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Opening extract from

Island of the Phantoms

Written by

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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Courtney, Orion, and Ming crawled through the rotting mulch and ducked beneath a tangled hedge of rhododendrons. In the darkness the wet leaves and limp blossoms licked their arms and faces. The dank smells of moldering foliage, dying flowers, and decaying bark added to the uncomfortable sensations of bugs crawling up their ankles and spiderwebs in their hair. Earlier that night there had been a thunderstorm. Though the rain had stopped, the air was warm and humid, as if a huge invisible dog were breathing down their necks.

The clouds had pulled apart to reveal a sliver of the moon, hanging above them in the sky like a sharpened sickle. Fifty feet ahead, they could see the profile of the

library with its granite walls, cast-iron grilles, and turreted roof that made it look like a fortress.

"Somebody's there," whispered Orion.

"No, that's just a security light," said Courtney. "It's always on."

"How do we get inside?" Ming asked.

"Follow me." Courtney lifted herself off her knees and into a crouch. The three of them crossed the empty parking lot and ran through the shadows of an overhanging oak until they reached a corner of the library, where they huddled together, listening for sounds.

"Are you sure there isn't a burglar alarm?" said Ming, pressing herself against the rough stone wall.

"No, of course there isn't," said Courtney, who always had an answer even if she wasn't sure. "Nobody's going to steal old books."

In the distance they heard a car and saw its headlights flickering through the trees along Elm Street. After the sound of its engine faded into the distant mumble of the interstate, Courtney led them along the wall to a barred window at ground level.

"Come on, help me," she said. Together, the three of them were able to lift the heavy metal grate. Once this had been removed, Courtney pushed on the window, which

swung open easily. Earlier that day, she had unlatched it from inside.

"Ming, you're the smallest, you go first. There's a desk right under the window."

Hesitating for a moment, Ming felt Orion push her forward. It was like crawling into a mailbox. She squirmed in backward and feet first. Her arms scraped against the windowsill and she felt herself begin to fall, but at the last second her shoe kicked the desk, and she was able to stand up before lowering herself to the floor. Inside the library basement it was completely dark, like a cave or a tomb. Above her, Ming could just make out Orion's shape as he slid through the window and nearly fell on top of her. Every scuffling sound they made was amplified. Courtney followed, and the window closed behind her with a thud.

"Where's the flashlight?"

"Here," said Orion.

A feeble beam of yellow light poked through the darkness, and they could see one another's faces in the glow.

"It isn't very bright," said Ming. "You should have got new batteries."

Orion shone the light over the rows of stacks that lined the basement. The gray metal shelves reached almost to the roof, and the spines of books stood in ordered ranks.

All three of them had been in the library basement many times before, but it looked different in the dark, as if everything were closer together. The musty odors of paper, ink, and glue were suffocating, and there was a muffled silence in the stacks, as if all of the words in all those books had never once been uttered aloud.

Now that they were inside, Ming led the way, reading out the call numbers on the stacks as Orion's flashlight wavered from shelf to shelf.

"Here we go," said Ming, stopping in front of a sign that read BF250-GH85. She made her way down the rows of books until her fingers came to rest on one.

"BF1612.C76," she whispered. It was an ordinary-looking book, old and heavy as a brick, with a plain green cover that had no words or decoration—the kind of book that seemed to have been buried in the library forever, like a forgotten fossil.

Courtney leaned closer as Orion held the flashlight steady. The first few pages were blank, and on one of these was a smudged stamp in red ink:

CARVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY
RESTRICTED
NOT FOR CIRCULATION

As Ming turned to the title page, the batteries in the flashlight started to grow dimmer, though they could still read the words:

THE COMPLEAT NECROMANCER

An Investigation into the

Mysteries of the Afterlife

by

Prof. Hezekiah T. Osgood

1946

"What's a necromancer?" Orion whispered.

"Someone who talks to ghosts," said Courtney.

At the top of the page was a strange-looking symbol, a conch shell with wings.

"Quickly, page two hundred and three," said Ming.

"What time is it?" asked Courtney.

"Almost midnight." Orion glanced over his shoulder.

Ming flipped ahead, the pages brittle and sticking together. Her fingers trembled, and the old volume suddenly felt heavier. Two days before, when Ming had

discovered the book, it had fallen open to page 203, but tonight it seemed as if she would never find what she was looking for, as if the numbers had all been scrambled and everything was out of place.

"There it is," said Orion, shaking the flashlight to try to make it brighter.

" 'Spells and Incantations for Summoning the Deceased,' " Courtney read the chapter title under her breath.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Orion asked.

"You're afraid," said Courtney.

"No, I'm not."

