

14 or 30

How to Get a Head in the Afterlife...Without Really Trying

There were three skeletons standing by the snack table. The first had no eyes, the second had no mouth and the third had no ears... well, I guess none of them had ears. They seemed to be guarding the punch bowl with their lives. They were hogging every drop, but I couldn't wrap my head around why. The one with no eyes never got any because he missed his cup every time he poured it. The one with no mouth couldn't drink it because he had no bottom jaw. And the one with no ears... well, considering he was an all-around regular skeleton, seemed to be the only one able to drink it. Oh well, I suppose I had enough anyway. That arsenic was throwing me off my game. I passed up several opportunities to grab Guillotina while no one was watching, and all of this could've been over before you could say *rigor mortis*.

But, spotting Eva beside the Phantom's organ, I realized that it wasn't too late to carry out my plans. "Francesca!" She ignored me. "Miss DeSalvo!" She perked up and looked around but still didn't realize I was calling her. "Eva!" She looked my way and waved ecstatically. "C'mere!" She floated across the dance floor, apparently expressing embarrassment at having to phase through so many guests.

"Sorry. Excuse me. Sorry." After she passed, the ghosts she went through seemed strangely fatigued and a little upset. "Sorry about that." She stopped in front of me and clicked her heels together. "Hi, Charlotte. Boy, I feel great all of a sudden. I don't know why!"

"I was calling Francesca DeSalvo for quite some time."

"Really? Who's she?"

"She's you!"

"... Oh, right! Sorry about that."

"It's okay, but I need you to do something."

"Hmm?" She seemed a little preoccupied with something.

"I need you to get up on stage with the orchestra and sing."

"What?" She locked her gaze to mine and looked at me as if I were threatening her puppy. "But I can't get up in front of all these dead people and perform!"

"But you do it in front of live people all the time."

"That's different. It's more intimate in the restaurant."

I put my hands around her arms and shook her gently, saying, "You once told me that you wanted to sing on stage, right? It's just that you were too scared. Well now is the perfect time to stop being scared! I need you to do this for me otherwise we're all sunk. I need you to go up there and sing a nice song for me."

"Well, what should I sing?"

"It doesn't matter. Make something up if you have to. If my hunch is correct it won't matter what you sing as long as you sing it!"

"And if your hunch isn't correct?"

"Then you finish the song, come down here for a glass of pumpkin punch and we'll come up with another plan! Just give it a try!" She was still staring at me with those scared little girl eyes as she vanished from sight. I figured I'd give her as long as she needed to pull herself together. I trusted that she would do what she had to. She always had before. Iggy jogged over and asked if I'd found Eva. "I did, but..."

"But what? What's wrong?"

"She's got stage fright."

"Stage fright? Are you kidding me? She's a ghost for crying out loud!"

"I know but we just have to give her some space. She's got her own things to work out."

"I don't think that'll be a problem," he said open-jawed as he pointed to the stage. Eva had just materialized up there, looking timidly out from under her flowing hair.

"Ummm..." She cleared her throat as she addressed the partygoers. "My name is..."

Please don't say Eva...

"...Francesca DeSalvo."

Phew...

"I'm an opera singer..." There was a round of applause. "and apparently I'm famous. I'd like to sing a song for you, if that's alright." There was more thunderous clapping and she smiled.

"In fact, eet's better san alright," echoed a female voice with a French accent. Everyone turned toward Guillotina, standing gracefully at the foot of the steps. "Ah was hoping you would perform for us,

Mademoiselle DeSalvo. As long as my cousin, Coppelia, we'll dance as well." Eva nodded happily as Coppelia did a cartwheel onto the stage and landed with a bow; her ribbons flailing.

"Ready?" Guillotina asked her cousin. But the mechanical girl suddenly shirked at the audience and slid over toward her.

"I'm kind of embarrassed, Cuginatina, but..."

