Soiree at Schloss Twilight

The five of them gathered together on the stone balcony that jutted from the western wing of the ballroom, high above the formal gardens of the Schloss Twilight. The dancers whirled on into the evening behind them, unaware of the passage of time outside their dream of music and motion. Bishop Morden looked over the crumbling balustrade at the hedges and flower beds below. One of the stuffed penguins caught a slanting ray of light and seemed to wink at him; he shuddered, briefly genuflected to the five poi nts, then turned away.

"Would you care for an aperitif?" asked Lady Stael, expectantly. "I am aware that the servants cannot be relied upon today, but -- "

The Bishop smiled uneasily and sidled away from the edge of the terrace. "No my dear," he said, "I fear for my digestion! Perhaps an infusion of gentian would be of help, but for the time being I am distraught with worries that I would not care to inflict upon your gentle head: and they have sorely aggravated my colic. Perhaps, however, our noble friend the Paramage -- "

Lady Stael stared at him; her eyes raked him with a peculiarly matronly expression of disdain that sat ill with her appearance of blossoming youth, making her look like something preserved beyond its time. "The so-called Paramage and his disreputable colleagues are here at the bidding of my fate, to honour an appointment made some seventy years ago," she murmured. "If they should ask for refreshments, why, I should have to ensure their satisfaction! But they are not welcome, you understand. Unlike yourself."

"My apologies, madam," said the Bishop, sweating under his stiff collar. "I was unaware -- "

Lady Stael turned and stared past the Bishop. He followed the direction of her gaze. A table of filigree and shadow graced the far end of the balcony, concealed from the dancers in the ballroom by the thick velvet drapes of the curtains. Five chairs were drawn up around it. One was occupied by a strange gentleman whose appearance was that of a ruinous ruffian or cutthroat; a man who by rights should grace her dungeon rather than her balcony. The brim of his hat was drawn low across his eyes, and it was ob vious that there was room-a-plenty for any number of dark thoughts behind his shadowed brow. Next to him sat Jack-Jones the Paramage, a saturnine man of middle years who wore his beard in the archaic manner of a castillian noble. His expression was jovial but his hair and his pale blue eyes were glacial, even when he laughed. And finally, occupying a seat so close to the curtains that he almost blended in with the shadows, was a figure that Jack-Jones had not introduced. This person was swathed from head < P> o foot in a black and odiferous robe, such that the Bishop could hardly blame Lady Stael

for not desiring him on her premises. He looked like a hedge-priest and he smelt, not to put too fine a point upon it, like Death.

"It is sometimes said," Lady Stael muttered, "that the presence of guests is a trial sent by the Lord to test our wits and our witticisms. If that is the case then I am afraid I am sore wanting, for whenever I confront these three desperadoes all badinage flees! Perhaps it bears upon the evening ahead. Your holiness, I do not wish to sit with these alone, and I would surely not wish to presume upon your patience, but -- "

The Bishop smiled and bobbed his head. "But why, if that is the case, do you come out here to take in the sunset?" he asked. "Surely there is a ball behind us, and no shortage of guests who would willingly trip away the darkness with the lady of the household come Heaven or Nightmare! Why come out here?"

He watched her face closely. The Bishop was not a young man -- there were very few such still alive -and he had done many strange things before he took the cloth, yet there was a kernel within Lady Stael that, should it crack, he feared to see. She had lived within her shell for a long time; and she had steeped herself soul-deep in a bitterness like that of cyanic almonds, until her facade of youth was a mockery. Her husband had not been seen for many years, not since he set off on his crusade in search of the unsighted lands of the anti-arctic: and yet still she remained loyal to his memory and maintained appearances.

She breathed deeply. "I am not a young maiden any more, Marcus, however I might preserve this flesh I inhabit. Please don't presume upon my innocence. Presume by all means upon my chastity -- certainly, in the absence of my lord and master -- but not upon my naivete! Without the Paramage all life might have fled this soul long ago. I owe him this appointment, upon the unburied body of my past lives, but I shall not be coerced into enjoying it! For I know what game that <u>man</u> has brought his friends h ere to play, tonight."

The Bishop was taken aback at this invective, directed by a member of the fair sex at a gentleman of whom, although he had little direct knowledge, he had heard much. "Surely it is not as bad as that?" he asked, unwisely treading upon her sensibilities. "Has he made any improper adv -- "

"He has not," she said icily. "It is merely his <u>presence</u>, and all that it implies! On this night of all nights, to be trapped on a crumbling balcony with such a man! The indignity!"

The Bishop sighed. "My Lady," he said, "do you not remember the teachings of Our Lord? That selfconsciousness is the greatest sin, for the unconscious mind does know things of which we are unaware, so that we would live lives enchained within the dungeons of our psyches were we not to expose it to each other in <u>agape</u>? That, therefore, to hold to this grudge solely on behalf of his perceived guilt for a crime not yet -- "

" -- You have not heard it from his own lips!" she exclaimed, falling silent with a sudden vehemence that

spoke louder than her words. "From the lips of the Paramage, I mean; far be it from me to impute doubts as to your interpretation of Our Lord's Message!"

"Pardon me then, my Lady," said the Bishop, touching his rosary to feel the holy pentagon. "Would it not then be worthwhile for me to discern the truth for myself, from the lips of the man whom you assert is making this demand upon you? And perhaps, in so doing, lead another lost soul into the light?"

She sighed, and suddenly he perceived the evanescent quality of youth that her husband Lord Stael must have discerned in her when he married her so many years ago. "You are right and true as always, Marcus: your Holiness. I should not lose my temper over such ... trifles. If the world is indeed coming to an end, tonight of all nights, it is unfitting for me to reach the extent of my life as a middle-aged harridan ... "

"How many years have you been lady of this demesne?" asked the Bishop, softly. He turned and stared out at the shadows lengthening across the lawn below.

"Four decades past," she said quietly. With a gloved hand she gathered up the ice-blue skirts of her gown and turned towards the table. "And I was thrice reborn when he married me: firstly as a sailor of no consequence upon the Sea of Yang, then as a -- woman -- who met with an untimely end, and then into my present skin. Three lives, Bishop: is that <u>all</u> there is to this universe? Come, let us join the gamers. You are right as usual, it would not be correct for me to be inhospitable to my guests on this night of all nights."

She extended her arm and the Bishop took it, escorting her across the mossy flagstones of the balcony towards the gaming table at which the wizard and his companions waited. Behind them, the dancers whirled to the strains of a chamber orchestra; they whirled as the rays of the setting sun lanced through the tall glass windows and fell across the parquet for the last time; they spun like tops across the polished floor as the sands trickled out through the smallest aperture of all, as the great and universa l orrery ran down.

As they approached the table the Paramage glanced up. He paused in mid-sentence, his mouth open as if entrapped in the incantation of some mystic function, and then he began to smile. As he smiled, the two vacant chairs moved silently, turning to accommodate their approaching occupants.

"Good evening to you, my Lady," said Jack-Jones. "Is that not Bishop Moran you bring to our table? I must admit I was half-expecting him. A delight, I'm sure!" He stood and extended a hand; behind him the rogue and the cowled sacerdote rose to their feet..

Lady Stael extended an arm, and the Paramage bent to kiss her wrist. As his lips brushed the black velvet of her glove a shot rang out from beneath the balcony, followed by a moan of utter despair and loathing. The wizard and the lady froze as the hooded monastic turned to stare across the garden. "The servants are playing Muscovian Roulette," he said, his voice bereft of all intonation. "The cook appears

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to have won. That is his wife's lament." There was a second shot, and the moaning ceased instantly. < P> "Who will clear the dishes, then?" asked Lady Stael.

