciting? You'd best break them all apart and see what's inside.*"

"Not until we're ready." I looked into Jessica's room, at the black plasm burn that had eaten away the centre of the abandoned bed. That had been caused by a ghost unleashed at the wrong moment. Lockwood had his back to it; he was calmly unwrapping another bundle from the crate. He seemed to have his emotions regarding his sister's death well under control. I glanced again at the ghost-jar. "How's George doing?" I asked.

The ghost swivelled; it scanned the bedroom. "*He's lying very still with his mouth open, so he's either asleep or dead – all right, all right!*" (I'd made a frantic move to get up.) "*He's snoring like a puppy, so we can take it he's asleep.*" It frowned contemplatively. "*You say his face is badly swollen… In all honesty, how can you tell?*"

"Just keep an eye on him." I reported the skull's remarks to Lockwood and Holly.

“George has dropped off again. He still hasn’t read that book.”

“Can’t be helped,” Lockwood said. “His recovery’s the most important thing.”

George, in fact, slept most of the day, while we continued our work in the neighbouring bedroom. In the late afternoon, Kipps returned, to be followed soon after by a large delivery lorry, inching its way down Portland Row. It came from a builder’s supply yard; under Kipps’s direction, men began unloading large sections of chipboard, tools, ropes and other materials, and dumped them in the hall. Before they could depart, a Mullet’s van showed up, bringing fresh quantities of iron, salt and new magnesium flares, and there was a great kerfuffle in the street as the vehicles struggled to pass each other.

We took possession of the deliveries and shut the door on the shouting men and honking of horns. Holly and I took organised the agency supplies, Lockwood and Kipps the wood and tools. Very soon banging noises began downstairs.

At teatime, we gathered in the kitchen for a meal. The day was almost over, and still there had been no sign of our enemies, no attack, no retribution.

“It’s weird,” I said. “I was sure we’d have been arrested by now.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Lockwood said. “I don’t think they *can* just arrest us up front. They know, or guess, we’d kick up a fuss and raise a *lot* of awkward questions.”

“Or kill us,” Kipps said. He had placed a hacksaw on the table before taking his plate of sandwiches, and there was sawdust in his hair.

Lockwood nodded. “That’ll certainly be their preferred option. But they can’t easily bump us off, either. It’s one thing to beat up George in the street. It’s quite another to dispose of all of us. That would take a concerted effort – and would be very risky for whoever did it, because they know we’ll be expecting it. Also, the attack couldn’t be in public for obvious reasons. Even Fittes can’t blatantly authorise murder. That means it’ll be done quietly, when no one’s around. And that’s why I’m expecting a night attack here at Portland Row.”

“Tonight?” I said.

“We can only hope not. We won’t be ready. Give us another day and I’ll be a lot more confident. Then we’ll have upstairs done as well. We’ll just have to keep watch and trust to luck. Maybe it’s taking a while to get anything out of the Orpheus people – we left them in pretty poor shape.”

“Anyone have a theory about those stilts that madman was wearing?” Kipps asked. “What possible purpose did *they* have?”

Lockwood shrugged. “It was Other Side kit of some kind. All of it was – even the electrical guns. All designed to keep spirits at bay. Didn’t work quite so well on us, sadly for them. Well, if we’ve eaten, we should get on. There’s plenty still to do.”

Defending 32 Portland Row wasn’t impossible, but there were definite points of weakness to overcome. On the ground floor, the street-front side gave little cause for worry. The old front door was thick and sturdy, and fixed with so many locks and chains it would have needed a bazooka to blow it down. The library and living room windows were fairly safe too, as both overlooked the basement yard, and so weren’t easily accessible. It was the kitchen at the back, with its steps leading down to the garden, that worried us. That evening Kipps fixed home-made barricades to the inside of the windows and across the glass pane of the door. Lockwood also went out and spent quite a bit of time constructing something on the steps below the door. “I’ve been inspired by our visit to Marissa’s tomb,” he said. “Might be best to avoid using this entrance for a few days.” He didn’t explain more.

The basement had long been our main point of concern. Again, the front of the house was theoretically less vulnerable. It was true that windows in our office opened directly onto the sunken yard below our front door. Steep steps led down here from the gate and – though lots of dead plants in big pots filled the space – intruders could easily reach the windows. However, following a burglary years before, we had added iron bars to these, and it was hard to see how these could be bypassed. This meant we focused all our attention on the back.

At the rear of the office, past the rapier practise room, the storeroom and the scullery – where our washing machine sat, and stiff socks and other items hung on lines – you came to the back door. It was made of glass, and opened straight onto the grass of the

garden. Of all parts of the house, this door was the weakest point. Already Kipps had fixed a series of wooden staves across the opening, but we doubted they'd survive sustained attack. As night fell, extra defences were added by Lockwood and Kipps, who spent a lot of time messing with the floorboards just inside the door.

Holly watched proceedings from the arch that led to the rapier room. When Lockwood finally stopped, shirt rolled up and knees scuffed and dusty, she indicated the two straw dummies hanging on their chains. "Anything we can rig up with Joe and Esmeralda?" she asked. "They've got potential too, somehow."

Lockwood nodded. "Yes, it seems a pity to leave them out," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

Nightfall came. Holly and I stockpiled weapons and watched the street. Neighbours moved about inside their houses. Arif closed up his stores. Portland Row was silent. Our enemies made no move.

Towards midnight, George woke up and asked for sandwiches and a bedside light. He began reading the book. The rest of us took turns on sentry duty, two hours at a time, while the others slept.

A crescent moon rose over London and migrated slowly through the sky. At around two a.m. I sat at the living room window sill with the ghost-jar by my side. Hey, it was late. I was tired. I needed the company.

"There's a spirit standing on the garden path opposite," I said. "I just caught the moonbeams going through it. So very faint. Man in a bowler hat. Very still and peaceful, like he's thinking about something."

Tonight the face in the jar shone pale and silvery, mirroring the moon. "*Oh, him,*" it said. "*Yes, he's thinking about something, all right. In about twenty minutes he'll move towards the house and disappear. At about 3.40a.m. he'll reappear, just briefly, with a dirty big bundle over his shoulder. I reckon it's his dead wife wrapped in a rug, but you only get a flash of a pair of slippers as he sets off up the road, so I've never satisfied my mind on that*."

I stared across the street. "This happens every night? I've never seen it before."

"*Yeah, it's funny how often one doesn't see things that are right under your nose,*" the ghost said. "*So… what shall we talk about? I know! Lockwood.* He's *in his element now, isn't he? Enemies closing in. Endgame afoot. Nice for him! He's chirpy.*"

"Nonsense. He's worried sick, like the rest of us."

"*Is he? Then he hides it well. If it was me, I'd say he's more than content with the way it's going. Suits the trajectory he's been on ever since his parents croaked. Oh, you can huff and pout all you want, but you know it's true. Going out in a pointless blaze of glory is just how he'd like it: saves him the hassle of doing the boring, complex stuff – you know, like going on living.*" The face grinned at me.

"That is *such* a lie."

"*Isn't*."

"It so is."

"*Yes, it's our intellectual debates I'm going to miss when you're dead,*" the skull remarked. The eyes fixed on me. "*You don't* have *to stick with him, you know. You could get out, go somewhere different, try to survive. Nip out now, you'd be on a train at dawn. I can see you're getting all furious again, but you shouldn't. There are options – less noble, but somehow more sensible – that's all I'm saying*."

"I'm staying here."

"*Fair enough. At least you've got the choice. Some of us don't have that luxury.*" The face gave a sigh, swept slowly round and round against the inside of the jar.

"Skull, when this is all over—"

"*Don't say you'll let me out, because we both know that's a lie.*"

"It isn't. I promise. I'll break the glass and let you go."

"*Thanks for saying it, but you'll just stuff me back in that storeroom with all the crisps. You'll forget me as soon as the danger's over, I know.*"

"I won't. What do we need to break the silver-glass?"

If a disembodied head could have shrugged, it would have done. "*A hammer ought to do it*."

"We've got hammers! Kipps and Lockwood have been using some today! No problem, then. That's what we'll do."

The skull seemed unconvinced. "*Don't suppose you could bring the programme forward and release me* before *your brutal death, could you? Might be more efficient that way. No? Well… it was a nice thought.*"

"I'm not *going* to die."

"*Yeah. That's what* I *said once, too.*"

I didn't deign to reply to this. We fell silent and watched the road.

Despite our fears and dark predictions, the night passed without incident. No one attacked us in our beds, and the only disturbance was George calling for cheese on toast at five in the morning. Dawn came at last, and we met again for breakfast. The kettle had only just boiled when a furious knocking sounded on the kitchen door and Flo Bones appeared, looming like a haunted scarecrow at the window. She bore ominous tidings and a rather crumpled box of chocolates for George.

"Excuse the mud splats on the cardboard," she said, brushing at a stain on the side of the box. "I didn't pass an open drain, or I'd have washed them off on the way up. Well, I see you've all been busy. What's that tripwire thing halfway up the steps?"

Lockwood shut the door behind her. "Sorry, Flo. It's a deadly man-trap. I should have told you."

Flo reached under her hat and scratched at her scalp. "Good thinking, and it seems like you might be needing a few more of them and all." She broke off, and regarded us levelly.

"Why?" Holly said. "What have you heard?"

She shook her head. "I don't know as I should say, seeing as how it'll give you all the willies. And it ain't confirmed, neither. Just a bit o' hearsay what's washed along the Thames, and been gathered in her sack by old Flo. But the word is—" She glanced over her shoulder, made a lucky sign, and lowered her voice. "Word is that Sir Rupert Gale's been in deep discussions with the Winkmans, and your name has been mentioned."

"Ah, *that's* it, is it?" Lockwood breathed. "I *knew* there'd be a reason why they've taken so long."

"I don't get it," Kipps said. "Why would Gale talk with a known criminal to—"

"Because they're old acquaintances. Gale used to buy black-market Sources from Julius Winkman. Anyway, shut up a minute, Quill. Sorry, Flo – go on."

During the interruption Flo had helped herself to Lockwood's mug of tea. "Yeah, Julius Winkman," she said. "Since his release, he's been lying low. There's been word sent out that he don't want to see any relics or stolen goods or any of that stuff, though 'course," Flo said, rolling her eyes, "that don't mean nothing, as it's his missus Adelaide and that young smear of cow-cake, Leopold, who take possession of all the hush-hush items these days. So officially, old Winkman is all above-board now. But they say that Gale went to see him, and since then Julius has been out recruiting some of his old associates, fellows who ain't so particular about the kind of work they do. Head-crackers, bone-breakers, knifemen and garroteurs – *that* sort of tidy gentleman. Rounding them up, routing them out from the inns and wharfside stews, getting them tooled and ready for a dicey and unspecified job." Her blue eyes gazed at us from the shadows of her hat. "Unspecified… but concerning *you*."

"*That's* why they've taken so long to get going," Lockwood said. "Fittes and Gale are getting the Winkman family to sort us out. Marissa keeps her hands clean and shuts us up, while Julius gets the revenge he's been after ever since we got him arrested after Kensal Green that time. Hey presto, everyone's happy."

"Except us," Holly said. "We'll be dead."

There was a pause while we all digested Flo's news. "Maybe it's better this way," I said at last. "Maybe it's better that it's not going to be other agents. They won't be trained, like us, will they? They won't have swords."

"No," Kipps said, "just guns and knives. Hooray."

No one had much to say about this. We looked at one another.

"Is this a private wake, or can anyone join in?"

The voice came from the hallway door. Everyone turned: there stood George. He was in his pyjamas, and very grey about the face – grey, at least, where the purple bruises weren't blossoming. The bandage on his head had come away, and you could see where the hair was still matted with congealed blood. His sleeves were too short, and there were bruises on his arms. He stood awkwardly, limbs shaking, clasping the doorframe for support. But he was standing, for the first time in days.

"Look at me," he said. "Upright again! Things can't be so bad, surely." He gave us a wonky, mottled smile. "Hey, and there's the proof of it! Are *all* those chocolates for me?"

18.

Dubious as Flo's gift undoubtedly was (my theory was that she'd found the box floating down the Thames and had dried the chocolates out individually on riverside stones before repacking them), it was good to see George take an interest in it. And his interest in other things had reignited too. During the night he had read and thoroughly digested *Occult Theories*, the little book we had brought back from the Orpheus Society. Over breakfast, sharing tea and chocolates with Flo, he filled us in on what he'd found.

"It's by Marissa," he said. "No question about it. Hasn't got her name on, but I recognise her style from the *Manual* and other works. But it's a strange piece of work. She must have written it when she was very young, because there's nothing about being an agent, or psychic detection or anything *practical*. It's all much more airy than that, full of weird theories about life and death. The thing that really jumps out is her obsession with the stuff that spirits are made of. She thinks ghosts are proof that this substance is immortal. The body falls away, and the spirit continues on."

"She's talking about ectoplasm, then?" Holly asked.

"The skull said she asked *him* about that, too," I said.

"I guess so," George said, "though she calls it by other names too: 'the soul', 'eternal essence', stuff like that. The thing that's interesting is that she reckons that if you could somehow capture this 'essence' and absorb it, it would rejuvenate your body and make you young again. Anyone see the significance of that?"

Everyone did. "The woman we *call* Penelope…" Lockwood said.

"Exactly right. Do you want that last caramel choc, Flo, or shall I have it?" George popped it in his mouth and looked round at us. "The thing is, if you read Marissa's ideas, she sounds completely cracked. And as we all know, she never went public with anything like that again. Soon after she wrote this, the Problem began, and it was ghost-hunting for Marissa all the way. But it seems to me," George finished, "that she's been quietly working on this pet theory of hers ever since."

Lockwood nodded slowly. "You've hit it, George. That's the answer. And if we could get into her rooms in Fittes House, we'd have ample proof of it, I bet. But they're too well guarded…" A thought struck him; he broke off, looking into space.

"There's the small matter of the Winkmans to contend with too," I said.

"Lockwood," Holly said, "I've been thinking about this. Shouldn't we get Barnes down here to help us? Can't we inform him that people plan to murder us in our beds? I know he's not got as much power as he once did, but surely this is something he can help us with."

Lockwood didn't answer at first. A small, slow smile was spreading on his face. Whatever it was that amused him, he folded it up and stored it at the back of his mind. When he turned to Holly, he was as serious and businesslike as ever. "I don't think so,"

he said. “If we get Barnes in, Winkman’s men will just melt away and wait it out until his back’s turned. He *would* help us, I think, if we gave him sufficient proof, but not before… It all comes back to proof, which we haven’t yet got.” He clapped his hands together and stood up from the table. “Meanwhile, we have to survive, and I’ve got a plan for that. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Not long after breakfast, Flo Bones left Portland Row. Always uncomfortable with a roof over her head, she had even less inclination to stay with the possibility of an attack planned. Before departure, however, Lockwood took her to the library. They spoke there for a long time, alone. Then Flo slipped away, leaving only a few dirty footprints in the hall for us to remember her by. We continued making improvements to our barricades.

Mid-morning came, and there was activity at Arif’s Stores. Two men were seen to go into the shop, where they purchased newspapers. With these under their arms, they migrated to opposite sides of the street and sat on walls there, one in shadow, one basking in the autumn sun. Thickset and silent, they read their papers and smoked cigarettes; otherwise, they were as one with the bricks and the concrete. Occasionally they glanced along the road, to see if anything was happening at number 32.

Holly made a surreptitious foray over the back wall and out through a neighbour’s garden to the road behind. Here she discovered several other men loitering, blocking off the exit. She returned to the house, having found out what we wanted.

Portland Row was surrounded. The Winkmans had arrived.

For the present this didn’t concern us. All our activity was within and, specifically, upstairs in Jessica’s bedroom. George was in charge of this. An easy chair had been brought up from the library and positioned on the landing. From here, surrounded by mugs of tea and crumb-strewn plates, he supervised our efforts. At his side, the skull sat in its jar, watching dyspeptically. It too was an advisor in the operation.

“How many chains have we got looped on the floor now?” George asked as I emerged from the room, sweaty, thirsty and covered in dust. Lockwood, Kipps and I had been setting up a circle for the past half hour.

“Lots,” I said. We’d had to shift the old bed away from the wall in order to wind the chains around it. The chains were piled high in layers, sealing the bed – and its death-glow – inside a fat hoop of iron. It was the strongest circle we’d ever made.

George shook his head testily, and winced. He rubbed his neck with careful fingers. “Not specific enough. We need at least five A-class chains of 50mm width. I know we used to have two downstairs – did Kipps get hold of the rest?”

“Kipps!”

“What?” Quill Kipps emerged, sneezing.

“How many A-class chains have we used now?”

“All four.”

“We need one more,” George said. “Or we’re putting ourselves at risk.”

Kipps stared at him. “Too late. If we go out now, those bozos down the street will kill us. Can’t we use two B-class ones?”

“Yeah, we can,” George said, “if you *want* a host of phantoms breaking out and surrounding you in your sleeping bag tonight.”

“It’ll make a nice change from your snores, anyway,” Kipps said. He went away.

“Plus we need the B-class ones for the cross-chain.” George was studying some crumpled plans on his lap. Since his appearance in the kitchen that morning, he and Lockwood had been in deep discussions, and the plans were the result. “I’m still trying to figure out how we can suspend it in mid-air. What do we fix it to?”

“Lockwood says we’ll just hammer posts into the ground. Like Rotwell did.”

“Rotwell wasn’t building his Gate in an upstairs bedroom,” George said. “What if the ceiling falls in?” He sighed. “I still think we need more chains.”

He was full of little worries like that, George, which was understandable, given we were working to his design. He had based it on our memories of the Gate constructed at the Rotwell Institute earlier that year – the one through which Lockwood and I had

travelled in our first visit to the Other Side. The Rotwell team had done everything on a massive scale, with a double set of giant chains forming the circle, and a suspended iron chain (which crossed the circle) making the way in. The circle had contained a vast number of stolen supernatural Sources that, together, created a hole leading to the Other Side. We didn't have anything like that many Sources, but Lockwood reckoned we could still force a breach, provided we used most of the artefacts from the walls of the house and the boxes in Jessica's room.

"What do *you* think, skull?" I asked.

"*About what?*" The face in the jar wore an expression of supercilious boredom. "*If you mean Lockwood's plan, I think it's bound to end in your painful deaths. If you mean George, I think his bruises improve him markedly. They make him more symmetrical.*"

"I'm not talking about George or the plan. I'm asking about the chains."

"*Oh, you need as many as you can get for the circle, or you'll do Winkman's job for him. Mind you, who am I kidding? You'll all be pushing up daisies tomorrow, one way or another. Why not just relax? Forget the chains. Use a ribbon instead, or a bit of string*."

I rolled my eyes and stepped into the bedroom, bracing myself as always for the impact of the death-glow, the pulses of cold energy that burned my skin and set my teeth on edge. We were clearing the room out of everything that was inessential. Lockwood had been emptying the chests of drawers at the back, throwing its contents into bags. Now he was standing by the window, holding something up to the light.

"Got a problem with the circle," I said. "George and the skull reckon we need more chains. But since Winkman's men—"

"Look at this, Luce." Lockwood held a small box in his hands; inside it, something blue was shining bright. "Found it at the back of the bottom drawer," he said. "Don't worry, it's not a Source or anything."

I took the box. It was lined with tissue paper. A golden necklace was coiled in it and, for its pendant, a shimmering blue stone, smooth and oval and darkly translucent. It was like looking into the fresh, clear waters of a mountain lake.

"Oh, it's lovely," I said.

"Yes, a sapphire. My father got it out east somewhere, and he had this made for my mother. It was her favourite thing. That's what my sister told me once, anyway." Lockwood took the box back and shut it up. "I didn't know it was here."

"So your mum didn't have it on her when she—?"

"I don't think she wore it in the ordinary way. It was too special to her. My dad had given it to her soon after they met. It was a symbol of his undying devotion."

"That's nice," I said.

"He was always giving her presents. That ropey stuffed bird in the case on the top shelf in the library? That was from him. And that dodgy gourd in the hall."

"I suspect she preferred the brooch," I said.

"Me too." He put the box in his pocket. "What were you saying?"

"George says we need more chains. But that means going out."

"Oh, that's not a problem. I need to nip out anyway, do a few things. Tell you what, why don't you come with me? Winkman's men won't attack us in broad daylight, though they might try to follow us, see where we go. We'll lose them, if so. Come on, let's tell the others what we plan to do."

Not long after lunch, Lockwood and I left the house and set off down Portland Row. We walked nonchalantly, rapiers gleaming in the sunshine. As we passed Arif's Stores, two men who had been sitting on opposite walls reading their newspapers abandoned this activity and began following us at a distance. We walked to Marylebone Station, where another man, sitting at a café table below the iron ghost-wards, put his coffee down and sauntered into the ticket halls behind us. All three men waited while we bought our fares; they themselves had tickets ready, and passed through the barriers close behind.

We took a southbound train to Oxford Circus. The train was fairly empty. The three men rode in the next carriage along.

Lockwood said: "All we have to do is shake them. If we go to Bond Street, they'll think we're going to Mullet's. With luck we can double back while they're still making that assumption." He nudged me. "I've never had to lose a tail like this. It's almost fun."

The brown shapes of the men were visible through the partition window at the end of

the carriage. I could feel them staring at us. “Fun’s not the way I look at it,” I said.

At Oxford Circus, we changed onto the Central Line and headed west to Bond Street. The three pursuers made the transfer too. Now they were in the same carriage, hulking shadows separated from us only by a small knot of shoppers. Lockwood whistled to himself cheerfully, quite unconcerned.

“Luce,” he said, “I’ve got something to tell you. Once we’ve lost them, we’re going to split up. I’ll want *you* to go buy the chains. I’ve got a couple of calls to make. No, don’t ask me where. It may not come off, and I don’t want to get your hopes up. We’ll rendezvous again later and head home.”

His plan didn’t exactly thrill me. My mind was turning to the business of the night to come. “Winkman’s got a whole gang of apes like these,” I said, as we got off the train and made our way up the teeming escalators with our pursuers close behind, “and you expect four of us to hold them off tonight? *Four* of us, Lockwood. George is in no shape to lift a flare, let alone a sword.”

“It may not be quite as bad as you think,” Lockwood said. “We have allies.”

“Oh, really? Who, for instance?”

We came up from the underground station into the autumn sunlight. A steady crowd of people were issuing down the steps behind us, slowing the ascent of the men following us. Lockwood touched my arm. Ducking out into the traffic, we ran across the road to the subway entrance on the opposite side, and pattered down the steps into the underground system again. We returned to the ticket barriers and caught escalators back down to the trains.

“For instance,” Lockwood said, as we filed onto a northbound carriage. “You remember I told you once how Kipps and I first fell foul of one another? At the DEPRAC fencing competition when I was young? I beat Kipps and went on to the final, where I lost to someone with a far better grasp of sword-play than I had.” He grinned at me; the doors were closing, and there was no sign of the men. “Remember I told you that?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said. “Though you never told me who it was who beat you.”

“I’ll tell you now. Flo.”

The train set off into the tunnel. We stood in the central aisle, holding the ceiling grips, being gently moved from side to side.

“What?” I said. I’d been waiting for the gag, the qualifier, the Lockwood-saying-something-else bit. Anything. It didn’t happen. “What...? *What?*” That last one was the kind of ‘What?’ that made fellow passengers look up at us from where they sat. I spoke more softly. “You’re kidding.”

“Flo,” Lockwood said again. “She was very good.”

“Wait, we’re talking the same Flo Bones here? Wellington boots, duffel coat, parts of the anatomy on which the sun has never shone? *That* Flo Bones? No! – don’t you dare raise that eyebrow at me!”

“Well, you just seem to know more about her than I do, that’s all,” Lockwood said, smiling. “Anyway, none of that was the case back then. Not a welly to be seen. I think I could have beaten a girl in wellies, Luce. Come on.”

“Forget the wellies! I want an explanation. I’ve known Flo for years and you’ve never told me about this!”

“Well, she was a different person then. She wasn’t really Flo Bones, that’s the point. She was Florence Bonnard of the Sinclair and Soanes Agency, operating out of an office in Temple. A young agent, very promising indeed.” He shook his head at the memory. “She could swing a mean rapier, that’s for sure. She gave me a good thrashing.”

I tried to reconcile the two images in my head – the Flo I knew, who squatted under storm drains, poking the mud with sticks, and this other one. No good. The difference was too great. I decided to close my mouth before someone used it as a bottle opener.

“I’ve never even heard of Sinclair and Soanes,” I said.

“That’s because it doesn’t exist now. It was a tiny agency. A two-man band, really, run by Susan Sinclair and Harry Soanes. Flo Bonnard was their apprentice. One night the three of them got surprised by two Limbless in a chapel on Dulwich Heath. Both Sinclair and Soanes were killed instantly and very horribly; Flo grabbed an iron cross off the altar,

and wedged herself behind it in a corner of the room. She spent the night there, beside the bodies of her companions, fending off repeated attacks by the Visitors. You know what Limbless are like. A quick glance at them gives anyone the creeps. A whole night of it, alone… Well," Lockwood said, "the upshot was that Flo survived. But it changed her."

The train was slowing; we were coming into the next station. "Too right it did," I said. "It made her cracked in the head."

"That's not altogether true and you know it." Lockwood was looking up at the tube map above the doors. "Anyway, I helped her out, in the difficult early months. I tried getting her another job, but it was clear she'd been broken by the ordeal; she wasn't going to be an agent again. After a while she drifted into relic-collecting. Sad, in a way, but also *not* sad, Lucy. She's a survivor. She's our friend. That's Flo's story…"

I didn't speak for a moment. "All very well," I said finally, "but what use is it, if she's not going to be with us tonight?"

"She's not going to be at the *house*," Lockwood said. "That much is true. Do you think we lost them?"

"I didn't see them getting on."

"Nor did I. Good. This is Swiss Cottage. Right, we'll split up here. Go get the chains. I'll meet you on Primrose Hill in an hour."

On Primrose Hill, the park stretches down a long grass slope, and you have a clear view south over London. I waited for Lockwood on a bench near the top, the new chains lying beside me in the grass. Below, the shadows of trees stretched out across the lawns. From the west a spreading pinkness tinged the rooftops and bled like watercolour across the pale blue sky.

It was that final flourish before the light began to fade and the city withdrew into itself. Children ran past with hoops, played with footballs, roller skates. Couples pushed prams; you could hear the tinkling of their ghost-wards rising up the hill. Adult office workers, dawdling on their way home, bought cups of tea from vendors; the first night-watch kids leaned their sticks against the trees and played football or ate ice creams before their shift.

Lockwood came striding up the path, dark and thin and lit to shining by the sun. It was like he was going to ignite. For some reason the sight made me want to cry. He flung himself onto the bench beside me, and looked out at the view.

"Made your calls?" I said.

"Yes. You got the chains?"

"Yep."

"Excellent. We'd better be heading back, then."

"Lockwood," I said. "I'm so sorry about your parents. I've been meaning to say this, but there's been no time. Everything's moving too fast."

Lockwood was sitting with hands resting in his lap. There was a sense of perfect peace about him. He smiled at me. "Why are you sorry?"

"Because of what you found out at the Orpheus Society, of course. About how they were killed."

"You don't need to be sorry, Luce." He gazed out at the sunset, at the red stain spreading over London. "I'm not. It's the best news I've had in a long time."

