

# The Singularity Spectres

by  
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The centre of the planet can be accessed through the underground station at Finsbury Park. It's just a question of finding the right escalator. I made the journey last year with the man who discovered the route. He was a notorious rogue who needed the support of a reliable witness to verify his claim. I went along on impulse; it was a typically drab morning when he entered my office and I was desperate for a change of scenery. To add to this, my wife had kept me up the previous night with a lengthy tirade on how I had turned into a bore. Having promised to correct the fault, I welcomed my visitor with uncharacteristic zeal. He took the offered seat and accepted one of my cigars.

Before introducing him, allow me to say a few words about myself. I am Professor Cherlomsky, the Applied Eschatologist. My work involves the practical study of ghosts, wraiths, lemures and other forms of afterlife manifestation. I'm barely tolerated by the college authorities, who keep me securely out of view in one of the condemned buildings, together with the Sociology Department. Here, among the rubble and cobwebs, I maintain my equipment, the etheric-engyscopes and spirit-levels. Occasionally the Dean comes to belittle my achievements, which are admittedly thin on the ground -- and thinner below it.

But to return to my guest: he smoothed his fringe and stretched his limbs, completely at ease in my cluttered surroundings. I enquired, "And what can I do for you, Mr...?"

"Zimara." He blew a smoke-ring which settled over his skull like an unwashed halo. "Mark Anthony Zimara. Actually it's more a case of what I can do for you. Are you familiar with the hollow world theory? It's been largely discredited by geologists but it's about to enjoy a revival. I'm giving you the chance to be involved. A terrific opportunity, Professor! You won't regret trusting me."

I was suitably receptive. "I'm charmed, but my views on rocks stray toward the conventional. Besides, in my field, the downward direction is regarded with some suspicion."

He lunged with his cigar, stubbing my satire. "It's not the mineral aspects of my proposal that matter. I know you've had problems trying to prove the existence of sprites in amber, but I have the solution to your difficulty. The heart of the world is rife with phantoms; I've seen them with my own eyes. If you permit me to guide you there, you'll be assured of fame. You'll win a Nobel Prize -- I can't say in which category. Maybe they'll fashion a new one? Come now, Professor, this is the break you've been praying for. Real spooks!"

I pondered. Although the man was plainly a fool or liar, any chance to humiliate the Dean had to be considered seriously. I recalled my wife scolding me for my unadventurous lifestyle. How long before she ran away with a more dashing academic? And my career was in the doldrums. Despite a decade of thorough research, not a single goosepimple of proof for the reality of ghosts had come my way. In one of my cabinets languished jars of ectoplasm, a tooth from a walking skeleton and a link from a rattling chain: the sole relics of my endeavours. All were vulgar forgeries. What I required was something more, or preferably less, solid -- stuffed souls and anthropomorphic bedsheets. I sighed. "Supposing I accept your proposal? How will we find a way through the Earth's crust? I'm not handy with a pick and shovel. Indeed, I have a horror of gardening."

He tapped his nose. "That's the beauty of it. There's no digging to be done. Listen, I won't say anything more. Just come with me and take a look for yourself. What have you got to lose? You won't have to sign any documents. I'm an honest cad!"

In the smoke which filled the office, a mirage of my wife congealed and wagged a vaporous finger. I stood and reached for my hat and coat. I had the impression even my guest was startled by my compliance. Gripping the cigar between his teeth, he opened the door; we stepped out into the corridor, avoiding the crevices which yawned through the building to the basement. At the bottom of the deepest, something shuffled. When we took the external fire-escape and finally gained the pavement, Zimara set off toward the railway tracks. Gutters slurped puddle-soup as I followed him up the Benwell, Hornsey and Tollington Roads, alternately cursing myself and the Dean for my gullibility.

My breathless questions were ignored as we snatched the rain out of the air, mimicking sponges all the way to Finsbury Park. My patience was exhausted and I gasped, "I refuse to take another step unless you reveal our destination!" He turned and gestured at the entrance to the station, which nonplussed me. "The Tube?"

"Of course! Did you expect me to guide you to the rim of a volcano? This isn't a French novel, Professor! I haven't got any change on me. Do you mind buying two tickets for the Piccadilly Line? Come on, don't be a cheapskate. It's an investment."

Muttering, I dipped into my pockets. We groped into the grubby dark of the underground, buying our tickets from a capricious vending-machine and passing through the automatic turnstiles into the organised chaos of the commuter landscape. Zimara led me down a corridor at an angle to the main flow of humanity; halfway along this, we took another side-passage. We trudged an interminable number of deserted tunnels, each narrower and more crooked than the previous one. The quality of the lighting began to deteriorate; the electric lamps were dimmer and spaced further apart, as if illuminating the past. Finally, gas-mantles took their place, lashing our shadows on the mouldy walls.

Above us, behind the flaking plaster of the roof, trains rumbled on unseen tracks. We were far below the normal platforms. I shivered with a sudden realisation of my predicament. It was too late to go back now, so I remarked that pick and shovel might be a quicker method of ingress. My companion ignored my sarcasm and placed a finger to his lips. We emerged into a damp chamber spiked with stalagmites: he scurried to the far end, where a single escalator smoothly descended into infinity. I reached his side and peered into the chasm; hot air dried the moisture on my cheeks. Prepared for most situations, I removed a collapsible telescope from one of my deep pockets and opened it.

The bottom of the escalator was beyond the power of the instrument. The walls of the shaft were coated with a phosphorescent slime and there was enough light to observe the moving staircase at maximum range. While I silently marvelled, Zimara plucked at my sleeve. "Well here it is, the ninth wonder of the underworld."

"Who on Earth designed it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It might have been the Victorians. They were obsessed with ambitious projects. Didn't they try to build a tunnel under the Atlantic? It doesn't matter. This is our means of entry to the world's core. Four-thousand miles!"

"How do you know it goes all the way?"

He smirked. "I've come up it. A terrible journey! Imagine having to run the wrong way for that distance... Each time I rested, I lost ground as the blasted thing carried me back down. Luckily, I was able to stitch a balloon from my prison overalls and hot air rising up the shaft lifted me the remainder of the voyage."

I found his sense of humour somewhat obscure. "Prison overalls? You convinced me you were honest. If the Dean finds out I'm in league with a reprobate, my contract will be terminated."

His face creased with annoyance. "It was an unfair trial. I decline to furnish the details. Just confirm whether you're willing to follow me to the centre. I need to know."

The vision of my wife returned to harangue me. I snorted and raised a foot to place it on the first step. "I'm ready!" I announced. My guide blanched and snatched my elbow.

"Not yet! You'll die if you go unprepared. The escalator is falling at the rate of four miles per hour. That's one thousand hours, or nearly forty-two days, to reach the heart of the world. Even if you walk as you drop, the journey will take almost four weeks. We'll need food and water and a pack of playing cards."

I stroked my chin. "You're right. Also I want to take my scientific equipment to conduct tests. If there really are spectres down there it's vital I measure and categorise them. The professional journals insist on trivia. For example, are the physical differences between malevolent and benign spirits mostly sartorial or ectoplasmic? Are the discrepancies in haunting aptitude manifested in facial characteristics? If so, they must be plotted on graph-paper! Do souls moan in minor keys? Are fat phantoms jolly frightening or merely jolly?"

Zimara seemed uncomfortable. "I said there were many wraiths at the core, but I don't know if you'll be able to study them individually. The ones I saw were compacted together."

I frowned, but he was unwilling to elaborate. Reluctantly I allowed him to lead me through the tunnels to the surface. We arranged to gather supplies and meet at the station the following day. I watched as he took off down Blackstock Road, his confident gait reminiscent of a salesman's amble in the aftermath of a swindle. I did not trust him, but I had less faith in my other confrères. Besides, my telescope was a sober attestant and I required no more evidence to convince me something astonishing lay below Finsbury Park, even if not a ball of compacted ghosts. I reflected on this last statement, but could find nothing compelling in the notion. It was too unexpected a scenario.

On my way to the college, I stopped at a tailor's to purchase seven or eight large suitcases. As I was coming out, staggering under the mass of leather cuboids, I narrowly avoided a collision with my Dean, who was also hurrying down Isledon Road, under the aegis of a gigantic umbrella. His moustache curled in salutation.