Jack-Jones smiled again. "That is hardly a problem," he said. "Come, my Lady! Eat, drink, be merry -- for tomorrow we will most certainly <u>not</u> be around to die."

The Bishop sat down uneasily. As he did so, the chair slid towards the table as if an invisible footman stood at his back. He grasped the arms, feeling carved lion-faces press into his palms. "Would that I could be so certain, your Excellency. If perhaps I have understood your prophecy correctly -- "

"Call me Jack, please!" said the wizard; "and I may call you Marcus, perhaps? My Lady, you are radiant tonight! The earrings of amber are so fine; am I correct in perceiving that those are tiny salamanders trapped within?"

She smiled coolly and withdrew her hand. "They are not amber but glass, and the occupants are not reptiles," she said. "They are the embalmed brains of my first-born twins, who came into this world rather too early. I shall not bear any others," she added, "but it gives me a certain comfort to wear them from time to time. I fancy I can hear them whispering to me ... "

The cowled priest nodded understandingly, and an odour of tomb-rot swept from his hood. "That is a meagre encouragement, but a real one," he said. "As one who has never sown or reaped the seed of the loins, it behoves me to congratulate you upon your partial success. There was once a time when motherhood was cheap and lives were short: but no more!"

He retreated from the balustrade, sat down and rearranged his cowl. The Bishop was intrigued, and somewhat chilled, to realise that not once had the man's face come into view. There was a great <u>geas</u> at work on Lady Stael, if his senses were informing him correctly: and this secretive monk was part of it.

The rough-looking man in the wide-brimmed hat and the leather suit sat down. He had remained silent during the introductions, but now he tilted his face up and looked at his hostess. His jaw was unshaven and his eyes were expressionless. "I am pleased to meet you," he said slowly. "My friend, his Excellency Jack-Jones, instructed me to come to this place to facilitate the coming event. I am deeply appreciative of such an -- "

"But what's your name?" Lady Stael interrupted.

The ruffian grinned with the fey expression of one who knew all the cards in the game of life. "I am the Last Gambler," he said. "I teach the statistics of uncertainty, those of the honourable Thomas Bayes in

particular. Would you care for a lesson?"

The Lady recoiled, her cheeks flushing bright red. "Certainly not!" she said furiously. "Unless you can

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tell me the odds upon my husband being alive and returning to wreak justice upon such as yourself!" She turned away suddenly, so that only the Bishop glimpsed the film of tears that lay across her eyes as she stared at the distant hills.

"That and other things can I estimate," said the Gambler softly, his undertone directed at the hooded monk. "But methinks the Lady would not be of a mind to thank me for it." He reached to the table and raised a tulip-stemmed glass to his lips. Red liqueur caught the setting rays. "Shall we begin?"

"Begin what?" asked the Bishop distractedly. His attention was directed upon Lady Stael, towards whom he felt more concern than he knew to be right and proper. She was, he decided, very beautiful, especially when she shaved her scalp so that only a thin patina of gold fuzz caught the light, setting off the magnificence of her decolletage.

The Gambler produced a deck of peculiarly large cards, and laid it flat upon the table-top. He sat back, contemplating it. "Has anyone explained to you why we are gathered here tonight?" asked Jack-Jones.

The Bishop shook his head. "I fear not," he said benignly. "Am I to understand that this is something more than a friendly soiree, on the occasion of the ball given by her Ladyship in honour of the end of the world?"

The Paramage smiled enigmatically.

"It is more than that," said the hooded figure. "For tonight is the twilight of the universe, as the worms of rebirth multiply through the fabric of incarnation. It is an evening for truth and consequences, for naked ambition and lust laid bare to reveal the chance of stillborn futures; an evening for the revelation of doom. And we who are gathered here tonight all have a role to play -- yourself, your Holiness, and her Ladyship too -- for this was the only event that was foreordained."

"What do you mean?" Sudden icy fear rooted Marcus to his chair and liquefied his guts. He looked up as Lady Stael glanced back at him. Her face resembled a shattered mask of anguish as she met his eyes.

"False pretences, Bishop Moran," she whispered. "I pray you will forgive me, but I could not bear to face this ordeal alone! Not only is one of these three men responsible for the end of the universe, but another has the ability to revoke such a cosmic judgement as has gathered all the threads of time through this one knot-hole, and poised the blade above it. Yet they will not tell me who, or why, or how to avert this fate, until I judge with my own wits and emotions as to which of us, and why, might desi re the ending of eternity itself! And so I brought you along, for if this world should end at midnight you too will end with it; and if you can advise me fearlessly and correctly, as in the past ... why, then we might survive."

Her face went ashen as the Last Gambler reached out with a certain panache and turned the top card on his deck face up. It was not a card with which Marcus was familiar; it was neither playing card nor tarot,

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of either major or minor arcana with which he was familiar. Instead, drawn in the finest of water-colours upon the parchment was a round and luminous cloud with a stem beneath it like a flowering cactus, or perhaps a toadstool. Superimposed above it was a strange artefact, a cylinder with stubby wing s attached; it glowed with a light reflected from the strange cloud. Inscribed at the top of the card in gold leaf were the runes

$\mathbf{E} = \mathbf{mc2}$

"Let the game begin," he said decisively. "I have been informed of the variant Rules for this case, and the appropriate authorities will be watching this table to prevent any turpitude. I challenge -- <u>Jack-Jones</u>."

The hooded sacerdote leaned across to Marcus and whispered, in a voice as dry as any crypt; "Jones must now tell his tale, with total honesty and truth. When your turn comes, you too must do so. It is <u>imperative</u>, no matter how painful it might be, to tell the truth. The order -- " the cowl twisted for a moment, so that Marcus caught a glimpse of dark, hooded eyes in a shadowy, gaunt face -- "is determined by the cards. For if chaos is to teach us a lesson of life, how else are we to learn it?"

His words were punctuated by an unearthly shriek. In the gardens below a peacock was spreading its plumage in iridescent display, to reflect the tattered glory of the fading sunlight. Marcus started, then quickly looked to Lady Stael for guidance. She sat bolt-upright, as if welded into position by the stays of her strapless gown. A diamond glittered from one finely-sculpted nostril, but her white skin outshone it against the ice-blue taffeta of her corsetry; and for an instant she seemed to personify fem inine perfection in his eyes, to be the substance and ideal of all that he desired to possess and protect and exhibit and dominate in life. He wondered how he had ever taken such a turning as to become a Bishop, so that she was simultaneously inaccessible to and intimate with him, being as she was a prominent member of his flock. He held his breath, as if she was chiselled from ice and a single false, hot gust might cause her to melt away before the heat of his single dreams. Remembering the ordinal comman

ment, <u>Know Thyself</u>, he forced himself to look away. <u>You are here to help her in her moment of</u> <u>weakness</u>, he berated his libido; <u>not to take advantage of her vulnerability</u>!

He directed his attention to Jack-Jones the Paramage, who appeared to be sweating. And so he should, for if the hooded one was correct the stakes depending upon his truthfulness ran higher than his reincarnate soul.

"Speak," said the Gambler. "It is time we heard the truth from your lips. Enlighten us; his Holiness -- " he raised an eyebrow at the Bishop -- "is <u>dying</u> to know how the current predicament arose. And who knows? Perhaps if you speak truthfully, we shall live to see the dawn."

Jones grimaced slightly, and raised his glass to his lips. It was a tumblerful of stroeh, a fiery spirit from Dansk; he sipped it gingerly, then replaced it on the table and sat back.

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"Very well then," he said; "you have asked, so I suppose I must tell you all! Very well. I was not present for much of this, and I have little first-hand knowledge of the major actress in this drama, but for the sake of enlightenment let me tell you about Imad the Insane, who was once my student, and about the Countessa Danielle, and what they did. And then, perhaps, the meaning of the current situation will become clear."