After a moment's blankness, I couldn't help grinning at him. It had to be said that after all these years, after all our time together, Lockwood kept surprising me.

"Obviously I was shocked at first," he went on, "but not now. Remember when we sat in the cemetery, at my parents' grave? I told you how I hated the randomness of it all, how meaningless everything was. And yet what you said to me then was right – things *aren't* meaningless. Least of all my parents' death. It wasn't some stupid accident. It was murder." He looked at me, and a fire burned in his eyes, a reflection of the declining sun. "And that gives *me* purpose now, Lucy. I know *exactly* what I'm living for."

Now, if it had been there, the skull wouldn't have had any truck with this, and I'm not sure I did either. The skull would have pointed out that Lockwood's new sense of purpose was leading him in precisely the direction I'd always feared. But as always, when he spoke like that, you wanted to believe him. You no longer noticed the cuts and bruises on his face. You didn't see the weariness of the past few days. He was closest then to the

idea I'd always had of him, the picture I saw in my mind's eye when drawing near to sleep. I sat too close to notice the imperfections, and besides he shone too bright.

"We should be getting back," I said. "Got to finish the circle."

"Yes." He hesitated. "Before we do, Luce, I thought you ought to know something."

"Well?"

"It's just… there's no one else I can speak to like this," Lockwood said. "There never has been, not since Jessica died. Only you."

"So I'm like your sister?"

"Not like a sister, no."

There was a tiny kid far off, running across the grass, running downhill like an idiot. I kept expecting him to go head over heels, or put his foot down a rabbit hole. But

somehow he just kept going; it was controlled falling, basically, on and on. I don't know how he managed it. He went into a fold of the hill and disappeared from view.

Lockwood shifted on the bench. "Lucy… I thought you'd be pleased."

I looked at him. What I *should* have said was: "I am – it's just I'd have liked to celebrate by going on sitting here. Instead of which we've got to go back and spend the evening nailing boards over our windows in expectation of a violent attack which we probably won't survive. Timing is everything, Lockwood – and your timing, in this case, well and truly sucks.' I *should* have said something like that to him. But of course all I actually said was: "Oh, I am – very."

"That's good. Me too."

We sat, looking out over London. After a while we got up, picked up the chains, and started the long walk home.

19.

The watchers were back outside 32 Portland Row, two shaven-headed men standing sullenly on the pavement opposite as we pushed open the iron gate and walked up the tiled path. I gave them a little wave. We unlocked the old black door and went inside.

The hall had that odd, cold, slightly echoing quality that you usually get when you're moving house. The air smelt of sawdust and chain oil. The chipped pot had a couple of umbrellas in it, but no rapiers, which were now part of our defensive armoury. The shelves were bare of their usual ornaments, and the coat rack had been ripped off the wall. Everything had been taken upstairs.

In Jessica's room, all the furniture, except for the bed, had been removed, and the tea chests and other boxes were gone too, broken up and used as barricades downstairs. The bed itself, with its death-glow still pulsing fiercely, had been pulled towards the centre of the room. Looped chains surrounded it like dozing serpents, and we added our fat new A-grade chain to the pile. Kipps had fixed two tall iron posts outside the circle on opposite sides and had hung another chain between them. He was just soldering the ends in position. This chain crossed from post to post, straight across the circle, over the top of the bed, not far from where the death-glow shone. Piles of psychic artefacts from the crates and the walls of the house sat ready to be put in position inside the circle, and Holly was in the process of doing precisely this, under George's direction. First, each object was carefully opened – wax seals cut, pouches slit, iron surfaces pierced – to allow the escape of the spirit within. Anything that contained a Source was broken in this way. It was still daylight, so the work was theoretically safe. Even so, no one was dawdling.

"*Thank goodness you've arrived*," the skull said. Its jar was sitting on the landing. "*They've just put a Javanese back-scratcher* and *a witchdoctor's second-hand chamber-pot in the circle, while totally ignoring my very clear signals to chuck them both away.*"

"We haven't got time to be picky," I said. "It'll be dark soon. Everything with the slightest shred of power is going in."

Lockwood and I hurried to join the work. I helped with the artefacts. Lockwood turned his attention to the coat-rack, which had been nailed to the bedroom wall just inside the door. He hung the three spirit capes from his parents' crates on it, together with two prime silver specimens we'd stolen from the Orpheus Society storeroom. We had a

good array of silver gloves and boots there too.

"*Another point,*" the skull said. "*How come every last cut-price spirit in this house is being set loose except for me? Stone-knockers, Shades, Lurkers… not an ounce of personality between them, yet all in the circle! They don't* deserve *to roam free!*"

"And you do?" I'd knocked a hole in a small clay pot, revealing a fragment of bone. My fingers tingled with the release of psychic pressure. I put it carefully inside the circle.

"*There's a hammer in your hand right now, for Pete's sake! Quick smash and I'm out. Promise I won't kill Cubbins*."

"That's good of you. The answer's no."

"*He's half dead already; to be honest, it's beneath me. Kipps, though… now* he's *a different story. No one would miss him*."

In twenty minutes, the work was done. The floor around the bed – except for a little clear avenue underneath the suspended chain – was littered with broken objects. The light in the room was failing slowly, and the air within the circle already seemed thick and hazy. I was beginning to hear a slowly mounting whirr of psychic noise.

"Should be enough," Lockwood said. "Before we go, I'm going to allocate cloaks. With luck we'll never need them. But if we do – if we need to use this last defence – Lucy, I want you to have our faithful old spirit-cape. Kipps, you take this other feathered one. Holly: this one with the furs is for you. George and I will try the Orpheus outfits. There are enough Orpheus gloves to go round too. Everyone quickly give them a go."

I already knew the feel of my spirit cape – its warmth and lightness, the soft protection of its plumage – and I had it on in no time. The others were more hesitant. Lockwood and George both shimmered with silver; their scaly cloaks had a smooth, reptilian feel. Kipps's eyes boggled at the multicoloured splendour of his feathered ensemble, while Holly cringed at the patchwork texture of her pelts.

In the jar the skull cackled long and loud. "*This is like feeding time at the world's worst zoo*," it said. "*I feel like throwing you all some sardines*."

"Just how many dead animals am I wearing here?" Holly muttered. "I look like a fur trapper. This is awful."

"And *I* look like a stuffed parrot," Kipps said. "Trust you to give me this."

"I think you look adorable, Quill," George said. "Very colourful. Those pink feathers in particular are lovely. And see how long it is. That'll give you ultimate protection on the Other Side."

"You make it sound like a deodorant. If any of my friends see this…"

"*Friends*, Kipps?" George gave him a slow and painful wink.

Kipps snorted. "Yeah, well, if I had any before, I certainly won't now. Did I tell you I was allergic to ducks? I bet there are duck feathers in this."

"*How does he* know *he's allergic to ducks?*" the skull asked. "*Trust me, there's a story there."*

We didn't shut the bedroom door. You could feel the throb and pulse of the Gate in the circle even as you went downstairs.

Night fell. Out across London, the ghost lamps would soon be coming on. Ordinary people would retire behind their defences, draw their curtains, turn their back on the empty streets. And our little group of agents at number 32 would be alone.

As we ate a hurried meal, the skull in the jar made so many loud attempts to speak with me that I closed the tap in its bung just to get some peace. When I'd finished, I took it alone into the hall.

"*Well, here we are*," it said. "*In a few hours you'll probably be dead. I'll ask again, in all seriousness. Break the jar and set me free*."

"We've discussed this," I said. "Doing that won't actually free you, because you'll still be tied to that mouldy skull. If you want, when all this is over, I'll gladly take you to the Furnaces, and incinerate it. That'll free you for good."

The ghost made a face. "*And send me back to drift around drearily with all the other idiots? No thanks! That's not for me. I* like *being tied to the skull – it gives me a window onto life. But let's talk about now. One way or another, you're going to the Other Side tonight, and I'll be left alone. I don't want that. Smash this jar now, before Winkman's men get in*."

I shook my head. "We're going to beat them off," I said.

"*And if you don't? If they over-run the place, what will happen to me? You can't take*

this jar with you, and I'll be left helpless in here. If you let me out I'll at least be able to kill a few of them." The eyes glittered. "*Think of that. I can help you! I might even save your life…*"

I lifted the side of my jacket to reveal a small hammer tucked into one of the belt loops. "See what I've got with me? If the fight's going badly, I'll set you free. Not a moment before."

"*Meantime, you're going to leave me in a war zone,*" the ghost protested. "*A bullet might strike my skull! Your tumbling corpse might squash it! You don't realise how vulnerable I am in here!*"

I rolled my eyes. Time was pressing, and I didn't have time for this. I grabbed the jar, took it back into the kitchen and stuffed it in a cupboard. "You'll be safe in there," I said. "I'll come back for you in the morning."

"*Nice words*," the ghost said, as I shut the door. "*By then it'll be too late*."

We washed up (it seemed important to do so), then went to the living room for Lockwood's final briefing. As in the rest of the house, the walls were bare and marked by stains where his parents' artefacts had hung so long. One lantern was on, but the room was oddly dark. The boards across the windows blocked out the street lights in the road. Lockwood stood in front of the window, peering through a hole in the barricade.

As we filed in, he turned and smiled at us. It was his old grin.

"You all know what's going to happen tonight," he said. "At some point between now and dawn, Winkman's thugs are going to try to get inside this building." He tapped the wooden boards beside him. "They want to break in and kill us. Well, we're not going to allow that. This is 32 Portland Row. We've always been safe here."

George raised a hand. "Except when that Fairfax assassin broke in one time," he said.

"Oh, yes. True."

"And that time when Annie Ward's ghost was unleashed here," I added.

"And the various times the skull's caused us grief," Holly put in.

George nodded. "Let's face it, it's always been a death trap, hasn't it?"

Lockwood clenched his teeth. "Yeah, but it's *my* death-trap, goddammit. They're not getting in. So – there are five of us, with a whole house to defend. That sounds pretty bad, but as we know there are only two really vulnerable points: the rear basement, and the kitchen. Right, George is injured, so he'll remain upstairs with the stash of weapons on the landing. That's where the rest of us will retreat to if things go wrong. Luce and Holly, I want you both stationed in the kitchen. Quill and I will be in the basement. Listen out. If any of us are in trouble, we whistle, and the others help if they can." He smiled at us. "Let's get to our stations. Good luck, everyone."

Hours passed. In the kitchen, Holly and I sat on the floor, our backs against the units, rapiers and ammunition close at hand. We had set a lantern beneath the table, and its dull red light shone within a little forest of chair legs, like an ogre's fire seen far away. The outside door was boarded up, and further secured with bars and chains. The worktops were empty; the windows hidden behind Quill's defences. We'd bored a couple of spy-holes in the planks, and every now and then got up to look through them at the garden. You could just see the apple tree, the garden wall, the shapes and lights of other houses. The night was still. The fridge emitted its usual hum. Faint psychic sounds also came from the cupboards by the door, where I'd stowed the ghost-jar. Probably it was still complaining.

"Tap's dripping," Holly said, after a time. "We must get that fixed one day."

"It's a menace. I don't know why Lockwood doesn't sort it."

"Next week. We'll get a plumber in next week, Lucy. That's what we'll do."

"Sounds a good plan to me, Hol."

Holly had her head back against the unit, her eyes looking to the ceiling. Her hair hung loose about her shoulders, and her legs were stretched out in front of her, with her hands resting in her lap. She was as cool and composed as ever, but there was something artless in the posture that made me think of a very little girl.

"You all right?" I said.

"Yes, of course."

"You think we'll be okay? You think we'll get through this?"

Holly smiled and looked at me. "What do you think?"

“We’re always fine.”

Without waiting for her response I got up, leaned over the sink and peered through the nearest spy-hole. You had to press your eye really close to the wood to see out; even then, it took a while to focus. Branches moved in the apple tree at the far end of the garden, but I thought it was just the wind.

“Seems clear,” I said.

“They may not be here for hours yet.” Holly came to stand beside me.

“Hol,” I said, “when you first came to the agency, I’m sorry I wasn’t very… accommodating. I know I could have been nicer to you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. We’ve talked about it before.” She pushed her hair back from her face. “I’m sure I was an utter pain. Anyway, must have been odd having me show up.”

“It was a bit, but—”

“But you needn’t have worried.” She smiled at me. “Funnily enough, Lockwood isn’t actually my type.”

I’m not sure quite what expression I gave right then, though I doubt the eerie red glow in the room made it massively attractive. It was sufficient to make Holly laugh. She moved to look through another spy-hole at the far end of the window, which gave a different angle on the garden. “Don’t look so baffled, Lucy,” she said. “If anything, I had my eye on someone else.”

“Good God, you don’t mean George?”

Holly laughed again; her eyes sparkled as she glanced at me sidelong. “You must know there are other possibilities in this world.” The smile faded, her body tensed. “Hold it – we’ve got company out there.”

I jammed my face against the nearest spy-hole. Yes, it was unmistakable – something stirring in the garden. Swift forms, soft lumps of darkness breaking free of the night, slipping over the garden wall. They flowed up towards the house, past the apple tree, spreading outwards left and right.

I stamped a warning on the kitchen floor. At the same moment someone – Lockwood, I guessed – whistled sharply from downstairs. Holly and I moved away from the windows, nearer to the table. We stood side by side, facing in opposite directions. Our swords were out. We gripped each other’s hand.

It was very silent.

Silence… That was the worst of it. You hardly dared breathe. I stared at the garden door. We had the internal doors propped open, so you could see candles flickering down the hall; that was the only movement, those tiny wisps of golden light. In the whole of 35 Portland Row there was not a sound. Holly’s hand was damp in mine.

A little scuffle, perhaps on the garden steps. Holly made a small noise in her throat.

From downstairs came the crash of broken glass.

I glanced at Holly to see if she had heard it—

There was a terrific bang. The room shook; I saw bright white light shine for an instant at the edges of the boards hammered into the garden door. The light of the magnesium explosion faded. Lockwood’s tripwire had done its job. There was a thump on the wall as something collided with it, and the sound of a man howling.

Holly was grasping me hard. “Lucy…!”

I scowled at the wall. “No, Hol. No, it’s good. Maybe it’ll put them off.”

It didn’t. Glass broke behind us; beyond the boards, the kitchen window smashed.

“Guard the door, Holly,” I said.

I moved to the window and stabbed my rapier out through the nearest spy-hole. I was rewarded by hearing a gasp of pain, and a crunch of broken shrubbery as someone dropped from the window into the bushes below.

From downstairs came a frantic whistling – Lockwood’s alarm signal. Holly and I looked at each other across the kitchen.

“You go,” she said. “I’ll hold on here.”

“I won’t be long…” I was already careering down the spiral staircase, boots clattering, feeling the temperature drop with every step. I reached the bottom. My skin tingled; my teeth ached with sudden cold. Strips of greenish fog lapped against my boots.

Ghost-fog…

I heard the ringing of steel, psychic concussions and a buffet of screaming voices, not all of them from living throats. They came from the arch on the left, from the rear of the house. I plunged through, saw Lockwood and Kipps retreating from a massive, faintly glowing form. Its outline was rounded, knobbly and ill-defined. There was a broad, low-slung node that might have been a head, the suggestion of sloped shoulders, gristly protrusions instead of arms – and nothing else. The rest was a shapeless, glowing mass. It hung just above the floor, palpitating slightly, drifting towards us. As Lockwood struck it with his rapier, the plasm parted around the wound and just as swiftly reformed.

"Hi, Luce." Lockwood spoke with frankly unnecessary calm. "Thanks for coming down. So, you see we've got a Limbless. They bust a hole in the door, threw its Source in. It rolled away somewhere by the washing machine. Can you find it? Quill and I have our hands full."

"Could blast it with a flare," I said. I was already moving to the side, looking for an opportunity to dart past the apparition. Never get near a Limbless, lest it sucked you in.

"We will if necessary, but I don't like the idea of all that plasm flying around in such an enclosed space. Take a look. Just don't tread on the floorboards by the door."

I darted forwards, ducking through a wall of cold, out into the scullery area at the back of the basement. Fragments of broken wood lay scattered, and our barricade was already part dismantled. Beyond it, dark forms worked feverishly to break their way inside.

I threw a flare to dissuade them, and by its silvery light scrabbled on the floor among the wood and debris and the odd sock and pair of leggings left there from our washing. I couldn't see anything that looked like a Source. White smoke plumed above me. The barricade was smouldering with white tongues of fire and someone with an axe was attacking it in a frenzy.

"How's it going, Luce?" Lockwood's call wasn't quite as nonchalant as before. From the Limbless came a horrid gurgling sigh; from Kipps, a cry of fear.

I didn't answer. I had my torch on, held between my teeth. I'd opened a pouch in my belt, held my fingers ready to grasp the silver-net that lay folded within. Where *was* that stupid Source? The axe was making short work of the door. I knelt close to the floor-tiles, craning my neck to look down the side of the washing machine, among the fluff and buttons…

There! A roughly circular fragment of bone – a piece of neck vertebra, most likely, wedged almost beneath the machine. As I reached for it, the last remnants of the barricade splintered. Magnesium smoke swirled, and a short but broad and powerful-looking man clambered through. It had been a while; the last time I'd seen Julius Winkman, he'd had on a smart blue suit, ready for sentencing, and I'd been high in the courtroom gallery. Today he wore black and carried a length of metal piping, and I was lying on the floor with my arm under a washing machine. We knew each other, even so.

Jail hadn't made him any less muscular. His arms were still knotted like guy-ropes, his chest and neck as massive as those of a horse. His lips drew back, the teeth bared as he saw me. He stepped into the room and put his weight on one of the loose floorboards Lockwood had rigged up. His boot went down, the board swung up and slammed into his face, sending him crashing backwards into the men entering behind him.

At the same moment I pulled the piece of bone out from the crevice, and rolled it up in the cool, loose folds of the silver-net. Across the room, the giant floating shape crumpled in on itself like a punctured balloon. My ears popped; the Limbless was gone.

Roars of fury sounded in the garden. Someone somewhere fired a gun; I felt an impact behind me on the wall. I got to my feet unsteadily, left the swaddled Source lying. Hands grasped me; Lockwood was pulling me back into the room. "No good waiting," he said, "the door's bust, Luce. They're in. Quill's gone upstairs to help Holly. You come with me."

We ran through another arch into the rapier room. The air was filled with smoke, with flecks of dwindling ghost fog, with sparks of burning magnesium. The still shapes of Esmeralda and Floating Joe hung on their chains. A thin wire extended from Esmeralda's left leg and trailed away behind a pile of salt sacks in the furthest corner.

Lockwood grasped the wire. He pulled me down behind the sacks.

We waited.

Noises beyond the arch. A man with a long knife stole into sight. Despite his bulk, he

moved silently, cautiously, through the swirling smoke. He glanced up the iron stairs, then looked into the weapons room. *This* made him stop abruptly. He had seen the dummies' misshapen forms hanging on their chains in the soft darkness. They must have been an unnerving sight. A torch-beam flashed briefly; it picked out their straw hands, their painted faces. Just dummies… The man returned his torch to his belt and inched into the room, knife at the ready. Softly, softly, he padded across the space, making for the door to the storeroom, and the pile of sacks where we were hiding. As he reached the middle of the room, Lockwood yanked on the wire, making Esmeralda swing abruptly towards him like a floating ghost. With a stifled curse, the man reacted; the knife stabbed straight into the centre of her stuffed straw stomach, where it burst one of the magnesium flares we had hidden there. Searing white flames erupted from the dummy's torso in a spreading ring, ripping her apart, engulfing the man right next to her. He toppled to the floor in a cloud of burning straw, then rose again, screaming, his hair awash with pale magnesium flames. Frantically beating at his head, he turned, collided briefly against the wall, then careered away towards the office.

We got up from behind the sacks. In the midst of the swirling silver-grey smoke, the dummy's head hung swinging from the chain. Her body was gone.

"Good old Esmeralda," Lockwood said. "Fell in action. We should get upstairs."

Up the iron staircase, round and round. A bullet cracked against the metal tread beneath my feet, sending out a brief, bright spark. We burst into the kitchen. Holly and Kipps were standing side by side across the fragments of the fallen garden door. Two men in black clothes were attempting to get in. The men had rubber bludgeons, which they were swiping frantically left and right. Kipps and Holly swung their rapiers in furious, complex arcs, driving the men back, slicing gouges from the bludgeons, holding the line.

A familiar face appeared in the dark behind the men. I caught a flash of pink cheeks, of blue and bulging eyes. "Get out of the way, you idiots," Sir Rupert Gale said. "*I'll* deal with them."

At once Lockwood was at Kipps's and Holly's side. "Fall back," he shouted. "Get upstairs." Footsteps sounded behind us on the iron staircase. I took my final flare and lobbed it at the doorway, sending Sir Rupert leaping back into the garden. Even as the explosion sounded, we were already out into the hall and swinging round to climb the stairs.

On the landing, George sat calmly in his chair. He had been fixing up makeshift spears, using broom and mop handles and some knives from the kitchen. He nodded at us as we piled up alongside him. "Sounds a bit warm down there."

"It is." One side of Lockwood's coat was black and steaming, presumably from his fight with the Limbless. His pale face was ablaze with energy. "You all right, George?" he asked. "Weapons ready?"

"Yes."

"Carpet ready?"

"Yes."

"Good. Sir Rupert Gale's here."

George nodded. "Knew he'd want to get in on the act."

There were loud thuds; boots on stairs; shouted commands echoing in the depths of the house. Then, rising above it all, a cry of fury in the kitchen.

Holly jumped. "What's that?"

George rose slowly from the chair. "Looks like Sir Rupert just found the little cartoon of him I drew on the kitchen table. Well, when I say 'little', I mean 'filling the entire Thinking Cloth'. It's amazing how perfectly that cloth accommodates a picture of a man bending over. I only just found space for my accompanying message."

"Which was?" Lockwood was readying one of the spears at the top of the stairs.

He told us.

"Gosh," Holly said. "I'm not surprised he's a bit cross."

"What's particularly good," George said, "is that Winkman's men will have seen it too. That," he added, "is what is known as psychological warfare. It'll destabilise Sir

Rupert, make him mad and reckless."

"That's good, is it?"

A red face appeared at the bottom of the staircase. Lockwood hurled the spear; the face jerked back at the last instant and the point embedded itself in the floor.

"Yup," said George. "Watch out: here they come again."

One of Winkman's men had appeared fleetingly at the bottom of the staircase, darting across into the library. A moment later the barrel of a gun appeared around the corner. Three shots were fired. We ducked back as plaster fell from holes in the ceiling above our heads. At the same moment, a swift, athletic shape took the opportunity to bound halfway up the stairs. A familiar voice came calling up at us. "Oh, Lockwood…" it said. "Where are you?"

Lockwood spoke quickly. "I'm going to buy us some time. The rest of you get into Jessica's room, put the cloaks on. You too, Lucy." Even without looking, he knew that I would disobey him. He drew his sword, stepped to the top of the stairs.

At my back I could feel the pulsations of the Gate inside the room. I heard the outcry of the ghosts inside the circle. For an instant I remembered the skull, shut in a cupboard down in the kitchen. I had promised to free him before this; now it was too late. I shook the thought away. The others were gone into the room, Kipps supporting the slowly moving George. But I hung back, watching as Sir Rupert Gale slowly clambered into view. Aside from a peppering of magnesium salt, he had entirely evaded my flare downstairs. He wore his usual green tweed jacket, a cerise shirt; his face was eager and smiling.

Lockwood waited at the top, his hair down over his eyes, his rapier ready. He was trying to look relaxed, but I could see he was breathing hard.

"Anthony Lockwood!" Sir Rupert said. "Do you realise you've managed to put Winkman *and* four of his men out of action so far? Shockingly unfriendly, I call it. Where's your hospitality?"

Lockwood wiped his fleck of hair aside. "Come up," he said, "and I'll give you a little more."

Sir Rupert chuckled. "You know," he said, "for months I've been wondering where this encounter would take place. I must say I had high hopes. On some castle battlements, perhaps. Or in a palace garden…" As he spoke, Sir Rupert jumped forwards. He ducked under Lockwood's first blow, and met the second with an easy twist of his rapier. "But this mean little staircase?" he said. "In this cramped and dreary squat? It's a trifle disappointing."

Lockwood cocked his head to one side. He struck out again, parried, guarded his legs against repeated side-cuts and low jabs. "Are you insulting my house?"

Sir Rupert's eyes twinkled. "Well… the dreadful sofas, those ethnic cushions, that faint, ineradicable smell of toast… It's all so frightfully homely. It's just I'd hoped for a more glamorous location, that's all."

Sir Rupert moved up another step. Lockwood edged back from the lip of the stairs. Their arms were moving too fast to see now; the swords blurred and moved, melding the air white like margarine. The clash of blades became a continuous burr, a wall of sound. A thin red line appeared on Sir Rupert's cheek; one of Lockwood's hands was suddenly bleeding.

"I'm sorry that Portland Row disappoints you," Lockwood said. He flashed his gaze towards me, where I stood at the door to the room. I gave a signal to show him that the others were ready, to urge him to come on. "And you're right about the furniture," he added. "It *is* shabby. Sadly the floor coverings aren't much cop either."

He sprang to the side, bent down, pulled sharply on the carpet at the top of the stairs. George had loosened it earlier, so that nothing held it tight to the steps. The whole lot came free, was wrenched upwards into a tight diagonal. Sir Rupert's boots were pulled from under him; he was thrown backwards. With a cry he vanished down the stairs, over and over, rolling head over heels. There was a complicated series of staccato bumps as he disappeared from view.

A moment later Lockwood was rushing past me, through the door into the bedroom. We slammed the door shut, thrust bolts into sockets, ignoring hoarse shouts from beyond. The cold power of the Gate behind us thrummed against our skin.

Lockwood turned to face us. "Well, that's it," he said. "There's no other option. We've *got* to go through."

20.

Almost at once, someone tried the handle of the door. A bullet was fired into the wood, but the iron layer on our side prevented it from penetrating.

Lockwood took his silver cloak down from the rack, while I took the cape of feathers that had already survived one passage to the Other Side. The others were dressed and ready. Kipps had on his bird-of-paradise cape and his goggles; George, his silver scales. Holly was doing up the belt on her animal pelt combo. It was the same menagerie as before, but now that we were about to use them, the humour in those outfits was gone.

"Don't forget your gloves, Lockwood," I said. I put mine on.

Something struck against the door: wood splintered. Even after everything that had happened, the violence of the sound made everyone jump.

Lockwood scowled. "The axe again. We can't wait any longer." He drew his rapier and faced the door. "I'll be last through. Who's going in first?"

This was something we hadn't discussed. Obviously we'd hoped it would never get to this, but it was a bad omission. For a couple of seconds five faces stared helplessly at each other. The axe didn't hang around for us: it chopped at the door.

I was about to speak, when Holly said suddenly: "I'll go."

Lockwood nodded. "Well done, Hol. It'll be fine. George, you follow straight after. Then Quill. Then Luce and me. Remember what we said. Ignore the ghosts. You follow the chain right through to the far side. Then… you'll be there."

"Good. Come on, George." Holly held out her hand for him; limping, he joined her at the chain.

I gave George a grin. "Cheer up. You've been dying to do this!" It wasn't the best choice of words. "See you in a minute," I added. He didn't answer. His face was etched with fear.