"My dear Professor Cherlomsy! You are going on a trip somewhere, I presume? How delightful! To escape your English weather? *Celui qui veut, peut!* But some of us have to work."

I controlled my temper. "I'm preparing for a research project, Dean Nutt. I do not take idle holidays." "Mais oui! I have never doubted your dedication, Professor. But you have a knack for combining business with pleasure. That excursion to the Caribbean to investigate ghosts trapped in the melody of a calypso song? Some of the staff reckoned it an extravagance. *À vieux comptes nouvelles disputes!* Now our funds are tight."

"This is a self-financed expedition, Dean Nutt. I don't require the support of my enemies. At long last, I'm going to prove you all wrong. I expect to confirm the subsistence of large-scale phantasmagoric activity before the climax of the semester."

"There are no ghosts, *mon enfant.*" His smile was very thin. "But my kind regards go with you in your folly." With a bow stiffer than a stale baguette, he moved onwards, mumbling cryptically, "Certainly none on the surface of this particular planet."

I gazed at his receding form with a grimace. His own researches had an air of mystery about them. Despite the manifold administrative duties attendant upon his position, he preserved his links with the Engineering faculty, shutting up all his spare time in the laboratories. I was aware of his background and achievements in the discipline, but his dedication was excessive even for a technophile. The majority of college funds were diverted into that one Department. The Arts and Humanities blocks had to sing for resources; often with a ukulele during the graduation ceremony. Dean Nutt missed no chance to mock votaries of the soft subjects. Yet he was still more popular than myself.

Trailing behind him, I returned to my office and started packing my apparatus, wrapping an etheric-engyscope in a shirt and pair of trousers kept spare to ameliorate accidents with succubi. I went out for victuals and filled four cases with bread, cheese and bottles of red wine. Razors and a portable backgammon board augmented my arrangements, together with a toothbrush and electric torch. I did not take my cigars; I deemed this a fine opportunity to give up. Exhausted, I walked home into the arms of my latirostral wife. She berated me for something, I forget what, and we passed the evening in shared disharmony. I neglected to inform her of my intended journey: to prove I was not a bore meant impressing her with my independence. I went to bed early.

My dreams were original and wildly inventive. I witnessed Zimara in outmoded prison garb, a smock stitched with arrows pointing downward. He was covered in cayenne pepper and standing on a deserted road, elevating a thumb as if to beg a lift. A vehicle approached and suddenly I was the driver, pulling up and winding the window down. Rather than jump inside, he removed his shirt to expose a body constructed from iron bars, like a cage. Inside his chest was his own ghost, which howled to be set free. I passed him a hacksaw and he began cutting at the metal. As the final bar fell into the dust, I threw open the passenger door and beckoned for the wraith to enter. With a joyous cry, it leapt from his torso, but instead of landing safely, it passed straight through the ground. I heard it dip under the Earth's crust and plop into the liquid mantle, accelerating to an unknown fate. When its bewildered groans faded, I shuddered and drove off, reaching wakefulness by dawn.

A burning sweat slicked my brow. I snapped my eyes open and stilled my timpani pulse with deep breaths. Rarely an early riser, I nonetheless decided to forgo my pillow and continue my hypogean preparations. At the Earth's core, the temperature would be excessive and a certain amount of prior acclimatisation could not go amiss. I steamed myself in the shower for an hour, toughening my skin to the sulphurous vapours which might be a feature of the descent. After breakfast I headed for college, entering the library and digesting a shelf of geology textbooks until it was time to meet Zimara again. None of them mentioned compressed ghosts. I hefted one of my suitcases to Finsbury Park station and found the rogue waiting outside. He had no change to pass through the turnstiles. For the second time, I paid his fare and we went down to the cavern. I mentioned my odd dream, but his ears had healed up.

We stood near the escalator and I pushed my suitcase over the side, but before I let it go, he tied one end of an enormous ball of string to the handle. Then I released the item of luggage and it trundled downward with its cargo of tasty cheeses. The ball of string began to unravel and I followed the progress of my case with my telescope until it became too tiny to discern. Zimara chuckled.

"That's the first one. We'll return at the same time tomorrow. I've calculated everything precisely." Repeating the formula of the previous day, we parted on the surface and I walked back to the college. Once again, on the Isledon Road, I saw the Dean, but I was careful to avoid catching his eye. I lingered in the doorway of a shop until he passed.

Where was he going? His lunchbreaks were generally taken up chiding the cook in the staff canteen. Why had he suddenly taken to strolling in the rain? I wasted an afternoon pondering the enigma and trying to adapt a camera to take pictures of the aether. It was crucial I gather as many exhibits as possible before publishing an account of the voyage. I hoped Zimara would not challenge me with his own written narrative. I returned home in a state of agitation and my wife was animated by this flicker of passion, but not enough to donate me a kiss. I clambered into bed with a feeling of trepidation. As I had feared, the dream came back to bewilder and assail my chaste subconscious.

I spared my wife the opportunity of laughing at my childish terror. Even Zimara, when I subsequently confided in him, was dismissive of the nightmare, claiming it revealed naught but my innate fear of success. "Now you are on the verge of finding what you seek," he said, "the responsibilities of fame seem daunting." He was also scornful when I mentioned the Dean's anomalous behaviour. There was nothing odd in seeing him every time I left the station, he insisted. As for the two events being connected, that was simple paranoia. I declined to argue and we continued to pour supplies down the gullet of the world, though he was more discreet with his offerings than I, confining himself to providing giant balls of string.

I have never been a great upholder of the benefits of routine. This is not because of any moral objection, but a wish to avoid hypocrisy. My wife claims I have a haphazard soul, its wispy limbs and organs arranged in random fashion. This may well be so. I have certainly proven her much quoted maxim that I am incapable of organising a haunting in a cemetery. Unfortunately, in my case, disorder does not correspond with excitement. I'm an unrhythmic bore. Yet with Zimara in the equation, my nature began to alter. The days became systematic but invigorating. My wife permitted me to nearly hold her hand. I guessed when I returned from the middle of the world, our marriage could be consummated. It was a concept no longer beyond the borders of imagination.

Always at the same hour, I descended with my guide to the grotto of the escalator. We would arrive just as the ball of string had played out and Zimara would catch the end up and secure it to the handle of the new suitcase, simultaneously attaching the end of a fresh ball. Thus was our luggage linked together, as if we were knitting for the planet an abacus beaded with rations. I bought more cases as instructed, expensive models with castors. For exactly six weeks this continued and then he commanded me to be ready for departure. I found it impossible to sleep that night, denying the cyclical dream entry to my lobes. At sunrise, I sneaked away from my somnolent wife, blowing a farewell kiss. How long before I wiped her formic breath from my brow again?

I fetched the last suitcase from my office, locking the door behind me. As I skirted the big crevice in the corridor, a snigger erupted from the basement. I peered into the chasm and saw a dark object flitting far below. Shrugging my shoulders, I proceeded to the ground floor. I turned off the campus just as the Dean lurched out from another exit. Dusty and obviously embarrassed by this unscheduled encounter, he gaped wordlessly at me for a full minute before his eyes alighted on my load. "Leaving us again, mon enfant? You

are playing truant every day now. But perhaps you need to rest before your expedition?" "You're also guilty of absenteeism," I hissed. "Since cook has been free of your insults, the texture of his orange jellies has degenerated. A poor example for a Dean to set!"

"The canteen is staffed by fools. I no longer wish to eat there. It is none of your business anyway, mon enfant." He was plainly stung by my observation. "I have been shopping in my lunchtimes. Like yourself, I am planning a new project. Rather, I am ensuring the continuation of an old one which is coming under threat."

I was indignant. "Shopping every working day for six weeks? I can't accept you require so many items."

"One item alone, Professor Cherlomsy. A pair of scissors." Dipping into his pocket, he lifted and worked two shiny blades under my nose. As I stumbled backward, his eyes glinted. "What do you think of them? Is it not worth extra effort to obtain the best?" Smoothing his moustache with his free hand, he added quietly, "Take care how you travel. Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte."