Raw and Tenderly

A long distance away, in both space and time, there was a mis-guided youth named Imad who apprenticed himself to the magus named Jones in order to search out <u>Truth Absolut</u>. Imad was young and had no memory of his previous existences; he was gangling and thin and pale-faced, and there was about him the shifty expression of one who spent too much time in libraries, after the fashion of the ancients. Unfortunately this did not give Jones cause for concern, for in those days he had yet to receive the ad ditional soul that gave him his extra name and his reputation for infallibility. Instead of sending the youth packing, he gave him tasks to accom-plish -- the mild services of the postulant -- and took it upon himself to give Imad the tools of wisdom with which to learn his trade. The fact that Imad later misused them horribly was not Jones's responsibility, for by that time the youth had long since absconded: but nevertheless Jones was galled by the whip of hindsight and, resolving not to permit events to continue unhindered, sent an Eye to watch over his runaway tutee.

This is what he saw:

Imad nearly died in the Marches, hanged as a poacher and a horse-thief and anything else they cared to accuse him of. The fact that he was travelling afoot was beside the point, for there was no notion of a fair trial in that harsh land of exiles and river-barons. The villagers who apprehended him as he dozed by the highway one afternoon bore him up to the gates of the small and ruinous castle, and were already preparing a celebratory rope for his gullet when the knight of the demesne and his soldiers rod e back from the hunt and interrupted the lynching.

"What is going on?" demanded the lord. "Who is this man?" His shadow fell across the villagers, who cowered in abject terror before his mounted might. Imad, his arms twisted behind him in the grip of two peasant lads, gulped and stared fixedly at the mounted warrior clad all in chain mail, with his lance at his side and six armoured riders behind him.

The village hetman blinked stupidly, then knelt. Behind him, the two peasants pushed Imad face-down. "He be a stranger, y'r highness," said the hetman, still holding the coarse noose in his hands. "Caught'm lurkin' by th' fields, 'e was. Up ter no good, 'll warrant."

"But what has he <u>done</u>?" asked the knight, idly fingering the pommel of his saddle. His eyes were dark and utterly unreadable. Insects creaked in the background, but not a man dared move.

"Rr ... nuthin' yet, y'r highness. But 'e was goin' ter!" The hetman was agitated. "There be a demon in 'im! 'E's a stranger round 'ere, see!" His Lordship looked bored.

"I understand. <u>You</u>." He pointed at Imad with an armoured finger. "What have you to say for yourself?" Imad couldn't see, but he could hear when he was being addressed. And he knew what was likely to happen, should he fail to speak in his own defence.

"I've done nothing, your Lordship," he said desperately. "I'm just a journeyman of magic, learning my trade at country fairs! I haven't done anything! Please -- "

All of a sudden, the peasants who were holding him down released his arms. He scrambled to his knees and looked up, meeting the eyes of the knight for the first time. The warrior stared down at him pitilessly, one hand gripping his lance as if challenging Imad to outrun his steed.

"A magician," said the knight, slowly. "Well, well ... " He pointed an iron finger at Imad. "My apothecary died last month," he said quietly. "You will take his place, won't you?"

Imad looked at the hetman, who was still fingering his noose, and nodded violently. "Anything you say," he blurted. "Anything at all!"

"Good." The knight didn't smile. "Welcome to Castle Capeluche. I hope you enjoy your stay."

Imad was happy to escape with his life, but less pleased with his new accommodation. A flea-ridden straw tick in an outhouse within the courtyard was his closest approach to privacy; that, and a workroom with cluttered benches, a stuffed crocodile hanging from the rafters, and such a profusion of dusty herbs and simples as to make his nose sting and his eyes water. After his arrival he was acquainted with his post by one of the men-at-arms, and then ignored by everybody except the cook -- who cursed him r oundly when he enquired after victuals.

"But what am I to do?" he asked in confusion. "What are my duties here?"

The dark-skinned chef fixed him with a beady stare as he honed his cleaver upon a leather strop. "Keep out of way," he said. "See tower? Lord Capeluche keeps wife locked up there. Her father, he come to war soon. Very bad thing; Lord Capeluche very angry, want death spells, demons, big loud curses. Meanwhile, best not let self be seen."

He put down his cleaver and rotated the spit. The truncated torso of a small pig sizzled and dripped fat into the fireplace. "Lord Capeluche not like women," he hinted darkly, his voice drowned in the crackling of the flames. "He had vision, told him they all evil. Look at village -- see any wives, huh? He sent them away. Don't cross him. He wears skin of enemies under his armour."

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Imad looked at the spitted pig and swallowed. Saliva filled his mouth, even though when he looked closer the roast didn't look much like a pig at all. In such a backward area as this, it was unwise to enquire too closely about the dietary habits of the residents. He turned away as the chef rolled the spit again. "Is there a library here?" he asked slowly. "A place with books?"

The chef nodded. "Other tower," he said. "Has old guy's books, what-his-name -- he cast spell here before he dead. Warn you -- not to tamper with Lord Capeluche's place. Don't get them mixed, huh? Bad for you."

"Thanks," said Imad without any real feeling. His fingers were itching. <u>Real books</u>? he wondered: <u>in a place like this</u>? Imad was an ob-sessive bibliophile, pursuing his habit to extremes. He was also a magician. He resolved that he would not attempt to escape until he had seen this library; who knew what he might discover?

Leaving the kitchen he walked across to the far tower. It was decrepit, the window-slits boarded with rotted timbers and the thatching on the roof turned grey-green with age. Although Lord Capeluche's guards patrolled the walls, none so much as glanced down at him as he pushed open the door to the abandoned turret and went inside. Their attention was focused on the other tower, their master's boudoir, and the wild forest beyond the walls.

Within the tower, everything was dark. A thick layer of dust coated the broken furniture; leaves had drifted in, and something scuttled away in sudden panic as Imad tugged the boards away from one of the windows. With added light, the scene that met his eyes was dismal. Although it looked unpromising and he was still unfed, Imad climbed the tightly-spiralling staircase to the upper floor and shoved his way through the first door he came to.

A roosting bat flashed past his head, squeaking in panic; he instinctively reached out and plucked it from the air. It lay in the palm of his hand, twitching slightly as he examined it; he'd broken one of its delicate wings with the speed of his reflexes and now it was no more than an ungainly air-shrew, damaged and in pain. So small, and yet so natural, he thought as he closed his fingers around it and squeezed it gently dead. Then why do I feel incomplete, when creatures such as this need noth ing more in life? It was an unanswerable question, so Imad forgot about it and passed through the doorway instead, closing another more insubstantial portal in his mind at the same time.

Inside the room Imad found a small fortune in books lining the walls. There were no vermin, although numerous small skeletons littered the corners of the library; the former occupant had been efficient. Bat droppings streaked the spines of some of the tomes and stained the floor white, but there was no significant damage -- so Imad browsed for an afternoon, taking in the chronicles and metagrammars and methodologies of the unknown librarian who, judging by the depth of dust, had been dead far longer than Lord Capeluche's apothecary. <u>This is priceless</u>, he thought after a while, when he looked up and realised how low the sun had drifted in the heavens. <u>I could have travelled for years and not come upon such a collection! I must apply myself and study ... there will be clues with which to enhance my</u>

understanding ...

He sighed happily and left the library, taking with him a chap-book written in a crabbed hand. When he closed the door he renewed the decade-old wards that had destroyed the rodents. <u>It will be good to study</u> by candle-light again, he thought. He completely failed to wonder why it was so easy for him to rebuild a charm intended to kill, but that insoluciance was completely characteristic of Imad; it was, in effect, the reason why Jones the Paramage had driven him forth. Imad, unless he grew out of it , was gifted with all the makings of an excellent sadomancer -- an aptitude for destruction and pain -- and his master had taken exception to this. But now by accident or destiny he had come to the right place, for Castle Capeluche was full of pain.