"It says we have to read it all together," said Ming. " 'Three friends must gather in the darkness and conspire to raise the dead. If their voices join in unison, these words expelled in a single breath, only then will the spirits be revealed.' "

"What do we have to say?" Orion asked.

Ming pointed to the verses at the center of the page.

Nore glamat nantam algeron
Mutae crop gnong porce atum
Nor denam lostat sol manedron
Mutan ebel uknyn kul ebenatum

Gni loti velulu levi toling
Na pizrah tolo tharzipan
Gnilor ports ninstrop roling
Na pizro lodab abado lorzipan

"What does it mean?" Courtney wondered aloud.

"The book doesn't say," said Ming.

"How are we supposed to pronounce the words?" Orion said, trying to decipher the jumbled letters.

"We'll just have to do the best we can," Ming said. "Hurry, before the flashlight goes out."

"I can hardly read it," Orion complained, leaning forward nervously.

"Remember, all in one breath," said Courtney. "Here we go—one, two, three . . ."

It was like taking a big gulp of air before you jump into the deep end of a swimming pool. As they read the words aloud, their voices sounded strange and distant. At first the syllables seemed to fit together awkwardly, and they had to squint to read the tiny print, but by the second stanza it felt as if they were all speaking the same language. The rhyme and rhythm fell together. In the hollow darkness of the library basement, their three voices became the echo of a single voice that rustled the pages on the book like the

first breeze before a storm.

After they had finished, none of them moved, eyes fixed on the page, where the words seemed garbled now, as if the ink had started to run and blur. But it was just the fading flashlight, which had grown dimmer and dimmer until it finally went out. Orion shook it again, but the batteries were now completely dead, and darkness closed in around them.

"Let's get out of here," said Ming.

"Wait," said Orion. "Listen."

They held their breath for almost a minute.

"It's nothing," said Courtney. "The spell didn't work."

"Did you really think it would?" said Orion.

"No, of course not." Courtney laughed nervously. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Especially not in libraries," said Ming, trying to sound relieved.

"Okay, let's go," said Orion.

"Wait, I have to put the book back on the shelf, but I can't see." Ming was fumbling about in the dark, her hands brushing the cold metal shelves.

All three of them reached out and felt along the stacks, trying to locate the empty space where the book had been. Eventually, Ming found a gap and pushed the volume into

place. Stumbling over one another, they made their way back down the row of shelves.

"We could turn on a light," said Ming.

"Don't be stupid," said Courtney. "Somebody might see it and call the cops."

"Ouch," said Orion, as he bumped into the desk.

Through the squares of glass in the window above, the moon peered in on them. It seemed much larger now, like a giant eye, half-opening out of sleep.

Climbing onto the desk, Courtney reached up and struggled with the latch before prying it loose. Though climbing inside had been easy, it was going to be much harder to get out.

"You'll have to boost me," said Courtney. "Then I can help pull each of you up."

She was about four inches taller than the other two. Having grown a lot this year, Courtney was self-conscious about her height, though at times like this it was an advantage. With all three of them standing on the desk, it began to creak as if the legs were going to break. Finally, Orion and Ming were able to lift Courtney high enough so that she could scramble through. After that she dragged Ming up while Orion pushed from below. Now he was left alone in the basement. While the two girls reached down to help

him, he tried to scale the wall.

Just then they heard a siren.

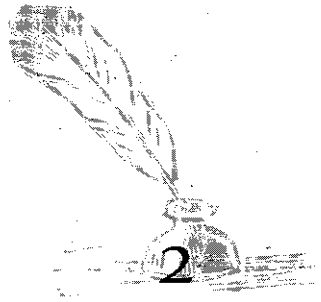
Courtney and Ming let go of Orion's wrists. He stood on the desk as the wailing of the siren grew louder. Even inside the basement the sound seemed to be coming in his direction. Outside, the girls kneeled next to the window, trying to decide if they should run and hide. There was more than one siren now, and they could see red and blue lights flashing along Elm Street. A fire truck went by, followed by an ambulance, but instead of turning down the street toward the library, the sirens kept on going in the opposite direction.

Ming could feel her heart pounding in her throat, and her mouth had gone dry. Courtney let out her breath and turned back toward the window.

"Orion!" she whispered. "Come on. Let's get you out of there. Orion?"

"Orion!"

There was no reply.



2

Earlier, when Ming had first found *The Compleat Necromancer,* she read the introduction, which described a country called Ilhas dos Fantasmas. This was where Hezekiah Osgood, the author, had done his research on ghosts. Ming had never heard of the place before, but after checking upstairs in the reference section of the library, she came upon an entry in the *Encyclopedia Orientalia,* which explained that the Republic of Ilhas dos Fantasmas (also known as Prithvideep) lies in the middle of the Indian Ocean, just south of the equator. The golden sands of these remote islands are washed by the Bromeil current, a seasonal swirl of water that circles up from Antarctica, carrying with it a multitude of squid, krill,

and plankton. As sailors have known for centuries, the current is especially treacherous in early August, bearing many ships to their doom on the coral reefs that ring Ilhas dos Fantasmas.