There was something so menacing in this pronouncement that I nearly decided to abort the mission. Only by visualising my wife's topology and the feasibility of its analysis was I persuaded to push onward. My guide had finally brought some luggage of his own, a huge wooden crate which I realised was empty. We picked our way to the cavern and he bewildered me by taking up the end of string from the previous day's suitcase, looping it around a stalagmite and securing it to the crate, which he positioned on the rim of the escalator. Then he sat in the rear of the box, calling for me to join him. I hesitated and he sighed deeply. "Have you paid any thought as to how we get back up?"

I was forced to concede I hadn't and he nodded solemnly. This was a gesture weighty enough to command my obedience. I crouched in the crate, gazing in mute panic at the drop. Why was I made to have the front seat? It was unjust. While I was huffing, Zimara whispered in my ear, "What do you think I brought the string for?" He thrummed the line with his thumb and I watched the vibrations race down. "You didn't expect me to go on a one-way trip to the world's core?" "I deemed it best not to ask," I replied.

"The timing was critical. I planned everything. The very first case we sent down has just reached the bottom. All the others are exactly one day's travel from each other. Sitting in this crate, we can slide faster down the steps than if we allowed the escalator to carry us. As we fall, the string which is looped around the stalagmite will pull the suitcases up. That way, we'll get our food in half the time! As the cases go past, we'll transfer the rations into our crate. It's much more civilised than having to chase after our edibles!"

Swallowing painfully, I said, "I thought we were going to walk down and that it would take four weeks?"

"I don't intend walking anywhere! When we reach the Earth's centre, the last suitcase will arrive up here. The crate's weight should hold it steady at the top. When we're ready to return, I'll knock out the wooden sides and that will lighten the crate enough for the suitcase to descend a second time and draw us back up."

"Ingenious," I conceded, "but worrying. It's too elaborate. Can you be sure the arrangement will work?"

"One way to find out!" he shouted. With his foot, he pushed us over the edge. I shut my eyes as the crate rocked forward. We began to slide, accelerating gradually. With a base long enough to straddle the edges of a dozen steps, the crate was a smoother ride than I'd anticipated. After a couple of minutes, I overcame my alarm, opened my lids and fumbled for my telescope. Beneath lay an interminable length of stairway, monotonous and illuminated by lambent slime. Close to my face, pulled upward by our descent, was the nerve which connected the global heart to its skin: the four-thousand mile long cord. I leaned out to touch it but Zimara jabbed me in the spine and called, "It's moving too fast! It'll singe the flesh off your bones. Leave it alone!"

Behind us, the gas-lit cavern receded to a speck of purer light and disappeared. A tedious journey was in store, I realised, as Zimara asked to be passed the suitcase I'd brought with me. He claimed his motive was a better distribution of mass, but immediately it was in his possession, I heard him unclasp it and rummage through the contents. I felt it was a little early to be dipping into our supplies, but he was content to fill his mouth. He opened a bottle of Château d'Yquem and I grudgingly joined him in a toast to our adventure.

When that bottle was drained, he opened another. "There's plenty to spare," he announced. "Just relax and enjoy yourself. What else is there to do on this jaunt? That's why I told you to pack so much stuff. It's a feast as well as a contribution to science!" I was forced to accept this logic and I joined him in devouring the

entire innards of the case. When it was fully plundered, I was surprised he didn't jettison it overboard. He told me it was important to hang onto all the luggage; it formed part of his scheme for our ascent. I'd already resolved to let him handle the technical side of our mission, so I didn't challenge any of his actions. We plummeted with full stomachs.

My chief duty consisted of looking out for the suitcases which were coming up to meet us. With my telescope I studied the depths of the shaft in the hope of spying something other than slime and string. I attempted to judge our velocity, but in an environment lacking scenery this proved extremely difficult. Yet my estimate of the position of the first supply dump was marvellously accurate. A speck appeared at the maximum range of my telescope, expanding in the lens and adopting a familiar shape. "Here comes number one!" I spluttered.

Zimara was cool. "Nice work, Professor. Time to apply the brake. Do you wish to remove your toupee?" I looked in vain for the mechanism in question. Had he neglected to install one? He chortled at my perplexity and removed a heavy glove from his pocket. I was incredulous. "You intend to stop us with that? Did you forget to pack all your senses?"

He smiled, drew on the gauntlet and reached out to grip the string. Smoke poured from his palm and suddenly the crate lurched, propelling me forward. The empty bottles, which had been resting on Zimara's lap, also obeyed the law of inertia, hitting me on the head and dislodging my wig. We screeched to a halt next to the ascending suitcase. Even with castors to smooth its voyage, it was in a sorry condition. But the tough leather hadn't ruptured and the rations inside were safe. Zimara started to gasp and beads of perspiration rioted on his cheek. "I can't hold it for much longer! Hurry up with the grab!"

I undid both pieces of string, the upper and lower, from the handle of the suitcase and tied them together. Then I hoisted the case into the crate and Zimara let go. As we resumed our descent, we celebrated with a grand snack, polishing off these latest edibles within the hour. Opening a final packet of biscuits, he congratulated himself profusely. "I can't praise my logistical skills enough," he confided. I tried to deflate his ego by mentioning a lack of supplies for the return journey, but he even had an answer for this. "No need, there's food down there. Sequoia-sized mushrooms, for one thing. I know the core quite well. There are saurians too, living in primordial seas."

"But how do you know the core? And what was all that about going to prison? Are there subterranean penitentiaries? What was your crime? Will I get into trouble for abetting an escaped convict? Why do you appear in my nightmares as a hitch-hiker?"

To pass the time, we exchanged histories. Originally a salesman, he had stumbled into the realm of the paranormal after a practical joke had gone wrong. After impersonating a ghost on a lonely country road, a real phantom had challenged him to show his haunting license. Unable to bluff a way past this apparition, who was a sort of otherworldly policeman, he was arrested and put on trial. Apparently, spectral society ran parallel to our own, with spookily similar institutions. Found guilty, Zimara was incarcerated in a dungeon deep below the surface of the planet. Managing to escape, he chanced upon the escalator and went down to the bottom. At the very centre of the world, he discovered a cavern so big it contained oceans and continents, not to mention diminished versions of the sun and moon hanging suspended in mid-air. Finding an abandoned canoe, he sailed to an island in the middle of the sea where a sphere of compressed souls rolled round a deserted plateau.

I was totally absorbed by this tale, but Zimara was quite unable to answer the pressing queries it raised. How could a spirit be licensed to haunt? Did the ghosts running the prison know about the crushed phantoms in the cavern? Where did the escalator obtain its power? He shrugged and pouted in lieu of answer. I suggested the diminutive sun was a source of nuclear energy, a fusion reactor which worked massive motors at the base of the moving staircase. He offered no opinions on this notion, but when I wondered if the sphere of compacted spirits was a metaphysical form of punishment, he finally perked up. "Personally I don't think my captors are aware of what lies beneath them. It was pure luck I broke through into the escalator shaft. I'll be delighted to share my pet theories with you, if you're interested, but I don't feel capable before lunch!"

The second suitcase took slightly less time to reach us. The amount of smoke which poured from Zimara's glove increased and the accompanying jolt was more violent. I pointed out this discrepancy, but he repudiated my concern. "It's an increase in gravity as we go deeper. We'll continue to accelerate until we

reach the core. Don't worry, no details have been overlooked. This asbestos glove can withstand far higher temperatures. A greater worry is the string wearing away on the edges of the stalagmite. It's nylon, so I feel confident."

I knotted the two ends of cord together, lifted the suitcase aboard and we continued on our ludicrous voyage. Wining and dining was followed by Zimara's speculations on the constitution of the spectral universe. A society so compatible to ours in manners and infrastructure would hardly arrange for a large percentage of its members to be crushed into an orb. The ball of spectres, he felt, was an anomaly. Or rather, its dimensions had grown beyond what was originally envisaged. He reproached me for not formulating my own hypotheses from the available data. This irritated me and I reminded him of my professional standing in the paranormal fields. He cared little for this, he admitted, nor for the fact that the college which employed me was the only institute in the country to offer courses in Applied Eschatology. I argued the advantages of continuous assessment over written exams in the subject.