"What?" The doll whispered something into her ear. "Oh! Of course, Darling! Sere's nosing to be ashamed of; we're all among friends!" Then Guillotina stepped behind Coppelia and wound the brass key in her back five times. With a low ticking sound, the key spun slowly and the doll gave her cousin a grateful hug. "Now remember, Copi," I heard the countess whisper as she passed the stage. "If you're going to do any acrobatees, just be mindful of your surroundings. Try not to drop kick Mademoiselle DeSalvo, like you deed our musical guest last time."

"*Oui-G!*"

"Coppelia..."

"I mean, *Oui Oui!* Yes yes! *Si, signiorina, la mia bella cugina!*" Guillotina placed a hand to her temple, shook her head and returned to the staircase. Once everything was quiet, the orchestra started playing, accompanied by the Phantom on the organ and Mr. Invisible on piano. As Eva first opened her mouth, hardly any sound came out at all, as if her voice itself were too timid to speak up. But as she saw that the audience was awaiting her every note, she sped up into a rousing song, exceeding even my expectations. Coppelia danced gleefully beside her, twirling like a top and inspiring the others to take the floor and dance as well. The whole party was filled with merriment as Eva's voice sped up and got louder. Mr. Invisible stepped up his tempo again and the ghostly guests frolicked at a swinging beat. Skeletal toes were tapping and the orchestra became livelier than they had been all night.

*"There's nothing mysterious about spooks
There's nothing mysterious about spooks
When the sun and daylight pass away
The tombstones shake and start to sway
There's nothing mysterious about spooks"*

*There's something mysterious about love
There's something mysterious about love
There's something I can't understand
About people walking hand in hand
But there's nothing mysterious about spooks"*

"Who is that vision?" Iggy asked, staring blankly at the stage.

I turned to him, bewildered, and said, "That's Eva, you amnesic head case..."

"No, not Eva! *Her!* That graceful ballerina!"

"Oh, that's Coppelia, the dancing doll."

"She *is* a doll, isn't she," he said with a love-struck slur.

"...Yes, as a matter of fact, she is." Coppelia stopped momentarily and waved cheerfully at him.

He lifted his eye patch and waved back.

"Look at the way she spins..."

"Don't let yourself get hurt again, Ig!" He wasn't paying attention. "She's probably made of wood or something!"

*"There's something mysterious about life
There's something mysterious about life
We can't even begin to know
Just what to do or where to go
But there's nothing mysterious about spooks"*

Even Guillotina seemed to genuinely be enjoying herself, although she was making a forceful effort to keep her queenly composure. As I peered around the room, I spied some of the most hideous-looking creatures really having fun. Even Squeezebox the clown, who gave me the creeps, and his giant companion seemed to be sweetly taken with the music. So I guess it's true. Eva's voice really does have the power to affect people... even dead people!

*“There’s something mysterious about nature
There’s something mysterious about nature
Why what goes up must then come down
When birds can flutter round and round
But there’s nothing mysterious about spooks*

*When midnight’s nigh, the moon is high, you know what to expect
You very soon detect
A mausoleum wrecked*

*Then, indeed, you’ll find no need to stick around at all
You realize
It’s no surprise
What’s out when night begins to fall!*

*There’s nothing mysterious about spooks
There’s nothing mysterious about spooks
A graveyard in the dead of night
Is clear as crystal, black and white
There’s nothing mysterious about spooks*

*There are no mind-confounding rules
To being ghosts or ghastrs or ghouls
There’s nothing mysterious about spooks!”*

The song finally came to a rousing finish and Eva and Coppelia both took a bow; and the ballerina gave Iggy another giddy wave before doing a back flip off the stage. Eva seemed to have been swallowed by a wave of euphoria as raucous applause exploded from the guests. *Okay, Char... time for stage two of Operation: Nap Time...* When she peered over to me, I gave her a thumbs-up and made a sleeping motion with my hands. Getting the message immediately, she spun around to the orchestra and exchanged some quiet words with Maestro Mortissimo, after which she returned to the edge of the stage and began to sing. Her voice, this time, was far slower and more gentle; like a summer night where even the wind is too relaxed to form more than a subtle breeze. It was as if every note she sang was merely the suggestion of a note; like an idea of a note, making no sound but conveying the music perfectly. A haunting melody for when even the waking dead have to sleep... a lullaby.