They set off up the iron chain, going steadily, hand over hand. Nearer and nearer to the circle, to where the chain entered the haze of ghostly light and disappeared.

A particularly loud crash came from the door. An axe-head flashed in the middle of the wood and pulled away.

I looked back towards the circle. Holly and George were gone. The chain was empty, but it was still swinging in little rhythmic movements, crisp and definite, like someone was moving along it. The ghosts inside the column of hazy light move agitatedly back and forth, keeping away from the iron.

The sideways rhythm of the chain stopped suddenly: it slowed, hung still. When you looked through the haze you just saw the bed and the chain vanishing into nothingness. There was no sign of Holly or George.

"It's worked," I said. "They've gone. Kipps, it's you and me next."

Kipps nodded, which sent the long feathers of his hood bobbing madly. With the best will in the world he looked like a drab and mournful chicken about to walk a gangplank into a cooking pot. He grasped the chains and shuffled towards the circle. I was at his back; even through my gloves I could feel the iron's cold.

Something decisive happened to the door. You could hear the wood being ripped apart, the iron strips screaming as hands tore at them. Both Kipps and I looked back. Lockwood was standing there in the silver cloak, rapier held ready, like a sea captain reluctant to step off a sinking ship. All at once I had a fear he wasn't going to come.

"Lockwood," I shouted. "Come on!"

The door was in pieces. Men were struggling to pull them clear. Sir Rupert was there, face bloodied, teeth bared. He was like a wild dog throwing itself at a fence.

Lockwood looked over his shoulder at me. "My house," he said.

"We'll come back."

"Yes." He turned to join us at the chain.

Something scrabbled at the aperture behind Lockwood. Sir Rupert Gale launched

himself through. He landed awkwardly, but lashed out at Lockwood with a fist. Lockwood stumbled; he was caught off-balance. Sir Rupert raised his sword to get a quick thrust in. I moved, but I knew I would be too late—

Then something else flashed past me like a vengeful chicken, striking left and right with a rapier. Sir Rupert was driven back against the door. He seemed stunned, transfixed; it was all he could do to parry the blows. Maybe it was Kipps's weirdness that contributed to his shock, the bird-of-paradise feathers bouncing and bopping above his head, the pink plumage swinging wildly with every frantic sword-swipe. I think it would have put me off too.

Even so, Sir Rupert's skills remained. He began to exert himself. Kipps's momentum slowed, he backed away…

And now Lockwood and I were beside him. For an instant it was three swords against one, the air a blur of movement and clinking metal. Someone slashed with a knife at Lockwood through the broken door. He dodged, spun round and struck at Sir Rupert's head. Sir Rupert ducked under Lockwood's blow and thrust at Kipps's midriff. Kipps cried out. I cut down with my sword, slicing Sir Rupert's wrist. He swore and jumped back, holding his arm.

That was our cue. Kipps, Lockwood and I leapt away and bundled ourselves along the chain, almost falling over each other, through the blast of cold, towards the rushing column of hazy air. We went so fast we outstripped fear: without pause, without thought, we stepped over the humped coils of chains and entered the psychic chaos of the Gate.

We were right on top of the exposed Sources, and their occupants were near. Unholy voices screamed and whispered in my ears, using languages I didn't understand. Pulsing figures stood on either side, keeping clear of the icy iron chain that stretched away before us, over the bed, into dimness. They watched us, clustering as closely as they dared.

Kipps was stumbling, slowing. This figured: it was his first time. "Ignore it!" I shouted. "Keep walking, follow the chain and don't let go!"

The bed was covered in ice, which cracked as we clambered over it. Not just the ice: the mattress itself was cracking, solid and frozen. Crawling things with broken backs skittered under it on hands and knees, like sharks glimpsed through the glass bottom of a boat. When we jumped down on the other side, they darted clear of our swirling cloaks. Another couple of steps and we were out over the loop of iron chains again and into sudden silence on the far side of the room.

How *quiet* it was, and how cold.

Not only had the psychic hubbub stilled, but you couldn't hear anything else either, not the shouting of Winkman's men, or the smashing of the door. It was very dark, everything lit by a troubling grey half-light. The bedroom wall, which was very close to us, was split with bands of ice. Frost glittered at our feet.

"Move away from the chain," Lockwood said. His voice sounded hollow in the strange, dead air. Kipps and I backed away. Long blue icicles hung from the lip of the post beside us. The suspended chain hung still, stretching back into the mist and haze. Lockwood and I stood with our swords ready.

We watched the Gate. No one came through.

"Thank God," I breathed. "I thought he'd follow us."

"It would have killed him," Lockwood said.

"Even so, I wouldn't have put it past him trying."

We moved carefully round the outside of the circle, out into the centre of the room. Holly and George were waiting for us there, two huddled, hooded shapes, their breath pluming white and fast. Beyond them, the door to the landing was a black, bare opening. No one stood there. We were alone.

"What happened?" George said. His whisper filled the emptiness. "You were an *age*."

"No, we're good," Lockwood said. "We've done it. Well done, everyone." He lowered his rapier, expelled a long breath of bright, white frost. "You all right, Quill?"

Kipps's face was pale underneath his goggles and the feathery cape, but his voice was strong enough. "Fine."

"I thought Gale caught you there at the end."

"He did. It's okay. There's a bit of pain, but it's not a problem. I feel fine."

"Good."

“Was it your side?” Holly asked. “You want me to look at it?”

Kipps gestured at his voluminous robes. “Under all this nonsense? I don’t think you’d ever find it.” He shook his head. “Thanks, Holly. It’s a scratch. No big deal.”

“It’s best to keep ourselves well wrapped up anyway,” Lockwood said. “See how cold it is? The power of the capes doesn’t extend far, and if you take them off, you’re done.”

“So…” George said. There was a silence.

“So,” Lockwood said. His old grin flashed in the shadows of the cape. “We’ve done the hard part. We’re out of trouble. The question is – what do we do now?”

“I thought the plan was to wait here,” Holly said. “Sooner or later, they’ll have to leave and we can come out.”

“We certainly *could* stay here,” Lockwood agreed. “But how long will it take? Sir Rupert in particular isn’t going to walk away just lie that. You can bet he’s seen a Gate before. We’re temporarily safe, but still bottled in… But we don’t *have* to be.”

Something in the way he said it. We looked at him.

“There *is* another option,” Lockwood said. His grin broadened.

“You must be joking,” Kipps said.

“Not at all. Lucy and I have done something like it before.”

“Oh!” Holly said suddenly. “I know what you’re going to say! Oh! That’s wonderful!” She hesitated. “Wonderful *and* completely mad…”

“Thanks, Hol,” Lockwood said, “I’ll take that as a compliment. Yes, we can stay here holed up in this little room, until we freeze or until Gale figures out a way to follow us. *Or* we simply stroll out the door. We leave the house and exit into the *other* Portland Row. It’ll be there, of course, just like – or *almost* like – the one we know. Easy. Then we walk off across London – the *other* London, I should say. Where do we go? I’ll tell you. We go to Fittes House. We locate the Gate that we know is there. We step through it, back into the real world – and in so doing catch dear Marissa entirely unawares. We go there, and we get the proof we need to end all this. In so doing, we’ll have turned desperate defence into triumphant surprise attack.” Lockwood smiled round at us. “How’s that? You might almost call it a master-plan.”

Kipps rubbed at the back of his neck. “You might also call it rank insanity. From what you and Lucy saw last time, this ‘other London’ isn’t going to be uninhabited.” He swallowed. “It’s not some crummy village, with a few dead yokels to worry about. It’s going to be *packed*…”

“Won’t hurt us to take a look,” Lockwood said, smiling. “All we have to do is stay alive, and we’re old hands at that. What do you think?”

I was thinking *lots* of things, mostly caused by the sudden uncomfortable realisation that this was what Lockwood had intended all along. He’d known we would likely get defeated in the house; he’d known we’d be driven through the gate. He’d planned it all along with this extravagant counter-attack in mind. So it was with admiration and anger that I looked at him: admiration for his ingenuity, anger at being kept in the dark. But I knew he was right. Everything led back to Fittes House, and what waited in its heart, and this was the only way we could get to reach it.

“*I* think I want to get Marissa,” I said. One by one, the others nodded.

“Well, then…” Lockwood gestured at the door.

The landing was dark, naked, glimmering with ice. A faint mist hung in the air. The room had the same proportions as the one in the living world, but all its warm, soft details and imperfections had been stripped away. The walls were bare, its decorations gone; the floor had cracks running through it – thin, curved cracks like veins. After the noise and chaos of the battle, the silence pummelled our ears.

We filed to the stairs. There was no carpet; the treads were wooden. With our boots scuffing through frost, we made our slow way down.

As we neared the bottom a faint dark figure rushed past us along the hall, moving from the kitchen towards the front door. For a moment it was silhouetted at the threshold, then it stumbled away down the path. It turned to the right and off along the twilit street.

Lockwood, who was in the lead, had stopped in shock. He looked back at me, eyes wide beneath his hood.

"Who was that?" he whispered.

I had no answer. Lockwood speeded up; we came down into the hall and hurried along it to where the door gaped open under the blank black sky.

A thin mist hung over Portland Row and the street was white with frost. A dull hard half-light that came from nowhere kept everything in perpetual dusk. There were no ghost-lamps on; the lamps themselves had disappeared, and the iron gates and railings outside many of the buildings were gone too. The houses were grey slabs.

The figure was just visible, racing away down the centre of the street. It did not look back. The mists swallowed it; stillness returned.

"Who *was* that?" Lockwood said again.

"Who else could be in our house?" Holly asked.

A thought occurred to me. I knew someone who was. I looked back into the darkness of the hall.

"Wait for me here," I said.

I turned and walked back into the house, feet crunching on frost. The wall beneath the staircase was riven with cracks, some so big you could stick a finger into them. The kitchen door was part frozen, ice melding it to the floor, and I pushed my way in only with difficulty. The room inside was very dark, but I could see there was no table there, and none of our cupboards or units. From the corner of my eye, just below the curve of my hood, I sensed their outlines, as if sketched in by a draughtsman's pencil, but they vanished if you looked at them.

As I had expected, a thin and rangy youth with spiky hair stood at the side of the room, where one of our cupboards sat in the sunlit world. He grinned at me. Both his shape and his voice were faint, perhaps the fault of the silver-glass jar that imprisoned him on the other side.

"*Ah,"* he said, "*I wondered if you'd think of me. You got through, then.*"

"Yes."

"*And now you're going for a little walk? Off to the Strand, maybe?*"

"That's the aim."

The youth nodded. "*Don't need to tell me whose plan that is.* I *know. Well, crazy as it sounds, it's a better bet than trying to come back out upstairs. I'd avoid this house in the near future. They're not happy at all.*"

"What's happening?"

"*In simple terms, they're trashing the place. Sir Rupert Gale is using some very salty language. Even* I've *learned a few new words. Far as I can make out, he's posting guards here, in case you try to sneak back in. To be honest, though, he's got his work cut out keeping control – most of Winkman's men haven't a clue what you just did, and they're wildly freaked out. There's talk of witchcraft and devils.*" The youth chuckled. "*Honestly, the average medieval serf would have more wit than them. You'll be pleased to know that most of that crowd are injured too – stabbed, bashed and otherwise blown up by all your flares. They haven't got an eyebrow between them.*"

"Good," I said grimly.

"*Oh, and Winkman's just died.*"

"What?" I sucked in the ice cold air. "*What?* How?"

"*As far as I can make out you walloped him with a floorboard. When he fell back he collided with one of his lackeys' knives. Well, if you do go running around carrying sharp objects, what do you expect?*" The youth gave a callous grin. "*They brought him up to the kitchen, but he passed across just now. I'm surprised you didn't bump into him*."

I thought of the stumbling shape fleeing down the hallway and off into the dark. I raised my glove to my face. There was a coating of ice on the palm; I lowered it again hurriedly. When I moved my feet, I had to break little bonds of ice that fixed my boots to the floor. I had the sense that the walls were warping, closing in on me; that if I didn't hurry I would never find my way to the open air. It was like being inside a grave. My breaths came fast and shallow. A grave… We were in a grave. Panic rose in me. "I've got to go," I said. "But I'll come back."

"*I won't be here,*" the youth said. "*Gale's just found me. He's going to take me away*."

"Where to?" It occurred to me that I had never really looked at him, not properly, not when he wasn't making stupid faces in the jar. But he was fragmenting before my eyes.

His form blurred, like paint smudged with a finger. I could get no hold on it.

"*How do I know where we're going? I'm a spirit, not a mind-reader.*" The grey face flickered, reformed, and broke apart again. The voice sounded rueful. "*Well,* sometimes *I am. I told you it would be too late.*"

"Skull, I'm sorry. I had the hammer in my belt…"

"*Too late for both of us.*" Only the thin smile lingered. The shape was gone.

On the way back up the corridor I had to twist my body past big extrusions of ice that had pushed through the cracks in the wall. But the front door was open, and the others were waiting for me on the path under the black sky.

*

It was utterly silent, except for the rasp of our breathing and the crunch of my boots on the ice of the path. A white coating was already shimmering on the feathers of Kipps's cloak, and the fur of Holly's cape was beaded with points of ice.

I told them briefly about my conversation with the skull, and his news of Winkman. Everyone was as shocked as I had been.

"Well," Lockwood said, "I've got to say his death isn't going to weigh too heavily on my conscience. All the same, I *am* sorry." He looked off down the road.

"It's good news that he's not hanging around your basement like some victims of violent deaths do," Kipps said. "Otherwise you'd find his ghost glaring over your shoulder every time you went downstairs to wash your pants. You'd be on an endless repeat cycle."

"But where do you think he was *going*?" Holly said.

"He was definitely off *somewhere*," George said. "Somewhere alone."

I glanced at Lockwood; his eyes caught mine, and I read what he was thinking. Once, long ago, Jessica Lockwood had also come this way alone.

"Well, we haven't got time to stand around wondering," I said in a decisive voice. "We need to make our own journey. Who knows the quickest way to the Strand?"

21.

It was Portland Row. But it *wasn't* Portland Row, not with that ferocious, never-ending silence, and the frost on the road, and the roofs and chimney pots merging with that dull black starless sky. The houses were architecturally the same, with adornments that I recognised from walking past a thousand times. Oddities of design were replicated on individual buildings – from porches to loft extensions to distinctive patterns in the brickwork – but the dull, dead light that shone over everything and came from nowhere (there was no moon) rendered them flat and lifeless, as if drawn on giant slabs of card.

There was something false about those buildings. You felt that if you knocked them with your fist, whole walls would topple down. And their doors and windows weren't right. The doors were either absent or ajar. They were gaping holes torn in the fabric of the street. None of the windows had curtains: all were stark and blank and staring. It made you feel things might be watching you from inside the empty rooms.

We walked down the centre of the street, huddled together, boots crunching the hard, white frost. A faint set of marks stretched ahead of us – the wandering footprints of a solitary man. We followed them as far as the empty shell of Arif's Stores, where the wide shop windows hung blank and open, with mist swirling deep inside the carcass of the house. Here the footprints veered away along a side street and were lost to sight. We did not follow them. If it *had* been Winkman we had seen, he had taken his own road. His way was not our way.

Kipps adjusted a drooping feather on his hood, so that he could see us. Blooms of ice crusted the lenses of his goggles. "We should go left here," he whispered. "Cross Portland Street, take Regent Street, then cut through Soho. That's the shortest route."

"Good." Lockwood's face was pinched, as if with remembered pain. I felt it too: already something pressed upon my spirits, a relic of my last walk in that freezing world. "We need to cut it short as we can," he said. "And above all, avoid being noticed." He looked up at the black windows all around. "If that's remotely possible…"

We started off again, following Kipps's directions. It wasn't pleasant to walk too

close to the open doors, but it wasn't nice being out in the middle of the street either. *That* left us feeling exposed. Despite the mist that coiled around us, despite our hushed voices and the stealth with which we took each step, we knew our very presence made us vulnerable. We did not belong there. We were too solid, too colourful, too *alive* to be mistaken for an inhabitant of that dark city. If they saw us, those inhabitants would know that very well.

But to begin with we saw nobody at all.

There were no ghost-lamps, no railings, no cars, nothing of iron, and no running water. The drains and gutters were empty, the runnels dry. Street nameplates had gone, and the signs above the store fronts carried no legible words. The way we took was familiar to us, but the overarching silence made it alien. I'd been exposed to stillness like this when I'd crossed over at Aldbury Castle, but *that* journey had been in the open and empty countryside. Here, in central London, the utter silence had a transformative effect. It turned the rows of houses into cliff faces, the streets into a dark labyrinth of canyons and ravines. When you drew close to the buildings, you saw that the brickwork was brittle and cracked; on some corners whole sections had eroded away, leaving vast holes like a giant's bite-marks in the walls.

The air was bitter-cold, a dry, dead absence that sucked the life from your lungs and the motion from your blood. It clung to the surface of our cloaks, coating them with ice that creaked and cracked gently as we moved. But it could not penetrate. Whether made by long-dead witchdoctors, who had sewn my spirit cape out of silver thread and bird feathers, or by the modern day fanatics of the Orpheus Society, who had aped this art with silver flakes and iron wire, the cloaks performed their function well. We existed in fragile bubbles of warmth that sustained us as we hurried on. Even so, the hard, grey silence bore into our skulls, and the countless watchful windows on every side filled us with a slowly mounting dread.

"Can't somebody say anything?" Holly whispered. We were standing at the corner of Weymouth Street and Portland Place, on a sloping pile of frost-blown bricks, taking stock of the next abandoned road. Holly's fur cape was frosted over, making her look like a small and anxious polar bear. Strands of her hair protruded around the clasp at her neck, glistening straight and hard with ice. "Say something, somebody!" she said. "This silence is going to drive me mad."

"Tell you what *I* don't like." Kipps pointed upward. "That emptiness. No moon, no stars."

"Best not look it, the sky." George sounded tired. He'd been moving slowest of all of us, and we'd had to rein in our pace to stay with him.

"Best not look at anything," I said. "Don't look, don't think. Just keep going."

Lockwood returned from the corner, where he'd been spying out the broad expanse of Portland Place. He met my gaze and smiled, but you could see the effort it took, and the anxiety in his eyes. "The next street *seems* empty," he said, "though there are several sets of footprints crossing it. Don't know if that means someone's been here recently or not. Prints here might last a long time."

"Do we risk it?" I said. "It's very open."

"Yes, but it's direct. I don't see it's any worse than going a narrow way."

"And there's no one there?" Holly said. "You're sure?"

"As far as I can see." Lockwood shrugged. "I've got to say, I'm surprised we've not seen anyone yet. We're lucky."

Lucky was one way of putting it. When Lockwood and I had walked in such a world before, the inhabitants had been drawn to us like summer flies to rotting fruit. We would take the emptiness while it lasted. So we turned down Portland Place, where the mist hung low between the hotel fronts like the waters of a white lagoon. The dull blank light that had no source lit both sides of the street the same: there was no sun, no north or south, no time and no direction.

As Lockwood had said, three or four lines of footprints, one clearly a little child's, crossed the frosted street at intervals. With the mist and the half-light we couldn't see where they had come from or where they were going.

"No one's talking yet," Holly said. "I know it might bring things after us, but I *really* need us to chat a bit. Please, just a little."

“Okay, I’m game.” George spoke with forced jollity; he was the weakest of us, finding it hardest to move. He put his arm through Holly’s. “Did I ever tell you my theory about why the dead followed Lucy and Lockwood that time?” he asked. “See, when Visitors come to our world, they bring with them all sorts of stuff to mess our senses – foul miasmas, chill, creeping dread, you name it. Mostly, that means we know they’re around before they even show. Well, why wouldn’t it be the same in reverse? We’re intruders here. Who’s to say we don’t carry all kinds of unsettling scents with us?”

“*You* certainly do, George,” Kipps put in. “It’s a plausible theory.”

“Thanks.”

“When we get through all of this,” I said. “I mean, when we expose Marissa publically for what she is, I’d like to take a holiday. I want to go to the countryside, where there are hills and streams and not many ghosts, and stay awhile there. Anyone with me on that? We could rent a cottage, just the five of us—”

“Five? What about Flo?” George said.

“Oh, okay, she could come as long as she took a bath. Then we’d go for walks and see things, and sort of hang around and do nothing. And then we’d come back to Portland Row and get back to work, but only do the jobs we really liked. And George, everyone would want to know about our cases, so you could write them up properly and get them published in a—”

“Lucy,” Lockwood said, “shut up a minute.”

He had been walking slightly in front, alert and questioning, head moving always side to side. Now he stopped and pointed. There was a place ahead of us where the office buildings sat back from the centre of the street. In the frosted square of concrete thus created, a group of people was standing. They had their backs to us, and the mist was thick around them, but we could see that they were men and women and children, dressed in a great variety of styles. They weren’t still, but shuffling and moving about with every appearance of disquiet, and the focus of their attention was something dark that hung behind them, black but also shimmering.

I thought at first it was a door, though the shape wasn’t right; then I thought it was a hole in the wall of the building, but *that* wasn’t right either – the darkness seemed separate from the wall, and somehow closer, and a corner of it kind of overlapped a window behind. The figures were making a great effort to get closer to this darkness, but were deterred by an object that I couldn’t quite identify. It looked a bit like one of our silver nets, only it was much bigger, and supported by poles, so that it resembled a little fence. White flecks hung twitching and fluttering on the net. As we watched, one of the figures, impelled by strong compulsion, broke free of the crowd and threw itself against the silver net. There was a soft sound, a flash of light; the figure was gone. New white fronds hung twitching from the net and the crowd stirred with agitation.

“Come on,” Lockwood whispered. “If we’re quick, we can get past them.”

Pressing close to the other side of the road, we made off down a narrow side street, looking behind us all the while. No one followed us and we soon slowed our pace, for we were very weary. Weary – and perplexed, for now a new mystery hung over us. That dark space preyed on my mind. Though it would have been fatal to draw the attention of that silent crowd, I had experienced a strong and unaccountable urge to draw near to it. I think the others felt the same. Without Lockwood, I think all of us would have been slow to move away.

We crossed a grey and empty Oxford Street not far from the great junction of Oxford Circus, where another crowd of figures, larger than the first, milled and churned around. Again I glimpsed a flash of silver, a vertical patch of darkness rising at the heart of the throng. One or two solitary persons could be seen advancing along the street towards us, and we did not dawdle now, but hurried down into Soho, where the streets were narrower, the buildings older, and hollow shells of houses pressed close beside the road.

My limbs were heavy, my breath rasped at the back of my mouth. Tiny cold flames danced across the hood of Holly’s cloak, and twists of vapour rose from our ice-bound

capes, stretching us in a long and telltale trail.

With every step and every street now, the way became difficult. Many of the cracks that ran through the fabric of the buildings extended out into the roads, causing great slabs of frozen tarmac to sheer up randomly like shark fins in the swirling mist. There was noticeably more activity around us now too; shambling figures seen in side-roads, hunched presences in upstairs room. Several times we had to make abrupt changes of direction when something appeared in the mist ahead of us. Kipps led the way now. My strength was seeping out of me, and the others were also failing fast, but he appeared to have had a burst of energy. At each crossroads he took to going ahead, scouting the way, while the rest of us gathered our breath.

"You all right, Lucy?" Lockwood fell in step beside me. Holly was just ahead, supporting the limping George.

"I'm feeling it now," I said. "It's getting hard. And there are more of *them* around."

"Maybe more people have died here. I don't know."

"And Lockwood…"

His lips had a dusting of ice. "Yes?"

"Did you see them? Those dark spaces…"

He didn't speak, but only nodded. I knew the weight he felt; it lay on my heart too.

"Did you see the spirits, clustering round?"

"I saw them."

"Like they were doors to move through?"

A shrug was his only answer. He was right, in a way, not to want to talk about it. Our business led us elsewhere. And neither of us wanted to re-enforce the tug we'd felt, when we'd looked at the strange dark voids. It was the tug you get on a crumbling cliff-top, when you're tempted to step close, lean over, and look down.

At the next junction, Kipps went ahead again. We watched him dart along the grey-black street, his boots sending up tiny clouds of frost. Halfway along he flitted suddenly into the shelter of a shop porch. We waited; moments later one of the inhabitants of Dark London came out of a nearby house, moved across the street and vanished in the shadows beyond, passing just a few feet away from Kipps without noticing him.

When all was clear, Kipps peeled himself from the shadows and moved on. Presently he came to the next crossing, where he looked in all directions before signalling us to follow.

"You're in good shape, Quill," I whispered, when we caught up with him.

Kipps nodded. "I feel great. Must be the effect of this coat or something."

"How's the side? Not giving you any trouble?"

He gave a shrug; he was already staring up the next street, eyes bright, eager to be gone. "It's funny. In that last second in the bedroom, just before going through, I thought Gale's blade had really caught me. And it *did* hurt a bit at first, but it's really calmed down now. Can't feel it at all."

"Great. I'm glad."

"You struggling?" Kipps asked me, after a pause. "You look tired."

"It's the cold," I said. "And the silence. I don't think it does any of us much good, even with the capes on."

We looked at the others. They were slumped at the corner, where the pavement's cracks had become so distorted that great sections had erupted like broken wheel spokes, projecting into the black sky. Their heads were down, they stared dully from under their frosted hoods; evidently they shared my feeling of oppression.

"Even Lockwood's taking a breather," Kipps said. He chuckled. "Not often I've got more of a spring in my step than him." He stood up, gazing down the cold and silent road. "Well, don't worry. It's not long to go now. We should take Windmill Street and cross Shaftesbury Avenue at this point. I don't think there's much going on down there."

"You mean… inhabitants?"

"Right. There *are* some, but it feels less busy than further up, even though it's a

slightly longer distance to The Strand. You others ready?" he called. "I thought you wanted to do this fast."

Almost without waiting for them to struggle to their feet, he was off again, nimble, light-footed, our self-appointed guide. And as Kipps said, Windmill Street *did* look mostly empty. He was gone so quickly I didn't have a chance to ask him how he knew.

Our cloaks were steaming thickly now, leaving a vapour plume that trailed behind us, coilingly persistent on the still, dead air. I disliked this trail. It was my habit to look behind me, check nothing was following in our track. At last, when I did so, I saw that we had company. Some way behind us, a thin man had come out of one of the narrow houses; he wore a pale brown suit and an old-fashioned, broad-brimmed hat. Our footprints passed right in front of him, and I had a suspicion that our trail of vapour did also. He didn't look at us. He stood staring straight out into the road like he was clockwork and his key had just wound down.

"Trouble behind us," I muttered.

Everyone looked. Holly's voice was hoarse and high. "What do we do?"

"Just keep walking," Lockwood said, "and take the next turning."

The mists ahead of us swirled and parted. At the intersection up ahead, a group of figures stood near one of the shimmering black doors, which had again been closed off by a silver net. There were men there, women, children. They blocked the road.

Lockwood cursed. "Quick! In here." He darted to the wall on our left, where an alley opened, a slot between buildings. We followed him in, ploughed down it. It was the narrowest of gaps. Bricks brushed my cape on either side; fear gnawed at me in case it would be ripped, as another cape had once been. I drew my shoulders in. The alley became narrower and narrower, I felt that I would be pressed to nothing. All at once it turned sharply to the right and opened into a tiny yard.

High brick walls towered over us on three sides. In one of them, at head height, was a rectangular opening – a door that in our world was perhaps reached by iron stairs. There were no other doors, and no routes through.