We were interrupted by an attenuated wail and I rotated to confront a distant apparition approaching from above. My telescope resolved it as the figure of a child, a young girl, complete with pigtails and freckled cheeks. Despite our velocity, she quickly gained on us. Instinctively, I ducked as she passed over the crate, spinning at a fantastic rate. For a brief instant, her gaze fixed on mine. There was such innocent terror in her blue eyes that I bowed and momentarily crossed away my atheism. Even Zimara had tears lodged in his throat as he cried, "Poor thing! She must have died directly above Finsbury Park. They normally plummet the entire way through solid rock. Maybe this is better. But there won't be much of a welcome for her at the bottom."

I was too affected by the sight to search for my camera. Shuddering with pity and fear, I waited until her flowered party-dress had vanished far below. "A real ghost!" I breathed. "She was floating in thin air! So it's true: I'm going to be famous at last! But what has made her descend through the radius of the Earth?"

Zimara sighed. "It's happening all over the world even as we speak. Have you never wondered how phantoms pass through walls? Clearly they're comprised of atoms finer than those which make up the material universe. But if they can drift through a solid wall, what's stopping them falling through floors just as easily? And if floors, why not the ground? Spooks are rare on the surface because once the host body expires, the majority of them drop toward the centre of the planet. It's gravity, and it reels in every soul without a license."

"Very well, I'm convinced of the postulation. I presume the central cavern with the ocean is an abode of rest for these unfortunate spirits? It must have been designed with them in mind. But how can they enjoy its pleasures when compressed into a sphere with other wraiths? And just who is responsible for issuing the licenses? Where do I make an application? I'd rather stay above than roll aimlessly over a barren plateau. Did you manage to obtain one down there?" "Alas, no! And neither can I assist you. From what I gathered at my trial, mortals selected to become surface-spooks are approached on their twenty-first birthdays and given a license immediately. Everyone else is destined for the long drop. By what you've said, I assume nobody came to you on your birthday? Nor to me!"

I fretted and groaned as the import of his words depressed the soul which sat inside my body. It clung tight to the rails of my ribcage, too scared to let go in case it slipped between the knots of my tendons; its anxiety manifested itself as a dull ache in my chest. Life is a fragile, precious thing, too frail to entrust to a wooden crate and an escalator. Beating heart, steaming organs, stringy nerves, clanking bones, generous brainpan, miserly muscles: these formed the boardwalk on which my spirit could balance above the chasm. Once my vital spark was extinguished, the bridge would collapse and the ghost tumble an unimaginable distance into Limbo. I sought to reassure it by patting my stomach. "Don't fret, soul, I'm in reasonably good health!"

Chuckling at my naivety, Zimara informed me that the mortal body is soundproof and that my ghost wouldn't be able to hear me. This may be so for most others, but I once had my appendix removed and the wound hadn't healed properly. I felt a knocking on the inside of my skull: my spectre was appreciating my reassurance.

Our velocity kept increasing. Retrieval of suitcases rapidly became more hazardous. Each stop for supplies turned Zimara's gauntlet into the hand of a genie; smoke writhed up the shaft. Eventually we had collected so many cases there was no more space in the crate to store them. Now we affixed them to the

line at the rear of our vehicle. Bouncing behind us, they rendered sleep difficult. I slung my camera around my neck, just in case more phantoms passed us in the shaft, but my guide warned me of the unlikelihood of this event. Not only would somebody have to die directly over the escalator, but die at an angle. Otherwise the spirit would slip vertically through the world and we wouldn't get to see it. Even wraiths have to obey the laws of geometry.

As the days wore on, I found that the effects of rising temperature were cancelled out by the breeze generated by our mounting speed. Sundry factors contributed to our acceleration -- stronger gravity, larger mass, a decreased counterweight. The trauma of each new stop trumped what went before and I developed an interest in knowing our terminal velocity when we attained our destination. Would we dash ourselves to bits at the base of the shaft? My guide was amused.

"Don't worry, Professor, the second half of the voyage will be more sedate. Indeed, it will be a jaunt. When we encounter the last suitcase, we'll transfer it to the crate and tie the empty ones in its place. Once restored to the other side, they'll help to arrest our motion. It's very simple. Before contacting you, I made a model on my stairs and it worked superbly. I used matchboxes and thread. Also, we'll stuff the cases with our empty bottles during the exchange. We can judge the weight perfectly by adding or subtracting garbage."

"But what if we miss the final suitcase? They're speeding upward so quickly now we might not be able to brake in time! Do you have plans for that eventuality? If so, tell me!"

For the first time, Zimara seemed honestly flustered. "No, we can't afford to miss the last grab. We'll keep constant watch from now on with your lens. We'll take it in turns. Remember: the interval between spying the case and applying the brake will be minuscule. The exact instant you see a dot, scream yourself silly!"

I had no choice but to be satisfied with this suggestion. From that moment, the telescope was rarely detached from one or other of our eyes. Somehow, the hours of keeping watch began to shift to my side, until the greater burden was upon my orbit. I was only permitted a couple of hours sleep for every dozen Zimara enjoyed. During one of my infrequent rests, I was awakened by a change in our rate of descent -- it had substantially increased. Something was wrong.

With considerable alarm, I discovered my guide had dozed off during his watch. I shook him back to consciousness and wailed, "We're supposed to be gaining speed by degrees. Why are we moving so fast?" He rubbed at his eyes and peered over the side. His tone betrayed a terror I'd deemed him incapable of feeling. Absorbing his sense of dread, my teeth started to audition for an orchestra, percussion section. I champed on my sleeve to no avail: my molars were keen. Only by tapping the baton of my tongue on my palate could I restore them to order. Zimara signalled at the cord which ran parallel to the crate. "It's going down instead of up! The string must have snapped on the stalagmite. We've got problems!"

I nodded dumbly. Our only means of ascent had been destroyed. There was also nothing to check our descent: without a line to grasp, Zimara's glove was useless as a brake. We watched the string slide down the shaft until the severed end passed us. I cried, "It didn't break! It's a clean cut! Someone has deliberately sabotaged our mission!" I imagined that an employee of the Tube, a porter perhaps, had stumbled upon the grotto and resolved to cause some mischief.

Zimara shared my suspicion. "Typical of Finsbury Park station!" But his nervousness quickly cooled and he regained much of his former poise. I detested his unflappability at such a time and told him so. He laughed and replied there was little we could do about our situation except stay in the crate and wait to reach the bottom. I clutched my head between my knees and sobbed, arising only an indefinite number of hours later, when Zimara slapped me on the back. Our velocity was now great enough to iron smooth the wrinkles of my years.

He indicated a deep crack in one of the walls. "That's where I came through the first time. Nobody followed me when I escaped from prison. I don't know why." I was less pleased to encounter a landmark in the bland environment than I might have been. So preoccupied was I in keeping hold on the edge of the crate that I barely offered the fissure a glance. Our mission was nearing its end: we would find the phantoms we sought at the centre of the world. Unfortunately, they would be ours. I closed my eyes as my guide tapped my shoulder. "Not long now! What's that glow of light down there? Must be the cavern!" I anticipated a violent demise at the foot of the staircase, but my fears were to be confounded. I can't say for sure what



happened, because I kept my lids batted down, but Zimara later avowed we shot out of the shaft like a hamper from a cannon. I remember a grotesque screech as the crate sped over unknown terrain. Colours filtered through the webs of my damp lashes, the first hues to greet me since leaving the surface. After the green slime of the escalator, they might have soothed my irises like the tongue of a nurse, but I refused to look. I felt warmth on my cheek, the attentions of tiny sunbeams.

I also recall, with some embarrassment, my infantile whimperings as we suddenly seemed to splash into water. Only when I felt a shadow cross my brow, did I sneak a look at my surroundings. A toy moon had traversed the body of a puppet sun... We were drifting in a calm ocean. Before us, jagged and bare, was a lofty island. I turned to regard a distant coast. A plesiosaur glanced askance and returned below the waves. I breathed in the salty air and relaxed. High above the spun clouds, a ceiling of rock arched over all. Climbing plants covered the inner surface and it seemed we were encased in a shell of wild flowers. Zimara was paddling with one of my spirit-levels, skillfully.

"We were incredibly lucky," he said.

"So I gather. Why weren't we smashed to crumbs? And how can we stay afloat in an unseaworthy crate?"

"When the string was cut, the final suitcase fell to the bottom and broke open. The bottles of wine spilled out but somehow remained intact. They acted as rollers when our crate landed on them, carrying us all the way to the ocean; our momentum helped to propel us toward the isle which was our original destination. The empty cases tied to our rear work like buoyancy tanks, making it unnecessary to find another canoe. It's turned out really quite well, I think."