That evening, a mute slave-child came for him. "What is it?" Imad asked, irritated at being accosted by lamplight as he sat reading at his cramped apothecary's desk.

The child opened his mouth and pointed. "Oh," said Imad. "You want me to come? To his Lordship?" The child nodded, his eyes stretched wide with fear. Imad yawned. "Very well," he said. "Lead me."

The tongueless boy turned and walked out into the night. Imad followed, not pausing for a cloak; it occurred to him that his new master was not of a disposition to be impressed by delay. The boy led him across the yard towards the motte on which stood the central tower, then up the side of the steep hill to a heavily-barred door. This he gestured at.

"I am to go in? Alone? Very well." He pushed on the door, and it opened inwards, smoothly and silently.

Within the hill, Imad found himself in a tunnel where the smell of damp was pervasive and the only light was shed by a single guttering cresset mounted on one wall. Pulling the sally-port shut behind him, he walked forward expectantly. There was a stench in the air that he found distinctly invigorating, for it made him think of iron. The corridor turned and there were barred doors to either side, but Imad followed his nose and presently came to a landing where stone steps spiralled up towards the cellars of the tower above.

"Magus," said Lord Capeluche, "I have a task for you."

Imad turned round. The knight was standing stock-still, his back against the wall beside the door; he must have been watching Imad's progress for some time. He wore a strange suit of pale leather, and a huge sword slung across his back. "Yes, my Lord?" said Imad alertly.

Capeluche stared at him from the shadows. His eyes glittered like chips of black glass as the flames leapt and fell back from the smoking torch. "I had you sent here in order to show you what becomes of those who dismay me. You might care to look inside the cells as you leave, magus."

"Thank you sir. Is there anything else?" asked Imad, his throat itching terribly from the oily smoke.

A shadow crossed Capeluche's face. "A curse," he said. "The father of my bride prepares an army to dispossess me of my territory and my wife. He claims that the marriage is void, which is a lie! He wishes to destroy me. Unless he is killed, all who live here will suffer the same fate!" As he spoke he shook, a string of spittle flying from his mouth. Imad stood stock-still, a cold sweat standing out on his forehead. "I will not tolerate it! Wreak me a spell, wizard! Cast me a glamour, construct for me a sc ript, such that it will stop the Count of Westmarch dead, <u>dead</u>, I say -- dead in his boots! Do so by the end of the week, using any materials you require, or I shall ensure that you respect my hospitality of a weekend!" Capeluche stared at Imad with the wild expression of a feral creature trapped in human skin: which Imad saw he was, when he observed his suit more clearly.

"I will need a virgin," said Imad thinking fast, the concentration of the hangman at his back.

The statement cooled Capeluche's ardour a fraction, so that a semblance of humanity returned to him. "You will have one," he said, breathing heavily. "Prepare your spell, using any materials you desire. I will deliver an appropriate woman to you at the appointed hour. Now, I am becoming angry. You do not wish to remain here when I am like this. Go now!"

Imad left in silent haste, sweat dripping from his brow. As he went he glanced through the door of a cell at one of the oozing, silent inmates who had contributed to Capeluche's leathery wardrobe already, and would soon contribute to his dinner table. Being Imad, he was neither revolted nor terrified; he had insufficient imagination to conceive of a situation in which he himself might lie broken and bleeding on such a pallet in the dungeon. However, it did give him cause for concern. He had two days until Friday, and he resolved to use them fruitfully. His new-found Lord required a spell? Very well, then. He could oblige. It would require a life for a life; but he would endeavour to oblige. Only the outcome might be unexpected ...

The next day, Imad went exploring.

He took along a pinch of herbs looted from the apothecary's stores, a small iron triangle, and a long pin. Then he returned to the abandoned tower, only instead of returning to the upstairs library he sought around the lower rooms for a door he expected to find.

Eventually he located it; a stout oak portal, locked with a heavy catch from the other side. It opened into the space within the walls of the castle, unused except in time of siege. Imad examined the lock for a while, probing with the needle and listening to the click and scrape of the stiff mechanism, then he stood back and thought for a bit. Presently he struck the iron triangle a single ringing blow, and muttered a command in an ancient diction. There was a click, but nothing happened. Cursing, he trie d again, this time transposing two vowels and a glottal stop: the lock sprang open.

The corridor was dry and dusty, stacked with supplies of a military nature. Imad stepped across racks of torches and arrows, over firepots filled with frozen lead, past an antique Gatling gun hunched on its

stand like a maimed beetle.

At the next door, Imad's spell of opening worked perfectly. But before he could open the door, it opened itself for him -- and he was confronted with the sight of twelve inches of cold steel, pointed at him by an alert guard. "Hey," said the guard, "aren't you the new pharmacion, you bastard? What are you doing -- "

He toppled over and Imad caught him before he clattered to the floor. Some words did not have to be spoken to be effective, and such was the force of Imad's will that surely he would have qualified as a magus in terms of power. His only deficit was wisdom.

Imad was now standing in the cellar of Lord Capeluche's tower. Time was of the essence. He gathered his wits about him, concentrated, and then uttered a somewhat different version of the spell that he had beguiled the guard with. Some functions were unchanged, but there was an enveloping loop that took in all within earshot: unbroken silence descended. Imad began to climb the stairs, intent on solving a question that had troubled him since the night before. Capeluche wished his father-in-law dead. Why?

Presently he came to the knight's chambers. The door was unlocked, for his spell of opening had operated throughout the castle; Imad entered, passed through an antechamber and a study to come at last to the bedroom. There was a wide window, high above the ground -- too high to jump from -- and a guard lying prostrate outside the door, and no furniture but a dark oaken chair and a huge bed. A maiden of such beauty as Imad had never before set eyes on lay sleeping in the bed. The breath stopped in his throa t as he gazed upon her. Her hair was long and unshorn, her ribs showed through her skin which was dotted with bedsores, and she was chained hand-and-foot to each post. Love or lust clouded his vision with its heady scent of fulfilment. If this was the daughter of Count Westmarch, he reasoned, his question was answered, for surely Capeluche must resent any greater than himself. He resolved then and there that to sacrifice her would be something of a waste: for was not a magus of his stature a worthy match < P> or a countessa? Thinking these unquiet thoughts he glanced towards the window in time to see Lord Capeluche's hunting party returning along the highway. His heart pounding with fear and something other than loathing, Imad beat a hasty retreat. Any solution to this conflict of interests would require careful planning.

He needed time to think ...

Programmers and Magicians

At this point, Jack-Jones paused in his narrative.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "my throat is somewhat dry and this spirit is too fiery by half. May I suggest that the time is ripe for a cup of coffee?"

Lady Stael nodded graciously. "You may suggest it, sir. Your tale is intriguing, and I would be pleased to hasten its' climax!" She looked over towards the ballroom, where the dancers were gliding to a stately gavotte. "Rupert!"

"He cannot hear you," said the hooded priest, "now or ever. The servants game has continued apace: did you not hear the shots?"

"Oh," said Lady Stael. She mustered her composure. "Then, sir magician, I regret we will have to serve ourselves. Rupert is -- was -- my butler."

"That is not an insurmountable problem," said Jack-Jones. "If you will tell me where the pantry is, I will effect a transposition."

Lady Stael's brow wrinkled. "Truth be told," she said, "I don't really know." She looked abashed; "it is the retainers job to serve, after all, is it not?"

"Then I shall just have to summon some ... informants," said Jack-Jones. "Please bear with me." He closed his eyes and appeared to murmur to himself silently.