"Hell," Lockwood panted. "Dead end."

"What do we do?" Kipps wasn't breathing hard. "There's a door up there."

"We can't go inside a building, it's not safe. We wait. If he didn't spot us, that single guy will drift off eventually. We can go back, take another way."

"I don't think he noticed us," I said. "What do you think, Holly?"

"I think he did."

I stared at her. "Yeah…" I said slowly, "I do too."

We stood in the yard, with black brick walls around us, and the alley's aperture the blackest strip of all. Time passed; by and by we heard faint sounds coming from the gap, as of bare feet scuffing along it on hard ground.

"Door," Kipps said. "It's the only way. I'll give you a shin up."

"Yes—" Lockwood was already beside him at the wall, clasping his hands ready. "Quick, Hol. You too, Luce."

Neither Holly or I had to be told twice. I gave a little run-up – or as close to a run as I could manage with my deadened limbs, stepped onto Kipps's hands and was propelled upwards with surprising strength onto the ledge. Lockwood launched Holly alongside. We slipped and struggled, and got in each other's way, but in moments stood in the open doorway. George, heavier and stiffer, was harder work; Kipps and Lockwood had to combine forces to propel him to the ledge, where Holly and I bundled him through the door. Lockwood moved back a few paces and was vaulted up by Kipps's hand. Then Lockwood, Holly and I reached out, grabbed Kipps's arms and dragged him bodily up the wall.

We were just pulling him alongside us when the thin man with the broad-brimmed hat shuffled into the yard.

"Can he get up here?" I said.

We stood in the doorway looking down at the man. He stood looking up at us, with bone-white face, and dark unblinking eyes.

He started to walk towards our wall.

"Tell you what," Kipps said, "let's assume he can. Come on – these old Soho houses

are a maze. We can cut through here and out into another street quick as anything. Follow me."

He drew his sword, briefly surveyed the passage ahead of us, then plunged along it, deep into the building. We hesitated. If the hall in Portland Row had been unpleasant to walk down, this was no better. The proportions of the corridor felt wrong, and ice glistened in fissures by the ceiling. There was a sour taint on the air.

Fingertips scrabbled at the wall behind us.

You know, that passage looked just fine. We stumbled after Kipps as fast as we could go.

My memory of what followed has the jumbled quality of a dream. We went down corridors, up staircases, into rooms that led nowhere, doubling back the way we'd come, expecting always to come face to face with what pursued us. We went through endless doors, some ordinary, others thick with ice and twisted into odd dimensions. All were open – no doors were locked in the dark, cold world. You could go anywhere, but nowhere was any better than anywhere else, and we could not find the way out of the building. Sometimes we passed windows, but either they were too high, or too narrow, or so caked with frost that we could not see out from them to know if it was safe to jump. There was nothing but the scrape of our boots on the wooden floors, and our breath like broken pistons, and the flap and flutter of Kipps's feathers just ahead. And somewhere behind, feet following.

He was right: those old houses *were* a maze. We passed through attics, where faint outlines of dolls' houses and rocking horses merged with spreading shadows; through rooms where beds seemed half sunken into the tilted floors; through kitchens, where dark objects hung dead and heavy from ceiling hooks; up rattling staircases that grew wide then thin with every twist or turn; and once, out on a high parapet that ran between buildings, with the white street far below and ice shards tumbling soundlessly beneath our skidding boots. That street unnerved us, and not because of our height: a host of grey figures stood in it, looking up as we ran like rats into the house beyond.

And now there began to be noises from neighbouring rooms, as if things kept pace with us beyond the walls. Kipps was cursing now, moving ever faster, shying away from open corridors, squeezing through cracks, dropping through chutes of ice and rubble; and all the while Lockwood brought up the rear, rapier out, steadily retreating, staring back the way we had come.

And then, all at once, we came into a room where a small child sat. It had a pudding-bowl haircut and was sitting cross-legged by an empty chimney hearth. It looked for all the world that it was reading, but there was no book in the little hands, and the stool or chair that it had sat on was long gone too. It floated in mid-air, forlorn and self-sufficient, and there was something so pitiful about it that we couldn't help but pause.

Beside it was something else: a narrow fissure, filled with light. It was hard to tell whether it was on the floor or just hanging in mid-air. As with so much to do with the Other Side, you saw it best when you weren't looking at it directly, but there was something about the quality of the shimmer that made my heart leap with longing.

Because it was not *of* the Other Side, it was not *of* this place at all.

"It's a Source," George croaked. "It's where that Visitor goes through."

"Back to our world," Holly whispered. "Look at the light…"

Trust me, I *was* looking. "Could we—?"

"No!" Kipps said. "It's too small. It's too small! Come on! We can't stay here!" He pulled us towards the door.

"He's right," Lockwood said in a hoarse voice. "They're close behind."

George groaned. "That guy can't be *still* following us?"

Lockwood grimaced, showing his teeth. "Him and the rest. I've counted at least four."

And then we were out of the room, down another flight of steps with a long corridor stretching in front, and saw (it was almost as welcome as that flash of *real* living light), an open arch that gave us a glimpse of frosted pavement and open air.

"There!" Holly said.

We burst out through the arch and halted, wheezing, gasping, particles of ice falling from our capes. Exhaustion overcame us, then. We had no strength to carry on. Which was a pity in that particular road, because we weren't alone. It was crowded with a host of London's dead. Silent, pale and moving fast, they swarmed towards us along the street.

We pressed our backs to the wall.

22.

"Don't say anything," Lockwood hissed. "Don't move."

As all-time unnecessary suggestions went, it was way up there. We made like five statues, lined up by the door. Breathing wasn't high on our agenda, let alone movement. I was pressing so hard against the bricks I thought I'd probably push right through. My heart was banging like a bass drum in my ears; it beat so loud in the awful silence I felt sure the ranks of rushing figures would at once change direction and throw themselves on me.

There was sizeable company of them, twenty figures at least, adults mostly, but children too. They were passing along the centre of the road, neither walking nor exactly running, but hurrying forth in a kind of stumbling lope. Their clothes were bleached of colour, their faces in dark shadow; there was nothing strong or definite about them, except the glittering of their eyes. But they pulled a cloud of longing and unhappiness in their wake, and it swept against me in a great cold wave. The company came within a few feet of us, making no noise except for the faintest flapping of their thin, cold garments, and swept away along the road.

We prised ourselves carefully clear of the wall; in those few seconds frost had already begun bonding our capes to the surface. Kipps brushed his feathers down. "What, aren't we worth killing any more?" he said. "I feel a little hurt."

"Something's attracting them," I whispered. I was looking along the street where the wandering spirits had gone. Between the houses I could see a thin grey line, straight as a pine tree, rising stark against the pitch-black sky. "Something's drawing them on."

Lockwood drew his cloak tighter and stepped off the pavement. "Let's go and see what it is."

It was the way we had to go, for the thin grey line was Nelson's Column, and the road soon opened into the great expanse of Trafalgar Square. Not far beyond this lay the Strand – and Fittes House, our final destination. But all thought of that was for the moment blotted out by what we saw in the centre of the square.

In our world, the open plaza beneath the column was often the site of demonstrations by people protesting at new curfews, or other restrictions caused by the Problem. In this, at least, dark London was no different, for a great congregation of the dead was gathered there. It was a host large enough to effortlessly absorb the little group that had just passed by us. I could not begin to count them all.

The mass of spirits was pressing in on a low, fenced structure ranged around the foot of the column. These fences were formed of silver mesh, similar to the ones we'd seen blocking off the strange dark apertures at Oxford Circus and elsewhere. Within the compound a small number of men and women in silver clothes were moving. Even from a distance it was clear that they were living. They had a different quality to the horde of grey forms beyond the barrier; they were far more solid, the hues of their outfits more vibrant and real. They bustled about with focused, purposeful movements, and faint metallic clanks and clattering drifted towards us on the still, dead air.

There was something jarring about the noise and the colour and the sense of purpose, something brash and inappropriate in that sombre place. Looking at them, I recognised for the first time how wrong it was that *we* were there.

They did not wear cloaks, but long tunics hanging over loose trousers. They had light helmets, and goggles similar the ones Kipps wore. They moved casually, absorbed in their work. This consisted of tending to racks of glass cylinders, stacked near the foot of Nelson's Column. Some of the smaller cylinders appeared to have something inside;

workers were carefully decanting them into bigger ones, which were then lined up near the gate to the enclosure.

The proximity of the dead did not disturb them. One of the group (a woman, I thought) patrolled the inside of the fence with a device on a long pole. It had some kind of silver tip. Occasionally, in a bored sort of way, she thrust it outside to touch one of the spirits who got too close, sending it darting back into the crowd.

A man emerged from an iron hut at the centre of the compound. He wore stilts similar to the ones the Orpheus secretary had used and had a large cylinder strapped to his back. As we watched, he slipped out of the compound and waded waist-high through the mass of swarming dead, who rippled backwards they sought to evade painful touch of silver. Some weren't quick enough; we could hear the hiss and squeal of bursting plasm. The man strode onwards, outstripping those spirits who tried to follow him, and disappeared through the mists in the direction of the Strand.

We watched for a short time. Then Lockwood drew us close.

"Want to know the cause of the Problem?" he whispered. "This is it, right here."

Holly brushed ice from the sleeves of her steaming cloak. "What are those idiots *doing*?"

"Apart from stirring up the dead, you mean?" George said. He was squinting over the top of his glasses; they were thoroughly frosted over, but he hadn't the strength to wipe them. "See those cylinders? Bet they contain ectoplasm. Or essence, or whatever other fancy name you want to call it." He gestured towards the Strand. "This is how *she* gathers it. I'll bet she gets it from those nets hung up around town."

"It's not just Marissa that's in on this," Kipps added. "The Sunrise Corporation makes the cylinders. You can see their logo from here."

"Yes, there's a whole industry going on here," Lockwood said. "The one good thing is we're surely right to think we'll find a Gate at Fittes House. Well, we can't stop or we'll freeze to death. My bones are like ice as it is. Let's go and end it now."

It was fortunate for us that the activity in the square monopolised the attention of both the living and the dead. We did not have the strength to do anything but shuffle, by the quickest, shortest route, to the mouth of the Strand. We kept as close to the buildings on the perimeter as we could; once we had to duck inside the shell of a blackened, frost-blown church as something on silver legs passed by. Otherwise, we were undisturbed. Soon we stood on the steps outside Fittes House, with mists and desolation stretching either side.

And it was the place, all right. There was no room for doubt. The frost on the steps had been worn away by the passage of many feet, and a silver net hung suspended in the open door to keep the wandering dead at bay. It hung there like a portcullis, or a range of jagged teeth. Above it, the bones of the building rose many storeys to merge with the black sky.

"Got to risk it," Lockwood croaked. "We might meet someone coming in or out, but we can't help that now. It's been too long. Must be hours since we came through the circle."

Kipps had darted up the steps to peer into the interior. "Looks clear. There are lamps burning to show the way. Want me to go ahead, scan the route?"

"No. We'll all go. We can't waste time."

It was a strange thing, entering that dark echo of Fittes House. What a contrast it was with the grandiose and busy version that I knew. In our world, the entrance hall was abuzz with business at all hours, ranks of cool receptionists attending to queues of prospective clients; successful applicants reading magazines in comfy sofas; a small statue of Marissa Fittes blandly watching over all. Here, it was a black and empty room, like a cavern in a slate mine, with low-slung roof and wet ice on the floor. In places, iron supports had been brought in to keep the ceiling from falling in. A few cracked cylinders and plastic oil cans lay in the shadows.

There was no statue of Marissa. Somewhere deeper in this house lurked the real thing.

Glimmering oil lanterns had been arranged at intervals, marking the safe route into the building. It was a necessary measure: in certain places the floor had fallen away

completely, or the ceiling had collapsed under the weight of ice. The walls bowed inwards; floors slanted. I began to experience the same claustrophobia I'd felt at Portland Row.

We followed the line of lanterns, and soon came to the Hall of Pillars – or its dark and dismal counterpart. Here, disconcertingly, the nine trapped spirits stood, faint and flickering. They watched us avidly as we passed, rotating to keep pace with us. Pin-pricks of light burned in their hollow eyes. Long Hugh Henratty, the highwayman whose ghost had been one of the first captured by Marissa and Tom Rotwell, grinned lopsidedly above his broken neck. The Clapham Butcher Boy made urgent motions with his spectral knife. Fortunately the silver-glass pillars on the other side held firm.

All nine called out to us in soft voices, hooting and crying like owls. The words were not pleasant. I'm used to such stuff, but it disturbed the others more than me, for to their surprise they found they could hear them too.

We left the room in haste, and so came to the Hall of Dead Heroes, where lift shafts accessed other floors. In our world, lavender fires burned perpetually here beside the shrines to fallen agents. There were no shrines here, just a black void. The three shafts were likewise gaping holes, filled with mist. The lanterns led us past them, and presently we came to a staircase leading down.

"The Gate must be on a basement level," Lockwood said. "Well, we expected that."

He mustered a frozen smile. "This is the last push, everyone. Stay strong. We're almost there."

Down we went, flight after flight; and the lanterns led us ever deeper into the earth. We went very slowly now, past openings to unknown levels. On the third floor down, we saw a light coming towards us through the dark.

"Quick! Off the steps!" Lockwood pulled us back into a side room, its mouth part-filled with rubble; here we crouched, as far back as we dared, watching as the globe of light drew nearer along a passage, and burned the mouth of the stairs into drab, grey life.

It was two tall figures walking side by side. We watched them as in a dream. They had their heads bent, close together; there was the murmur of conversation. The first wore a silver cloak with a sweeping hood. Her long dark hair was pulled back almost out of sight, but the graceful lines of the face were clear enough. It was the woman we knew as both Penelope and Marissa, and she was laughing at something her companion said.

This other person was a fair-haired young man, very tall and handsome. He wore a kind of shimmering robe, which somehow reminded me of the negligible dresses La Belle Dame had once been prone to wear: glitzy, glamorous, and not at all extensive. Its sole purpose seemed to be to highlight the impressive muscle tones of the young man's torso, his athletic arms and legs, the swaying way his body moved. He had an exquisite beauty, and you could tell all this because he lacked both cloak and silver tunic. He walked through the dark and frozen world without protection, and a faintly golden radiance hung about him. Indeed it was this light that we'd seen from afar.

The woman strode to the head of the stairs and was just taking the flight down when the young man touched her arm. He stood there, gazing all about him.

"What is it?" Penelope (or Marissa) said.

"***I smell something living***." The young man cocked his head; he wrinkled his elegant nose.

"It'll be the night crew. They've just started a shift. You know how the trace lingers."

"***Even so…***" He looked towards the side-room where we crouched in darkness.

She shook her head. "I need to get back. There's some kind of trouble on the sunlit side."

The young man made no further comment. They swept away down the staircase. The glow of other-light faded in the stairwell and the half-dark swallowed us again.

"What was *that*?" Holly whispered. "Did you see him?" Her voice shook; my own body was trembling with cold too, as if the cloaks were wearing thin.

"A spirit…" I said. "He was so *beautiful.*"

George spoke in cracked tones. "You think? Looked a bit over-ripe to me."

"Down!" Lockwood said; his voice was scarcely audible. "No matter what, we've got to keep going down and find this wretched Gate."

It was all we could do to descend the last two flights, for our stamina was at an end. Twice, George nearly fell; his legs were giving out, and Kipps, who was the strongest of us, had to grapple him under the arms and pull him onward. Holly and I supported each other too. In this manner, fumbling, dishevelled and almost dead, we came at last to the final basement beneath Fittes House. The lanterns led through a dark and empty chamber towards an arch, and here at last I heard what I'd been straining for: the psychic thrum and tumult of a nearby Gate.

Lockwood sensed it too. He made a noise that in better times might have been a cry of triumph. We roused ourselves a final time and hobbled forwards.

"*And what time do you call this?*" said a voice.

We stopped dead in our tracks; we raised our hoods a little and looked stiffly round.

"*If I'd known you'd be this long, I'd have put my curlers in*," the thin youth said. He was standing far off across the room, half in and half out of a giant bulb of ice that had risen through the floor. His spiky hair gleamed with other-light; otherwise he was as faint and flickering and gleefully supercilious as ever.

"Skull!" A wave of something washed through me. Relief? Pleasure at seeing something familiar in this dreadful place? Whatever it was, it made me warm. "I'm so happy to see you," I said, stumbling towards him. "How did you get here?"

"*Well, I'm not actually* here, *am I?*" the youth said. "*I'm still in my precious jar, sitting in a bright-lit laboratory storeroom below Fittes House, surrounded by cylinders of stolen essence, and with one or two rather faint-hearted scientists pottering by. In fact… hold on… yes, I've just scared one of them half to death by showing him the Happy Farmhand. And all while talking to you. Is that clever?*" The youth grinned. "*I rather think it is.*"

"But how did you—"

"Lucy." Lockwood shuffled alongside me, the others close behind. They were peering at the youth in bafflement. For a moment, I couldn't understand their confusion, then I realised what it was: they could *hear* him.

"This is the skull?" Lockwood frowned at him. "The skull's… spirit? He… he looks different."

The youth scowled. "*Yeah? You look just the same. I was banking on frost-bite taking a few of your fingers, or even your nose. Here's hoping something else has dropped off that I don't know about. If not, I'm sorely disappointed.*"

Lockwood stared. "Does he always talk like this?"

"No. Usually he's worse. See what I have to put up with now?"

"*Oh, she likes it*," the youth said. "*She can't get enough of it. I cheer her up no end.*"

"Cheer me up now," I said, "and tell me quickly how you're here – and what's on the other side of the Gate. We're going to come across now… if we can."

"*Shouldn't be a problem if you're quick*," the ghost said. "*The lab technicians have just gone for a coffee break. I think they were getting tired of all my faces. Well, I* say *it's not a problem. That's assuming you've got enough energy to survive the crossing.*" It cast its eyes over us. "*Let's see – hangdog, lacklustre, clearly out on your feet. Great. In cracking form for a finale.*"

"Don't lump *me* in with these lightweights," Kipps said.

"*And Kipps…*" The scrawny youth stared at him. "*How are you feeling, then?*"

Kipps blinked. "Me? Great. Why?"

"*No reason*." The ghost's image flickered out, then returned; it cast contemplative eyes around the empty room. "*I'll keep it quick,*" it said. "*Sir Rupert Gale brought me to Fittes House, to be 'assessed' or 'processed' or chucked in the Furnaces, whatever they want to do. He brought me down here, and I've been sitting in this lab ever since, waiting for you to show, watching a steady stream of madmen put on silly suits and pass back and forth to the Other Side. Marissa herself came past me just now; took off her cape and caught a lift up top.*" The youth pointed to a gaping lift-shaft in a corner of the room. "*She was in a hurry. Didn't stop to say hello*."

"Marissa came by?" Lockwood asked. "Was she alone?"

"*Hey,* Lucy *asks the questions round here,*" the youth said. "*You can't just swan in and take over like you're the leader or anything. Where's your respect?*"

I cleared my throat. "Please, Skull, was Marissa on her own?"

"*There – see,* that's *how it's done.*" The ghost smiled broadly at Lockwood. "*Yes, Lucy, she was on her lonesome. Why?*"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "We've got to follow her." A thought occurred to me. "What time is it now, over there? Is it morning yet?" I had a sudden desperate yearning to see the sun.

"*Nope. Clock on the wall says just past midnight. Hours yet till dawn*."

Lockwood spoke through cracked lips. "Wait! *That* can't be true! Winkman and Gale raided Portland Row just after midnight. It's *got* to be later than that."

"*It is. Twenty-four hours later. I was brought here early morning, and a whole long day's gone by*." The youth grinned at us, and in that grin the face in the jar was clearly visible. "*I* said *you'd been delayed*."

Our faces had sagged. "Impossible," Holly whispered. "We'd have known…"

"That's the thing about being technically dead," the ghost said. "You lose all track of time… "

There was no further hesitation; no one wanted to stay a moment more. The others shuffled towards the arch. Only I hung back.

"Thanks, Skull," I said. "I'll pick you up on the other side."

The youth nodded at me. "*I hope you've still got your hammer with you. Oh, one other thing. Kipps.*"

"What about him?"

"*Anything happen to him recently?*"

"No."

"*Sure about that, are you?*"

Before I could answer, I heard Holly calling me urgently from the next room. The youth waved an indulgent hand; I limped as fast as I could across the room and through the arch.

And in there was the Gate.

In actual fact, calling it a 'gate' doesn't really do it justice. It was more than that. It was a bridge, a checkpoint, a high-road for the living to pass through. George had been right. Lockwood's parents had been right. For years, hidden here, in this basement below Fittes House in the centre of London, there *had* been a permanent route between our world and the Other Side.

It was a large room, lit by lanterns, and in the centre of it was a pit. The pit was circular in shape and very broad, and it had a low wall built right around it. This wall, about the height of my knee, was made of solid iron. Thus, at a stroke, the Fittes agency had dispensed with the hassle and impermanence of iron chains. Although the precise *contents* of the pit could not be seen, I knew it was stuffed with Sources, because that familiar column of hazy light rose above it, packed with trapped and rushing spirit forms.

To cross the pit, the designers hadn't bothered with small-time stuff like hanging chains, as Rotwell (and we) had done. Instead, an iron walkway or bridge – thin, but very solid – surmounted the wall and spanned the centre of the pit, before disappearing into the swirling haze. I couldn't see to the far side, but I knew that if we passed through it, we would be back in the living world.

The others were waiting for me at the entrance to the bridge. I could scarcely recognise them beneath their crusted, steaming capes. Forget the spirits whirling in the pit behind us. *We* were five shapeless demons, made monstrous by our journey.

"There's just a chance someone will be in the room on the other side," Lockwood said. With stiff, hesitant movements, he drew his sword. "I'll go first, with Holly. Then George. Kipps – you and Lucy follow on. No one hang back for anything."

He didn't have energy for more, but turned and stepped onto the iron walkway. You could see him flinch as he approached the psychic maelstrom, but he did not stop. Holly followed him. They moved up the walkway, shoulders bent, heads bowed, with their cloaks humped and frozen like tortoise-shells beneath their burdens of smoking ice. On either side, spirits moaned and chattered; pale arms reached out for them, but broke asunder as they neared the strips of iron.

Lockwood and Holly passed over the centre of the pit. The haze closed round them, and they could no longer be seen.

"Off you go, George," Kipps said.

George's energy was almost spent. As he climbed onto the walkway, he tripped and fell. Kipps reached out an arm to catch him. As he did so, his coat of icy feathers swung aside, and I saw his tattered jersey below, with the rent in its side where Sir Rupert Gale's rapier had cut through. The fabric hung open, and I caught a single awful glimpse of the bloodless, gaping wound beneath.

The coat fell back into place. Kipps caught George, helped him get upright. He set him on the walkway. George shuffled forwards.

With a spring in his step, Kipps began to follow him.

"Quill," I said. "Hold on."

He looked back at me. "What? Come on! This is what we've been waiting for! We've got to get out and at them!" His eyes were sparkling; he was grinning with the thrill of the chase. I'd never seen him so alive.

"Wait." My voice was thick. "Don't go through."

He scowled. For a second it was the old Kipps, back again. "Why not? Don't be stupid, Lucy."

It wasn't easy to talk, and not just because of the cold. "Why do you think you're feeling so good here?" I said. "So… at home?"

He stared at me. "What? What nonsense are you talking about?"

"It's just. Just. Quill, that injury you got…"

He gave his little barking laugh. "When you say 'at home', Lucy, it's almost like you're saying—" His eyes held mine, and then he understood. The light slowly went out of them, like a flower closing. His face was a pale mask. Then he lifted up his cape and, ignoring the steaming, cracking ice that fell from the feathers, looked underneath it at his shadowed side. He didn't move for a while. He let the feathers drop back into position. He nodded once, very slowly, as if to himself. He didn't look at me.

"Well," he said.

"Oh, Quill…"

"Typical. And I was feeling so chipper."

"If you go through," I said, "then—"

"Yes."

I swallowed. I didn't know what to do. "Listen," I said, "maybe you'd better stay here."

He *did* look at me, then. "What, on my own? See you all go through without me? Leave me standing here like a pillock in the dark? I don't think so."

"But—"

"Especially in these stupid feathers."

"Yes, but Quill, on the other side—"

"I know," he said. "I know. It's got to be done right, in the proper place."

"Oh, maybe it'll be okay," I said desperately. "I mean, I'm only going on what the skull said, and we know what *he's* like. Talks rubbish about everything."

Kipps's mouth pursed. He pulled his hood back, and ruffled his short red hair. Then he took his goggles off and, casting them aside, looked at me in that sceptical, disapproving way he had. Only this time it wasn't *me* that disappointed him, but everything that had led to this, that had brought him to be here, dressed like a bird of paradise, in a hellish, freezing underground world, with his life almost drained away and gone. He shook his head. "No, as soon as you said it, I sort of realised that I knew already." He patted the side of his cape with a pale, thin, bloodless hand. "It's a mess down there. It's only going one way."

"I'm so sorry, Quill."

"You need to go through, Lucy."

"Quill, you were brilliant just now."

"I know."

"Without you—"

He grinned at me. "Yeah. You and Tony and the others would have never made it,

would you? Glad I made a contribution."

"Oh, God," I said.

"It's all right. You need to go through. Can I come with you? I don't want to go alone." He was busy taking the cloak off as he spoke, wrestling with the awkward clasp at the neck, ignoring the ice that instantly began forming on his skin. He shrugged the feathery mass off his shoulders and offered it to me. "You want this?" he said.

I shook my head. "I'm not coming back here."

"I am."

We left the cloak lying and walked together across the iron bridge. The ghosts did their usual. We ignored them. Halfway across I held Kipps's hand. We passed through the psychic vortex, the breach between worlds. Bright neon light shone ahead of us, and I could feel life pouring back into my body. I think Quill felt it too; his grip tightened on mine, flared suddenly warm and strong. It didn't last. We crossed the iron wall and left the Gate, back into our world. We were in the proper place. Before we had left the walkway he was already falling.

V.

Fittes House

23.

Don't ask me for a careful, reasoned account of what happened after that. I can't give you one. My excuse is that when you step out through a Gate (and I've done this since, and know it to be so), you're *always* sick, confused and ill. You don't see straight; every sense is shrieking with the sudden onslaught of light and sound, with the feel of warm air on your skin and in your lungs; your body goes into a kind of temporary shutdown and muscular collapse. This is particularly marked when you've been over for a long time, as we had, and it's not a condition that makes it easy to follow what's going on.

Grief's similar. Sudden, unexpected grief all the more so. So don't ask me to piece together the fragments I've retained: Lockwood dragging Kipps and me bodily clear of the circle; Lockwood bent over Kipps; Holly holding his hand; *everyone* bent over him, talking, talking to him (even I did, although what the point of *that* was, I don't know, because I knew he'd gone, and I'd already said everything that was to be said on the Other Side). Holly speaking to me, holding my face in her hands; me answering, staring right through her. Lockwood, covering Kipps with our discarded cloaks (we'd torn them off, I guess; at least, we were no longer wearing them). George just sitting there, his face stricken, the melting ice dripping from his spectacles like tears.