I stood in the prow of the vessel and swayed slightly as we scraped the shallows of a shale beach. First out onto the island, I clambered up a steep path while Zimara dragged the crate beyond the arms of the tide. Lacking a toupee, my scalp began to burn under the bijou but torrid sun. My guide followed, caught me up and we reached the summit together. "The midriff of the Earth!" he cried.

The sight was astonishing. In the centre of a perfectly flat plain, a pearly sphere rotated on its own axis. It was the size of an expensive house in Berkshire. And yet it gave the appearance of instability, as if it might collapse in upon itself at any moment. It therefore had more in common with an expensive house in Essex. Even as we watched, white forms descended from above and were drawn into the ball. I looked up and saw a score of wispy figures plop through the stone ceiling and plummet toward the orb. With each new arrival, the fragility of the structure increased and I feared for its integrity.

Because of my anxieties, it was some minutes before I noticed a man standing on a ladder which was propped against the sphere. As it rolled, it threatened to hurl him off, but he kept his balance with panache. Now I realised he held a net and seemed to be casting at the ghosts speeding into the orb. Zimara mumbled, "He wasn't here when I came. I wonder what he's trying to do?" Striding to the base of the ladder, he shouted, "Are you in need of any assistance?"

The man looked down and puffed out his cheeks. Then he descended to stand before us, removing his tall hat and bowing low. He was dressed in Victorian garb, with bushy whiskers muffling his ears. The very image of a northern industrialist, he fulfilled the role admirably when he opened his mouth to respond. He spoke as if his consonants had been drenched in vinegar and wrapped in newspaper; his vowels were like mushy peas. For a moment, I had the taste but not the meanings of his words. His smile was grimy with pitch and lampblack.

"Mortals, eh? And what brings ye to these parts? Come to behold the demolition of Heaven, I guess?"

Zimara frowned. "We're innocent explorers. It's the sphere of souls we're interested in. I don't know anything about Heaven. My companion is an Applied Eschatologist and I'm a lovable rogue. He wants to measure it and take photographs for work."

"Applied Eschatology?" The man scratched his head. "Are there other kinds? Don't answer: it's too late now to study the thing. It's about to collapse into a singularity..."

"I don't follow you. You mean to say it will vanish?" Zimara turned to me with a regretful gesture. The

man coiled up his net and offered his hand. "My name is Kingdom Noisette. Possibly you've heard of me? I was one of the finest engineers in the Empire. Prince Albert himself praised my achievements. This is my greatest work, my *pièce de résistance*, as they say in France." He ground his teeth and spat. "Scurvy foreigners! Never trust 'em, I say. Smell of garlic and deception, they do!"

At last I broke my silence. "You built this cavern? Did you win any awards for it? What about the sun, moon and escalator? How do they work? Did they cost much to install?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Steam powers them all. As for finance, revenue from the colonies provided ample funds: Africa, India, Australia and Wales bore the brunt. But these were straightforward projects. I was referring to the phantom-ball as my masterpiece. That's the enterprise I had most difficulties with. It's why I collaborated with that devil from across the sea. Gallic tyrant!"

"You made the sphere?" I was incredulous.

"Aye, together with my arch-rival. Well, we didn't build it so much as enable it to form itself. But now it's growing too big and the French government plan to remodel the whole of Heaven on Paris. I don't believe it's right, meddling with the divine scheme. But Monsieur Nutt holds all the aces, dash his *croissants!*"

I swallowed thickly. "Perhaps we should start from the beginning? I want you to presume I know nothing. Just tell me the point of the sphere and its relevance to my ghost."

Replacing his hat and stroking his whiskers, he regarded me with an inscrutable expression before crying, "Very well, laddie! There's nowt I can do here anyway. Might as well pass the time with talk. First of all, allow me to declare myself a genius. I'm such a marvellous engineer that I can repair my nervous system with a spanner. Regular maintenance of my body has ensured a lifespan far exceeding the average. Unfortunately, my method has been appropriated by my rival and he also enjoys the benefits of a post-geriatric existence."

I urged him to proceed and he rolled his smudged eyes. "Engineering was not my only concern. I was also something of a philanthropist. 'Twas my ambition to employ the former in aid of the latter. Prison reform was my speciality. I believed in rehabilitation rather than punishment and I took my arguments to Mr Gladstone. My plans for reform went further than our Earthly criminals. I persuaded the Prime Minister that even souls in Hell were not beyond help. Although he deplored the costs, he eventually gave my project his blessings."

"And you hollowed out this cavern?" I prompted.

"Certainly, with Irish labour. Then we added the water and two huge furnaces filled with coal which became the sun and moon. The flowers and dinosaurs are a mystery: I believe they spontaneously generated from the alluvial mud. The environment suits them. The entire cavern was supposed to be a sort of Eden where cursed souls might be re-educated in pleasant surroundings. Once we had snatched them from Hell, we were going to give them another chance to prove themselves capable of living in society. It was an idea almost Samaritan in its generosity. The reformation of every sinner who had lived on Earth!"

"How did you draw the souls out from Hell?"

"Ah!" He lifted a finger to wipe a tear. "That was my undoing. When I was studying Engineering, the works of Laplace were mandatory reading. He was the first to suggest that a star which contains enough mass might collapse upon itself into a singularity -- a body of matter so dense even light cannot escape its gravitational field. Such an object is now known as a Black Hole. It occurred to me that the same might hold true for the finer matter which comprises ghosts. If enough ectoplasm was gathered in one place, it would form a ball which would suck in other phantoms. When this sphere grew to a certain radius, it would be powerful enough to tug in souls as far away as Hades."

"But surely it would also affect innocent spirits on the surface of the planet? Ordinary ghosts would be sucked in and crushed into the ball together with the evil spooks!"

"Of course! That was part of the scheme. We hoped that having souls from above mixing with the damned at such close-quarters would influence the behaviour of the latter. I believed the good qualities of the former

would rub off on the villains. Only later did I realise that spirit-orbs are universities of crime! I'm an optimist, laddie, and there's not much help for that. But to return to my story: after the cavern was finished, it became necessary to collect as many spirits as possible at the centre to create the intended gravitational field. To do this, I originated the licensing scheme for phantoms."

After a pause for breath, he went on, "Since time immemorial, souls who aren't consigned to Heaven or Hell have been permitted to float near the site of their demise. They are also allowed to move through walls. I prevailed upon Mr Gladstone to pass a secret law in Parliament requiring all ghosts to own haunting licenses. Those who didn't would have to obey the laws of physics and drop through the ground toward the middle of the planet -- which is logically where they should end up if they are able to travel through matter. Because phantasmic society so closely follows our own, the laws we pass have an effect on what happens to ghosts. At once, vast numbers of spooks dropped through the world and ended up here. Soon the sphere was large enough to tug in our first damned soul: the Marquis de Sade. I was standing here when he was drawn through the walls of Hell and propelled across the aether. He made quite a splash when he arrived. A short, heavy man in a peruke.

"I can't believe he preferred this to the fiery pit. It sounds just as horrid as eternal perdition!"

"Obviously the sphere was a temporary measure. When all the sinners had arrived from Hell and been converted by their nicer-behaved fellows, I was going to license the lot of them. The ball would be dismantled and the phantoms set free to return to the surface. Like the others, de Sade would have another go at humanity! Within a year, the orb was so swollen that its gravitational field extended to the darkest corner of Tartarus, where Judas, Cassius and Brutus are endlessly chomped by the Devil. Once they appeared, Hell was empty and it was time to start freeing spectres. This was when my collaborator and myself fell out. We constructed a huge printing-press to churn out licenses. One by one, ghosts peeled from the sphere and regained anthropoidal form. After a period of recuperation in the cavern, they were escorted back to the surface to resume haunting in a nobler fashion. Or rather, this is what was supposed to happen! On the first night of printing, the press was stolen! Monsieur Nutt, acting for his republic, spirited it away!"

"But why did you need his input in the first place?" I ventured. "A superb engineer like yourself must be able to design a printing-press on his own! Why not build another?"