*“If there came a morning the sun did not rise,
I still would remain here with you in my eyes
The passing of ages means nothing to love
For some things are ageless as Eldar above.*

*To we, to we
To we, to we
My love is forever for you in my heart...”*

A tear came to my eye. I couldn’t help it. My Mother used to sing me the very same song.

*“The mountains will crumble and cover the sea
And I am too humble to doubt what may be
The plains become mem’ries, the forests may die
But love shall remain here for you and for I*

*To we, to we
To we, to we
My love is forever for you in my heart*

My love is forever for you in my heart.”

She had only gotten started when horned heads were already drooping and bones were rattling as guests leaned against one another, just barely able to stand. Heads crashed against tables and waiters dropped their serving trays to the ground with a clatter. Guillotina was sinking into an elegant armchair beside the stage, hardly able to keep her eyes open, but completely ignorant to the reason. I leaned over to Iggy and asked, "Are you feeling tired?"

"No." He yawned like a hippopotamus. "A little."

"Good." I said, wiping my eye. "Time to make ourselves scarce." We took this opportunity to exit the ballroom and go somewhere out of earshot until the whole party was safely asleep. Then it would be show time. "Who knows? We might even be able to bag the whole lot of them if things go well!"

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, I don't know. Doesn't really matter." I pointed to one of the curling staircases in the entrance hall.

As I headed up the stairs, he said, "Well actually I was thinking of going that way."

"You mean you're not coming with?"

"Eh, no."

"Wow. A castle full of monsters and Iggy Dansil wants to explore on his own? Okay. Just make sure you don't spend too long away. We should meet back here in a couple of minutes, but I want to give Eva some time to really zonk them out!" He nodded and proceeded up the other staircase. "Iggy, there may be hope for you yet..." I strode the upper hall and wandered into the art gallery. The halls here seemed crooked and the paintings were interspersed with irregularly shaped windows. I peered out into the deep night and watched the raging storm outside. The sky had finally broken open again and rain was battering the windowpanes like an air raid, with blinding lightning striking the horizon with claps of thunder. With every flash, the corridor turned white and the paintings seemed to change slightly. With every boom and rumble the portraits' eyes seemed to latch onto my form and the faces seemed to warp in a most unsettling way.

"I may not know art, but I know what I *don't* like..." I made it an urgent point to leave as quickly as I could, but ended up wandering into the portrait gallery. The light was offered only by a few bronze, fist-shaped candelabra sticking out of the walls. They cast a meager amount of illumination against the blood-red walls, papered with white flowers. As I walked, I couldn't help but shake the feeling that the paintings were watching me, even following my every footstep. Every portrait there looked exactly like Guillotina in every respect, except her hairstyle was different.

"You've got to be kidding me! She actually had thirty different portraits painted of her? Just to show off her hair?" But as I passed, I read the nameplates mounted at the bottoms of the golden frames. "*Guillotina...Serpentina...Cementina? Giantina...Minitina...Robotina...Aquatina?* God, it's a whole *family* of head cases! She's only the last in an entire line of completely self-centered sociopaths!"

"Self-centered sociopaths?" I saw a dark shadow rising up at the end of the hall and the visage of the countess appeared in the candlelight. "Sat's not a very nice seeng to say about my family."

"Tina! Hi!" *Uh oh... what is she doing awake? This isn't the way things are supposed to happen...*

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Her eyes were set against me like they would attack at any moment. She was rubbing the ribbon around her neck again. As if she were hiding something under there.

She must be a vampire. She must be hiding her bite marks. If that's true, then I'll know how to defeat her, but I've got to find out for sure. "Oh, yeah! Great party! Wow!" She didn't seem amused. "So it's your birthday, I guess. Happy birthday! Can I ask you how old you are? Huh? You know, just between us girls? What're you... 18? 19?"

"I'm 213... just between us geerls."