And Lockwood, who was the first of us to rise to his feet. Lockwood, pulling his rapier from his belt and tapping it gently on the floor so that the last of the frost fell from it and the blade shone bright and new. Lockwood, putting his sword back in its place, then standing silent, patient, hand on hilt, waiting for us to recover.

It took a while. What a mess we were, all feathers and fur and snot and melted ice, our faces blue, our eyes puffed and red. What a pointed contrast with the orderly room in which we found ourselves. Okay, sure, it had a massive ghostly maelstrom at its heart, but all that whirring chaos was nicely contained within the iron circle. Once across the bridge, as we were now, you found a brightly lit and white-washed room with all the sterile neatness of an operations room in a hospital. Racks of goggles and silver suits hung along the walls, each one carefully named and numbered; there were wheeled plastic bins with a few discarded suits; a pair of stilts, leaning casually in a corner like the

severed legs of an idling drunkard; even a few safety notices by the doors.

You could tell they took a pride in keeping things just so. One side arch led onto a tiled washroom, where open shower cubicles showed where the workers scrubbed up after a hard shift beyond the Gate. Another led to an equipment room, packed out with ranks of shining weapons used on the Other Side. But it was a third arch *I* was interested in: the biggest of all and the twin of the one we'd entered by. This room beyond seemed filled with cylinders; in the distance, you could see the stairs and several sets of shining elevators. I knew one *other* thing that would be in that room, too.

I got slowly to my feet. I left the others and went to get the ghost-jar.

It was sitting precisely where I'd expected; on a laboratory table, in the equivalent position to where the youth stood on the Other Side. The room, of course, had the same dimensions as the cavern where I'd seen him, but instead of ice and rubble, I had to pick my way round well-scrubbed lab tables, technicians' chairs, centrifuges, scales, humming generators and any amount of sinister experimental equipment I can't put a name to. Many of the cylinders were connected by pipes to sealed chambers, where drifts of bright and shining substance floated drearily. The place had a chemical smell. Rows of neon ceiling lights lit everything and made my eyes hurt. Actually, *everything* was hurting me right then, and my body was not the half of it.

The ghost-jar throbbed with a truculent green light, as if in deliberate attempt to defy the pristine whiteness all around. Inside the glass, I caught the face doing something improbable with its tongue and nostrils. When it saw me shambling over, it flinched and raised its eyebrows in simulated horror. I caught a flash of the youth for a second in the expression, then the plasm subsided back into its normal grotesque default position.

"*You look dreadful,*" it said. "*Like something the cat brought in. Brrr… Now I'm the one getting spooked by you*."

I leaned against the table. "You were right about Kipps," I said. "He's gone."

The face in the jar nodded. "*Yeah. I know. I saw him pass through here just a minute ago*."

"You *saw* him?" I stared round the laboratory, at the humming generators, the glistening cylinders, the antiseptic walls. It was a room that had no shadows, and no prospect of one. There was nowhere that a ghost might hide.

"*Oh, he's not here* now," the face said. "*I saw him on the Other Side. He passed through, as I say; pegged it up those icy stairs and gone. He wasn't hanging around; he had somewhere that he needed to be. No dawdling near a dirty old Source for* him." For a moment the ichor in the jar drew back and I saw the skull grinning at me. "*He looked all right, you know,*" the ghost added. "*You needn't worry*."

I said nothing.

"*Personally I think he was just glad to get shot of those stupid feathers before he died. Can you imagine having to wear them for all eternity?*" The plasm fizzed back into the semblance of a face. "*Anyway, moving on… what super adventures are we having next?*"

I made no attempt to answer, but picked up the jar. It was all I could do to carry it. My strength had not yet come back, and my legs felt wobbly as I walked. But before I could return to the room with the Gate, Lockwood and the others came through the arch to join me.

No, not *all* the others, of course. Just Holly and George.

We'd all looked better. Our clothes had an oddly faded quality, like the cover of a book that's been kept too long in the sun. Our limbs dragged. We felt ill-fitting in our skins.

Lockwood's dark eyes fixed on me. They said a lot, and my eyes answered them. All that was actually *spoken*, though, was crisp and business-like. "If you're ready, Lucy," he said, "it's time to go upstairs."

I rested the jar on a table. "I'm ready."

"Good. You and I are taking the silver lift. We're going to see Marissa. Holly and George, you'll take the stairs, or one of the bronze lifts, to the ground floor, where—"

"Wait," Holly said. "No. That's not right. You can't do this without us. You'll need us, and besides, I want to see Marissa myself." Her hand tightened on her sword hilt.

"Seconded." George adjusted his glasses on his swollen nose. One of the lenses was cracked; the other had fallen away. "We *all* owe her."

"Very true," Lockwood said, "but you two are taking a bronze lift, even so."

"Why?" Holly said. "Why *should* we?"

"Because I ask you to."

Neither Holly nor George answered, but their Lockwood & Co. discipline kicked in. After a long pause, both gave little nods.

"Right," Lockwood said, "now listen to me. Before the attack on our house, I went to see Barnes. He tried to shut me up at first, but then he just sat and listened. I gave him the run-down of what we'd discovered, and what we thought might happen. I also told him we might end up here, and what we'd try to do. Of course, I *thought* that we'd get here in a matter of hours, not a full day later, and that might have skewed things for us. But maybe it's worked to our advantage. Heaven knows what Barnes has been up to in the meantime, but he'll have surely discovered what happened at Portland Row. Maybe he'll have even seen our Gate. The question now is whether he can help us in any way. I think he can. DEPRAC's compromised, for sure, but it's not all Fittes's people by any means."

"When we saw Marissa on the staircase," Holly said, "she mentioned trouble outside."

"Yes, she did. Maybe that's Barnes. Maybe it isn't. But I want you two to get outside and make contact with him. If it's humanly possible, get him down here. Take some of this equipment with you as evidence. Cylinders, cloaks, whatever you can."

"We might stop off in that weapons store," George said darkly. "Get a bit of insurance for the road."

Lockwood's smile was wolf-like. "I think that's a very good idea. Oh, and keep your eye open for Flo."

"Why?" George asked. "What will Flo be doing? She's not hanging round too, is she?"

"Maybe. I asked her for help as well."

There was a silence.

"What about Quill?" Holly asked suddenly. "It seems wrong that… that no one's staying with him."

"No one *needs* to stay with him," I said. "He's gone. The skull saw him go." I looked off across the lab. I knew they'd be watching me, hoping for more, but I couldn't meet their gaze. "He said he looked all right," I added. That was all the reassurance I could offer them. There was nothing else to say.

The door to the silver lift was identical to the one in the Hall of Heroes, four floors above us. It was inscribed with the Fittes emblem: a noble unicorn, rampant, holding a lantern in its hoof. The metal had been polished until it shone. There was a tortoiseshell button on the wall, and a floor dial overhead, showing numbers from -4 to 7. Right now the arrow pointed to 7, the penthouse floor. That was where we were going. Lockwood pressed the button; from somewhere came a faint, smooth hum, as distant mechanisms eased into action. We waited, gazing at the door. From behind us came Holly and George's soft voices as they rifled the weapons in the armoury.

The arrow flicked anti-clockwise back across the dial; the whirring sound grew louder. Presently there was a melodic ting, the humming stopped; the door slid open. It was a dark interior of gold filigree and inlaid tortoiseshell, with mirrored panels on the sides.

Lockwood and I stepped in and turned to face the front. I adjusted the ghost-jar under one arm, and pressed the button for the seventh floor.

The door closed; almost imperceptibly, the lift began rising.

"*Going up*," the skull said. "*Next floor: cutlery, condiments and underpants.*"

We stood staring at the door. There was a mirror there too. Thanks to that and the soft warm light on the ceiling, we had a lovely, lingering view of just how weak and ill we looked. Our faces were puffy and sallow. Lockwood's hair was sticking out at impossible angles; mine sagged over my eyes. Our clothes (the bits that remained) were blackened, faded, torn and dirty.

It was a beautiful lift, plush and evidently very old; a private lift for an exclusive

passenger. The air was heavy with a strong perfume, which I recognised very well.

"*Yes, she's been here just now*," the skull remarked. "*You can feel her scent. I call it 'Flowers and Death'. A classic combination.*" It hummed a jaunty tune to itself, rolling its eyes extravagantly as it watched the arrow flicking slowly across the dial.

We reached Level O – the ground floor – and continued smoothly on.

Lockwood pulled back the side of his tattered jacket and inspected the contents of his belt. I checked my sword; the Velcro clasp had deteriorated on the Other Side, but I thought it would just hold. The hammer was still there, and a couple of packets of iron filings. I had no flares.

"*So then*," the skull said, as we passed the second floor, "*just fill us in, while we've got a moment. What's the plan when we meet Big M?*"

Neither of us answered. We watched the dial.

"*Here's my theory,*" the skull said. "*Lucy keeps her chatting; while the old girl's distracted, Lockwood shimmies over and stabs her with a letter-opener off her desk. Sneaky, but effective. Or why don't you grab a leg each and toss her off the balcony, so she falls seven storeys into the mud-banks of the Thames? Splat!*" It waited. "*Too complicated for you? Okay, my last offer. You both strip naked, daub charcoal on your cheeks – and I'm not specifying which ones – and rush out of the lift, whooping and shrieking, before hacking her to pieces with your swords. Yeah – on reflection, I think that's the strategy for you.*"

We watched the dial. The arrow pointed to the fourth floor.

The face looked from Lockwood to me and back again. "*You have* got *a plan, I suppose?*"

The fifth… the sixth… You could hear the mechanism slowing.

I swallowed. Lockwood took a deep, slow breath.

Ting! The bell rang cheerfully to tell us we were there. The lift stopped with scarcely the slightest judder.

Neither of us turned our heads, but our eyes met in the mirror. We drew our swords.

The door eased open.

It would have suited the moment if we'd at once had a clear view up some kind of sinister throne room with a red carpet in the middle, and bowing flunkies and ranks of gibbering ghosts watching on either side. In actuality all we got was a small vestibule, or waiting room, with a couple of chairs in it, and some nondescript modern art on the wall. To our right, however, were two double doors. Lockwood pushed one open. A bright and cheerful light issued from inside, along with the sound of classical music playing. There was the heady scent of flowers. Lockwood and I tightened our grips on our rapiers and slipped inside.

And then? No thrones. No flunkies. In fact the room beyond wasn't sinister at all, though it *was* imposing in a senior management sort of way, being the kind of place that chief executives entertained clients before signing important deals. It was a broad, rectangular space, with a deep white carpet, and low-backed sofas ranged against the walls. They looked angular, modish and uncomfortably fashionable. Each had glass coffee tables beside them, scattered with books and magazines.

At the far end of the room was a desk, and a wide, deep window that looked out over the Thames and London. It was night, as the skull had told us, and the river was a deep black band running between the brightly jewelled banks. How beautiful it looked from so high up, this precious, beleaguered city, stretched out dark and glittering with all its imperfections smoothed away. The ghost-lamps were just pretty lights, twinkling like stars. You couldn't see the people in it, either the living or the dead.

The only curious thing about the room – and I scarcely noticed it at first, being preoccupied with the woman who waited for us, smiling, at the desk – was the profusion of mirrors on the walls. There were a *lot* of them: big ones, small ones, mirrors in plain wood, mirrors in ornate gilt frames. Indeed, apart from the window, some bookshelves, and a single white door on the left-hand side, the walls were mostly covered with them. There were even a couple of large free-standing floor-mirrors here and there, so positioned that they multiplied the reflections from the wall and a person might see

themselves reflected from several different angles.

The Orpheus Society had had a thing with clocks. Mirrors were what counted here.

Aside from all that glass, the main item of furniture was the great oak desk sat in front of the window, piled high with books and papers, and with two jars of white lilies at either end. It looked expensive and contemporary, the perfect place for a busy chief executive to work. And in front of it, with her chair swivelled half towards us and one white elbow leaning casually on the desktop behind, was that chief executive herself.

Ms Fittes seemed no more put out at our sudden appearance in her private chambers than if we were old friends she'd bumped into in the street. Without the hooded silver cape and boots, she was suddenly back in slick and elegant businessperson mode, with a bottle-green knee-length dress and high-heeled shoes. Her long dark hair was doing that flowing, full-bodied thing, all lush and loose and impeccably aligned – the sort of effect you get (I'm told) if you devote untold hours to grooming, instead of simply eating, sleeping and keeping yourself alive, which is how it works for me. I had a sudden clear perception of how important her beauty was for her, how tightly its maintenance kept her constrained. The mirrors told their story. The windows opened out on London, but the whole apartment reflected in on her.

She sat at ease in her fashionable chair of leather and chrome, with one arm bent behind her and the other draped casually across her lap. Her pale hand hung relaxed; a bracelet of green stones dangled on her wrist. There were no weapons nearby and no one else in the room. She smiled at us and bid us enter.

"Anthony *and* Lucy," she said. "How pleasant it is to see you both. Come on over. You're too far away for me to see you, skulking at the door."

So deep and melodious was her voice, so calm was she in her smart, sophisticated room, that even then we hesitated, acutely conscious of our ruined clothes, our grimy, bloodied faces. I looked down at the pristine carpet, my blackened boots planted on them. On either side the mirrors coolly reflected our ragged forms, our drawn swords, our feral, vagrant air.

"Come over," Ms Fittes said again. "There are seats for visitors." With a flick of the fingertips she indicated two canvas armchairs near the desk. "Please don't be shy to use them. I can always have them cleaned."

With that remark, our hesitation melted clean away. My teeth clamped tight together. I squeezed my rage tight in a vice; cold and bitter fury trickled downwards through me, dripping across my heart. This would be for Kipps, this would be for George; this would be for the city ranged behind the calm, complacent woman at the desk. The sensation was not dissimilar from that which had possessed me at the Orpheus Society. I almost lost control. Shaking, I raised my sword and walked across the carpet towards her, Lockwood at my side.

"*Careful*," the skull said in my ear. "*You must feel it.*"

Yes. I did. Somewhere close, another presence. But at this time it kept itself cloaked and silent. It was shadowed from the probing of my mind.

"She's not alone, Lockwood," I murmured.

"I know."

The weariness he'd shown below had fallen from him; the old light shone in his ravaged face.

We didn't take the chairs, but came to a halt a few feet away from the woman. She hadn't moved, but just watched us with her big, black eyes.

"Swords, Anthony?" Ms Fittes said. "I'm surprised at you." Her eye lit on the jar under my arm. "And, Lucy – what's this bottled abomination? Some pet Lurker? A Pale Stench in a jar?"

I felt the glass vibrate furiously under my arm. "*Hey!*" The face goggled in outrage. *Don't give me that! You know who I am!*"

If the woman heard the skull's voice, she gave no sign of it. "Anthony, Anthony… you look so sad and ill. But, as ever, your initiative astounds me. How did you get here? The lift? Didn't you meet any of my guards?"

"Oh, we took the lift," Lockwood said, "but not from the ground floor, where the guards are stationed. We came up from the basement, you see."

She hesitated a moment, then nodded. "Ah, I *do* see. Then you've made quite a journey. No wonder you look so tired. I'd half wondered if it were possible, but Sir Rupert assured me you'd never dare make such an attempt; and, if you dared, you'd not succeed. What a fool he is sometimes. I have to applaud you."

Lockwood smiled. “Thanks. You being such a difficult person to track down, we felt we had to take unusual measures to get here. There’s a lot to talk about, and we thought it was time we had a conversation with you on level terms… *Marissa*.”

The dark-haired woman gazed at us. She didn’t show any reaction. Perhaps her eyes widened just a fraction; or maybe it was that something moved inside them, came close to the surface to gaze at us.

“*Strike me sideways,*” the skull said. “*She’s surely not going to deny it now!*”

“Marissa?” She gave a lazy smile. “Why do you call me that?”

“Because we know you’re not Penelope,” I said. “You see, we read your book.”

“*Occult Theories*,” Lockwood said. “Well, actually *George* read it. Wading through the dull speculations of a raving lunatic isn’t something Luce and I do too often. George isn’t fussy, though. He reads anything. He’d read the memoir of a lavatory attendant if it was propped against his cornflakes. He told us about your theories of immortality, how the body might be endlessly replenished by spiritual matter drawn from the Other Side.”

“Oh, he read that, did he?” the woman said. She tapped her fingers on her knee. “You stole the copy belonging to the Orpheus Society, I suppose.”

“Well, you took George’s copy from him,” I retorted. “We owe you for that, too.”

“I notice you don’t deny your crime,” Miss Fittes said. “This sounds like a matter for the police. Let’s see now: breaking and entering, theft, causing substantial damage – not to mention severely wounding several very important citizens… And now you break in here and threaten me? Dear me, such a roster of iniquity! You’re both in serious trouble.”

Lockwood’s smile narrowed. “What’s a bit of breaking and entering between friends? Everyone’s at it, these days. Your friend Rupert Gale, for instance. Is he around, by the way? I’ve got a strong desire to see him.”

The woman swivelled her chair slightly; she indicated a telephone on the desk. “He and his men are downstairs right now, trying to deal with some rather inconvenient visitors. I’m expecting a call from him shortly. If he can’t sort things out, I may have to go down and see to it myself.”

I could tell from Lockwood’s expression that he badly wanted more information about this, to know whether she was referring to George and Holly. But all he said was: “The book isn’t all we’ve seen, Marissa. Far from it. There’s the small matter of your tomb just up the road.”

She spun her chair back round, very slowly, her face hardening. “Pardon me?”

“Yes,” I said. “Your posh old tomb. Which you’re not in. We met someone who *was*, though. Remember your doctor? What was his name, Lockwood?”

“Roberts,” he said. “Dr Neil Roberts. He was asking after you.”

“He was asking *for* you,” I said. “He badly wants to be reunited with you again.”

For a second, the woman’s expression became as static as one of the old masks we’d once had on our walls. Her hand twitched, making the green stones jangle at her wrist. Then she gathered herself. “Oh dear, poor Neil. Is he *still* there? And still angry? That *is* a shame.”

“Sounds awfully like a confession to me,” I said.

“And this isn’t the half it,” Lockwood said. He stepped closer to the woman, keeping his rapier in a guard position. “We’ve been to your basement. We’ve been to the Other Side. We’ve seen what you and your Orpheus friends are doing. We’ve seen the nets you’re rigging up around dark London, the things you’re bringing back. We know the mess you’re causing over there.”

“And just *why* are we doing this?” Ms Fittes said. “Remind me.”

“*So you and your friends remain young!*” The jar vibrated; the skull flared with sudden irritable light. “*Don’t try to deny it, you old harridan. Yes, that’s right. It’s me. I’m back. And as you very well know, I can see you for what you truly are*.”

Ms Fittes’s gaze dropped to the ghost-jar under my arm. “Sorry. *Should* I remember you?”

“*After all the help I offered you? I think so*.”

I stared down at the skull. “What’s this? You offered to *help* her?”

“*Details, details. I helped Bickerstaff too, remember? Who better to help Mrs High and Mighty here with her great project? But no.* I *wasn’t good enough. She never even let me out of this jar.*” It glared at me. “*Still, what’s new?*”

“I don’t believe it! And you never thought to mention this?”

"*So sue me. It skipped my mind.*"

"It may be true…" The woman smiled apologetically at Lockwood and me. "I've spoken to so many spirits. Some simply aren't that memorable."

There was a hoot of outrage. The jar shook so much I almost dropped it on my toe. "*The cheek! After all the tips I gave you! Stab her now, Lucy. Stab her and have done!*"

"Oh, shut up! Don't you dare go giving me advice."

Lockwood had been watching the light flickering from the jar; though he couldn't hear its words, he got the gist of the conversation. "Enough of this," he said. "Marissa, you're talking to the skull, which, as far as I'm aware, is a Talent only you and Lucy share. That's the final proof. By morning, the rest of the country is going to know it too. Get up now and come with us."

Ms Fittes yawned. She stretched out her arms and looked idly at the phone. "I *do* wish Rupert would call. It's late. I need to get to bed once I've resolved the issue downstairs."

Lockwood flicked his rapier towards her. "No problem. We'll resolve it by going down there now."

"I don't think so… Anthony, why don't you put that thing away? You're always so well-intentioned – but so hopelessly over-eager." Her dark eyes blinked at him. "Just like your parents were."

Hitherto, Lockwood had been moving fretfully, shifting his weight from one leg to another, glancing warily behind him, making little wrist moves so the sword twirled to and fro like the tail of an angry cat. Now, all at once, he was quite still. In the mirrors a dozen Lockwoods stood frozen. He and the woman held each other's gaze. "What do you know about my parents?" he said. The tip of the rapier edged up towards her neck.

"I know more than you do, I think," she said. "I remember them quite well. You look rather like your father, but it was your mother who gave you your impulsiveness and insight. I was there when they gave their last lecture at the Orpheus Society. It was very good." Her smiled broadened. "Too good. That's why it was their last."

Just for a second, Lockwood didn't breathe. Then he laughed. "Oh, well then," he said. "That's easy. That settles it."

His arm shot forward; the point of his rapier was at the woman's throat.

"Lockwood!" I said. "*Don't*. It's not right."

The sword tip was beneath her chin, forcing it up. He laughed; it was not a pleasant sound.

"*Uh oh*," the skull said. "*We've got trouble*."

I looked up. The windows were closed. The doors were shut. Yet a strong breeze had carried across the room. It lifted the edges of papers on the desk, and riffled the corners of the magazines on the far table.

My skin crawled. I'd seen that effect before.

I Listened. It was psychically very quiet, but it was the kind of quiet you get when something is about to pounce. Its stillness was the stillness of a mousetrap. It didn't fool me.

Something somewhere was feeding off Lockwood's rage.

"Don't," I said again. "Calm down. She *wants* you to get angry."

He didn't look at me. "Did you *hear* her, Lucy? Did you hear what she said?"

"I know. But you mustn't hurt her. You *must* calm down."

His lips were tight together; a vein pulsed at the side of his head. "My parents…"

"I know." I spoke as carefully as I could. As he'd said the words the breeze had risen again. A document from one of the stacks of papers skewed sideways and drifted gently to the desk. My hair blew against the side of my face. "I know," I said. "But she's leading you into a trap. Remember Aickmere?"

He said nothing. Our visit to the Aickmere department store had been almost a year ago. That time, it had been *my* anger, not Lockwood's, that sparked disaster. It had begun with riffling papers too. Twenty minutes later, half the store had been destroyed.

Lockwood said nothing, but he understood. He took a deep breath and pulled the rapier away.

The woman rubbed her neck. "You're too weak to do it, anyway," she said.

Lockwood shrugged. "It doesn't matter," he said. "You're finished."

"Am I?"

"***Lucy***…"

It was a little sing-song voice that seemed to come from all around. My eyes opened

wide. I looked into the mirrors, expecting to see something standing with us in the room, but there was nothing, just the three of us – a shabby boy and girl with rapiers, a glossy woman sitting in a chair.

"***Hello, Lucy…***"

In the jar, the face winced. "*Ooh, that's not so good*."

"Something's calling me, Lockwood," I said.

The woman smiled faintly. She glanced towards the white door in the side wall. "If you want to see the truth about me," she said, "take a look in there."

Lockwood's rapier was still ready in his hand. "What's beyond that door?"

"That?" She smiled her dreamy smile. "That's my bedroom."

"Luce," Lockwood said thickly. "I'll guard Marissa. Do you mind going over to that room and seeing what's inside?"

We looked at each other.

"*Go on*," the skull said. "*Have a peep. I mean, how bad could it possibly be?*"

24.

I pushed open the door. The first thing I noticed was that Marissa's bedroom – and it *was* a bedroom: there was a double bed in the centre of it – was much colder than her mirrored office. My belt thermometer showed a drop of five degrees as I passed across the threshold. It wasn't a particularly large space; there was a closet, a wardrobe, a chaise-long, and a door opening on to a swish-looking *en suite* bathroom. The bed itself was made from some fashionable pale wood; it was fitted with red silk sheets, fat pillows and a snow-white counterpane. A lantern burned on the table beside it, casting the rest of the room into dusky shadow. There were floor-length curtains pulled across the wall at one end; elsewhere, a deep window, similar to the one in the office, afforded another view over the London night. I looked at the window. Tight closed. *That* wasn't why it was so chilly.

I stood in the doorway, listening. Stillness… The coquettish voice had fallen silent, but I could sense something nearby, watching. I glanced back into the study. Lockwood and the woman remained more or less as before. I saw Lockwood glancing anxiously in my direction. I raised my rapier reassuringly, and stepped fully into the bedroom. Like the office, it had a thick white carpet; my boots made no noise.

The ghost-jar was weighing me down. I put it down on the bed, where it sat at a nautical angle, and slowly scanned the room.

"*Nice bed,*" the skull remarked. "*She sure likes to indulge herself.*"

"I'm not talking to you." I moved slowly across to the bathroom and pushed the door fully open with the hilt of my sword.

"*Spends too much time in front of mirrors, mind. Bickerstaff was the same. It's not good for you. My old mum said witches are born that way*."

The bathroom was stuffed with racks of perfumes, soaps and lotions; in its hyper-clean way, it had something of a witch's workroom about it. I retreated back into the bedroom. "I can't imagine you ever having had a mum," I said.

"*Nice old dear, she was.*"

"I find that hard to believe." I stood at the foot of the bed, seeking the source of the cold. It was brushing against me – an icy draught, flowing from the end of the room.

"***Lucy***…"

There it was again – that high, sweet voice, clear and melodic and something like a boy's; only no boy I'd ever met would trouble my psychic senses like this voice did. I'd heard it in the office, and I'd heard it once before that. It was the voice of the handsome young man we'd seen walking with Marissa in the dark version of Fittes House.

I knew where it was coming from now. I'd fixed it. It came from behind the curtains at the end of the room, just beyond the head of the bed. I knew they didn't conceal a window – that was further along the wall. Evidently, they concealed something else.

"*You're going to have to look, you know*," the skull said.

"***Lu-ceee***…"

It was calling to me as if we were just finishing a game of hide-and-seek. As in many ways we were.

I took off the remains of my jacket and laid it carefully across the bolster of the chaise-long. It encumbered me. I wanted to be light on my feet, this final time. I smoothed my hair back and took up my rapier again. I looked down at my frost-burned boots, my skirt and torn leggings, my old jumper with the ghost's handprint on the side. I glanced around for a mirror, but funnily enough, after all those looking-glasses in the first room, there were none here that I could see. This made me feel slightly sad. After the journey through the dark city, and with whatever waited for me behind the curtain, I wanted to briefly remind myself of who I was. Lucy Carlyle.

The curtains were of dark red silk. They were of the same stuff as Marissa's sheets and pillow-cases. From behind them, the merry, sing-song voice called my name.

My feet made no sound on the soft carpet. Beyond the window, lights twinkled. London slept.

I came to the drapes and drew them aside.

"***Surprise***," the voice said.

I'd expected *something* nasty. If you'd asked me to guess, I'd have predicted that what I'd find behind the curtains would be the Source of the beautiful, exquisite spirit that had accompanied Marissa on the Other Side. It was evidently a Type Three of some kind; like the skull, it would need to have its Source nearby, somewhere close at hand. I'd have predicted another skull, perhaps, or something equally unpleasant. It stood to reason it wouldn't be too pretty.

I hadn't expected a whole body.

