

The Blood Canvas

Andrew waited under the arches of Cabildo at the corner of Charters and St. Peter. The streetlamp glowed softly in the early evening light. Crowds were beginning to mingle and grow as All Hallows Eve's high hour grew close at hand. Still he could steal an occasional glimpse of the riverboat as it steamed by on the Mississippi. The humidity hung in the air along with the whiff of horse urine mingled with dirt's decay. Huge oak trees lined the target of his interest, St. Peter Street.

It was here the community of New Orleans's artists plied their trade. Musician's, painters, and more than a few homeless thieves and vagrants graced Jackson Square, the heart of French Quarter. But the iron wrought fence surrounding Jackson's monument was the artist's domain, their turf, their kingdom, their livelihood. It seemed easy to join this small, jovial subset of New Orleans humanity. But Andrew knew that only time and talent truly cemented your membership.

Membership that gave you insights to the more sordid details of life on the square. The artist's secrets, shame, and nightmares were only shared with members of this tightknit family. Purchasing some art and selling some caricatures had earned Andrew his place among these peers. With the honor came the information he had sought so desperately for so long, the story of the blood canvas.

As Andrew waited patiently for his companions, a high pitched woman's laughter split the air. The sweet gentleness of the tone and the innocence of its joy drove Andrews's thoughts from tonight's gruesome task. His mind was transported to the meadow as a gentle smile crossed his lips. Heather, Crystal, and Eden were giggling unabashedly at some insider joke as they lay about the blanket set upon the ground. Andrew, Allan, and Grant had rolled their eyes knowingly as the three girls began an intense exchange of gossip, insights, and general tawdry information. It was all good fun with no harm intended, but the ladies just seemed to delight in the light banter.

Andrew turned his gaze from the women to their surroundings. It was a quiet place, save the chatter, and beautiful. All six members of their group were artists. Quite often they chose their summer picnic spots based upon nature's palate, not any common sense. More than once this habit had gotten them in trouble with some land owner or the odd animal.

Andrew couldn't fathom the amount of time that had passed since that gathering. He did remember the taste of the cold beer, the smell of the tall grass surrounding them. His mind forced his hand to reach out to feel once again the breeze as it passed by. The day was warm then, not hot, and far from the humid confines of New Orleans. Andrew could feel the warmth of Heather's skin on his as he touched it for assurances of her love. Heather turned and grabbed his hand in hers. Her eyes were shining saucers of youth and love as she bent down to grace his lips with her kiss.

Andrew touched his lips at the memory. He felt the fullness of her kiss and the sweat taste of her lips. Their softness thrilled him. But this short reverie was shattered by the whinny of a horse. It jolted him back to his task at the square. The kiss's memory lingered and its loss drove him deeper into despair.

Shortly after that last picnic the group began to break up. Grant went on to Savannah to learn more and ply his trade. Allan had made some detours through New York and California. Chrystal and Eden tried domestic life then quickly traded it in for itinerant artist. The free spirit that drives creativity couldn't be bound behind a split-level with a bath. Heather and Andrew had moved to a fourth floor walkup in SoHo splitting time between starving artist waiting to be discovered to waiter at the local bar.

But they both had shared intense togetherness. It was them against the world. They worked together, laughed together, and loved the deepest love together. Andrew was making serious gains in New York as an emerging young artist. Heather had yet to catch on and Andrew knew, despite her protests, that she was unhappy.

Then one morning she had left without leaving a note. There was no need. He knew where she was going. New Orleans. It was a destination and who they were. She longed to go back and he couldn't deny the desire either. They were always happiest in New Orleans and they could ply their trade on the wrought iron fence of Jackson Square.

But Andrew's career was in New York. He fumbled a heartfelt wish for her success on Heather's Facebook page. Then Andrew shut himself in the now cold lifeless apartment. When a week had passed Andrew picked up his brushes and began to paint once more.