"Wow. My guess was a little off but I've gotta say... you look great for your age. Seriously. What kind of skin cream do you use? Because it must be fantastic."

"Just what are you up to here, anyway?"

"Nothing really. Just admiring your gallery. Nice paintings you have here."

"Sank you. Ah painted sem myself."

"And *of* yourself, too... how about that! I guess you worked from a mirror?"

"No." She placed the tips of her fingers together and stepped gently beside me. "Let me ask you somesing."

"Hmm?" I tried not to make eye contact.

"Are you a good golfer?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, I did win that dead women's tour or whatever."

"What happened to your club?"

I looked down at the still slightly crooked shaft, silently cursed Metal Girl and replied, "Just an accident. Golf is full of risks."

"Hmm. What's your handicap?"

"Well, I'm a terrible public speaker. Heheheheh... oh, you mean in golf?" I was starting to sweat. I had never played golf in my life. "Well, you know... average I guess. Well, I'd say below... average... less is better in golf, right?"

"Aha! I knew you were no golfer!"

"I am too!"

"Really? Well, for some reason, everybody else seems to have forgotten, but I remember quite clearly inviteing Charlotte Jenkins to my party twice before, and you are not her!"

I didn't know what to say but clearly things had suddenly, and quite thoroughly, turned to crap. "...Okay," I said, holding my hands up apologetically. "Truth time..."

"Yeeeeeeaaaaahhhhhhh!" She shrieked as she drew a rapier from her side and thrust at me; the blade whistling as she advanced.

I picked up a candelabrum from the wall and held it up, half in defense and half to try and calm her. "Now, let's just sit down and talk about this, Tina... can I call you Tina?" The blade whipped in front of my face again and sliced the candles in half, so perfectly, that they seemed to stay whole for a few minutes before their top halves fell to the ground. Since I had little hope of talking my way out of this, I did the only other thing I knew how in a situation such as this. I ran. I took off at full speed in the other direction.

"Come back here, you!" Of course, I wasn't running because I was giving up. I was just trying to get her someplace where I had a little elbowroom. Then I could work my magic. Using the speed and stealth skills that made Madame Midnight rich beyond her wildest dreams, I managed to lose the Countess in the twisting hallways of Castle DeCapita. "Where are you, you leettle faker?" Enraged, she sheathed her sword and threw open the double doors leading back into the ballroom. She stood at the top of the lushly carpeted stairs and gawked at a death more foul than the one she had suffered; more tragic than anything she could imagine. "My party ees *dead!*" All three hundred guests lay peacefully sleeping all across the chamber. "Oh... Ah'm just glad Auntie Langwidere eesn't here to see sis!" They were sleeping on top of each other, on tables, on the stage. The members of the orchestra had all made beds inside their instruments and Squeezebox had fallen asleep in his soup, making bubbles as he breathed into his bowl. The Phantom was sprawled across the keys of his organ, with a single, groaning chord echoing ceaselessly from the pipes. Even the great chandelier, which had been rocking back and forth, nonstop, for over a hundred years, was still as stone; and the marionettes were all hanging chaotically from its limbs, snoring loudly.

"What is going on here?" She ran down the stairs in a panic, gripping her dress as she stepped. Running over to the organ, she climbed up beside the Phantom and shook him frantically. "What is se matter with you? Wake up you lazy sack of bones! Play somesing! Play!" She grabbed him by the wrists and haphazardly shoved his hands against the keys, but his head collapsed on the keyboard again and ghostly snores echoed from behind his mask. She dashed from the organ to the piano, but the floating hat was drooping low and the cigarette was limply hanging, moving up and down as the unseen piano player snored loudly. "Ah can't believe sis!" She was just about to resort to setting off fireworks, when I just happened to wander back into the ballroom to look for Eva.

"Eva? Iggy?" I peered around the doorway and she spotted me at once.