Bishop Moran shivered and rose to his feet; to his surprise, he realised that it was dusk already and his legs were tingling with pins and needles. "Will you excuse me?" he asked; "I feel the need to stretch these shanks. This is obviously not going to be a short game, and I would not want to disappoint you by providing short measure of my wisdom by virtue of physical distraction."

Lady Stael nodded then rose, her gown rustling. "Perhaps you will accompany me around the garden?" she asked. "Some parts of it are best seen by twilight, and I fear you have never seen them before. And if not tonight, then what other opportunity might there be?"

Marcus looked abashed. "I fear, my lady, that there might never be such an opportunity. I would look upon your garden, it is true, but only from the balustrade. Call me craven, but I am not keen to leave this company while this particular game is afoot."

"Very well, then," she said. "Let us take the air by the rail, and smell the night blossom for a final time!"

She walked around the table and, very forward, took his wrist. Marcus allowed her to lead him towards the far end of the balcony. It was built in the shape of a horseshoe wrapped around the outside of the ballroom, which filled the entire western wing of the castle; it was not long before they had passed round the curvature of the walls and were out of view of the gaming table and the doors. Now only curtained windows opened out from the ballroom; they were alone.

"Look," he said, "the moons are full."

"Indeed." Lady Stael released his wrist and rested her hands on the banister. "Look, Marcus. The garden is untidy. What's that over there?"

"It appears to be the gardener," said Marcus, feeling bitter nausea sweep through him: "and there! Could that be your butler?"

She sighed. "First my husband, now my servants. Is nobody reliable?"

Marcus looked up at the stars that hung unblinking in a vault that was slowly turning from aquamarine to violet. There were no clouds to be seen, even on the horizon. "I could ask the same question of you," he said, "but I am sure I could predict the answer. Angelica, why did you agree to host this meeting?"

She inclined her head, looking up at him with an expression of innocent dismay. "What makes you assume that my complicity was requested? Should there be any question of my voluntarily participating in any dubious acts, you would most certainly not have been my choice of chaperon, Marcus! I know you too well, just as well as you know me. This is most serious; it was imposed upon me without my consent, by an agency that I was powerless to refuse. You think improper for a lady to be involved in such an occas ion, don't you?"

He met her eyes. "Yes," he said. "I worry for your incarnate soul, madam. Not only is it not lady-like, it is not safe! I have read of these <u>games</u>, the like of which is played out here tonight. I tell you it is dangerous!"

"That is why I invited you," she replied. "I need a lord protector, Marcus. My husband: let us not bandy around. You believe, and I too, that he has been dead these thirty-six years, is that not the case? And that being so, what am I, a frail woman, meant to do? If he were here today to stand by me, there would be no drama. But I am fated to be host to this trial, and so ... "

Marcus reached out, put his hands upon her bare shoulders and gathered her to him. She did not hug him back, but neither did she pull away. "What are we to do, Marcus?" she whispered. "Can even Jack-Jones stand between us and the fate of losers?"

Marcus ran gentle fingertips across her golden-stubbled scalp. "Perhaps he can," he said. "Remember, my dear, there is one advantage to our cause that does not pertain to the one who precipitated this crisis, if I understand it aright; for against us is arrayed a most powerful sorcerer, a magician of the first order: but on our side we have Jack-Jones, and he is not merely a magus but a programmer of destiny."

Lady Stael stiffened slightly in his arms, and he released her instantly. She pulled away and adjusted her skirts, then smiled at him. "That was most welcome, Marcus. Come, will you give me the pleasure of a dance before we return to the fray?"

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Marcus felt himself flush. "My dear, much as I would love to do you that favour I regret that I have some difficulty dancing; I have neither the training nor the aptitude, and under the circumstances I feel it would be wrong to devote myself to learning the minuet while the world teeters on the brink of oblivion."

"Ah." She looked away from him. "But will you at least join me in a glass of wine within, so that we may escape the gamesters on the balcony for a few scant minutes? Their presence oppresses me ... "

He nodded slowly. "And I, likewise. Yes, I would be glad to join you for a brief drink, my lady." She extended her arm, and he took it; they strolled slowly back round the balcony, towards the open doors.

Someone had ignited the chandeliers within the ballroom, so that the room glowed with a brilliant white light that cast deep shadows. Diamonds burned themselves slowly into air, exhaling invisible vapours as the dancers swirled around beneath them. Bishop Moran and Lady Stael paused at the edge of the floor, then circled slowly round it towards the sideboard beneath the huge portrait of her husband that faced the orchestra. It was still heaped with untouched delicacies -- honeyed larks tongues and sturgeo n's roe and strange, green cheeses -- for the dancers appeared to have no appetite other than for ceaseless motion, and the orchestra played tirelessly.

"A glass of wine, your holiness?" asked Lady Stael.

"I should be delighted," said Marcus. A liveried footman, his face concealed behind a lacy mask of finewrought steel, poured him a goblet of fine red wine and proffered it. He blinked. Although he had seen no other servants, Lady Stael was already holding a full glass. "Jack-Jones is as efficacious as his reputation leads me to believe," he said.

Lady Stael smiled, showing pearly teeth. "He says he believes in tools, Marcus, in finely crafted interlocking invocations that serve but a single purpose, and can be assembled into superstructures of power upon demand. He also says that those who play with devils are apt to take on the attributes of their servants. Is that what you meant when you said we are lucky to have a programmer on our side, rather than a sorcerer?"

"You are perspicacious, my lady." Marcus peered at her again, wishing that she did not have this habit of disconcerting him with her sophistication from time to time. "Have you studied the arcana?"

She laughed. A few of the dancing couples glanced at her disapprovingly, then whirled away. The orchestra struck a crescendo and hovered there; she withheld her reply until the diminuendo. "You know and I know that there are no arcana, your holiness. There is only memory, and meaning, and the nature of time itself. For is it not true that time and space are interchangeable, and a man who controls one can manipulate the other?"

"In your case, my lady, would it be appropriate to substitute the feminine pronoun?" asked Marcus. His heart hammered in his ribs suddenly, for he had just realised how isolated he was.

"No, Marcus; I am not a witch." Her smile lingered, despite his obvious suspicion. "But memories of my previous lives conspire to haunt me from time to time. I was not a witch then, either, but I was, I knew of -- " she shook her head. "When we return, remember that the tale Jack-Jones is recounting happened a long time ago. Time means something else to that man, for he is a chronomancer." She fell silent for a moment. "Tell me, is there any likelihood of my servants being reborn before the end of the wor ld?"

Marcus pondered this question as she sipped her wine. "If I was a servitor," he said, "I would not choose to be reincarnated. This is supposing that the dogma of Assigned Destiny holds true, and that souls know their true place in the order of things. If it is false, however, and we merely repress our memories of those lives in which our status and condition are unacceptable -- why, then, might they not be reborn as princes and courtesans and fine nobles?"

"Angels, Marcus, dancing upon the veriest point of a needle!" She smiled at him humorously. "If I did not know better I would accuse you of being indecisive."

Marcus nodded. "And I might accuse you of lingering too long in your previous lives, my lady."

Suddenly, her smile slipped. "Don't say that," she said sharply. "How could you know what I might forget or mis-remember? Is it not true that just <u>one</u> person who remembered sufficiently well could prove or disprove your endless theological dialectics, all the Church's debates over Will and Carnation and Assigned Position; that such a person's memories could overturn the foundations on which our fine and noble system of justice and truth and duty is built?"

Marcus shivered. "That one person, my lady, would have to remember what it was like to be dead," he said. "To remember how the choice is made, how destiny is shaped. Never forget; we can remember our previous lives, but what is life without death? What is Man without Woman? What is duty without responsibility?"