Five years had passed since she left. Andrew would like to believe he had moved on, but he knew he really hadn't. His artwork really began selling shortly after she left. The agony of her leaving had been transferred to his brush. That passion had attracted buyers and cemented his position as a collectable artist. He had become the success they had both hoped to achieve. But it was an empty success.

A string of lovers and friends passed his time. He began to move on with his life although the ache of Heather's absence never seemed to abate. Then a random email with an unknown address filled his inbox. It came with a picture embedded of his lost Heather. The picture showed Heather with her beautiful smile standing before her paintings hung upon the Jackson Square fence. Andrew smiled at the picture. But he realized from the time stamp the picture was four years old.

Andrew flipped over to Facebook and typed in Heather's page. Little came up. For all intents and purposes the page had been abandoned for almost four years. Andrew couldn't believe it had been that long. He looked again at the email.

The only information embedded besides the picture were the words New Orleans, Jackson Square. Four words. Just four words and his world churned in agony again. Andrew left the next day for New Orleans.

Andrew had walked the square on his first day in the old city. He thought he might catch a quick glimpse of Heather, maybe even his old friend Grant. Grant had moved back to New Orleans shortly after Heather. Andrew didn't know what he would say or do. He just needed to see Heather and know she was alive. He needed to know she was OK. Andrew soon remember local artists don't keep regular hours or even days. He made a few inquiries but was met with muted responses and furtive looks. It became clear he wasn't going to get any information quickly.

Days of searching. Frequent trips around and around the square didn't reveal any new evidence. But time slowly melted some of the resistance, time and the purchase of one or two works of art. Acquaintances were developed and stories shared. Eventually a drink or two was purchased late at night at one of the local taverns.

The Three Legged Dog was a fertile ground for gossip. It was far enough away from the square that peer pressure gave way to thirst. Curtis was one of the first to give him a clue. They were setting together at the bar, Curt's dog Odin at his feet. Andrew noted that the dog's coat was as black as the night outside. Odin also seemed more welcome in the bar than his owner.

"Yeah. I knew Grant. Good artist. One of those killed in the square," Curtis said.

"What do you mean killed?" Andrew was taken aback. He hadn't known Grant had died let alone had been murdered at the square.

"I think he was the third blood canvas," Curtis replied. He downed the last of the dregs of his drink and slammed the glass on the bar.

"Blood canvas?"

Curtis looked up with tired eyes set inside a weathered face, a product of too many days on the square. He slumped in his chair and what little energy he had left from his turn at the fence slipped from his body. Odin looked up somehow knowing a deep pain had risen to the surface. Curtis scratched Odin behind the ears for some solace. Then he looked in the distance as if trying to remember the tale.

"Yeah. We call 'em the blood canvas because each one was painted with the fresh blood of their victims. Been going on five years now. Cops are going crazy trying to find the bastard. Won't find a regular out on Halloween night because of it." Curtis replied.

The next round came and Andrew paid the bill.

"What's the story?"

"Take at least another drink and a poor boy to tell that story. Odin's got a thirst too."

Andrew nodded to the bar keep to confirm the order. The bar keep left to complete the request as Curtis took a small sip from the drink in front of him. It was the first hint on Andrew's quest to find Heather and now Grant. He wasn't going to pass it up.

"Blood canvases have been showing up for four years now. Happens every Halloween, right at the witching hour. You would think with all the cops around it would have stopped some time ago. But doesn't seem to matter how many cops are there. Every All Hallows morning another painter is found dead and that damn blood canvas lying next to them.

First victim was a woman named Heather. Didn't know much about her. She was a tremendous artist. Her brush strokes were just right. The composition perfect. She really was exceptional as an artist. Her art compelled you to look. Should 'a been in some gallery in New York or Paris. But there she was painting right next to us. Sitting on that little stool, painting, reading, or just passing time."

Andrew's world stopped when he heard Heather's name. He face turned white and he thought he was going to throw up.