"Ghosts were once automatically entitled to haunt and exorcists had to revoke this right with bell, book and candle. These three items, when used in conjunction, could hurl a troublesome phantom down to the centre of the Earth. To send our spirits back up, we had to reverse the process and split apart this trilogy of adjuncts. Our printing-press requires no ink or lead-type: it nullifies the ectoplasmic aura which connects bell, book and candle by bombarding each with garlic. Unfortunately, the items are destroyed in the operation. We had sufficient books and candles, but too few bells in the Empire to license every phantom. Besides, we had to take the French government into our confidence at the very beginning: it wasn't enough to ratify the licensing laws in our parliament. As well as Mr Gladstone, the Gallic leader, Eugène Duclerc, had to pass the Bill or the spectral courts would have ignored it."

"This presents a problem," I agreed. "Do you have any idea where it might be now? Surely there aren't too many places to conceal a cyclopean printing-press and a Hell's worth of clappers, novels and tallows? Where would you hide them if you were Monsieur Nutt?" As I uttered the name, I thought of my Dean and squealed.

Kingdom Noisette held up his net sadly. "Laddie, if I had any clue, I'd be on top looking for it. I've been trying to catch spectres as they fall through the ceiling, to stop them merging with the orb. This net is made of sinews, the only substance which can hold unlicensed ghosts. But it's a losing battle: the ball has been growing unchecked for a century. First it emptied Hell of sinners, then it sucked the faith from dwellers on the surface -- which is why there has been an increase in atheism. Now it's ready to collapse and form a singularity which will pull in blessed souls from Heaven, which is further away than Hell. The French will then send agents to teach them Parisian ways. When they've been indoctrinated to appreciate haute couture and glace plombière, the press will be taken out of hiding and set to work, hurling 'em back. The whole universe will be colonised with onion shrugs!"

As I listened, fear and trembling chewed me up. I'll go further and say that dismay digested me and found me to its liking. On some level of my psyche I'd anticipated the crisis. I now understood my dream -- my own phantom had attempted to warn me of the conspiracy, presenting Zimara as a hitch-hiker unable to thumb a

lift, a suitable metaphor for the French system in general, where altruism, though freshly baked each morning, is stale by the afternoon. Unable to communicate directly with my ears, the ghost which dwelled within my skeleton had fiddled with my subconscious. Its message was too subtle for me to grasp. To repair the blunder, I now granted it sole use of my skull.

While it turned the wheels of my cognition with its cirrus fingers, Zimara asked, "If we return to the surface and lay out sinews across the globe, will souls remain aloft?"

The engineer slapped the wrists of the question. "Aye, I think. But where do we find enough of 'em?"

Unsettled, Zimara gestured at me. "How about the Anatomy Department of the institute? And we'll ask for volunteers to donate a tendon or two from their ankles." Desperation did not suit his brow, which was glacial and smug. Raising my hand for silence, I allowed my un-kissed lips to dub my spook's more virile opinions.

"I believe I know where the printing-press is located. Furthermore, I can reveal that the villain behind the scheme and my Dean are the same person. He's been spying on me for years, hiding in the crevices outside my office. It was he who snipped the string in the grotto with a pair of scissors bought with college funds. Any nervy mesh strung on the surface will meet with the same fate. If we're going to fix the mess, it must be done properly. To crack our Nutt, we'll have to discredit him in public, which means a confrontation in his lecture-theatre. Are we stuck in this pothole or is there a way back?"

"What a question, laddie! Do ye believe I'm a maroon? Travelling up is easy. Now tell me your plan."

"No time. What I require is a selection of phantoms. We'll line the inside of our suitcases with sinews from your net, fill them to the brim with spectres and carry them to the surface. These will be proof of Dean Nutt's intentions. They won't constitute hard evidence, but the facts of his immorality will be transparent. Help me fetch the cases and I'll use an etheric-engyscope to shovel them in. Come now, we only need to fill a couple. It must be worth a try!"

With a smile which betrayed doubts about my sanity, Zimara preceded me down the path to the shore. From our makeshift boat, we obtained five or six suitcases which we dragged to the sphere. Kingdom Noisette laid a web of sinews at the base of each, after untying the knots of his net. I selected my longest instrument and approached the perimeter of the ball, chattering in the metaphysical chill which emanated from it. I thrust my tool into the pearly dewdrop, scooping out a portion of compacted ghosts and transferring it into a case.

Quite rapidly, we stuffed them all with congealed ectoplasm. But it was to be regretted there were no women present, otherwise we would have managed to cram in thrice the amount -- it's a trick men haven't learned. Anxious not to upset our wispy cargo, we shouldered it back, one case at a time, like mourners at a world's funeral. Our raft became more buoyant with the addition of these waterproof souls. Wrenching a holiday's worth of apparitions from the sphere should have reduced the pressure on it to become a singularity, but even as we mounted the boat, new phantoms from above percolated through the ceiling and added their screaming molecules to the perpetually rolling mass.

Zimara and the engineer paddled, with spirit-levels and hat, across the antique seas to the mainland. We transported the cases to the bottom of the escalator and I gazed up the slimy chute. Running an ascent would be impossible for one in my physical condition, and we had no recidivist cloth to construct a balloon. My concern was shortly relieved by Kingdom Noisette, who flipped open a panel on the side of the stairway, set into the rock. A recess revealed pipes, gauges and two levers. Bending close, he tapped a crystal dial and chuckled.

"There's enough steam to carry us all up at maximum speed. Might be back by the end o' the week, laddies!"

Zimara was aghast. "I wish I'd thought of this!"

Noisette reversed the levers and the stairway ground to a halt with a hideous squeal. Then it started moving upward at a steadily increasing rate. We positioned our luggage as securely as possible on the steps and took our own places below. Now it was a question of murdering time until we emerged in Finsbury Park station. As we ascended, hot vapours drifted up from beneath, broiling our brows. Conversation which might have eased the tedium of the voyage was precluded by Zimara's stomach, which loudly reminded us of our dearth of supplies. In the excitement of adventuring, we had neglected to seek out any sequoia-sized

mushrooms. No matter -- as our speed gradually became excessive, my appetite was dampened by a fear which mirrored that of our drop.

I found the irony unbearable. "Won't we be smashed into the calcium carbonate deposits at the apex?" "No, laddie, the sun's due to run out of coal any day now. We'll be lucky if it powers us another thousand miles." He indicated the cloud of moisture which rose to swaddle us. "It's overheating, which means it has started to consume itself. When the liquid in the boiler has evaporated, it'll blow itself asunder, taking the moon with it. The core will linger in the sky as a dying star -- a brass dwarf. But don't worry: our inertia will lift us safely to the top."

Although this explanation did little to soothe me, my troubles were modest contrasted with those of the engineer, who had to fret not merely about whether the singularity would form before we attained the surface, but also about his place in modern society. I assured him he didn't even need to shave to be accepted on campus -- sideburns were back in fashion. Zimara expressed mirth at my assertion, but his own preference in facial formats cancelled out his satire. Passing the crack in the wall which he claimed as his escape route from prison, he tapped Noisette on the elbow and repeated his fantastic tale.

The engineer was unimpressed. "This planet is riddled with passages and stairways. When I worked as a mining consultant in Wales, I explored one which looped down and up into Austria. Lined with marmalade jars for its whole length. Very strange!"

Zimara went into a sulk and we continued in boiled dissatisfaction. I decided the hiatus would be best served by catching up on sleep and we curled on our individual steps. I immediately lapsed into a sequel to my dream which depicted Zimara's wraith reaching the core of the planet and landing on the unearthly sphere. Acting like a trampoline, it sprang his startled soul back through geology and into his chest, where it replaced the metal bars of its cage. Hiding the spectacle by buttoning his shirt, the hitcher climbed into my vehicle and we roared away to new careers. I woke to see the real Zimara also dreaming, eyes spinning under lids like pebbles in a lunatic dodo's gut.

So exhausted were we, from mental as well as physical travail, that we remained prone for almost five days. We were roused into awareness by a shudder and a distant roar: blasts of grimy heat flooded over us. True to Noisette's forecast, the inner sun had detonated. The escalator began to decelerate, but the process was unhurried. One of my suitcases tipped over, spilling its spectral contents, which bounced back down the steps, but we could afford to lose a few samples. I quickly steadied the others while the engineer and Zimara blearily disputed the physics of velocity. Noisette maintained the eruption had occurred exactly when it suited us, at our halfway point to the top.