"How is nobility to be savoured without the shadow of slavery?" she retored. "Marcus, you presume upon my feminine nature. I am not unaware of the difference between my status and that of the masses. But if you are right, if the dogma of Assigned Destiny is false, then ... "

He smiled. "I cannot believe that such a sublime vessel as yourself might carry the soul of a higgler or costermonger!"

"Neither can I," she said quietly. But she didn't meet his eyes, and she drained her wine-glass with unseemly haste then reached for more. "Shall we return to the game of futures?" she asked.

"I think that's a good -- "

The music stopped. "Quick, take my hand," hissed Lady Stael. "I have seen this happen before when

Jack-Jones is distracted -- "

The dancers stopped. Elegant couples disengaged and stood waiting attentively for the music to begin; the women in their incredible frocks and gowns, their heads decorously shaven and inlaid with gemstones: the men coiffed and bearded and expressionless in their dress uniforms and evening suits. The Bishop drew his breath in sharply and held Lady Stael's hand tightly. There was such total quiet in the ballroom that they might have been standing on the other side of a huge pane of glass, sealed off from the dancers by a wall of silence made solid.

"Magic tools," whispered Stael. "Jack-Jones programmed this. These dancers -- "

"They were for me?" hazarded Marcus.

"Yes," admitted Lady Stael. "It is a projection of a ball that might have been, or that will be, or somesuch. But it was not intended as an entrapment, I assure you; merely as a reassurance that things were as near to normal as, as ... "

"As they are not."

"Yes." She drew close to him, put down her glass, took his other hand in her own and stared into his eyes. "Do you remember who you were, before?"

Marcus Moran, Bishop of the Duchy of Marguerete, shuddered. He could not look away from her eyes: they trapped him, forcing his attention to sink into their dark pupils. "You expect too much," he said nervously.

"Maybe not," she countered. "Do you remember yet?"

Marcus forced himself to reply. Sweat oozed cold and clammy fingers down the small of his back. "I was new-born, these fifty years since," he said vehemently. "I can honestly say that I have no, no memories of -- no former lives: I have never died! There, I have said it. I am tabula rasa, an unwritten soul, yet to proceed to the first judgement. A rarity in these latter days ... "

She smiled. "Perhaps you should pay heed to what you preach," she said, then genuflected to the five points: "know thyself, Bishop!" She stretched up and lightly kissed Marcus on the mouth.

He recoiled, as if stung; his lips seemed to burn with possibilities. "Let me go," he said tightly. "This is indiscreet."

"Oh?" she asked, looking past his shoulder. He turned. The wall of silence seemed to have congealed in the ballroom, and the dancers were fading like unremembered ghosts. "There are none here to be scandalised, Marcus. Will you forgive me for being somewhat crazed, on this of all possible nights? I

didn't mean to offend you. It was simply that -- "

Marcus flinched, torn between guilt and desire. He felt as if she was drowning him by increments, pulling him into her tangled web of conspiracy. He could see what was happening, but he didn't know how to resist her attractions effectively; with a sense of desperation he realised that he was collaborating in his own seduction, an almost-eager victim being led to the slaughter. "Let's go," he said tensely, and turned back to the balcony. She followed him at a distance, her scent conspiring to fill his nost rils so that even the night air could not remove the tingling in his blood.

They strolled back to the gaming table to discover that a morose silence had descended across it. "My lords," said Lady Stael, smiling, "has the evening so wearied you already?"

Jack-Jones glanced up, and two chairs pulled themselves out for Stael and Bishop Moran. His cheek twitched. "The stars are out," he said. "I am ready to continue my narrative, if friend Gambler will draw another card from his tarot."

Marcus sat down gingerly, watching Lady Stael do likewise. She glanced at him and her eyes lingered on his face knowingly for a while before she looked away again. "That is a good idea," she said. Marcus blinked. In the twilight he could have sworn that she was looking younger; not in terms of physical age, which was meaningless, but as if she was somehow becoming invigorated, the sap rising from the roots of her being as the universe itself wound down around her. He silently prayed to himself; the hard s hell she had built up around her soul was cracking open, and he was terrified of what he might witness emerging from the interior.

There was a sudden noise from the garden directly beneath where they were sitting: it sounded like a monstrous insect shedding its skin. The Gambler made as if to stand up, but the hooded preacher raised an arm. "Do not worry," he said tonelessly. "It is only the gardener's wife hatching from her corpse. She will remember nothing and do no harm; you are best advised to leave her be."

"Hah." The Gambler sat down again. "I like not the odds on such a contemporary rebirth." He shuffled his deck.

"On what authority do you claim the right to dictate my conduct in the manse of my husband?" demanded Lady Stael, staring at the hooded priest. "She was my maid, and I am entitled to determine the disposition of my servants in all respects, both before and after their deaths!"

"Do not contradict me," said the cowled priest. "I have travelled among the stars; I am aged beyond belief! I am so ancient that I remember when Virgo's corset was Orion's belt. I came here not to bicker with fools but to determine the future!" Lady Stael flushed and was about to reply when Jack-Jones cut in.

"Then reveal yourself," said the Paramage. "It is long past time that your identity was explained;

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otherwise, these two worthies might doubt your right to participate in this rite."

The hooded priest reached up and pushed back his cowl abruptly. Lady Stael froze, angry words faltering on the edge of her lips; Bishop Moran stared at the priest, all colour draining from his face.

"Are you Death?" he asked.

"No," said the man, whose face resembled that of a mummy abducted from the catacombs. "I am merely intellect pure and simple. In an age when things were not as they are now, my progenitors replaced my skeleton with bones of metal and ceramic. My nerves were spliced with woven fibres of glass, and then they sent me out to wander the heavens aboard a ship of stars. Long lifetimes I spent out there, and when the flesh began to wither on my bones I returned to the world that created me in order to find my tom b. But they forgot to provide one for me ... and so I am still alive, undead, unable to die, my mind trapped in a brain of crystallised sand. I have come to this place to offer advice, the wisdom of an earlier age. Tell me Bishop, do you consider yourself experienced enough to scorn the wisdom of ages?"

Marcus shook his head silently. The skull-faced man, whose eye sockets were occupied by obsidian spheres that whirred when he moved his gaze, stared at him. "What name do you call yourself by?" he asked, dry-lipped.

"I am known to some as the Iron Brain," said the cyborg. "It is my second most noteworthy characteristic."

"And what is your first?" asked Lady Stael, her curiosity momentarily overcoming her acrimonious temper.

The Iron Brain turned to focus on her, grinning like a skull. "I am immune to time," it said. "Gambler -- turn your next card."

The Last Gambler whistled tunelessly and flipped over the top card on the pack. It drifted down on top of the strange, angry cloud and everyone stared at it. Marcus could feel his pulse pounding: he was most certainly not enjoying this evening. He had a headache, and somewhere inside him a gathering nucleus of raw panic was condensing. "What is it?" he demanded, looking at the picture on the card.

Hanging in the middle of the picture, with no visible means of support, was a knight in strangely fashioned armour: his helmet was a sphere with a black visor that hid his face entirely. Behind him was a starry blackness, like a painting of the sky at night. Emerging from his belly was a swollen cable like a baby's umbilical. And most strangely, reflected in the black depths of the knight's visor was a silver box positioned in front of a blue circle.

"What is it?" echoed Lady Stael.

"A picture of a knight, from a time when programmers were magicians," said the Last Gambler. "Your move, Death."

The skull glistened in the twilight. "I believe that Jack-Jones should continue," the Iron Brain said softly. "We have not yet heard out his story, which is of some importance. Therefore I yield up my priority."