"Whoa. You all right? You look sick. You need something?" Curtis asked as Andrew seemed to fade on his chair.

Andrew fought to regain himself. First he found out Grant and now Heather had been killed by some freak in the very square they sought refuge. He needed to know the story. He sat back in his chair, waved off Curtis' help and took a deep gulp from his glass.

"I'll be alright. Just tell the story."

Curtis took another look and then began again.

"Well Halloween was coming to New Orleans. Big time in New Orleans. Lots of people partying, lots of tourists. Basically New Orleans just more intense. Heather was selling her paintings almost as quickly as she painted them. She was laughing and having fun.

Anyhow Halloween arrived and Heather was sitting under that old oak tree at the corner of Charters and St. Peter. You know the one. It sets inside the fence surrounding old Jackson. One of its tall branches reaches out over St. Peter. Heather had set herself up just there."

"It was getting late and close to midnight so we were all pulling up stakes. Those of us that hadn't left already for some party. Heather wasn't moving though. Said she was going to stay right up to midnight. She wanted to be in the heart of the old city at the height of the witching hour. She laughed

that beautiful laugh and even tried a witch's cackle. I laughed back and moved on. I had a party of my own to go to so I didn't stick around. Must have happened shortly after I left though."

"What happened?" Andrew asked.

Curtis shuddered at his thoughts, drew a deep breath, and took another drink.

"It was the next morning when we found Heather. I remember she was in one of those blue Victorian dresses. You know the kind that buttons up all the way to the neck. A flower print I remember. It was such a vivid memory. Never had seen anyone hang themselves before, so the scene sort of stuck with me."

"Hang themselves?" Andrew sucked in his breath as though he had been sucker punched.

"Yeah. She hung herself right there under that tree, right on that branch. Threw an old rope across the branch stepped on the stool and hung herself. At least that is what we thought at first. People passing by all night thought it was a Halloween prank. Some even took selfies with it. Wasn't till morning we knew what it really was. That it had all been staged. That she really had been murdered."

"Anyone find out what happened?"

"No idea and no clues. Well except one. There was a picture laying against the fence just next to Heather's hanging body. When they took a closer look at it they saw the brown and red areas were done in her blood. Her veins had been opened and used to paint the picture. Who could do that?" Curtis paused in his story as he thought about what he had said. "Anyway it was the first of the blood canvas."

"The first."

"Yeah seems Heather's death started a new curse for the old city. Like the voodoo and cities of death aren't enough weirdness. Every Halloween since her death people say that an hour before the witching hour a small woman wearing a blue Victorian dress sets up under that old oak. Some swear it's Heather. Others aren't so sure. Most of the artists and others won't even talk about it. Guess they are afraid they will be labeled as crazy. As if the Square artists aren't already known to be crazy."

"You see her?" Andrew asked.

"Not me. I am somewhere else on Halloween. Got no time for ghosts. Especially ghosts that get people killed."

"What do you mean?"

"Next year. First anniversary of her death was the first time anyone saw the ghost. One of the new painters came by the site, girl named Crystal. Apparently came to pay her respects. People say they saw her trying to talk to a woman in a Victorian dress just before midnight. The Crystal woman seemed scared and frightened. Next morning they found her crucified on the iron fence. Her body looked as though it had been whipped unmercifully and the veins on her arms were cut to let her blood flow freely. Next to her was another painting, painted with her blood.

"Next year your friend Grant. Damn good painter in his own right. Was found impaled on the fence. He was seen trying to talk to the same woman. A painting, using his own blood, was right next to him.

We have four canvases now. You can see 'em if you can get inside the top floor of the Cabilo. That's where they keep them for some reason. Gruesome if you ask me."

"Who was the last victim?" Andrew asked. He feared the answer before he even asked the question.

"A girl named Eden. Branch of one of the trees shoved right into her heart. Canvas on the path next to her feet."