I trusted the Victorian inventor, who seemed as confident in racing up as Zimara had been in hurtling down. My faith was justified -- another five days of inertial motion, in the course of which we improvised a set of dominoes from my false teeth, an act of sacrifice made futile because Zimara kept cheating, and a spot of light far above finally presaged our imminent arrival. We came to a halt on the lip of the grotto and I leapt off the stairs and kissed the biggest stalagmite in gratitude. A glimmer at its base attracted my attention and I stooped to pick up a shiny pair of high-quality chrome scissors.

The engineer took them from me and gazed at the fingerprints on the handles. "Belong to 'im, these do! Recognise the unpasteurised whorls on the thumb. I have a method of sorting French prints from those of honest citizens. Pattern de foie gras!"

Sharing the surviving suitcases, we hastened up the tunnels and out of the station. It was still raining in Isledon Road and our loping gait and troglodytic squinting did little to endear us to the damp and grumpy pedestrians. We shrugged off the oily precipitation and arid insults and gained the shelter of the college cloisters, where I outlined my general strategy for Dean Nutt's demise.

I slapped Zimara on the back and winked conspiratorially. "Here are the keys to my house. You've done enough already, leading me to the ball of ghosts. But I require another favour from you: tell my wife how brave and intrepid I've been. Then I'll be able to fall straight into her arms after the fight with our enemy!"

He opened his lips to protest at such an easy task, but the ecstasy on my face was more eloquent than phrases and he assented. How would she be able to resist my approaches after hearing his account? I burned with impatience to take her in my arms like a real husband. Zimara was a fine herald of my new

confidence: his own dashing aspects would turn her mind to thoughts of sensual activity.

As he stepped into the drizzle, I shouted after him, "Help yourself to refreshments from my cellar!"

Kingdom Noisette stroked his whiskers. "What about me, laddie? What part do I play in your revenge?"

I consulted my watch. "The Dean will be in the middle of one of his lectures now. While I search for the printing-press, I want you to burst in with the suitcases and confront him with the truth. Cast them open at his feet. His audience will scorn your revelations -- they're engineering students and don't believe in apparitions -- but then I'll enter with the press and we'll issue the necessary licenses. Our captured spectres will fly in their faces! That will show the cynics! Just tell me how to print licenses for anonymous spirits."

"It can't be done, laddie," replied the engineer.

"What? You mean we've dragged these samples all the way up here for naught? What a chump I've been!"

"Try printing a group visa. It probably won't work, but that's what they said about the Darlington to Thule railway." He tapped his nose. "I was responsible for laying the underground line. It's still a secret. We use it to import nasty weather." I was astonished. "Doesn't supply exceed demand?"

"I'm not an economist, laddie. Sensible or not, it's a grand sight, all those wagons loaded with blizzards."

This was no occasion to be gossiping over the climate. I guided the engineer to the imposing building which the Dean had claimed in the name of progress. We stood outside his personal lecture-theatre and I glanced through the oblong windows set into the swing doors. Monsieur Nutt was a monstrous sight, his arms and moustaches gesturing wildly as he decanted the complex points of beaujolais calculus into the ears of his fanatical audience. I was pleased not to be the one who first broached his demonic spell. After prompting, my colleague balanced the suitcases in his arms, kicked open the doors and blustered inside. Before leaving to accomplish my own task, I listened to the reaction. I caught an outraged gasp and a dozen words of violent exchange.

"Bon soir, République Nutt, you truffle!"

"Rosbif! My old rival, Kingdom Noisette!"

Then I was away, back to my familiar Department. I didn't climb the stairwell to my office, but went down to the unused basement. Icy shafts of light penetrated from above; the scene was a wonderland of infamy. In the dustiest corner, a tarpaulin covered something unofficial and large. As I reached out to disclose the secret, a voice mumbled a curse. I span in alarm, but nobody was there. The words radiated from above: there was a cleaner in my office, complaining about having to polish the artefacts in my cabinet -- the jars of ectoplasm, tooth from a walking skeleton and link from a rattling chain. I gazed up and saw a network of wide cracks, a canal system for eavesdroppers. For how many decades had the Dean been monitoring my secret conversations?

It was obvious now that his indulgence of Applied Eschatology was a cunning way of throwing potential pursuers off his scent. Who would look for the printing-press in the only college to conduct spectral research? I was a token, a puppet or decoy, and my work was tolerated only so long as it didn't produce positive results. The Dean must have been delighted by my lack of success. Doubtless the French government rewarded him well every time I failed to garner evidence of ghosts: it confirmed they were still falling into the phantasmagoric globe. When Zimara came to me with his report of the Earth's centre, Monsieur Nutt must have perceived this as a threat -- his subsequent efforts to sabotage our mission were surely sanctioned by his Parisian mentors.

I tugged off the covering and beheld a bizarre contraption. A cross between a clock and a garlic-crusher, it was corroded and betrayed signs of long inactivity. But it ran on castors and was fully loaded with iron bells, old books and green candles. I remembered Noisette's instructions and fumbled behind my ear for chalk. Like all scholars, I always carry a stick, to ease both exposition and digestion. I made out a group visa on the components of each anti-exorcism, omitting the names of the spirits. Crossing my fingers, I wheeled the apparatus out of the basement to Dean Nutt's lecture-theatre and propelled myself through the swing

doors with a cry. The room was in total chaos.

Monsieur Nutt was stamping on the phantoms in the largest suitcase. He'd already overturned the others and their contents had vanished. Held back by students, Kingdom Noisette was unable to prevent this onslaught. His tall hat rolled about the floor, battered and abused. He shouted his opinions on eerie phenomena, but the students were uninterested: mocking his sideburns, contrary to what I'd told him, they squeezed his ego in a sartorial vice. If the press refused to license the surviving spirits we were finished. There was nothing to do but wind it up and pray. I turned the handle and the Dean glanced up.

He bowed ironically, without ceasing his leaping motion. "Professor Cherlomsky! Après moi le déluge..."

"Unhand -- I mean, unfoot -- those paranormal manifestations, sir! Or they will rend you like roquefort!"

He threw back his head and laughed. I finished winding the machine, depressed the stud to set it going and stood clear. A tremendous booming came from its innards: the first bell, book and candle were being mashed by accelerated cloves of garlic. It sounded like lightning blasting open a scriptorium in a Dark Age chapel.

"Well done, laddie! You've freed a spectre!"

Rearing out of the suitcase in an anguiform vapour which unravelled into human shape, a genuine wraith floated over the Dean's head. Rubbing my eyes, I scrutinised it carefully. It was a character from the history books -- Jacques-René Hébert. Of all the lunatics who took a leading part in the French Revolution, Hébert was by far the most extreme, denouncing even Robespierre for being soft. I felt a twinge of pity for the Dean as the spook threaded bloodstained fingers in his hair and strained to lift him from the ground, grinning obscenely at his protestations. Shocked by this display, the students released the engineer, who joined me with his bruises. "A rotten one there, lad."

I agreed. "Hébert was cleaved by his own guillotine. He went to his demise most ignobly. See the join?"

Noisette nodded. A thin crimson line looped the ghost's neck, but a less subtle clue to his mode of execution was the fact his head had been put on sideways -- a bad repair job.

Before I could comment on his infamous exploits, the printing-press repeated its angry roar and a second tendril of ectoplasm separated from the mass under the Dean's feet, coiling around his thigh and climbing up to his chest where it abruptly swelled into another recognisable figure, Alexis Carrel, the Vichyite eugenist. This shade slapped the Dean's face with palms wider than puddles of spilled wine, until my employer felt as dizzy as if he'd slurped them up instead. The engineer glanced at me and shrugged as Carrel increased the speed and force of his attentions. "Who might that be? Do ye ken him also?"

"A leading Nazi theorist," I hissed. This meant nothing to Noisette and I passed over the opportunity to outline European politics since the end of the Victorian age. Instead we watched mutely as the two revenants mimicked a malignant hat and waistcoat, both tugging, beating and raking their victim mercilessly. Like any soul treated as pastry and baked into a pie before escaping as a crumb, each declined a crust on his vengeance and planned fully exposed retribution.

With two phantoms assaulting him, Monsieur Nutt began to panic. "Je fais de la tension! Je suis constipé."