"You! Sees is all your fault, isn't eet, you eempostor!" She drew her sword again and charged me. "For France and se DeCapita family honor! Heeeeeeeeyaaaaaaa!" It was at that point where I decided to throw aside anything that might hold me back. So I tore my dress right off, revealing the white skull emblazoned on my shirt. The gloves were off now. I was the Immortal Zombie Girl and it was time to rock. She stopped suddenly, gaping at me, and said, "You don't mean... you work for *heem* don't you! You'll never take me alive!" I gave up the opportunity for a perfectly good pun and jabbed her in the stomach with the head of my 9-iron. She returned with a parry of her rapier and, soon, the ballroom was filled with the sounds and sparks of metal clashing against metal. I won't lie; she was fast and some kind of prodigy with that sword. She must've been studying since she was five, but you know those eighteenth century Frenchies. "Ah'll skewer you for the deeshonor you've caused me tonight!" She thrust straight for my head and I shoved it aside with the shaft of my club.

"Bet you won't!" It just made her madder, but I didn't plan on making this a long fight. Concentrating my thoughts on a glass that rested on the Phantom's organ, I made it fall and smash against the floor. She only looked back for a fraction of a second, but it was enough of an opening for me to shove the point of her sword toward the ground and snap it in half with a quick stomp. When she heard the snap, she went livid and shrieked.

“Ahhhhhhhhh! My sword!” She dropped to the ground, wailing. “My *Steenger!* Little *Steenger...* my faser made me sees sword before they sent heem to se Bastille!” Then she looked upward at me, glowering. “For sat, I’ll skewer you twice!”

“With what?”

“Anysing I can get my hands on,” she shouted, dashing over the sleeping guests and snatched a partisan off the wall. The battle had roused many of the slumbering ghosts and they rose slowly, rubbing their eyes and trying to figure out what happened.

Oh, this is wonderful. Where are Iggy and Eva when I need them? “Don’t even bother, Countess! You’re under arrest! You’re all under arrest!” I must’ve been more famous than I thought because, taking one look at the skull on my shirt, the guests all fled in a panicked flock.

“What are you doeeng, you cowards? Protect me! Come back and fight!” Mr. Invisible put out his cigarette in a hurry and he and the Phantom both shoved their sheet music into suitcases and vanished. In a poof of smoke, Bat Boy became the very thing he was named for, and flew out the window, with his companions following him. Gil placed a water-filled bowl on his head and leapt out of the fountain, diving into the ocean as soon as he dashed out of the castle. The three skeletons by the buffet table were having quite a bit of trouble. The first skeleton couldn’t see what was wrong, the second skeleton couldn’t tell him what was wrong and the third... well, he just packed up his things and left!

“Come back here!” Guillotina shouted after them. “You call yourselves se undead? Afraid of a geerl wis a golf club?” I tapped her on the shoulder and, when she turned, I tore the red ribbon off her neck. “No! Don’t do sat!”

“What do you have to say about this, vampire?” As I proudly held the ribbon in my hand like a trophy, I was sure I had just exposed the vampiress and her weakness... I was wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time...

There was a precise red line visible across her throat; a line that had been covered by the ribbon. “Oh, you are so dead,” she said to me with a scowl, just before her head rolled off her shoulders and hit the floor. I know that, with a name like *Guillotina DeCapita*, you probably saw something like this coming from a mile away. I was somewhat less clever. A chorus of terrified screams rose up and continued for what seemed like hours before I realized that they were all coming from me.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Squeezebox, throwing his mallet, horn and cream pies into his trick bag. “Things have become very ugly all of a sudden, haven’t they?” Piecemeal grunted in offense and the clown snapped, “I don’t mean *you*, you great taxidermic nightmare! Now let’s split before things get any worse.” They both stared at me with their grim, yellow eyes. “Don’t worry... we’ll get her another time!” Then they left and, with them, nearly every other ghastly guest in the castle.

“Wait,” Guillotina’s head shouted from the floor as her body struggled to pick it up. “Don’t go! We haven’t even had cake yet!” The ballroom doors slammed as the last guest fled the castle; the floor littered with streamers, confetti and empty glasses. Now the two of us were alone and it was silent as a tomb. “Eet’s an ice cream cake...”