Curt fell silent at the last revelation. It was getting late and Andrew's spirit was crushed. He had a lot to think about.

Andrew followed his thoughts with actions. He had decided to investigate the truth of Curtis' story and find out who really killed his friends. He found his buddy Allan and they delved into the world of the dead and mystic hoping for a clue. That journey found them in one of the old voodoo shops of New Orleans.

"Need a sensitive, a familiar." The old lady croaked. "Need someone that can feel the dead."

Allan shook his head as if this bitch had truly lost what was left of her mind. Andrew pressed a bit further.

"Know anyone that meets that skill set?" Andrew asked.

"You can ask Justin. He might do it. But he doesn't let anyone know he can. So it will be a bit of an effort to get him to agree. If he does, you can't get any better."

Andrew thanked the old witch, passed a few bills her way and headed out the door.

"You don't really take this seriously?" Allan asked.

"Not yet. But four of our friends are dead. Their blood was used to paint canvases. Doesn't hurt to check it out," said Andrew.

They found Justin at the fence. He was a tall lanky man with a shock of long wavy brown hair. A full unkempt beard filled his face. His eyes large and brown held your attention as soon as he looked at you. His clothes were a tattered mismatch of brown and some manner of orange. Fugitive paint from numerous canvases smeared both. His manner was exact, but his paintings revealed an unknown depth. A much rehearsed banter began as soon as Allan and Andrew looked at his paintings. Justin was full on trying to sell his wares.

"Double the price, in cash, for the large one if we get information," Andrew said.

Justin got quiet and stood back at the offer.

"I don't know anything. I'm not who you are looking for," Justin stated as he moved to find another buyer.

"You're a sensitive and if you don't want everyone to know it we'll talk," Andrew replied.

"Nobody will believe you. Why should I care?" Justin replied.

"Want to take the chance?" Andrew pushed back. He needed these services.

Justin moved over the fence next to his paintings. Andrew and Allen stood next to him.

"Keep looking at the paintings. Cost you triple the price, in cash if you want information. Cash up front," Justin said.

Andrew passed over the cash.

"Do you know where the blood canvases are?" Andrew asked.

Justin huffed in disgust.

"Hell everyone does. There over in the top floor of the Cabilo." Justin said while pointing toward the structure and its roof.

"Can you find them in there? In the middle of the night with hardly any light?" Andrew asked.

Justin stood back to look at Allan and Andrew fully at the last remark. He turned his head a little to the left as if to read something only he could see.

"You aren't ghost hunters." Justin paused, then his shoulders sagged. He placed his hand on Andrew's shoulder. "I'm really sorry. I didn't know. Your friends?"

Andrew and Allan were shocked. They hadn't said a thing, but Justin seemed to know exactly who they were looking for and what had happened to them. Andrew just nodded at Justin's question.

"Cabildo under the arches. Two am tonight. Enjoy your painting."

Justin took the painting from the fence and handed it to Andrew. He turned and approached another couple. Just like that they were dismissed. Andrew looked at Allan. Allen returned the gaze. Andrew clutched his painting and they both left.

Andrew and Allan were skeptical at best that Justin would actually meet them. But they were where he told them to be at the exact place and time. Andrew noticed that it was eerily quiet. Well quiet for New Orleans. There were a couple of vagrants loitering about along with one or two errant purveyors of illicit goods. Still the night had a low hanging quarter moon and low hanging clouds rolling in from the Gulf creating an eerie deep darkness.

"Fitting night for what we intend to do."

The voice came from behind and nearly frightened the piss out of them.

"Geez. Hang on dudes. It's only me." Justin said with a sly grin.

"Damn near scared me to death. Where the hell did you come from?" Allan asked.

Justin just turned and put a finger to his lips. He headed out from under the arches to Pirates Alley. He took a left, went the length of the wall, and then a left again. They were behind the Cabildo staring at a window with a loose grate.