It was standing upright on a sort of golden stand, supported along its length by golden rods and screws and clamps that prevented sections of its black and shrivelled flesh from falling to the floor. Even so, it was in pretty ropey condition, starting with the head. Part of this was gone; the left eye, for starters, and most of the cheek, jaw and cranium on that side. Elsewhere, a black and rubbery rind of skin still maintained the vestiges of a face. There were sprouts of long black hair, and a bony neck like that of a plucked turkey. Below that, the torso was in poor nick too, all dried and thin and twisted like one of those horrid roasted vegetable chips Holly preferred to honest crisps. The surface was hard and black as cooled lava, and a couple of ribs were poking through splits in the skin. The arms and legs were little more than bones encased in a loose and papery rind. In places, screws had been driven through them to keep them in position. The thing was pierced, fixed, hung and clamped. It was a parody of a body. It stood in a little alcove all of its own, framed by the swaying drapes. The yellowed teeth grinned at me and the eye hole reflected no light.

None of *that* was what threw me, though.

It was Marissa.

I recognised what was left of her head. The beaky nose; the jaw and forehead; the sweep of dusty black hair. It was what I'd have more or less expected to find in the crypt below the mausoleum, if everything had been natural and as it should be; if the dead stayed in their proper places and the living in theirs. It was Marissa.

"*Oh,*" the skull said, from behind me on the bed. It's voice sounded as hesitant as I'd ever heard it. "That's *unexpected*."

"**I told you you'd be surprised.**"

The spirit was standing by the window. He was exactly as we'd glimpsed him on the icy stairs. A radiant young man in not too many clothes. His robes were twisted about him in such a way they seemed to merge with the other-light that streamed from his person. Close up, his beauty was almost violent: it battered you with its proximity. All his attention was on me – the bright blue eyes, the broadly smiling mouth. He flowed towards me, his body relaxed, unmoving. I shrank back, trembling, even as I raised my rapier.

"**Go back into the office, girl**," the spirit said. "**You can't resist.**"

I'd made a half-hearted swipe with the blade. It didn't seem to go quite where I wanted. The air was gluey.

"**You can't resist**," the spirit said again. It raised one hand: air moved beside me. The counterpane was swept up from the bed, knocking the skull's jar to the floor. The bedspread hung over me, hunched and crumpled, almost like a ghost itself; it swiped and feinted at me, blocking the blows of my rapier, driving me back to the door. As I passed the skull's jar, I bent and picked it up. Then the rush of air, and the buffets of the counterpane were unceremoniously bowling me out back into the mirrored room, where Lockwood and the woman were waiting as before.

I stumbled and scampered over to them, with the spirit flowing along behind. Back at the bedroom door, the air died and the counterpane dropped to the floor.

Lockwood's eyes flicked between the spirit and me. He still had his sword held ready, but I could see his uncertainty. In her chair, the woman smiled contentedly like a cat.

"What's happened, Luce? Are you okay?"

I came to a halt beside him; my voice was a whisper. "Lockwood, Marissa's in there."

"What? How can she be?"

"I don't know. Her body—"

"Dear Anthony," the woman said. For the first time, she abandoned her original posture and sat upright, in a businesslike manner. "Dear Anthony, you explained it all so prettily, earlier. And you've discovered oh, so much. But as this little bitch will tell you, you haven't got it *quite* correct. Not quite. No – don't raise that sword near me again, or *my* friend here will raise a spirit-wind that'll send you flying through that window." She sat back in the chair. "Thank you. When we talked a few moments ago, you accused me of being Marissa, who had somehow rejuvenated her crabbed old body and turned it into *this*." She looked down at herself with evident self-regard; in the mirrors a dozen reflections repeated the gesture. "Well, miraculous as spirit essence is, there's no amount of it that can accomplish *that* miracle."

The radiant spirit moved closer; its power thrummed against us, fixing us where we stood. Lockwood was listening to the woman intently; even so, I could feel his mind racing, constantly assessing our weapons, our position, the options of attack and escape.

"However," the woman went on, "you *were* very close." She leaned towards us now, her hands folded on her knees. "As that pustule of a ghost says, I *am* Marissa Fittes. But that's only half the story. Yes, I'm Marissa, but I'm Penelope too. Watch and see."

She leaned close, and now a strange thing happened to her; it was like watching the face of a clay doll being stretched to the side by the motion of a giant thumb. Her nose, mouth, eyes and cheekbones – *all* her features, for a second, were smudged and distorted, as something started pulling clear of them. Then they snapped back into position, as a second face began to break free alongside. Two faces – one solid, the other faint and see-through! At first they were almost entirely superimposed upon each other, then simply overlapping; finally the translucent, ghostly head emerged like a midnight insect from a chrysalis and hung independently beside the other. It was hard to say what was the more terrible: the malevolent glimmer of intelligence in the eyes of the spirit, or the sudden deadness in the eyes of the living.

Penelope's face hung slack and stupid, her breathing newly loud and ragged. And the face alongside? There *were* family resemblances, that much was true. The shape of the jaw and chin, the hairline on the forehead… Otherwise Marissa Fittes had precisely the hook-like nose, the ravaged lines and haughtily imperious expression of the bust in the mausoleum or the engraving at the front of our Fittes *Manuals*. It was the same face as the one that lay, decayed and ravaged, behind the curtains next door.

Lockwood swore under his breath. Our hands clutched for one another. Instinctively, as one does when faced by something repulsive and unnatural, we both moved back a pace.

"*Blow me*," the skull said, under my arm. "*I didn't expect* <u>that</u>. *Did* <u>you</u> *expect that, Lucy? I certainly didn't.*"

"No," I said. "Now shut up."

"*I just go on what's inside. I told you that, right? I call it as I see it. I see Marissa's spirit, I assume the body's hers as well! I didn't realise she was* <u>squatting</u> *in it.*"

A faint blur beneath the spirit head showed where the rest of its form disappeared inside Penelope Fittes's motionless body. Marissa's mouth moved; a voice came, faint

and crackling, like something heard down a bad phone line. “Squatting?” it said. “It’s a much closer, more perfect bond than that! See – I want to raise my hand—” Penelope’s left arm rose, and gave us a cheery wave— “I do so. I want to cross my legs—” The long legs made adjustments; the hand smoothed down the skirt— “I can. I inhabit dear Penelope just as snugly as one could wish. We are as one.” The ghost head grinned at us. Alongside it, the solid head lolled sideways like an unloved doll’s.

“So… so Penelope *was* a real person?” I said.

“Penelope is my grand-daughter, yes.”

“We thought you’d faked her life.”

“Not at all.”

Lockwood spoke harshly: “She was living, and you killed her.”

The spirit head clicked its tongue. “Tsk, tsk. Hardly! That would defeat the object. The body is alive and flourishing, as you can very well see. Granted, the mind has gone, but *my* mind fills the space, so no one loses out. It’s been a very practicable solution to my problem, and should last me a good many more years. Now, excuse me a moment. I should put this back on.”

With a horrid nuzzling, the ghost head bunted up against the side of Penelope’s head and burrowed its way within. In an instant, it had disappeared. The head jerked and drooled. Intelligence snapped back into the eyes. The woman raised her hand and wiped her mouth.

“This is an atrocious thing,” Lockwood said. “A wicked crime.”

“Oh, come. It *looks* odd, I grant you, but the benefits greatly outweigh the drawbacks. My contemporaries are dead. I live on.” Marissa Fittes scowled at us in the stolen face. “And don’t get on your high horse with me, Anthony; almost everything I’ve done, you and dear upstanding Miss Carlyle have done too – only not quite as well.” She indicated the handsome young man glowing at our side, and then the ghost-jar under my arm. “See? You have your Type Three to guide you. I have mine.”

In the jar the face squinted up at the radiant form. It gave a robust snort. “*What, you went for this male model? You could have had me!*”

The spirit’s eyes narrowed with displeasure. “**I itch to dispose of this thing. Marissa, if you remove the glass—**”

“We have the Furnaces,” Marissa said. “All in good time. As it so happens,” she said, addressing the jar, “I do remember you, vile spirit. I thought you coarse, cheeky and lacking in intelligence.”

The face in the jar frowned. “*Really? Sure that wasn’t some other skull?*”

“No,” I said heavily. “She remembers you, all right.”

“You were of no interest to me,” Marissa Fittes went on. “Your deficiencies aside. I already had my beloved advisor here. Why would I want anyone else? Since I was a child he has been guiding me deeper into the profoundest mysteries of the afterlife. To begin with, he showed Tom Rotwell and me these truths together. We studied supernatural pioneers, such as Edmund Bickerstaff; we learned ghost lore of the centuries. We developed ways of combating hostile spirits. We experimented with Sources. Using rudimentary cloaks as protection, we made tentative attempts to reach the Other Side. But Tom was slow and held me back. There came a time when we had to go our separate ways.”

“The Rotwell agency has been trying to make up lost ground ever since,” Lockwood said. “We saw their attempts at a making a Gate last year.”

“And you very kindly destroyed it for me,” Marissa said. “Don’t think I wasn’t grateful. It’s really the only reason I kept you alive at the time. If you’d been just that *little* bit more open-minded, I would have given you much more. There are such rewards for those who follow me! Rewards you can’t imagine.”

“Oh, I think we can,” Lockwood said easily. “Those crusty old fools in the Orpheus Society – they give you *plenty* of money, influence and help, don’t they? And what do they get in return? Let me take a wild guess – a shot at immortality.”

The woman rose from her chair. She went to stand beside the blazing spirit, who

broke off from glaring at the ghost-jar, and bowed his head to her. “When I was very young,” she said, “I believed that it would be possible to counteract mortality by getting hold of the immortal substance within all spirits. First I tried to snare the ectoplasm of the ghosts in our world. *That* didn’t work – as we all know, ordinary plasm harms the living. But on the Other Side, as I discovered, it is a different story – there a spirit’s stuff is purer and more potent, and fragments of it may be captured by means of special nets.”

Lockwood nodded. “Yes, we’ve seen the crimes you work on the spirits too.”

“Crimes?” She spat the word back at us. “They’re dead! They’re gone! They wander stupidly in the dark. We owe them nothing.”

I thought of Kipps, then. I thought of the dark roads he was wandering now. I stared at her, hot-eyed.

“If treated carefully,” Marissa said, “if processed in subtle ways, this spirit substance *can* be made palatable to the living. It *can* be absorbed, and has the effect of strengthening our own souls, of prolonging life. In all this, my dear companion showed me the way.” She smiled up at the radiant spirit, but it had been distracted again by the ghost in the jar, which was making a variety of abusive gestures in its direction. Marissa ignored them both. “Ah, but you have no idea how *much* of it is required for the slightest benefit!” she went on. “And there were significant drawbacks for me, because I was making too many journeys to the Other Side. My protective clothes were not sufficient. With each journey, though my spirit grew stronger, but my body aged. *You* both understand that,” she added. “I see you’ve both got a few grey hairs – you’d have a couple more after today, I don’t doubt. Anyway, it was not long before I began to grow old before my time.”

“And *how*,” I said. I turned to Lockwood. “That body in the bedroom? Yeuch.”

He raised an eyebrow. “She’s no looker, then?”

“Remember that wet corpse we found wedged under Lovell’s Wharf? Worse.”

“Good Lord.”

Marissa Fittes coughed slightly. “If I might continue? I needed the help of others to proceed, and my friends at the Orpheus Society have proved most reliable over many years. As you correctly state, they are driven by the same dreams as me, and to this day they fund many of the experiments going on downstairs.” She smiled at us; it was a thin smile, without empathy. “They are old and rich and growing desperate. They eke out their time, extending it little by little… it is a losing battle for them. But *I* – I have discovered the better answer.”

“Leave your body altogether,” Lockwood said. “Use someone else’s. Nice.”

“What alternative was there? My spirit had grown very strong – you would not believe how strong it is! – but the body was worn out. At last I lay near death, surviving only by pure will. The doctor who tended to me was a fool. He would have had me coffined up and buried! Instead, we arranged for him to occupy the tomb, while I sought refuge in a living vessel. My daughter was first, but Mary was weak in mind and body. I didn’t find her a good fit at all. Fortunately my dear grand-daughter Penelope is *much* more robust. I can see us having a partnership for a good many years. And now,” Marissa Fittes said, “what else is there to say? You know everything.”

“Yes…” Lockwood said, smiling. “We do. And one thing above all… You’re utterly insane.”

The woman stared at him. At that moment, the phone on her desk rang.

“Excuse me. We’ll come back to that comment in a moment.” Marissa leaned over, picked up the receiver. “Sir Rupert? It’s about time. I’m expecting to hear…” Her brow darkened. “Well, how can *that* be? Who let them in? A girl? A relic-girl? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Absurd! Well, what’s the situation now? Fighting? With *whom*? Where did they come from? No… I certainly *don’t* expect you to. Quite clearly I’m going to have to come down and deal with it myself…”

“Lucy,” Lockwood said, putting his head close to mine, “when it happens, I want you to make for the lift. Try to get out, no matter what. Promise me you’ll do this.”

“When *what* happens?” I whispered.

“Promise me.”

But there wasn’t time to answer. Marissa had put the phone receiver down. She didn’t slam it, but clicked it crisply into position, and stood a moment staring down as her long

fingernails slowly raked across the surface of the desk.

"Having problems?" Lockwood asked cheerily.

She turned; youthful as her stolen body was, there was a weight and weariness in the movement. A frond of dark hair hung over one eye. "Yes, Anthony, do you know, I *am*," she said, "and I have to blame you for them, don't I?"

Lockwood raised a modest hand. "Well, I wouldn't want to take *all* the credit – but that's pretty much the way of it, yes."

She nodded. "I thought so." She stepped across to stand beside her spirit advisor, and its radiance swelled to encompass her. For some reason I was reminded of the way La Belle Dame's head had sought to reattach itself to her body, those last few moments on the stage. They were inextricably linked together, Marissa and this spirit. How many years had it been there, infesting her thoughts and dreams? How long had she willingly lain to sleep in the next room, with it close enough to touch? There was no silver-glass case, no iron, no lavender here – nothing to hem it in. This was *its* room, as much as Marissa's – perhaps more so. They stood the two of them, gazing at us. It was the end.

"I thought so, Anthony," Marissa said again, very slowly and distinctly. She glanced at her companion. "Which is why we're going to kill you now."

25.

And Lockwood moved. He had been readying himself for it ever since I'd returned to the room. He'd known it would come to this. At some point during the conversation, he had decided on his course of action; now, almost before Marissa had finished speaking, he acted. No hesitation, no delay: the leap was faster than thought. Marissa and the spirit were taken entirely unawares. Perhaps even now they underestimated him, taken in by outward appearances – by his wounds and ragged clothes. Perhaps Marissa, in her complacency and self-regard, had assumed the matter dealt with, and was already thinking of the problems she faced downstairs. Perhaps the spirit was also distracted – it had been growing increasingly enraged by the rude faces the skull was making at it from behind its glass. Or perhaps Lockwood, as so often, was simply quicker than everyone around him. That's what *I* like to believe. He remained one step ahead of everybody, right to the last.

It also helped that he did the opposite of what our enemies expected. He didn't run. He didn't try a long-distance assault with canister or flare. Instead he jumped directly at Marissa and the spirit. It was a full frontal attack, and the spirit was the main target. Before his feet had landed on the carpet again, Lockwood's rapier had swung round and sliced straight through the waist of that preening, glowing young man, curling up and outwards again with dregs of ectoplasm pouring from the blade. Lockwood continued his spin; crouching, he twirled right round, coat swirling like the tail of a black bedraggled bird, and struck out at Marissa, catching her on one arm and sending her backwards, with a scream, to tumble between her desk and chair. Only then did he pause: he came to a standstill facing the ghost, where its severed parts still hung startled in the air, his sword held ready for a second blow.

All this before I'd even *started* on my run for the lifts.

It didn't help that all my instincts were to stay with Lockwood and join the fight. But he'd given me my orders, and I wasn't going to betray him now. I snatched up the ghost-jar and pelted away across the office. Beside me, I could see the handsome young man's torso reforming, the plasm flowing together, gushing upwards and downwards like a waterfall seen reflected in a lake. That was the trouble with powerful spirits. Iron wounded them, but seldom sufficiently to strike a decisive blow. There was a frowning, serious look on the thing's face, as if it knew its dignity had been compromised, and it was still trying to figure out just how.

Then *it* acted too.

An explosion of air, outwards across the room. Sofas and coffee tables shifted, papers and magazines were blown skywards; I was sent tumbling head over heels across the carpet. I picked things up: myself, the sword, the jar. Back across the room, amid a storm

of swirling papers, I could see that Lockwood had somehow remained on his feet. He was striking out at the radiant shape, cutting slices from its outstretched arms as it sought to grasp him. By the desk, the woman was pulling herself upright. She had her head turned towards Lockwood. She was behind him.

I hesitated. Did he see her? Did she have a weapon? Would she strike him in the back?

"*Thought Lockwood gave you a job to do,*" the skull said. "*The lifts are over there.*"

I cursed. "Yes."

I went on a few more paces, slower this time. There was the exit, just ahead of me. Looking over my shoulder, I was just in time to see Lockwood kick backwards with a boot, catching the advancing Marissa unceremoniously in the stomach, so that she went rolling away with her legs in the air. His rapier moved and shone; the spirit's arms flowed about him, questing for his exposed flesh. Ghost fog rose about them. Lockwood was retreating now, being pushed towards the desk. He twisted, sprung up onto it; was silhouetted briefly against the window, slim, ready, sword in hand—

The spirit made a gesture. Another explosion of air. Mirrors shattered; glass broke. Papers blasted outward around my face. It wasn't directed at me this time. I stayed standing. When I could see again, the desk was upturned. It had been driven against the rear wall. The glass in the window had been blown outwards into the night. I couldn't see Lockwood at all.

"Where is he? What happened to him?"

"*I didn't see. What is there about the phrase 'get to the lifts' that you don't understand?*"

"Oh God," I said. "The broken window…"

"*Lucy, that's not your problem right now.*"

Floating papers drifted floorwards. Two figures were walking towards me through them: a radiant ghost, a limping woman in a dark-green dress. The spirit waved a hand. The mirrors on the wall behind me cracked and shattered. The glass didn't fall. The fragments rotated outwards. They shook like they were trying to pull themselves free. Great jagged shards broke clear and shot towards me like horizontal hail.

"Oh, not *this* again." I sprinted for cover. "I hate this Poltergeist stuff!"

Glass ripped the air around me. I threw myself over the top of the nearest sofa and fell to the floor behind it. Here I lay, pressed between it and the wall, as the rain of glass sliced into the cushions on the other side. The point of one especially long fragment jabbed right through the sofa back, just above my ear. The barrage ended. Glass pieces dropped into the carpet. I could hear Marissa's footsteps crunching through them, and the soft swishing of the ghost's robes.

The skull's ghost-jar had spilled out of my hands and was lying horizontally next to me, the face gazing into mine. It would be a lie to say it looked any nicer than usual, though the appalling grimace it wore was possibly an attempt at a smile.

"*You know this is the time, Lucy*," it said.

I stared at it. "I can think of something."

"*No. You really can't. In thirty seconds you're going to die*."

I bent low, squinted under the sofa: yep, there were Marissa's high-heeled shoes crossing the glass-strewn carpet with the ghost's bare feet floating alongside. Little twists of ice formed on the carpet where it passed. Wreaths of ghost-fog crept towards where I hid. No respite.

"*The hammer's in your belt*," the skull said. "*Use it*."

There was blood on my face, and just above my hip. So the glass *had* struck me after all. My side felt odd: cold and not my own. I grinned mirthlessly. "I was waiting for a real emergency."

"*Okay, fine, and while you're waiting, why not die here behind a chintzy sofa,*

alongside all the dust balls and dead earwigs and coins people have lost. You want that?"

"No." The first trails of ghost-fog were probing under the sofa, green and bitter-cold.

"*You want that old hag to win?*"
"No."
"*Do you trust me?*" the skull said.
"Yes."
"*Then break the bloody glass*."

I scrabbled at my belt, felt for the little hammer. My fingers were wet with blood, and the handle slipped through them. I caught hold and drew it out.
Already it was almost too late.

The sofa moved in front of me. Slowly at first – all at once a powerful psychic force enfolded it, and it was suddenly swept aside. Ghost fog beat against me in a froth. When it settled back I was sitting against the wall, gazing up at my enemies with the ghost-jar in my lap and the hammer in my hand.
In some ways it was hard to know which of them was living and which was dead. They were very close together. Marissa Fittes's dark dress shimmered with other-light that extended from the figure at her side. Her face was ghastly with it. Her outline was wreathed in tendrils of ghost fog, making it curiously insubstantial. By contrast the ghost beside her, radiant and smiling, seemed almost solid, fizzing with energy.

"Poor Lucy," Marissa said.

And I suppose I *did* look pretty poor right then. I was lying in my own blood. I had my hair over my eyes. My clothes were torn and dirty— Hey, you know the rest. I gazed up at them through narrowed eyes.
"Aren't you going to beg?" Marissa asked. There was a rapier wound on her upper arm.
"***She won't***," the spirit said.
"Get it over with, then. But don't make it too quick. Take your time."
The young man drifted forwards. I raised the jar and had the satisfaction of seeing it hesitate.

"You're surely not wary of *that* pathetic spirit?" Marissa said. "It's just a Phantasm."

"***Something stronger than that***," her companion said. ***"But it doesn't matter. He's trapped***."
"No," I said. "Actually he's not."

With that I raised the hammer from where it lay hidden at my side, and struck it down against the jar with all my strength.

And the stupid thing bounced off. There was a slight chip in the glass, but otherwise all was as before.

"Sorry, were you trying to do something there?" Marissa asked.

The ghost in the jar had been braced as if for mighty impact. It opened one eye and looked up at me. "*What are you doing? Don't tell me you can't break it."*

"Hold on." I struck the jar again. The hammer bounced away.

"*Ohhh, that is so rubbish*," the skull said.
With mounting panic, I tried again. This blow was even more weak and ineffectual. It did nothing.
The skull gaped at me in disbelief. "*Utterly hopeless! A chaffinch chick could tap this open!*"
"Don't criticise me!" I roared. "You're the one who suggested I use a stupid hammer!"

"*I didn't think you'd be too feeble to lift it, did I? Why didn't you say?*"
"I've never broken a silver-glass jar before! How did *I* know how tough they were?"
"*Hopeless! You might as well give it to that dead cockroach over there! He'd have more chance than you*."

"Oh, why don't you just shut *up*?"

"***This***," the spirit said, "***is priceless***."

Marissa's deep tinkling laugh was the same as ever. "What a team. Well, I could watch this all day. But I'm not going to. Goodbye, Lucy. Now I'm going to go downstairs to find your companions, and watch my dear friend here suck the flesh from their bones. Not your darling Anthony, though. He's already dead." She bent close, smiling. "I saw him blown out through the window."

A white flash, not unlike fire, burst in front of my eyes. I saw Kipps. I saw George and Holly. Most of all I saw Lockwood. *Lockwood*. I lifted the hammer; I struck and struck at the jar, blind in my desperation and hate, little caring that the shining spirit was reaching out for me, pale hands about to grasp my neck.

Lockwood…

There was a crack. Still I struck and struck.

"*Oi! Careful! You could smash a skull, going like that.*" The voice came from above me. I was no longer alone. A thin grey youth with spiky hair stood close beside me. When I looked down, I saw that one side of the jar had caved in; pale green ichor spilled out from the cracks, floating like mist in the air around me. Below the spears of broken glass, an old skull grinned up from the base of the jar.

Marissa's companion had backed off a little. Marissa, sensing this, retreated too.

"*That's much better*," the youth said. It put its hands together and cracked its knuckles. "*Now we can all get properly acquainted.*"

It pointed a finger; a spirit-wind rushed outwards, carrying Marissa off her feet, sending her tumbling back across the room like a broken doll. She knocked heavily against the opposite wall and lay there.

"*Ooh*," the grey youth said. "*Sore! I felt that. Now then… what about you?*"

It glared at the radiant young man, who hovered a few yards distant. The wind had passed right through it, without disturbing so much as a well coifed hair on its head. I could feel the ferocity of its attention, saw its hand raise as if to reply in kind— Then, without warning, it flowed backwards across the room and took up a station close to where Marissa lay.

"*Very wise*," the youth said grimly. "*If he doesn't protect her, he knows I'll snap her neck like a twig. Now, you've got a few moments to scarper. She'll wake up soon*."

I got unsteadily to my feet. After a moment's hesitation, I picked up the broken jar.

"Thank you," I said. I stumbled back across the room.

The youth gave a groan. "*No! The lift's that way! What* is *it with you and your sense of direction?*"

I didn't answer, but ran across to the toppled desk, vaulting the chair, kicking aside broken flower pots and dying lilies. I looked behind the desk in hope… He wasn't there, but his rapier lay loose on the carpet. The window gaped ahead of me, filled with the lights and the night's soft darkness, and the seven-storey drop towards the mud-banks of the river below. My heart caught in my throat. I craned my head over—

And saw Lockwood just below me, hanging on to a lip of stone below the sill. His hair was swept back, his face stricken with the effort of clinging on. Both sets of fingers clutched the ledge.

"Hi Lucy."

"Hi." I leaned out, grasped his wrist. Fragments of glass fell from the sill, twinkled around us like confetti and were gone. I held him in a clasp of iron. Below us was the abyss, but I wouldn't let him fall.

It wasn't easy to pull him up; I didn't really have the strength. But I did enough for him to get proper purchase on the brickwork. Between him and me we pushed and tugged and got him up to window level; soon we were collapsing back through it in a tangle of clutching arms.

"*Last lift leaving in approximately ten seconds,*" a voice called. The youth with spiky hair was standing near the entrance doors. He was facing off against the radiant spirit on the other side of the room. The air between them was stirring as two unseen forces probed and contended against each other. An upturned chair halfway between them was

shaking and trembling, being pushed first this way, then that. Behind the spirit, Marissa was leaning against the wall, rubbing at her head dazedly, black hair covering her face.

This time I didn't hesitate. Lockwood and I ran across the ruined office, keeping low, making for the door. The spirit saw us: cold, malevolent fingers of air probed in our direction, but were counteracted by flurries coming from the youth. I heard Marissa give a cry of rage. Then we were out and into the vestibule, where the lift stood open and ready. We bundled inside, gasping. I stabbed the ground-floor button. Slowly, slowly, the door began to close.

There was an almighty bang inside the room. It sounded like the ceiling had come down. A cloud of dust and debris spilled out into the vestibule – and with it came a shape that flowed swiftly through the doors, across the vestibule and into the lift, just as the door shut fast. The grey youth slouched to a halt. It grinned at me and nodded insolently at Lockwood. "*Should keep them busy for a moment*," it said. "*But I don't think they'll be long*."

The lift gave a jolt and began its slow descent; the counter passed steadily back across the dial. Lockwood and I sunk back against the walls, gasping, coughing, suddenly overcome by the effort at survival.

The Skull's spirit stood watching us, a slight grin on its face. The only other times I'd seen it in its proper shape had been on the Other Side, when its silver-glass prison had made it faint and dim. Now the details were clearer, and it had to be said they weren't too prepossessing. It turned out the owner of the skull had been a rangy, almost scrawny youth, with amused, rather shifty-looking eyes and the remnants of a bad case of acne. His hair was short, but hacked about as if he'd done it himself. He wore a tatty white shirt and grey trousers that were slightly too short for him. His feet were bare. He looked in his late teens. He hadn't been too old when he died.