A chain of six islands, all but one of which is forested, make up the smallest nation on Earth. It has a combined landmass of thirty-two square kilometers and a total population of 923. The inhabitants of Prithvideep trace their ancestry to a mix of castaways, wanderers, and seafarers from every continent in the world, who have settled there over the past three centuries. In 1719, the Portuguese laid claim to the islands and gave them their name. However, Lisbon never asserted its rule or appointed a governor, for the territory was so minuscule it could hardly be considered a colony. At that time the population was no more than thirty, all but eight of whom belonged to the same family. The patriarch was Prithvi Sangarajan, a fisherman from the Malabar coast, who was lost at sea during a monsoon storm and suddenly found himself riding the Bromeil current to another destiny. His future wife, Philomenia, arrived six months later. Her story has never been fully explained, though it is whispered that she was the mistress of a pirate from Zanzibar who threw her overboard in a drunken quarrel. There is another version,

recounted within the family, that Philomenia was the daughter of a Spanish admiral, and the sole survivor of a wreck that sank his galleon. Whatever the truth may be, the Prithvis have always been the first family of Ilhas dos Fantasmas, and many of the inhabitants can trace part of their lineage back to Sangarajan and Philomenia.

As Ming continued reading, she learned that Ilhas dos Fantasmas got its name from early lore and legends about ghosts that are believed to have once haunted the islands, though there seems to be no current evidence of phantoms. According to some accounts, these spirits, known as *arora*[1] in the local dialect, once lived side by side with human beings until they suddenly disappeared, never to be seen again. This is one of the many mysteries and marvels of these islands. Another is a unique form of astrology practiced by men known as star-catchers.[2]

Until recently, the people of Ilhas dos Fantasmas used only feather money. Though there are no native birds on the islands, many migratory species pass through

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1. Arora is an expression used only on Ilhas dos Fantasmas, but it shares the same root as the English word aurora. Like many other words in the island's language, it is a local variation of the European spelling.

2. Using the photosensitive properties of a rare gum tree *(Glutinous luminosa)*, found only on these islands, the star-catchers produce strips of bark cloth that are spread on the beach at night. The light from distant galaxies and constellations leaves its mark on the surface of these scrolls, much like images on a camera film. By reading the curved shapes and patterns that are preserved, star-catchers can predict the future.

Prithvideep, crossing the equator in either direction. Before the introduction of modern currency, islanders collected feathers and considered these a form of wealth.

When Prithvideep declared independence from Portugal in 1912, nobody outside the islands really noticed. A constitution was drawn up, with a few unusual innovations, including a provision that the elected president of the Republic serve for a fixed term of seven years, after which he or she is sacrificed to the sharks.[3] This political ritual was decried by the few outside observers who visited the islands, and it attracted some attention in America, when whaling vessels returned with stories of distant lands. The Learned Society for the Elucidation of Primitive Cultures, based in Hornswoggle, Massachusetts, decided to send a scholar to Prithvideep in 1914 to learn more about the islands and help foster puritan values and democratic ideals. Professor Hezekiah T. Osgood, his wife, Clara, and their son, Nicodemus, who was only six months old, were sent by whaling ship. The Bromiel current, full of squid and plankton, attracted many whales and whaling vessels from America. Six weeks after leaving Hornswoggle, the Osgoods found

3. This practice was stopped in 1973, though there are occasional agitations to resurrect the tradition depending on who is president.

themselves in a dinghy, paddling through the waves and across the reef to the shores of the largest island of Prithvideep.

Their arrival was uneventful, though Hezekiah had loaded his musket just in case. Two of the islanders helped drag the dinghy ashore and led the Osgoods to a grove of coconut palms where the president of the Republic was taking his afternoon nap in a hammock. He still had four more years left in his term and slept soundly. When finally awakened, he decreed that the Americans could build themselves a home at one end of the coconut grove, so long as they promised not to cut any of the trees. All of this was communicated in hand gestures and signs. One of the first things Hezekiah did, after building his thatch hut, was to begin studying the language, and he soon discovered it was a combination of all the different vernaculars representedon the island. The Americans had little influence on Prithvideep, despite Hezekiah's establishing a Latin grammar academy—which closed down soon after it started—and Clara's futile efforts to get the women to wear bonnets. On the other hand, the effects of Prithvideep on the Osgoods were considerably more profound.