"Give a hand up, dudes." Justin said.

Andrew and Allan gave him a boost to the window. He pulled the grate aside, pushed the window up and squirmed his way in. In about a second or two he leaned back out and reached down for Andrew. He pulled Andrew up and through the window, then did the same for Allan.

Andrew and Allan found themselves in a janitor's cramped janitor's closet. A small single LED flashlight as their only source of light. It gave off barely more light than a match.

"Stay close." Justin said as he opened the door. He suddenly moved out. Andrew and Allan moved right behind him. A left out the door, a few feet down the dimly lit hallway, and a left turn at another door took them to a set of stairs. Two hurried flights up the stairs and an exit through another door and Andrew and Allan found themselves at the top of the Cabildo. Justin led them down a hall and bypassed the locked door to the archive. They found themselves before an old air grate. Justin leaned down, unscrewed a couple of screws and pulled the grate off and then pushed his way into the adjoining room. Andrew and Allan followed.

"Welcome to the archives." Justin said as they stood up.

The room was full of crates, file cabinets, and shelving. It looked like New Orleans government had stored centuries of records in these rooms. A small sliver of moonlight broke the gathering clouds and passed into the room through a small round window perched near the ceiling. It added nothing to the atmosphere but a deeper sense of dread. It did expose the expanse of their task. Andrew and Allan wondered how Justin was going to find these canvases in all of this clutter.

Then Justin just sat down on the floor. He dropped right where he stood and closed his eyes. His breathing became quiet and regular. Allan was about to say something when Andrew put his hand on him. They both held their actions and watched Justin. Quietly and ever so gently the room became still. Not that it wasn't before, but it was as if death itself had entered the building. The room became noticeably colder and Andrew shivered in his skin. Without notice and in the most quiet of the moment Justin stood and started walking down the aisles. Andrew and Allan followed. First one way, then the

next. Around a file cabinet and past a desk. Suddenly Justin stopped before a large wooden box. He placed a hand on it and waited. Andrew looked at Justin. Tears ran down his face as if in a great sorrow.

"They're in here." Justin said and stood back.

Allan flipped a loose latch that was hanging from the box top and raised the lid. Stacked in a neat row were four 16x20 paintings. Andrew reached in and pulled out the first one.

"Heather's" Justin said pointing to the painting in Andrew's hands.

Andrew almost collapsed. But he turned it over and forced himself to look at the painting. It was a passable landscape of one of the Pontalba Building's. The one on the north east side of the square. But that isn't what drew Andrew's attention. It was obvious the red brick had been done with human blood. Her blood. Heather's blood. Tears fell from Andrew's face and he turned from the gruesome scene before him. He sat on the floor and hid his misery in his hands.

Allan moved forward and took each painting and placed them on the floor. He inspected them side by side. The gruesomeness of the textures used was apparent in each painting. But he held his sickness and looked at the pictures before him.

"These are not scenes from the current square. It was the square decades ago, maybe a century." Allan remarked.

Andrew and Justin forced themselves to look at what Allan had found. They were indeed landscapes of the square, but well before the fence was installed and many of the newer features. They were images from the past. As if the painter was actually there themselves.

"They're signed." Andrew said.

"Well the police never told anyone that. Why didn't they go pick him up and stop this." Justin asked as he peered to look at the name. "Oh shit. That's why."

"What do you mean, that's why." Andrew asked.

"The name. It's signed 'le peintre', the painter. It's French. The only artist to ever sign his name le peintre was a Frenchman in the 1840's. I am not dealing with this shit. This is Marie Laveau weirdness, the first Marie Laveau. We are putting this away and getting the hell out of here." Justin replied.

Justin grabbed the paintings, shoved them back in the box and made a beeline for the exits. It was everything Allan and Andrew could do to keep up. When they were finally outside, they grabbed Justin by the arm before he could leave.