Lockwood had also been studying him. He gathered his breath, looked at the spirit levelly. "Thanks," he said.

"*Oh, I did it for Lucy, not you*."

Lockwood couldn't hear him; he'd already turned to me. "I thought I told you to get out back there," he said. "I told you not to hang around."

I stood upright, smoothed my hair out of my eyes. "*You* were the one hanging around. By your fingertips from a window. Good job I was there."

He shook his head. "You'd had more than enough time to be gone before then! But no – you waited for me! You shouldn't have endangered yourself, Lucy. It might all have been for nothing! You might have died."

I looked at him. "Yeah… Remember the bit about the window?"

"I'd have managed."

"You so wouldn't."

"*I'm keeping well out of this,*" the Skull said. "*Can't we just say you're both idiots, and have done with it?*"

There was a thump somewhere up high beyond the lift. The three of us looked at the ceiling.

"*Might be as well to check on that…*" The youth floated upwards so that his head and shoulders pushed through the top of the lift, causing the light in the ceiling bulb to shrink to a glowing wire. He dropped back beside us; the light came on again. "*Yeah, there's a glow descending the shaft,*" he said. "*I'd say they're on their way*."

"It's carrying her down?" I said. "How does *that* work?"

"*A spirit that can lift a sofa can lift a woman. Her companion is powerful – and very committed to her. If you want to destroy her, you'll have to find its Source*."

"Right, which could be anywhere," I said.

"*You think? I'd say Marissa has it on her person. Look at you, hugging my skull so close and tenderly. She'll be doing the same. Wherever she goes, it goes. What's she wearing?*"

"I don't know! How would I remember that?"

"Lucy!" Lockwood was looking at the dial. "We're almost at the ground floor. From what Marissa said, *anything* could be going on down here. When the door opens, I want you to—" He broke off. "Oh, who am I kidding? You'll just do what you want like always. Just be careful, please." He smiled at me, then his face dropped. He'd noticed the blood seeping through my jersey. "Wait, you're bleeding! What's this?"

"Just some flying glass. Don't worry. I'll be fine."

His face was grey. “That’s what Quill said too.”

“No. It’ll be okay. I promise.”

He wanted to say something else to me, but we were out of time. On the dial the arrow hit zero.

“*Here we go then*,” the Skull said.

The lift gave its cheery ting. But already it was almost drowned out by the shouts and screams from beyond the opening door.

26.

We’d known *something* was up on the ground floor of Fittes House, but until that moment neither Lockwood nor I had had the leisure to guess precisely what. We knew it was big. We knew Marissa wasn’t happy about it. We could guess that our friends were thoroughly involved. But it wasn’t until a plume of pungent lavender smoke came surging through into the lift, and we saw the body of the DEPRAC agent lying just outside the doors that we began to truly grasp its scale. The air rang with the sound of yells and clashing swords. Away in the smoke, across the Hall of Dead Heroes, we glimpsed frantically running forms. The burning braziers at the shrines opposite had been toppled and hot embers strewn across the marble floor. Behind it all, a loud psychic concussion beat at our heads; I heard ghosts’ voices howling.

We stepped out of the lift, swords in hand, then jerked aside as a man in a Fittes uniform erupted from the smoke and ran past us, screaming. The back of his jacket was seared with ectoplasm burns.

“*Ah, yes*,” the Skull said, drifting alongside us. “*A spot of carnage. This is what life is all about*.”

Lockwood indicated the man at our feet. “Looks like Barnes is here. Good. We need to find him and the others fast.”

“My money’s on *that* way,” I said. Most of the screams were coming from the door that led towards the front of the building and the Hall of Pillars. As we started off, an odd noise sounded behind us: the thud of something landing on the top of the lift car.

We looked at each other. Lockwood clenched his teeth. “She can wait her turn. Besides, it’s going to take her a few minutes to break through the roof. Come on.”

We weren’t experts on the layout of the Fittes building, and the passages were filled with magnesium smoke; it was a disorientating and tentative progress, made worse by the psychic pandemonium happening somewhere nearby. We didn’t go the shortest way. My side was numb, and it wasn’t easy to walk, but I didn’t want Lockwood to see it. I followed him as quickly as I could, the Skull’s spirit floating at my shoulder.

“*So,*” the Skull said after a while, “*who do you want me to kill?*”

“I don’t want you to kill anybody! Well… apart from Sir Rupert.” I gave a proxy kick to a man in a Fittes jacket who was stumbling, choking, through the smoke, and sent him careering against a wall. “Or Marissa. Or anyone who gets in my way… Tell you what, let’s do it on a case-by-case basis.”

“*Fair enough. What’s our objective?*”

“Survival. And I want to find Holly and George.”

“*There’s a host of powerful spirits cavorting up ahead,*” the Skull said. “*Think your pals might have something to do with that?*”

“Yeah. I reckon so— Lockwood, watch out!”

From a side passage came a knot of rushing forms. There were at least four of them, pressed close together in such a tight and shifting medley of flashing swords and flailing limbs that it was all I could do to figure out what was going on. Three burly adult Fittes operatives – their shaven heads signalled them as members of Sir Rupert Gale’s militia – were hacking with vicious desperation at a smaller person in their midst, whose whirling rapier and swirling blue puffer jacket kept them all at bay. This person had an additional weapon, a long implement with a curved barb that she jabbed repeatedly into sensitive

portions of their anatomy. Her straggling blonde hair slapped back and forth as she danced among them, feinting, blocking, stabbing... One man collapsed, clutching at his chest; the group stepped over him, continued their fatal progress across our corridor and off along another passage. As they went, a grubby face glanced over to us, and we caught a flash of bright white teeth.

"Hey, Locky!" it said. "You might want to get into the hall…" The group passed into the smoke and was gone.

I stared after the apparition. "Was – was that *Flo*?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Lockwood said. "She's good. And there's Barnes! Inspector! Over here!"

At the entrance to the Hall of Pillars a small group of DEPRAC operatives were clustered behind an upturned table. Two of them were busy looping lengths of chains on the floor around them. A third was bandaging a cut on the arm of Inspector Montagu Barnes, who leaned up against the door jamb in an attitude of supreme disgruntlement. His raincoat had several rapier slashes in it, and his moustache drooped with more than usual curvature. One of his eyes was blackened, and other ringed with weariness; when he saw us coming, he gave a trademark roll of both.

"Finally!" Barnes said. "Where have you two been hiding all this time? Some people said you were dead, but I knew we couldn't be that lucky."

Lockwood grinned. "Nice to see you too, Inspector." He pointed at the chains. "Getting some impromptu defences fixed up?"

"Yes we have, and we need them. Have you seen what's going on inside that room? What with all the ghosts and the madmen in this house, we're in a tight spot here."

I could feel the supernatural charge pulsing through the door, and I recognised the hooting, keening voices too: I'd heard them on the Other Side. "It's the ghosts from the pillars," I said. "How did they get out?"

"Ah, that would be your dear friend, Cubbins," the inspector said. "He evidently thought this party wouldn't be complete without nine terrible Visitors set loose as well.

He found some pretty hefty magnesium charges – *illegal* ones, mark you – and set them off beside the pillars." Barnes winced as his bandage was tied about his arm. "Actually, I'm grateful to him, because before the ghosts got involved, we were getting massacred by Gale's men." He grimaced, showing bad teeth. "It's evened things out a lot. Now we're all as helpless as each other."

Lockwood looked back up the passage that led to the lifts. There was no movement yet in the swirling smoke. "It would help if I fully understood what was going on," he said.

"You and me both!" Barnes said. "If you want the short answer, this is all thanks to you. After your tip-off the other day, I gathered a few of the men I could trust around me. Yesterday morning, I paid a visit to your house in Portland Row. There I discovered all hell had broken loose, with some kind of psychic inferno upstairs, you all missing, and two of Winkman's beauties camped there in your kitchen, helping themselves to the contents of your larder. They put up quite a struggle—" Barnes pointed to his black eye—"but the upshot was my boys took them off to a quiet spot where they became quite talkative. I heard enough to decide to have a word with Sir Rupert Gale, at any rate, so I came down here. I spent all afternoon trying to get in, but the Fittes crowd stonewalled me. That's what they always do. No, Dobbs – don't! It's not worth trying!"

One of the DEPRAC agents had drawn a gun; he stepped over the coil of chains and was staring through the door into the Hall of Pillars. Whatever he saw made him yelp and jump back. As he did so, he passed quite close to the Skull, who had been standing there unnoticed by the adults with an expression of extravagant boredom on his face. The man's proximity awoke the spirit's interest; I noticed him stretching out a thoughtful hand towards the man's neck. I gave him a warning glare. Scowling, he pulled it away.

"Back in here, Dobbs," Barnes said, "and wait for the order. No, Mr Lockwood, after what you'd told me, I knew you were likely to be here, but I was stymied. I'd never have got in – if it wasn't for that crazy, unwashed girl."

"Ah, yes," Lockwood said, "that would be Flo."

"Not long after midnight she sidled up to us in the Strand, said you'd sent her, and that she knew a way in." The inspector shook his head. "And she *did* too, though it's not one

any of us are likely to want to experience again."

Lockwood raised an eyebrow. "Flo knows all the waste pipes and outflows emptying into the Thames. Hope it wasn't *too* horrid for you, Mr Barnes."

"Only mildly. An old sluice gate, leading to a cellar below the kitchens of Fittes House. That got us in nicely; but it wasn't long before we met Sir Rupert Gale and his men. I served Sir Rupert with a warrant, and said I wanted to look at the basements while I was here. Well, he didn't like that. Next thing we knew they'd drawn weapons and set upon us, and it was going badly until Cubbins got involved." Barnes rubbed his moustache. "Course, now it's going a good deal *worse*, but it's the thought that counts."

"And where *is* George, Inspector?" I asked. "And have you seen Holly?"

Barnes's creased face crumpled still further. "Ah, well," he said, "we were with them, fifteen minutes ago, fighting Sir Rupert *and* the ghosts, but we got separated. I lost three men and had to retreat." He looked to the door. "I'm afraid they may still be in *there*."

"Let's go," I said.

"Thanks, Mr Barnes." Lockwood moved to the door, then hesitated. "One more thing – is Sir Rupert still alive?"

Barnes held up his bandaged arm. "He is, more's the pity. I've the evidence to prove it."

"No, that's just what I wanted to hear. Don't worry, we'll finish this. You should get out of here, Inspector. Take the sluice gate route again. Only, if you see Penelope Fittes coming towards you, don't stop and chat to her – *run*."

The Hall of Pillars had always been a fairly spectacular sort of room. It did things bigger and more grandly than anywhere else, and this held true in its final haunting. Whether it had been the initial explosions at the pillars that had blown the chandeliers, or whether the psychic energies thus released had interfered with the electrics, the hall was now a place of deep, blue shadow. Magnesium smoke hung in seeping layers in the air. Orange radiance from the ghost-lights in the Strand showed through the windows, illuminating the nine broken pillars in the centre of the room. Some were shattered, split right through; others more or less held their shape, their surface riven with cracks. In each case, it had been enough to release the spirit contained there, as nine shrieking spheres of other-light amply demonstrated. They moved separately across the marble floor, some rushing, some with more stately or painful tread. In the heart of each was a shape corresponding to one ghost type or other. There near the window a Dark Spectre, possibly manifesting from the infamous Frank Street Coffin, stretched out long tendrils of blackness. There the sinewy translucent shape of Long Hugh Henratty, the Mud Lane Phantom, stalked as if on tiptoe on its severed ankle bones. There the Gory Girl of Cumberland Place crawled along in her weltered nightdress… And so it went. The Morden Poltergeist had escaped its teapot; it had no discernable form, but had caught up the fragments of its pillar and was whirling them about in an upturned cone of shattered glass.

None of the Visitors could pull too far from their Sources, which remained clamped in the ruined pillars; perhaps the proximity of all that silver-glass still weakened them. Even so, they exulted in their freedom – my head rang with their cries.

"My God," I said. "The noise…"

"*Bit showy*," the Skull said. "*All that hooting and cackling. Don't see* me *doing that. I ask you, where's the class?*"

Ignoring the psychic buffeting, Lockwood and I edged into the hall. With the darkness and the eerie other-light it was hard to see what else was in the room. The bodies of several men and women lay scattered about, DEPRAC officers and members of the Fittes militia. Some lay in pools of blood; others, the victims of ghost-touch, were already swollen and blue. But there was movement in the shadows and, I thought, the sound of rapiers. And since Barnes and his men were behind us, that only meant one thing.

We began to run – Lockwood swiftly, me hobbling along. In my haste and discomfort I cut too close to one of the pillars; on its far side a faint green Spectre, with the form of a wild-eyed man in chains, ducked into the floor like he was swimming in it, and bobbed up beside me, clawing with his hand. I leaped away, slashed with the sword, ran on. And

ahead of us, I saw Holly fighting with Sir Rupert, and, behind her, George lying on the ground.

"Skull," I said, as I went – the grey youth was flowing at my side – "now's finally your chance for a spot of ghost-touch. Do what you like. You have my blessing."

"*Oh, nice one. Cheers. Does it matter which I kill? Sir Rupert, Munro, Cubbins?*"

"Sir Rupert, preferably."

"*Okay… I think I can remember that.*" The grey youth swept forwards, arms gleefully outstretched.

"No!" Lockwood looked back at me; he waved an angry hand. "Not ghost-touch! Leave him to me!"

The grey youth halted, rolled his eyes. "*Give me a break. Can't you slap him, Lucy?*"

"Lockwood," I shouted, "remember Kipps!"

"This *is* for Kipps," he said.

The sound of our voices had carried; Sir Rupert Gale turned slowly round. Behind him, Holly subsided, her rapier held limply between her fingers. She looked exhausted; she sank to her knees.

It had to be said that Sir Rupert didn't look on top form either. His clothes were as dapper as ever: a grey-green jacket with black lapels, dark trousers, a vibrant yellow tie. But there was blood on his neck and knees. His eyes glittered in grey sockets; veins stood out on his cheeks. When he spread his arms in welcome, an old strapping at his wrist showed the place where I'd struck him in the bedroom more than twenty four hours earlier. He smiled broadly at us, even so.

"Ah, I'm so pleased," he said. "You *did* make it, then."

Lockwood came to a halt, held his rapier at his side. He gestured around at the screaming ghosts; by their eerie lights you could see the ruined pillars, the stuccoed ceiling, the panels with their painted depictions of great events in the history of psychical detection. "Yes, I made it. Well, what do you think? This a glamorous enough spot for you?"

Sir Rupert grinned. "I've no complaints this time."

"That's fine, then."

They raised their swords, touched them together. Lockwood brushed his hair out of his eyes. Then Sir Rupert sprang towards him.

Three clashes, two feints, a side-step and a roll – already they were away across the hall, moving between the drifting tendrils of the Dark Spectre and the shuffling cadaver of poor Godel, weeping piteously for its missing arm. I forced myself to look away. It would be okay. I trusted him. I *knew* Lockwood and it *would* be fine. I knelt beside Holly and George.

Holly could barely raise her head to smile at me. George's face was blackened with smoke, but I couldn't see any obvious injuries. His sword lay at his feet. Moving stiffly, he propped himself up on his elbows.

"Looks like you two have been busy," I said.

"Holly's been amazing," George said in a faint voice. "Kept three of them at bay, single-handed. Drove off Sir Rupert… Gave me the opportunity to do the damage here."

"We *had* to do it," Holly said. "Gale had too many men; they were tearing Barnes's team apart…"

I nodded. "You did well. You've given us a chance. Now you need to get out."

"Found the explosives down in that basement," George went on. "You wouldn't *believe* the weapons they've got down there… The ones I used to bust the pillars weren't even the most powerful bombs! There were some little silver jobs that— Wait, is that the Skull?"

The grey youth had sidled closer so that it loomed over my prone companions. "*It is indeed. Well, Cubbins, this* is *nice. We've a lot to discuss. Certain experiments you carried out on me a while ago… I seem to recall electrodes, being heated in an oven…*"

George gave a croak. "Scientific research! No malice was intended!"

"*And there was the small matter of some shared baths…*"

All this time, I'd had the broken ghost-jar under one arm. I put it down, and helped pull Holly to her feet, wincing at the pain in my side. "You can kill George later," I said.

"For now, Skull, please escort them safely out. Reception's just through there."

Holly looked at me. "And Marissa?"

"Oh, we've maybe a couple of loose ends still to tidy up."

"Then—"

"*Please*, Holly. Just for me."

She didn't argue; she knew that they were spent. I left them hobbling together, arm in arm, following the glimmering shape of the spiky-haired youth. Left them, and turned back to the sword fight in the hall.

They were moving back and forth between the pillars, Lockwood and Sir Rupert Gale, their reflections skipping across the fractured surfaces, swelling and shrinking, distorting on the jags of broken glass. Spectral shapes threw themselves towards them, mouthing shrieks and curses. Sometimes the whirling iron deterred the ghosts; other times the combatants simply swerved away. They made no sound but the scuff and squeak and shuffle of their boots on the shining marble floor. In and out, foot to foot, twisting and spinning in a single synchronised flow. It was a ballet as much as a fight, with beauty as well as terror. It was a dance of death with two possible ends.

Within that dance, all weariness and injury had gone, all bodily weaknesses left behind. A while ago, Lockwood had been scarcely able to move, but you wouldn't have guessed that from his airy steps, they way he swung out of reach of the swiftest blows. Sir Rupert also; he'd looked half-dead when he'd turned to us. Yet now, from some deep well of defiance and hatred, he had summoned renewed strength, and moved with the most light-footed grace. Neither of them spoke; the illusion was too fragile, the concentration required to sustain it too great. One word, one mistake, and everything would fall away; the mask would slip and a life be lost.

"*Ghost-touch would be* so *much simpler*," the Skull said. Its spirit had returned; it hovered beside me, arms folded, tapping a translucent finger on its sleeve.

"I know."

"*Are you sure I can't just— Oh, too late*."

I followed its gaze. Marissa Fittes was walking towards us across the hall.

Her stolen body still seemed to be functioning well. Penelope's long hair flapped in the breeze that blew about her, her heels clicked purposefully on the marble floor. Her spirit companion was close behind, radiant and beautiful as ever, its drapes of swirling other-light coiling round her in a loving gesture of support. Marissa was carrying something strapped over her shoulder: a metal cylinder of some kind. I was instantly reminded of the weaponry the Orpheus members had used, but the woman didn't seek to use it. She came to a halt a few metres from me and signalled to her companion.

A snapped section of one of the pillars lay near them on the floor, jagged with spurs of broken glass. The ghost's arm swept round, and the pillar span with it, whipping across the floor towards me. At my side the scrawny youth made a similar gesture. The pillar's momentum slowed; it reversed its spin and shot back towards Marissa. The golden spirit moved its arm; the pillar swung aside, rolled straight through the Gory Girl's crawling form, and smashed against the wall.

The golden spirit frowned. A storm of air raged round me, met an answering wind from the youth beside me and fell back.

"*This is fun,*" the Skull said. "*Been ages since I've had the chance to do anything like this. But that pretty boy and I are evenly matched. It's all I can do to contain him. You're going to have to fix Marissa on your own.*"

I nodded. It hadn't been easy getting to my feet with Holly and George just then. My left side was no longer quite doing its job – I found it painful to stand straight. I stood crunched to one side, breath gasping. Still, I was alive and legitimately so – unlike the woman standing there.

"*That green bracelet on her wrist*," the Skull called. "*Think that might be anything?*"

"Oh, you mean the Source? Yes… Maybe."

"*And watch out for that cylinder. It's not a thermos flask of tea, put it that way.*"

The youth stepped away; he was a blur of movement, a centre of invisible lines of force, feinting, probing, deflecting unseen attacks. The golden spirit followed him.

Which just left the two of us, Marissa Fittes and me. We stood facing each other in the midst of all that psychic chaos, in that ruined hall, at the heart of haunted London.

We smiled at each other.

"How appropriate," Marissa said, "that you should have that ragged, spotty spirit to defend you, this spectral urchin! How typical of you, Lucy! How typical of Lockwood and Co.!"

I shrugged. "He suits me," I said. "And I don't see your glossy Type Three making any headway here."

I moved towards her, disregarding the pain in my side.

"You're hurt," the woman said. She stepped slowly backwards, fingering the metal cylinder at her side. "You're dying."

"Like you're an expert on that."

"You're bleeding to death."

"I don't think so. One of my friends has done that already today. I know what it looks like, Marissa. This is not the same." I was coming steadily, one hand slippery on my side, the other with the sword held ready. "But even if I was, it wouldn't stop me. I'd keep coming after you. If I had to leave this world, I'd pursue you from the next." I grinned at her. "You of all people know that's possible, right?"

You could see the fear rising in her, contorting her smooth and glossy features. She looked towards her spirit companion, but he and the skull were locked in psychic combat. She looked to Sir Rupert, but he was visibly weakening, desperately fighting off Lockwood's relentless advance. That lovely face didn't look so good now that certainty had gone; somehow its perfect lines no longer aligned; the cheekbones seemed too high, the chin too protuberant. Complacency had glued the mask in position over the years; without it, there was an ugliness coming through.

"Get away from me!" She picked up a piece of silver-glass, a fragment of one of the pillars. It smashed beside my feet. I didn't pause.

"Give me that bracelet, Marissa. Or find a sword and defend yourself. Whichever you want to do."

All at once she was in full retreat, panicking now, stumbling, tripping on her fancy heels. She was edging towards the centre of the hall, where baying ghosts wheeled and darted with expectation.

"I think they recognise you!" I said. "They know it's you who put them here."

She glanced aside in fear. I took my chance – leaping forward, I seized her arm and, with the tip of the rapier, slashed the jade bracelet from her wrist, severing its soft gold band. A violent psychic charge ran through me; I almost dropped the sword. Away across the hall, her spirit companion gave a plangent cry. It turned from its confrontation with the skull, and with glowing eyes rushed across towards me, robes flapping, mouth hideously agape. I scrabbled at my belt, pulled a silver-net from its pouch and wrapped it round the broken bracelet. The ghost seemed to disintegrate as it came, pieces falling from it like molten wax, flesh peeling to bone, bone stripping away, until it was just the eyes that kept on rushing, and even these grew pale and faded to twists of smoke that were lost in the darkness of the hall.

A moment later the skull's spirit appeared at my side, spiky haired, hands casually stuffed in pockets. "*Hey, stole my thunder there,*" it said. "*He was on the ropes. Another few seconds, and I'd have had him. Was it the bracelet?*"

"It was the bracelet."

"*Yay. And in more good news*," the grey youth said, "*Lockwood's just won*."

I looked across. Not far away, in the centre of the room, Sir Rupert Gale lay spread-eagled on his back. His rapier lay beside him. His arms were bent in a strange, unnatural way. Lockwood stood over him, chest heaving with exertion, his sword hanging loosely in his hand. There was no triumph in his posture, only exhaustion; exhaustion and a kind of regret. No matter what we'd suffered, no matter what had happened to Kipps, to George, to our beautiful Portland Row, another man's shade had gone moaning into the dark, and it was no cause for celebration.

"Two down," I said. "And now," turning to Marissa, "there's only one to go."

The woman stood at bay, cowering yet defiant. Technically speaking, of course, we only saw Penelope, but there was something in the twisted contours of the body, in the way it hunched before us, in the snarling lines of the face and blazing eyes, that made it seem as if the old woman's shrivelled spirit had exposed itself again.

“Keep back,” she said. “I’m warning you.”

Lockwood walked slowly over. The skull’s spirit and I closed in on her from the other side.

“Keep away!” Marissa said again. She pulled the cylinder round so that it dangled from her neck. She scrabbled at it, held it in both hands. “Don’t touch me!”

“You have to come with us now,” Lockwood said. “It’s over.”

“I’m not coming with you. I’m not giving up to a pair of stupid *children*. This is my house. I built it. It’s mine.”

“Not any more, it isn’t,” I said. “Put that thing down.”

The woman clutched the cylinder tighter against her chest. “Know what this is?” she said. “Sometimes, on the Other Side, we have to clear wide spaces, make it safe for our teams to get across the city. We use explosive charges like this. Then can level a whole block.” She gave us a lipless grin. “I’ve never tried, but I’m sure it’ll work just as well over here. I just flick this little lever – ten seconds later, the whole thing blows. Come any closer, I’ll do it.” She stepped slowly backwards, away from us. “Try to stop me, I’ll kill us all.”

“*Do I count?*” the Skull’s spirit said. “*Strictly speaking, I’m dead already.*”

“Stay right there! None of you come after me.” Shadows swathed her; her eyes glinted at us. “And be sure I’ll make you regret the damage that you’ve done to me today…”

“Yeah, Marissa,” I said, “you might want to watch where you’re going.”

It was too late. A faint blue glow of other-light expanded behind her; a smooth, round face materialised at her back. The Clapham Butcher Boy was one of the slower and quieter of the nine released spirits; he had made no noise in his approach, and he made no noise now as his great pale arms stole round Marissa and drew her to him. His slack mouth opened in welcome; his sightless eyes stared out at nothing. He was like a deep-sea fish swallowing its prey. He hugged her close, so that blue veins of ice ran swiftly up and down her skin. Her limbs jerked and thrashed; she made a gargling sound. Her hands clenched and spasmed, as she was drawn back into the dark. At her chest a little red light showed suddenly. There was a faintest whirring; a smell of oil and burning.

I looked at Lockwood. “Wait. Did she—?”

His eyes were wide. “Yes.”

The Skull’s spirit stepped between us, that thin, ill-favoured youth, with his sidelong eyes and scratty hair. “*She did, and there’s no point you running. You’ll never get out in time. Better brace yourselves. Two seconds.*”

“She said we had ten…”

He grinned at me. “*I’m not talking about that*.”

The youth lifted his arms. The spirit-wind that struck us forced all the air from my lungs. It sent us off our feet and straight out backwards across the hall.

As we flew back I saw the explosion deeper in the hall, saw a boiling plume of black and red expand outwards at blinding speed. It cut right through the broken pillars and the ghosts. It cut through the figure of the youth as he watched us go. It accelerated after us, and the windows of the Hall of Pillars burst with the oncoming heat. But we were still ahead of it, Lockwood and I. We were going too fast. It could not catch us. We went right out through the windows with the fireball licking at our feet. We shot out over brick and concrete and landed in the flower-beds by the road.

I lay there, with Lockwood alongside, our twin furrows slicing right through the unicorn design. I saw the plume of fire erupting over our heads against a tapestry of stars. I saw black smoke swell out around us, and then I didn’t see anything for a while. My last thought was that I’d left the ghost-jar in the hall.

VI.

The Beginning

27.

It was fortunate that the original builders of Fittes House had not taken any shortcuts with its construction, because – despite Marissa's dire predictions – the explosion in the Hall of Pillars didn't make the whole thing fall down. Most of the destruction was concentrated in the ground floor area, with the main force of the blast being directed streetwards through reception, blowing out part of the front wall, and sending glass and rubble spilling across the Strand. The famous glass doors, with their inscribed unicorn motifs, were utterly obliterated. One or two walls collapsed internally, as did part of the ceiling above the Hall. All traces of the silver-glass pillars and the relics they contained were at once wiped out.