I was half tempted to step forward and offer him assistance, but he was beyond help. I realised this when the press clanged a third time and a much older streamer of hauntwear spiralled upward. I knew it was older than Hébert and Carrel because of its brittle yellowness, like a toenail used as a bookmark in a grimoire. The technical aptitude of Noisette was unparalleled, but his appreciation of historical personages left much to be desired. He squinted as the smoke perched on the Dean's shoulders and expanded into a short man with grotesquely thick arms who leaned forward to pinch his host's face with hairy thumbs. This new arrival was encased in dirty armour and wore a helmet with a sealed beak, but a coat of arms emblazoned on his flowing surcoat proclaimed his identity, and his aspic breath confirmed his awful reputation.

"Simon de Montfort," I whispered. "The destroyer of Béziers. During the Albigensian Crusade of 1209, he butchered hundreds of men, women and children in the name of civilisation!"

The engineer was appalled by my allegations and he regarded his old rival with a measure of sympathy. The press tolled again and now a bushy fellow with mesmeric eyes distended from the suitcase. Noisette gestured at him hopefully. "He doesn't look so savage. Maybe he'll stop the other two from inflicting permanent damage?"

"That's Henri Desiré Landru, the murderer."

"Ah!" With a shrug, Noisette retrieved his hat. Landru remained low to bite the Dean's ankles with the delicacy of an experienced gourmet. I watched carefully to see if there was any group purpose to these attacks or whether they were uncoordinated. It soon became apparent the phantoms were trying to force the Dean toward the main windows. Landru eventually succeeded in making him jump from the suitcase, while Hébert, Carrel and de Montfort alternately pushed and pulled him across the polished boards of the floor. The press announced yet another entrant: Théotime Prunier. Then came Joseph-Arthur Gobineau. Why were all the visitors exemplars of evil? Had we collected no good ghosts?

With each attachment, Dean Nutt lost more ground as he struggled to regain his balance. His shouts for mercy became fainter under the sombre cacklings and diabolical howlings of his tormentors. I exchanged glances with Noisette, who cleared his throat.

"He's had enough now. Turn the press off, laddie, I'm feeling quite squeamish. He's learned his lesson..."

I rushed to the side of the device and fumbled with the controls. A spark flashed between my fingertips and I was hurled back. "The lever is stuck! Something's gone wrong inside."

"It doesn't want to be shut down, lad, so it gave ye a shock. There is nowt we can do. The Dean's obviously destined to suffer this multiple haunting. Let's just leave 'em to it."

"But why such loathsome spooks? And why all French?"

"When ye dipped your tool into the orb, you only penetrated the top layers, where the newest immigrants are housed. These are generally from Hell. The infernal lands are segregated into nationalities, just like on Earth. Ye must have taken a sample from the French quarter, so to speak. Damned coincidence, but I'm grateful."

His explanation grew more likely with every detonation of the press and every soul created from the note: Isidore Ducasse, Georges Bataille, Ernest Renan, Pierre Taittinger, Jean Baptiste Tropolmann, Gilles de Rais, all of them prophets, deliverers or justifiers of depravity, all of them from the country of fromage de chèvre and épi de maïs. Soon there was no room on the Dean's body for the final ghosts -- Marshal Pétain, Ferdinand Louis Céline, Pierre-Francois Lacenaire and, as if saving the vilest for last, Montbars de Languedoc, the 17th Century buccaneer, who circled the mass of writhing phantoms looking for access to Monsieur Nutt's abdomen. Montbars had a trick with dagger, spike and firebrand I had no desire to see performed. It involved extracting one end of a captive's intestines, nailing it to a post and scorching the unfortunate into a dance of death which gradually unlooped his innards.

I clutched Noisette for support as the Dean reached the window, the pressure of his torso against the glass bursting it open like a drowning mouth. For an instant, his face was visible through the cloak of ghosts. I noted in his expression a resignation more dramatic than his terror. A thin smile even flickered at the edges of his mouth, then he teetered on the sill and was over it, suspended in nothingness by his hair. He swung above the cloisters, rotating as his assailants passed him from talon to talon. They pretended to fumble and drop him, poked his ribs and removed his shoes, which clattered like hooves on the cobbles below. I know they were compelled to be gross and horrid -- it was in their genes -- but this fact didn't make them more palatable.

The few undergraduates who remained hurried from the room, down the stairs and out of the building, planning to pursue their teacher. It was a forlorn hope. The ghosts dragged him higher, over rooftops, toward the eastern horizon, and soon he was just a pathetic silhouette skimming the lower side of the rainclouds. I stumbled to the casement and extended my telescope, following his grisly progress until he vanished over Highbury Fields. "Where are they taking him?"



Noisette sniffed. "Back to Paris, I presume. His mission has failed and he'll have to answer to his superiors, a worse ordeal than grappling with the ghosts. At least those frights won't last long before returning to Hell. When does the visa expire?"

I frowned. "I didn't make out a date. I thought..."

For the first time, I saw the engineer in a temper. "You donkey! Do ye mean to tell me that brood are free to roam the Earth forever? 'Tis a pitiful day. You've hurt the world."

I hung my head in shame. "I'm very sorry."

"Aye, well I'd see that you are. But I've got important business to be getting on with. Trillions of licenses to issue. If I'm successful in dismantling the sphere, I'll return to give you a thrashing. Until then, you'd better stay out of my way and try not to interfere further. I know you've played your part, but now you're a liability and I don't want you around anymore. Zimara was smarter."

Wishing to make amends, I said, "You're welcome to use my office to operate the machine. I'll ensure you're not disturbed. Together we'll be highly efficient. Give me a chance!"

He dismissed my offer. "It's too big for you now. I need to see the prime minister. The licensing laws must be repealed. It's important that new ghosts are free to haunt the surface. Can't have any more falling to the planet's core. I'll take the press along. There are secret attics in Downing Street where it can be installed."

I noted the device had stopped of its own accord. I yielded, held a hand out to the engineer, which he ignored, and walked away, heading for home. At least I had one thing to look forward to -- an admiring wife. An unbearable excitement hurried me and within twenty minutes I stood on my doorstep and slotted my key into the lock. The house was strangely quiet and my call resounded hollowly. I went upstairs and found the bedroom in disarray. The wardrobes were all agape and my wife's clothes were strewn on the carpet. Many of them were missing, together with her jewellery. I wandered the other rooms in a stupor.

It occurred to me that Zimara might have elaborated his own role in the adventure to the detriment of mine. Perhaps he hadn't even mentioned me at all! Combined with his good looks, such lies would have captivated my wife utterly. That was it -- he'd stolen her away! I descended into my cellar for a bottle of brandy, to poison my grief, but a second surprise awaited me. Zimara had accepted my offer of helping himself to my stock. Every rack was empty. Fragments of a dropped glass of champagne sparkled on the stone flags, like drunken stars, and bubbling footprints led into the darkest corner. I couldn't explain this. It was as if the rascal had eloped with my wife through the wall.

I returned to the institute, but Noisette had also gone. I wondered if he would ever reach Downing Street and convince the prime minister of the truth of his tale. I'm still wondering -- I have heard no news. There are other stories dominating the headlines. It seems that dinosaurs have been discovered in Finsbury Park, emerging from the underground station. The sensible ones have started to move south, toward Holborn. There is a pub there which caters for extinct species, including writers. Meanwhile I enjoy a mordant success in my profession. Not all the ghosts collected by my etheric-engyscope were transferred to suitcases. One was lodged at the back of the instrument -- the Marquis de Sade. I discovered him while cleaning the gadget. He's a grim wit.

This breakthrough in Applied Eschatology has enhanced my reputation in the scientific community. My Department has been relocated and I rest my feet on Dean Nutt's desk. His students now occupy my former building, where they conduct acoustical experiments between the crevices. But I am unhappy. I want revenge on my betrayers. To that end, I've embarked on a fresh project. With care, I may be able to recreate a second singularity in this very room. Then we'll see who's the cleverest one! Watch closely as I knead together the Marquis de Sade, jars of ectoplasm, a tooth from a walking skeleton and a link from a rattling chain. It's a modest start but I live in hope. My wife must die someday and when she does, her soul will fly into this orb. If I can make it small enough, I may even use it as a wheel on my new leather chair.