"A dangerous move," said Lady Stael, her nose-gem glittering as it caught the lamp-light from the empty ballroom. Marcus looked over his shoulders and saw cobwebs, dust, shrivelled fruit.

"Nevertheless," said the Iron Brain. "I insist." His presence stank of mildew and damp places.

"In that case let the Paramage continue," replied Stael. She smiled like a hungry cat and appeared to relax in her chair, but Marcus had a sickly feeling of apprehension when he considered what this was doing to her. It is not right that she be exposed to this! he thought. It is not right --

Lost her Cherry

"Tell me about the countessa," said Imad.

The cook, who knew bettmer than to tattle about the affairs of his master, rolled his eyes and spat over his shoulder. "She his lawful wedded wife," he said. "Is all you need to know."

"No," persisted Imad. "What about her father?"

"Ahh," said the cook, pausing at his pestle as he ground together the peculiar herbs that Lord Capeluche liked his meat spiced with. "Long story there. He wedded her -- "

" -- The father?"

"Him not like Capeluche, oh no. Capeluche, he <u>strange</u>. Rumours ... " the cook turned and spat over his shoulder again, then put a leaf in his mouth and began chewing rhythmically. "Marriage or war. Now, war anyhow. So why bother with woman? Capeluche not like woman at all; prefers killing. <u>Eats</u> them, but won't ... " he made an obscene gesture.

"So the countessa is a virgin?" asked Imad.

The cook laughed. "You think she lost cherry to Lord?" His laughter was bitter and high pitched, almost like the hissing of a snake. "Say again: Capeluche not like women. What more, he not like other men who like women. He caught me, my wife, years ago. Fed her my -- " another obscene gesture -- "then

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when I awake again, he make me eat her." He turned his back on Imad and spat again, this time straight into the mortar full of herbs destined for his master's table. "Was glad we not had children, then."

Imad was taken aback, but had sufficient sense not to enquire as to the extent of his companion's injuries. Some scars ran below the surface, he reasoned, and if it were possible that the cook's feelings for his wife had approximated his new-found love for the countessa he would be mortally offended were anyone to ask him about them. He retreated to the abandoned library for the afternoon and buried himself in hermetic texts and the minutiae of his meta-grammars, there to stoke the fires of his infatuatio n with the fuel of daydreams.

At twilight he sallied forth again to find the kitchen busy. The cook was racing about, hindered by the need to direct two of the tongueless slaves about their tasks of serving at the high table; he barely spared a glance for Imad as he helped himself to a thick rasher of what might have been bacon and toasted it over the fire. Imad sat there munching, then speared a second rasher and waited for the cook to slow down. There was much noise from the great hall, not a little singing and roaring like a herd o f wild animals, and under cover of the noise the cook turned and hissed at him. "What you doing here?" he demanded. "Steal food from Capeluche foolish! Come on. What you doing?"

Imad stared at him. "Are there bats anywhere here?" he asked.

"Bats? Yes, you bats! Come, move, must give food to highness or he roast us too."

Imad moved reluctantly, the equations of sympathy and contagion roiling slowly in his head. "Give me a sack," he said. One of the slave-boys stared at him incomprehendingly; "a sack," he mimed. The boy vanished in the direction of a back cellar, then returned with a noisesome bag. "Good," said Imad, quirking his cheeks in what people often mistook for a smile. The cook returned. "Where do the bats roost?" Imad asked him.

The man threw up his hands in anguish. "In cave outside walls, half mile north of here!" he said. "Go away! Eat and go! You make me feel cold."

Imad nodded, and left the kitchen still chewing on a piece of gristle. <u>Not bad</u>, he thought. <u>Just as long as it's well cooked</u>. He took the sack with him; it would come in handy. Now as long as he'd judged the drop correctly ...

That night, Imad sat out in the courtyard. It was oppressively warm and he passed the time counting stars; he noted when the planets rose, and how much later it was that the light began to burn brighter in the room at the top of the tower of Capeluche. Then the light in the window burned down low, and a little later there was an unearthly shriek. Is he raping her? he wondered: but from what he knew of Lord Capeluche, that was extremely improbable. It sounded inhuman, a scream of pure rage and fury that send a shiver racing down his spine. Perhaps it is himself, giving in to his nature, Imad thought. He wished, briefly, that he could tap such a potent source of energy himself, for although his magic

revolved around the power of pain it was difficult to inflict on one's self and harder still to induce in another whilst on the move.

He sighed, and carried on counting stars. There was another scream, and presently a faint, heartwrenching sobbing that faded as the wind changed direction. Imad went to bed. Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

The next morning, he took his sack and set off on a hunt.

"Halt!" challenged the guard on the gate. "Where be ye going?"

Imad stared at him coldly. "Your master entrusted me with a mission," he said. "I am to collect ingredients for a spell that he requires to be cast. Am I correct in understanding that there is a cave where bats roost during the day, five miles north of here?"

The soldier looked at him, less self-confident now that he realised who it was he was addressing. "Half a mile," he corrected. "Follow that path 'till ye come to the cliff. Half-way up't is an opening, tis inside there."

"Good," said Imad; "then I had better be going."

"What is it ye go to collect?" asked the guard, relaxing slightly.

"Pain." Imad grinned. It was not a pretty sight. "I need bat's blood," he explained. "Human blood will not do ... "

The guard didn't trouble him again.

It was a hot morning, and it took Imad until noon to reach the cave. By that time, all the bats were roosting; not only that, but they were cosily asleep, safe and secure from any daytime threat. Imad set about changing the situation with a will. Rather than smoking them out, he har-vested them by hand with a combination of stealth and precision that would be the envy of any cat; he thrust them one by one through the neck of his sack, and presently their panicky fluttering subsided as they surren-dered to the warm darkness and fell asleep once more. He did not take all the furry occupants of the cave -- there was no need -- but he took sufficient to provide him with the raw material he needed. Then he set off back to the village, tired and sweaty and cursing the weather. His next task was to find the smithy, and see if the occupants had what he required.

"A mangle?" asked the blacksmith incredulously. "You demand a mangle of me? Wherefore, oh apothecary? Is it the washing that is now your domain? Or the mangling of hands?" The poor man appeared to be becoming hysterical. Imad quirked his face into a passable smile and stared at him. The man sobered up rapidly. "There is nonesuch here, lad," said the smith, "but if you were to look in the

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dungeon you might well find a press such as would suit your description." He paled. "'Tis a place of ill omen, but mind you my words -- any instrument of excruciation you would care to identify can be found therein. Now get ye hence and leave me to the beating of this here sword for our masters' sergeant at arms!"

Imad did as he was bid and left the smithy.

Across the square, he came to the door of the castle and banged on it. "Who goes there?" demanded a guard. "Oh, 'tis you again. Get thee inside, troublemaker!" Cursing, the soldier released the bolt on the sally-port and Imad stepped through.

"I need access to the dungeon," he said to the guard, and waited for the man to stop laughing. "Who do I go to?"

"You need access to the dungeon, you scoundrel? Whatever for?"

Imad grinned humourlessly and hefted his sack. "Be glad 'tis not yourself in here, man," he said. "I have work to be done with a leather apron. By the wishes of our lord!"

The guard stood back, an expression of disgust upon his face. "Don't you play your vile tricks on me, lad," he said, abruptly contempt-uous. "Do your magicks and leave us be." So saying, he yanked open the inner door of the tower he stood by and thrust Imad inside. "Begone!" he shouted after him.

Imad stood in the cool darkness, a sack of bats upon his back and a pouch of somewhat more obscure equipment at his belt. He sniffed; the scent of iron was in the air again. Blood. He followed it, navigating by the faint light that filtered through the murder-holes in the ceiling, until presently he came to a guttering torch and a staircase leading down into the murky depths.