More importantly, the explosion itself claimed few extra casualties. Since it happened at five in the morning, the surrounding streets had been mostly deserted, and the pitched battle that had been going on inside the building for the previous few hours had led to the evacuation of ordinary Fittes staff. The remaining DEPRAC forces, under command of Montagu Barnes, had also got clear by way of an underground tunnel leading to the Thames. As dawn broke, such survivors gathered in the Strand. Smoke hung thickly over central London, and a large number of onlookers began to congregate in Trafalgar Square.

Inspector Barnes, whose raincoat had sustained significant damage in the battle, cast the tattered remnants aside and commandeered a leather biker's jacket from a bystander in the street. For the next few hours he seemed to be everywhere, summoning ambulances and medic-vans, regrouping his DEPRAC team, and rousing the dozens of wandering Fittes agents, who were mostly in a state of shock, to assist with crowd control. He also requisitioned two cafés across the street to provide a constant stream of hot food and drinks to all.

The smoke cleared; the heat in the building died down. Search and rescue teams went in. Almost at once, they discovered a number of white-coated scientists, wide-eyed and tremulous, who had appeared from the basement levels. They were at once handed into DEPRAC custody. Two of Sir Rupert Gale's men, one suffering from ghost-touch, were also located alive; they were taken off to hospital under armed guard.

By mid-morning, DEPRAC crews had cordoned off the end of the Strand, and the situation was under full control. A census of survivors was taken, and a tentative list of the dead or missing formed. Bodies began to be brought out of Fittes House. Mostly these were ones that had been some way from the centre of the explosion. Those of Sir Rupert Gale and Penelope Fittes were not found.

At some point during all this activity the surviving members of Lockwood & Co. went to sit at a window table in the Silver Unicorn café, directly opposite the disaster zone. The emergency services had already taken us under their wing; our cuts had been cleaned, dressed and bandaged, and pep-shots of insulin given to us to counteract our close exposure to ectoplasm. For each of us, a hospital visit had been offered and declined. I had been forced to protest particularly strongly to avoid this fate: the stab wound in my side was the most serious of our varied injuries, and an overnight stay was recommended. But I would not leave the others. In the end I was patched up, drugged and given a temporary discharge, with instructions to report to a doctor the next day. Then the medics turfed me out. So I sat in the café with the rest of them.

There isn't any point in describing in detail how we looked. We were just as bad as before, only now with added plasters and minor burns. The soles of Lockwood's shoes

had partially melted. Even the frames of George's glasses had gone now. He was still wrapped in one of the silver thermal blankets we'd been given by the emergency crews; it looked uncomfortably like a certain silver cape he'd worn recently, but none of us felt the need to mention it. We nursed our cups of tea, our toast, whatever the harried café proprietors had been able to get for us, for the place was packed. We stared out at the Strand.

"I don't like to say it," a voice said behind us, "but you lot really need to spruce yourselves up a bit."

Flo Bones had materialised by our table. She looked precisely the same as she always did, down to the familiar stains on her puffer jacket and her mud-encrusted boots. Her straw hat was perched on her head at a jaunty angle, and she was spooning something hot and flavoursome from a polystyrene dish into her mouth.

"Look at the state of you all!" she said, shaking her head. "It'll get soon as I won't like to be seen in your company. Some of us have standards, you know."

"Hello, Flo," Lockwood said. "You look in excellent shape. I'm glad."

"Yeah, I'm just dandy. Just enjoying a bit of pie and mash here too."

George gave a start. "Pie and mash? Where'd you get that from?"

"Next door. You're in the wrong café. They do jellied eels there, and all."

George groaned into his mug of tea. "The best they can do here is fish-paste sandwiches. And it's too late to switch. All my muscles have seized up."

Lockwood half rose from his chair and gave Flo a fleeting hug. "You were amazing last night," he said. "Barnes has told me everything you did. How many of Sir Rupert's thugs did you account for again?"

Flo's blue eyes stared off across the Strand. "I'm not sure I can remember." She made a scraping noise with her spoon. "You did well and all, Locky. Didn't think you'd make it."

"We didn't," Lockwood said. "Not all of us."

"No. Well." Flo glanced over at the café door, where Inspector Barnes was loudly giving orders to an officer behind him. "Looks like it's maybe time to go. DEPRAC officers and me don't normally see eye to eye. Even when we've been squeezing up a sewer tunnel together."

"A sewer? Barnes told us it was a sluice gate…"

But Flo had already faded back into the café crowd.

With gruff apologies, Inspector Barnes pushed his way past the tea queues to our table. He had one arm in a sling, protruding from beneath his leather jacket.

Lockwood pulled himself higher in the chair, squared his shoulders and put on a fair attempt at his most gleaming smile. "Nice jacket, Mr Barnes," he said. "It suits you."

The Inspector regarded himself. "You know, I think it does. I might well keep it. So, you're all fed and watered then, I see. Anything else you need?"

"A plate of pie and mash would go down a treat," George said. "If you're offering."

"I'm not. And they're all out of that next door. One of my men just asked. What I really came to tell you is that we're scaling down the search on the ground floor. It's a mess, particularly in that hall. Everything there's been destroyed."

"Everything?" I asked.

Barnes shrugged. "Most everything. The good news is those ruddy Sources in that room will all have been blown to powder. Anyway, there's nothing more we can do now without heavy equipment."

"Have you tried the basement yet?" Holly asked. "There's plenty for you to see down there. Particularly on the deepest level. That's where we got the explosives. And… and most importantly—"

"Most importantly," Lockwood said, "Quill Kipps is there. We need him brought up, please."

Barnes nodded pouchily. "I understand. As to the rest, I'll deal with it in good time. I can do it in conjunction with my interrogation of those white-coats we found skulking down below."

"Most of the Fittes crowd will have had nothing to do with it," Lockwood said. "It's

just a very small group of them – an inner core – who worked on the secret project. But the same isn't true of the members of the Orpheus Society, and they're powerful people. What are you going to do about them?"

"I don't know yet!" The inspector glared at us. "I don't know! There are big decisions to be made, and much to be done." He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"There's one more thing you might want to prioritise, Mr Barnes," I said. "You'll find it behind some curtains in a bedroom on the top floor. Marissa's body."

The Inspector winced. "Not so loud, please, Ms Carlyle! We don't want everyone overhearing this." He looked anxiously across at the café crowd.

"Even so," I said, "you'll want to dispose of… the object pretty quickly. Might I suggest it's taken to the mausoleum up the road? That's where she *ought* to be, after all."

"There's someone there who'll be very pleased to see her," Holly said. She took a fastidious sip of tea.

Barnes straightened; he had noticed one of his men signalling at the door. "We'll see what we can do. Well, I'll leave you for the present. There are legions of reporters clamouring for a statement. In the meantime, rest up, don't leave, and *don't talk to anybody here*."

"At least the truth will come out now," Lockwood said. He had been looking towards the square, where the anxious crowds were continuing to grow. It gave us an odd sensation to think of them. It wasn't the first gathering we'd seen in Trafalgar Square that day.

Barnes patted him on the shoulder. "Ah yes," he said. "About all that. You and I clearly need to have a little chat."

In the event, our consultations at Scotland Yard lasted the entire afternoon. The DEPRAC cars didn't drop us back at the end of Portland Row until gone five. You could feel the onset of evening in the air, but the sky was still blue, and the rusted ghost-lamps were not yet buzzing into life. The momentous events in central London had yet to resonate here. Many of the houses had their doors and windows still open, and children were playing in the pavements and the basement yards. The purple-blue splendour of the lavender bushes pressing against the railings almost gave the street the feel of a formal garden. At gates and porches, beneath twinkling silvery defences, neighbours discussed the events of the day. Old Arif, standing outside his General Stores, was tipping last night's lavender ash out of his street brazier, before readying another fire. His humming, the laughter of the children and the voices of the adults merged and mingled on the ear.

We headed slowly, painfully, up the road.

The front of 35 Portland Row didn't look too bad. Apart from the magnesium stains on the path, the brightly coloured DEPRAC tape wound messily across the gate, and the Contaminated Zone warning signs plastered on the old black door you might almost have thought nothing had happened there.

Lockwood pulled the tape off the gate, crumpled it into a sticky ball and cast it aside. He put his hand on the metal cross-piece, but didn't push it open.

We stood outside in the street looking up at the house.

There wasn't much obvious external damage. Only one of the windows was broken. But we could see the remains of our boards over the inside of the basement windows, and the ones upstairs looked dark and hollow. There was salt and iron crusted on the path too, presumably left by Barnes's team.

How many times in our careers had we stood like this outside a building rendered terrible by a haunting, where some violent incident or trauma had scarred it psychically down the years? How many times had we picked up our kit bags and strolled purposefully in? We *never* delayed. Dawdling on the threshold wasn't our thing.

All through the aftermath in the Strand and Scotland Yard, we had maintained our composure and our energies. Now, suddenly, a great weariness descended on us. We stood frozen at the threshold of our own ravaged house.

It was Holly who drew herself up and pushed open the gate.

"Come on," she said briskly, "let's get it over with."

28.

THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL
Occult experiments in heart of London
Penelope Fittes involvement goes back years
Inside today: M U Barnes and A J Lockwood finally speak out

Extraordinary developments continued yesterday in the Fittes House Scandal, a full week after explosions rocked central London, killing company head Penelope Fittes and many others, and leading to revelations that have turned the psychical defence industry upside down. With Fittes House itself still under quarantine, and many employees remaining under arrest, DEPRAC officials have been slow to provide details either of the hidden laboratories discovered beneath the building or of the secret raid that brought them to light. Now, in an exclusive interview with today's Times *of London, two heroes of the raid, Mr Montagu Barnes of DEPRAC and Mr Anthony Lockwood of the Lockwood & Co. agency, set the record straight.*

"In the basement levels of Fittes House," Mr Lockwood says, "we discovered evidence of unnatural occult experiments using forbidden psychic relics. Stockpiles of illegal explosives were also found, some of which were set off in the fighting that followed our arrival. Many brave DEPRAC agents lost their lives when the criminals attacked. And Lockwood & Co. is mourning the death of our most valued friend, Mr Quill Kipps. Without Quill, none of this would have been uncovered. I'd like to pay tribute to him."

According to Mr Barnes, the scale of the occult activity was enough to threaten everyone in London, and possibly further afield. "We are investigating the nature of these wicked experiments and will continue to do so. There's no question however that Penelope Fittes was orchestrating them, and had been for many years. It's a grievous betrayal of everything her grandmother stood for. Marissa Fittes will be turning in her grave."

Several close associates of Ms Fittes, at the Sunrise Corporation and other major agency supply companies, have also been arrested. DEPRAC emphasises, however, that the public need not fear a breakdown in our national paranormal defences. The Fittes and Rotwell agencies are being reconstituted as the United Agency, under the temporary control of Mr Barnes. "Rest assured," he says, "that this scandal, shocking though it is, will not deter psychical investigations agencies, big and small, from continuing to serve you in our ongoing battle with the Problem."

Full Barnes and Lockwood Interview: see page 3-6
Decline and Fall – the Story of the Fittes Dynasty: see pages 8-11
Mr Quill Kipps – Memories of an Unsung Hero: see page 16

"What amazes me, Lockwood," I said, looking at him over the top of the newspaper, "is how much you manage to say here, and how little. You and Barnes are as bad as each other now. I'm surprised you're not growing a little bog-brush moustache."

Lockwood was sitting with his elbow resting on the kitchen table, luxuriating in a patch of morning sun. He had on a new white shirt, and since it was a new white tablecloth too, on a nice new table, on a sunny morning, the effect was almost enough to make you shield your eyes. He smiled ruefully. "I know what you mean, Luce. Though most of it's accurate enough, in its way."

I folded the newspaper (George would want it for his files) and placed it neatly on the counter by the sink. I was waiting for the toaster to ping. "Oh, it's all *kind* of right," I said, "and yet somehow the truth still manages to wriggle out of view. Penelope was bad! True. But no mention of Marissa. Unnatural experiments! True again. But no details, and certainly nothing about the spirit gate or the Other Side. Can you get us a new jam, Hol?"

Holly had been gathering breakfast materials in one of the kitchen cupboards. It currently lacked a door, and she was simply reaching in and rummaging among the jars. "That's the deal we made, Lucy," she said, throwing a couple of cereal boxes across to

Lockwood. “Barnes was very persuasive. We know the reasons why.”

The toaster pinged. I transferred the vital articles to the toast-rack, and put some more bread on. I took the toast over to the table. “I know,” I said. “But I still wonder. Would there *really* have been riots? Would there *really* have been a revolution?”

“I’ll just call George,” Holly said. She stuck her head out into the hall and did so. Her voice echoed on the blank, bare walls. “Er, yes – there would have been riots,” she said, coming back. “Lucy, could you please *not* put the toast right next to that horrible, disgusting skull? There are limits.”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t want that thing near the sunflower seeds, either. Can you move the seeds too, please?”

“Sorry, Hol.”

“I wish you’d just take it off the table. I don’t know why you insist on having it with us for each meal. It’s a lovely sunny day, and it’s not going to re-materialise here.”

“I suppose it isn’t. But you never know.” I took a piece of toast.

“If George is coming,” Lockwood said, “we can get on with breakfast.” He began pouring us all tea. “It’s a fresh new start for me this morning. No more visits to DEPRAC, no more media and no more newspaper interviews. Bliss! No need for me to say anything to anybody.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. Like you ever actually *said* anything at all.”

He smiled at me behind the steam. “You know perfectly well Barnes is correct, Lucy. If people knew the Problem was probably caused by the first psychic detection agents, if they discovered that the heads of many top companies were complicit in what Marissa had been doing, what would they do? I’ll tell you. They’d rise up and tear us all to pieces! There’d be anarchy. Society would fall apart. And all for what end? It *still* wouldn’t have solved the Problem.”

We’d discussed this all before and I had some counterarguments ready, but at that moment George came in from the hall, bringing with him a strong smell of paint. Like all of us, his bruises were beginning to fade, but his beating still affected him, and he walked more slowly than usual. He had on the new pair of glasses he’d got that week, slightly smaller and less round than his previous pair. Even I had to admit they were almost stylish. Right now, however, their urbane effect was somewhat blunted by his enormous, paint-spattered set of dungarees. These were of remarkable and sinister bagginess, revealing untold acreages of George whenever he bent over or made sharp turns. He had been undercoating the new door on the landing.

“Just in time, George!” Holly said. “Come and join us.”

Lockwood nodded. “Just try not to stoop too much when you sit down.”

George wiped his fingers on his front, adjusted his glasses and surveyed the table. “Let’s see… tea, toast, jam and chocolate spread, various sugary cereals… Looks like a proper traditional Lockwood & Co. breakfast. Wait! What’s *that*?”

Holly nodded grimly. “That’s that horrid charcoaled skull which Lucy insists on carrying around with her. I wouldn’t object so much if it was actually *in* something.”

“I don’t mean the skull.” George took his seat. “I’m talking about those bowls of sunflower seeds and funny little nut things. Eeesh, they look healthy. They’re not even salted. Where’d we get these?”

“The storeroom,” I said. “Holly’s got a stash down there.”

George gave Holly a reproving look. “You creep down to the basement to secretly eat nuts and seeds? It’s not the good you’re doing to your body that disappoints me; more the underhandedness of it all. Haven’t we got any cake?”

“Not for breakfast, we haven’t,” Lockwood said. “Tuck in.”

George did, and he was right: it *was* a proper Lockwood & Co. breakfast, in all the essentials, and it felt good, even if our surroundings weren’t as normal. The kitchen had

been one of the worst affected portions of the house, with its doors and windows shattered, most of its furniture destroyed, and bloodstains and scorch marks on the linoleum floor. So we'd stripped the linoleum, and removed the broken cupboards. The windows had been replaced. A new back door, unpainted, awaited our attention. Our real priority had been the table and its Thinking Cloth. With these in place, it was possible to function again. The house would be all right. Like us, it was taking time to heal.

And it *was* a beautiful morning to be healing in. In the garden, the tree was dark and heavy with apples. The rings of burnt grass below the steps and outside the basement door were almost lost in the general greenness. Soon I would pick the apples – I would make time for that this year – and reseed the lawns. We would repaint the windows and repair our basement office. We would build new straw dummies and hang them in the rapier room. We would restock our shelves and walls with books and curios. New artefacts would be found (almost all of Lockwood's parents' collection had been surrendered to the Gate in Jessica's room, and since removed by DEPRAC and destroyed), and new furniture bought. We had received a generous stipend from Inspector Barnes for just such a purpose. Above all we would take our time deciding how Lockwood & Co. should begin again.

"How *is* our friend today, Luce?" George asked, in between bites of jam on toast. The skull was sitting by my plate, very charred and blackened, but otherwise grinning out at us as insolently as ever. I could see why Holly objected to its presence, but I didn't care.

"Silent."

"No change, then?"

No, there hadn't been any change. This was the way it had been since the day of the explosion, when (ignoring Barnes's orders and the interventions of his team) I had made a brief foray across the Strand and found the remains of the ghost-jar wedged in a heap of debris near the ruined hall. The jar had been mangled and melted in the heat; the skull, however, though seared and cracked, had survived intact. I had pulled it clear, wrapped it up, and kept it with me ever since, just in case. But nothing had happened. Whenever I put my fingers on it, I got no psychic charge. The bone was dry and cold.

"Nope, he's still quiet," I said.

Lockwood glanced at the others. "Well, that *was* a pretty big explosion, Luce," he said. "All those other ghosts are gone."

"I know. But that's because their Sources were destroyed. Here's his Source," I said.

"I saved it. That explosion wouldn't destroy his *spirit*, would it?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"It wouldn't. I'm sure it wouldn't."

"Or disrupt his connection with it."

"No. That doesn't make sense. I guess it's true he won't come back in daylight. He's not protected from the sun by the silver-glass now that he's out of the jar. But at night time… that's when he *should* come back."

That's what I kept telling myself, but I didn't actually believe my theory. It had been a week now and he hadn't returned.

"Could be he's just… gone, Luce," Holly said. "You freed him from the jar. He helped us in return. Maybe that's encouraged him to do what he *should* have done a century ago – which is move on."

She was probably right. We ate our breakfast. After a while Lockwood said, "Okay, there's one bit of important business to attend to this morning. Yesterday Barnes gave me those official DEPRAC papers, which we all need to sign. You know, they're the ones where we promise not to make public statements about what we saw at Fittes House, about the Other Side – all the secret stuff, basically."

"I don't like having to sign this," I said.

"I know you don't, Luce. None of us are particularly comfortable about it. But don't forget that Barnes has his side of the deal to follow too, as a quid pro quo. The Gate at Fittes House is not being destroyed. DEPRAC is undertaking to try to fix this whole mess

and clear up whatever… obstructions have been placed on the Other Side by Marissa and her associates."

"The silver nets," Holly said.

"The nets, yes, and whatever else they've been doing. The trouble is we don't yet really understand how this operation worked. We don't really know how the spirits' essence was used, or how far they went to gather it. For instance, we don't know whether there are any *other* Gates, which seems probable, as the Problem's spread so far across the country."

"Our friends at the Orpheus Society might help," George said, "and the scientists from Fittes House, if DEPRAC gives them a bit of persuasion."

"I'm sure they will. Even so, it's going to take a long time to unravel this, and – even if we do – there's no telling whether it'll fix the Problem quickly or at all. Anyway, that's not for us to worry about—" Lockwood broke off and looked round the table at us.

"*Unless*…" I said.

It was the old Lockwood grin, the one that spoke of boundless energy and confidence, the sense that anything could be achieved. "Unless," he said, "we want to accept a proposal Barnes has made. Because DEPRAC needs our help with all this. And Lockwood and Co.'s uniquely valuable, because of what we've done already."

There was a silence.

"You mean go back to the Other Side?" George said.

Holly blinked. "Put on those cloaks again? Remove those nets?"

"That certainly could be *part* of it," Lockwood said, "but that's not all. They'll need help researching all the documents in the Orpheus and Fittes archives. They'll need to map Dark London, and perhaps beyond." He'd been addressing George while saying this; now he looked at Holly. "They also need our help drawing up new agency guidelines, too, ones which better respect the rights and opinions of young agents. And Lucy—" Here his eyes met mine— "they'll need help trying to communicate with the spirits on the Other Side. Take it from me, Barnes knows there's lots to do." He sat back and smiled at us. "Anyway, there's no urgency in making our response. He just asked us to think about it, that's all."

Which was fine. Our immediate response was to eat more breakfast.

"You know what *my* theory is," George said after a while. "Dark London? That's just an interim stage. You linger awhile, then move on. Those black gates…"

"Gates? I saw them as doors," Holly said.

"Black pools," Lockwood said. "Hanging vertically. All shimmery, but not wet."

"So more like curtains, then?"

"I suppose."

"Getting back to my theory," George went on, "I think the spirit passes through those dark apertures – however you want to call them – and reach yet another London, but this one's shining with light…"

"Where's your evidence for that?" I asked.

"Haven't got any. Just feel it."

"That's not like you."

"You'll have to write a book about it," Lockwood said. "If you do it quick, and publish it when we fix the Problem, lots of people will buy it and we can make some money."

"Not that we're going to be paupers, anyway," Holly said. "Even if we don't take Barnes up on his offer, there are hundreds of calls waiting for us to respond to them. Some *really* juicy cases. With Fittes and Rotwell in such a bad light, we're set to be the most popular agency in London if we choose. We could take on a dozen new agents tomorrow, if we were prepared to take them in hand."

"Not for me," Lockwood said. "Who wants to be an administrator?" He tapped his long fingers on the table. "Old Quill would have been the man for that."

As so often when Kipps's name was mentioned, everything slowed. We became acutely conscious of the birds singing, the sun at the window, the blue sky over the rooftops outside.

George sighed. "I hope he's all right. Not stuck there."

"Oh, you know Kipps," Lockwood said. "He's so bloody-minded. He'll definitely figure out how to get where he needs to go. Besides, if we *do* nip over again, and he's still

there—"

"No." Holly said. "Don't, Lockwood. Just don't."

There was a long silence. At last Lockwood cleared his throat, picked up a pen from beside the butter. "Right," he said. "One other important matter. We need to christen our brand-new Thinking Cloth." He smoothed out the cloth before him. "Let's have some suggestions."

"I could always draw you a nice cartoon," George said.

"No, thanks. We're not that desperate… Why don't we begin with a list of things to buy for Holly's bedroom when she moves in?" Lockwood moved the skull aside and put pen to cloth. "So, Hol – you'll need a carpet, for starters. And a bed…"

We were starting from scratch in Jessica's room. It was completely empty now. When DEPRAC's team had entered, they had proposed to remove the ancient bed. After only a moment's hesitation, Lockwood had agreed; and curiously, when the Gate was dismantled and the bed removed, it was discovered that the death-glow hanging over it had entirely gone. The room was peaceful now, stripped bare of psychic tragedy, though still sporting a giant circular ghost-burn on the floor, the legacy of our Gate. It had been universally decided that, since we now had a spare room, Holly could officially move in.

"Draw me up a wish-list," Holly said. "Do you *really* not want that room, Lucy? It's a bit bigger than your attic."

I smiled at her. "No, that's fine, Hol. I'm very happy upstairs. It'll be great to have you properly with us in Portland Row." I stretched back in a patch of sun. "Personally I'm looking forward to getting our business up and running again. What are these juicy cases we've got pending?"

"Oh, Luce, you'll *love* some of these. There's a Screaming Spirit in a vestry; a gabbling voice coming from a well, and a haunted yew tree that utters guttural remarks. There's a cowled Spectre in a shopping centre in Staines – my correspondent wasn't sure if it was a nun or a kid in a hoodie. There's a bleeding barrel, a Raw-bones on a barge…"

She went on telling me. Lockwood wrote lists on the cloth. George stole a pen and did a dubious cartoon. I drank some tea and sat in the morning sunlight. The skull stared peaceably out at nothing.

I hadn't lied to Holly. I *was* happy with my little attic bedroom. Almost alone of all the rooms in the house it had been overlooked by our enemies after our flight through the Gate, and was just the same as it had always been. I often went there, in the evenings of those numb and quiet days, to rest and think a little under the low-slung eaves.

That evening was no different. The windowsill was bathed in the last warm dregs of sunshine. You could see rings in the dust where the ghost-jar used to sit. I put the blackened skull on the sill in its traditional place and looked down into Portland Row.

The sky was grey and pink, and the sun was shining on the houses on the opposite side, making them glittery with life. White curtains shone, and the ghost wards in their windows sparkled. Children were playing in the street below.

There was a knock at the door. I turned and answered, and Lockwood looked in. He had his new long coat on, as if ready to go out, and was clutching a sheaf of papers to his chest.

"Hi, Lucy. Sorry to disturb."

"That's fine. Come on in."

It was nice to see him. Certain things had been said between us during the heat of the crisis, on Primrose Hill and elsewhere. In the days since, we hadn't mentioned them again. This was okay by me. We were all of us exhausted, emotionally washed up. None of us wanted to do anything much other than eat and sleep and enjoy the simple mechanics of being alive. But in a deeper sense also, Lockwood and I had gone through too much together to relate to words right now. We'd moved beyond them. That was okay too. I knew they'd catch up in time.

He took a few steps towards me, where I waited by the window. "Sorry to disturb you up here," he said again. "It's just there's something I wanted to give you, and there's too much going on downstairs. You know, George painting away like a man possessed; Holly

hacking at the broken library shelves…"

I held up my hand. "Yeah, okay. I can see what you're holding. That wretched DEPRAC statement. All right, I'll sign it, but not now. Chuck it down somewhere."

He hesitated. "I'll just put it on the bed, shall I?"

"Yeah."

I was gazing out of the window at the iron railings and sparkling ghost-wards. A small kid with a plastic rapier ran down the other side of the street, chasing two of his friends. Lockwood came to stand beside me.

"The Problem's still here," I said.

"Yes."

"Another half an hour, everyone will be hiding away indoors."

"True."

"Despite everything."

"Maybe things *will* start to improve," Lockwood said. "Now that those idiots are no longer messing around on the Other Side. I mean – it *should* help, shouldn't it? More spirits will be free to move on to their proper place, and not come back here."

I just nodded. Truth was, neither of us knew.

Lockwood clapped his hands together. "In the meantime, there are ghosts to foil and lives to save. But right now it's a lovely evening, and I'm going for a stroll. That was the other thing I wanted, to see if you'd come with me." He adjusted his collar. "It's the first outing for my new coat. What do you think of it?"

"It'll need a few claw marks to really make it look like yours, but no, it's nice."

"You don't think I ought to get a leather jacket, like Barnes?"

"No."

"Okay, well, if you *do* want to come with me, Luce, I'll be in the hall." He grinned at me. "And don't forget to sign the statement!" With that, he was clattering down the stairs.

My little room was filled with a husky early evening light. I could hear George whistling as he painted the door on the landing. On the sill, the skull was a squat black shadow. Its presence satisfied me. If he wanted to return, he would. If not – well, that was good too. I'd leave it there.

Meantime, we had ghosts to foil and lives to save. It gave us something to do.

A walk *would* be nice. I went to get my jacket off the bed.

Lockwood had put the DEPRAC documents beside my jacket. The papers formed a neat rectangle on the darkness of the counterpane, gleaming dull white in the fading light, but also softly sparkling.

Sparkling…

It was only when I bent close that I saw the golden necklace lying on the papers, with the shimmering sapphire glinting at its heart. I stood looking at it for quite a while.

Then I picked up my jacket and went out of the door.