"What the hell freaked you out in there? Who is le peintre?" Andrew asked. He did not have to be told about the voodoo queen Marie Laveau. After all he had lived in New Orleans. Everyone here had heard of her. Justin shook them off and headed into the dark night. It took another night before the tale would be told.

"Le peintre was a crazed lunatic. A psycho perfectionist obsessed painter in New Orleans in the 1840's. He was so obsessed with getting his paintings just right he used whatever material he needed to paint his paintings. He became convinced blood was the only true color of red that could be used. But he had to have fresh human blood. Nothing else would do. It was said he made a deal with the devil right in the middle of Jackson Square, right in front of St. Louis Cathedral. In return for the souls of the people he killed the devil would help him achieve perfection in his paintings using the blood of the victims." Curtis said.

Andrew and Allan were back in the Three Legged Dog. Curtis and Odin were relaxing on Andrew's dime after another day at the square. They couldn't find Justin anywhere after their late night sojourn so they turned back to Curtis.

"Might've worked out for him to, except that le peintre killed one to many of Marie Laveau's followers. Story says she confronted le peintre and the devil just short of where Jackson's monument now stands. Story says she drove a branch of prickly ash into his chest. It killed him instantly and she buried the body where it fell. Would explain a few things though."

"Such as?" Andrew asked.

"Why the killings fall on Halloween. It would be the only night with enough dark powers to allow his soul to rise from the grave. Why everyone killed so far is a painter. Le peintre believed killing painters and using their blood gave him their talents."

"But why is his soul able to escape now after more than a century held by Laveau's curse?"

"Probably a major ethereal event. You know, like having 1800 souls all taken at once well before their time.

"Katrina? You saying Katrina might have caused this?"

"That or some other event we don't know about. Doesn't really matter the demon soul has escaped."

"How do we stop it?"

"Why? Not your problem. Just leave. Nobody to kill. Nobody gets killed. Simple. Nothing as effective as not being there."

"Because Heather's soul isn't at rest."

"Ah. Yeah. Fair point. She keeps hanging around could be bad for the living as well as her." Curtis said while scratching Odin's ears.

Curtis paused awhile in deep thought.

"Shit were gonna need a familiar if we do this. And a witch. Hard to come by, especially on Halloween." Curtis continued speaking to no one in particular as he devised some weird plan in his head.

"Justin left, like now. Especially when Laveau was mentioned." Allan interjected.

"He ain't stupid. Still finding him isn't a problem. Getting mom to come over here would be the bitch. She has so much to do on Halloween. Guess a warlock could do it. Need some instruction from mom, though. Hell might as well. Haven't been in the ether in ages. Let's do it." Curtis said as he grabbed for another drink.

The plans, at least in Curtis' mind, were set.

Halloween night had arrived. Curtis, Justin, and Allan had finally joined Andrew under the arches of the Cabillo. Curtis looked every bit the warlock, a dark calf length cape with a blood red lining. His chest bore a silver pendant with various runes etched upon it. Dark leather boots matched the color of the cape. His dark black beard reminded Andrew of stylized pictures of Black Beard the pirate. The black velvet tri-corned hat completed the look. His ever present black companion sat silently by his side. Odin's attentions were riveted to the middle of Jackson Square.

"You sure Dad couldn't do this?" Justin asked in hushed tones.

"Halloween dude. You know better." Curtis whispered back.

"Nice look." Allan whispered when he saw Curtis. Allan still wasn't sure of all this supernatural crap and he definitely wasn't sure about Curtis.

"Thanks man. Halloween is about the only time I can wear the uniform."

"What's with the dog?" Allan followed up while rolling his eyes at Curtis' response.

"Hell hounds feel the demons and sense the undead. He knows something bad is close at hand." Curtis replied as his attention was drawn towards the object of Odin's stare.

Curtis crept towards the fence with Odin close at hand. Allan turned his head and was met with Justin's gaze. Justin was dressed all in black, black t-shirt, black pants, and black shoes. A pair of black gloves covered his hands.

"Nice gloves." Allan remarked.

"Helps filter out extraneous souls and concentrate on who I need." Justin remarked absentmindedly.

Justin was following Curtis actions closely. Curtis came back with Odin on his heels. Odin was obviously upset.

"It's coming. I can feel it." Justin said and closed his eyes as if concentrating on some inner desire.

"What's coming?" Andrew asked.

"The portal. It's one of the reasons Justin's here. He can find the portal and take us through. When the dead interact with the living an interdimensional plane has to be created to create a passage. What we call it a portal. The portal allows the dead to pass to the world of the living. It also allows us to pass to the land of the dead. If you can find the portal. But portals are only strong enough to allow passage at the witching hour on All Hallows Eve," Curtis said.

"Really." Allan said skeptically and rolled his eyes towards Andrew. "What are the other reasons he's here?"

"Well most importantly to get us back before the portal closes. But primarily to find the burial spot of le peintre."

"Here she comes." Justin whispered and pointed to the old oak tree.

Out of a wisp of gray fog a figure began to appear just below the limb of the old oak tree. It was a small woman in a Victorian dress buttoned up to her neck.

"Heather." Andrew uttered quietly. He couldn't believe it. As he was about to move to see her better Justin interrupted his thoughts.

"It's time," Justin said as he moved forward. It took Andrew a moment but he began to follow Curtis as they moved forward.

Justin, then Curtis suddenly slipped into nothingness and disappeared.

Andrew turned his head to look at Heather once more as he followed Curtis into the ether. Their eyes met briefly and she seemed to scream a warning he could not hear. A terrified worry filled her face. But he and Allan were pulled through the nothingness and could not stop.

They found themselves standing inside Jackson Square. But it wasn't really Jackson Square. It was silent as the grave, dark and oppressive. The sounds of the modern world slipped away and an oppressive heat bore down on them even in the darkness of the night surrounding them. Wisps of gray flew overhead and silent objects seemed to walk aimlessly around the grounds. A hand grabbed each of their arms.

"Stay close. We can't waste time looking for you or we'll all be stuck in here when the portal closes. You fall behind your left behind. Got it?" Curtis asked.

Andrew and Allan nodded their heads, any doubts soundly dashed at the passage through the portal.

"If you are handling le peintre and Justin's handling the portal, what are we here for?" Allan asked.

"Bait." Curtis said walking quickly towards Justin.

Andrew and Allan stopped in their tracks. Curtis turned and came back to move them along.

“Basically le peintre is looking for blood, painter’s blood and hopefully he will come for you. That will distract him long enough for us to do what needs to be done. Oh, and by the way if you see Grant, Eden, or Crystal in here keep moving, you can’t help them. But they can hold you here, a wholly unpleasant experience for any mortal.” Curtis continued as he finally got them moving again.

“Would have been nice to know all that before we came.” Andrew spat out.

“Yeah, well the void is a bit hard to explain unless you see the place first.”

Justin was standing just before the base of the Jackson statue. He was obviously nervous and vigorously pointing at the ground before him.

“Justin’s found the burial spot.” Curtis said. He moved forward with Allan and Andrew close at hand.

An agonizing scream from beyond death split the silence. A black demon formed just before Justin. It reached out as if to drag him to hell when suddenly a large black shape broke through the sky with a blood chilling howl. Odin grabbed the demon’s arm with sharp menacing 6 inch teeth. Odin’s eyes were blood red and his mane carried a hideous razor back. His lips drooled with rancid acid.

“Hell hound.” Curtis yelled as he moved forward to help his brother.

Andrew and Allan were frozen in place. The demon broke free from Odin’s grasp and his dark blood red eyes snapped to focus on the two of them. The word “bait” suddenly crossed Allan’s mind again as a long sharp claw reached out and gashed open his arm as he moved to protect himself. The pain was excruciating and he fell to the ground with an ear-piercing wail. Andrew rushed to him. He tried to pull both of them closer to Curtis who was frantically screaming phrases in French while performing some weird unknown rituals.

Odin leapt towards the demon once more with teeth bared, but missed. The demon directed his next attack towards Andrew who was frantically draped over Allan trying to protect him. Andrew could feel its heated breath as it came closer and prepared for an agonizing death. Suddenly blood curdling screams split the air. A swirl of gray masses descended on the demon. Glowing eyes, long claws, and determined anger flailed against the hideous entity forcing it back from Andrew and Allan.

Then unexpectedly the ground exploded with angry red and yellow light from intense flames dancing fiercely above le peintre’s grave. Andrew and Allan turned their eyes to witness Curtis on his knees thrusting a large branch of prickly ash into the ground. A woman that looked strangely like Marie Laveau hovered in brutal determination over his shoulder.

The burial of the prickly ash forced the demon to fall into the angry flames. The gray mass shoving and pushing him down. Then for a moment the gray mass separated and hollow sad eyes looked his way. Andrew recognized the faces of Grant, Eden, and Crystal. He wanted to reach out to them, but with a final explosion the flame, his friends, and the demon collapsed into nothingness. All was quiet. Andrew and Allan remained frozen in place.

“Dudes. We gotta go now!” Justin and Curtis were suddenly pulling and dragging Andrew and Allan trying to move them to the portal. “You fall behind, you stay behind, dude!”

Odin was already at the portal entrance pacing back and forth. Andrew tried to get Allan to his feet. They ran as fast as they could. Curt jumped through the portal first along with Odin. Justin was just ahead of Andrew and went through when Allan fell. The portal was closing fast. Andrew reached down to pick up Allan when they were pulled through the portal by some unseen force. Andrew fell on his head and blacked out.

It had been a few weeks since Halloween. Le piente's defeat had saved the square from another blood canvas and calmed the square's unconventional inhabitants. The Christmas rush was coming and money needed to be made. Yesterday's horrors were being quickly forgotten by many. Andrew threw another piece of his beignet toward Odin. Odin ate it up quickly and went back to sit down near Curtis.

"He'll do that all day. He loves those things," Curtis chuckled.

"Fine with me. Don't want to be on his bad side." Andrew laughed.

Normal as normal was had returned to New Orleans and the square, and their day was moving toward evening. Andrew reflected that this day had been a good day. He had sold a couple of his minor paintings off the fence and his gallery was opening soon. The sun hadn't been too hot as late autumn had arrived. But the smell of horse urine mixed with the decay of leaves and dirt still permeated the air. Still it was home, St. Peter's at Jackson Square in New Orleans. Allan walked towards them waving a wad of cash.

"Sold the large one." He smiled.

He took the empty chair just opposite Andrew. Another empty chair sat just next to him.

"I see she's back." Allan smiled.

"It's still too weird that you two can see Heather." Justin added sitting down next to them.

"Told you bro. When she pulled them through the portal, she got stuck over here. You fall behind, you stay behind. Being in the ether lets them see the ether." Curtis said.

"Yeah. Then how come we can't see her?"

"Dude, you'll have to ask mom that."

"What's she doing now?" Justin asked.

"Same as always." Allan sighed shaking his head.

Andrew looked her way. Heather was indeed doing what she always did. She sat quietly in the chair always reserved for her. Her hands painted lovely images on ghostly canvases. She wore a blue Victorian dress that was buttoned all the way to her neck. She looked over and smiled at her beloved Andrew. He smiled back. As they sat and waited for one more customer a stranger walked up to the group. His furtive look told them there was something wrong.

"Can I help you?" Allan asked.

"I was told you might be able to help me find a lost grave." He said.

"Well, I know you will need a familiar." Allan laughed.

"Oh, hell no." Justin said as he packed up immediately and left the square.