Presently he reached the landing that he remembered from before. Chains dangled from the walls, and several doors and passages opened off it; evidently it was used for access to the cellars as well as the dungeons. A guard dozing in a chair awakened with a jolt, to see Imad staring at him with a dark expression.

"What do you want?" asked the man, somehow managing to scratch in an armpit and yawn simultaneously.

"I need the Press," said Imad, smiling with hideous sincerity. He hefted the sack of bats, who were becoming restive. "I want to hear their screams."

The guard nodded. "In there, first on your right," he said. "Mind how you go -- better take a torch."

Imad took a fresh one from the pile by the guards' stool, then entered the indicated passage. There was a

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stench of damp and decay in it, but nothing of rotting meat; Lord Capeluche was evidently too fastidious to permit corpses to decay unattended beneath his castle.

Within the room the guard had indicated, Imad found the Press. For the first time he had doubts about what he was about to do; it was very big. Maybe too big. Nevertheless he man-handled the upper slab open, and slid the bag of agitated bats in, and then sprinkled certain herbs across the sack. He concentrated, reciting certain words he had read only the day before from memory, then placed his empty canteen beneath the lower edge of the Press.

And, closing the lid, stooped to catch what trickled out when the screams were finished and the silence began to bite.

That night, the boy came for him again. He had already gone to bed, anticipating sleepless nights to come, but the boy shook his shoulder insistently until he sat up. "What is ..?" he began, then realised that his questions were not worth asking. He sighed reluctantly and pulled his jerkin on. "Take me to him," he said.

The boy shook his head, but led him across the courtyard towards the tower in which Lord Capeluche dwelt with his unwilling bride. Imad stared at the door unwillingly, but the boy knocked thrice and it swung open. He beckoned.

<u>Damnation</u>, thought Imad. <u>Can he read minds, as well</u>? He shuddered, but stepped across the portal regardless; if Capeluche had decided to do away with his new magician in a fit of pique there was nothing he could do about it. Psychopaths were notoriously invulnerable to magical coercion.

The boy led him up the staircase, towards two impassive guards who stood with drawn steel before the door to the noble chambers. They didn't even deign to look at Imad but the door opened spontaneously, as if by some geas that recognised only those who were expected.

The boy stopped at the inner door to the study and gestured. Imad knocked. "Enter," called Capeluche. The boy cowered away and Imad, his heart pounding, raised the latch and entered.

"My lord," he said.

Lord Capeluche was seated on a throne of ancient oak, a writing-desk at his side -- an oddly chilling touch of civilisation to contrast with his arctic eyes -- and a small black cat asleep in his lap. He was dressed in one of his sinister suits, but over it he wore a silk sur-coat embroidered with the face of a demon. "I bid you be seated, magician," he rumbled.

"Yes, my lord," said Imad, a shiver of pure terror running up and down his spine. Suddenly face-to-face with the man who had saved him from an untimely lynching, his big plans of rescue and reward seemed to dwindle to something very small indeed. He tried to ignore the tingling that emanated from his sealed

belt-pouch.

"I summoned you here to discuss the mechanisms of the ceremony this Friday night," said Lord Capeluche. "I refer of course to the ritual by which you are to ensorcel the Count of Westmarch. Pray tell me what prepa-rations you have made so far?"

Imad swallowed. "I have discovered the old library," he said, "and have applied myself to certain studies. The effect that you require can be achieved with considerable ease, given one of two attributes; either a blood relative of the subject, or a virgin female who can be excruciated freely beneath the full moons or within a chamber especially fitted to the design."

Capeluche nodded slowly. "Then it will be so," he said. "I will be rid of the bitch and her sire at last!" He looked at Imad sharply. "You know whereof I speak?" he demanded.

"I would presume upon your indulgence, my lord," Imad replied, almost stuttering with fear. He had seen Capeluche's eyes, and he was not reflected in them; that stare went on for miles. "Perhaps you could en-lighten me?" His skin crawled, but Capeluche merely nodded again and glanced down at his crowded desk.

"The countessa Danielle is fractious and undisciplined," Capeluche said, with a mincingly haughty expression. "She refuses to submit to my conjugal rights, accuses me of all sorts of abnormality, and has upon occasion attempted to poison me. You may well wonder why I restrain her in our chambers," he added. "Truth be told the spiteful girl would seek any opportunity to kill me, and it was in full knowledge of this that her father imposed her on me: there is no love lost between us." He rested his hands in his lap and cradled the head of the sleepy kitten, which purred contentedly then opened its eyes and yawned. "I would not have it thus," said Capeluche, with dangerous plausibility. Then he froze and looked at his lap.

Imad looked, too. The kitten, awakened from its slumber, had nipped the knight on his thumb. Imad glanced up at Capeluche's face. There was no expression there, nothing of humanity to distinguish him from the stone of the fortress itself. Imad kept watching, even as he heard the crackle of tiny vertebrae and the limp thud of the discarded corpse.

"Nobody bites my hands, magician," said Capeluche. "Not now: not ever. Remember that, and you will do well by me. Otherwise -- " he looked towards the shuttered window. "There is no otherwise. Remember that."

The audience was at an end.

Cyanide Blue

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"That was quite, quite disgusting," said Lady Stael. The Bishop studied her expression. One half of her face was in shadow, the other half illuminated by light filtering through the ballroom windows; distaste had thinned her lips to lines and drained all colour from her face.

"I agree completely," said Marcus. "Was it necessary to recount such an incident in the presence of a lady?"

Jack-Jones stared at him enigmatically. "What I tell you is three-times true," he said. "This is no time for falsehood: would you have it any other way?"

"Then the structure of this 'game' is not to my liking," said the Bishop, taking a last sip from his empty wine glass. "An extended tale of gross moral turpitude recounted at night in the presence, if I may make so bold, of strangers! Is it really necessary?"

"Yes," said the Iron Brain remorselessly. "Understanding is a prerequis-ite for action. This is not a game, Bishop: this is history. Are you ignorant of the rules?"

Marcus desperately wished to say <u>yes</u>, <u>yes</u>, <u>I am ignorant and wish to remain so</u> -- but, as the Iron Brain had observed, this was an evening for truth and consequences: he could only proclaim himself culpable by such an outburst.

"I have read certain books about the subject," he said slowly. "I think I understand the nature of the ghosts we are here to exorcise -- for this is a kind of exorcism, is it not? -- and we appear to be following the normal forms. What more do you want?"

"Your co-operation," said Jack-Jones. He breathed deeply. "Your Holiness, I believe I have told as best I can the whole section that falls within my domain; the process will have to continue with a different guiding light, so to speak. I would like to talk to you in private, if I may. Lady and gentlemen, will you excuse us for a few minutes?"

Lady Stael's eyes blazed in the twilight. Marcus looked at her; "I fear I must go," he said tentatively. "I will return -- "

Her expression softened abruptly. "Then depart," she said, and smiled. "I anticipate the pleasure of your company in ten minutes' time. Please consider, though, that we have only the rest of this evening to avail ourselves of."

Marcus felt his chair retreat spontaneously from the table until there was room for him to stand. He pushed himself to his feet and bowed. "Ten minutes," he said to no-one in particular and turned to walk towards the far end of the balcony where he had stood with Angelica Stael in his arms. Only moments

seemed to have passed, moments and lifetimes. He felt as if he was drowning in intrigue: his heart throbbed as if he had run for miles.

"You're taking it badly," Jack-Jones confided close to his left shoulder. "Perhaps we should take a brief walk in the garden."

Marcus started, but managed at the last possible instant to maintain control. "That is a pleasant idea," he said nervously.

"Would you care for a glass of wine as we walk?" asked the Paramage.

"If it is no -- " Marcus looked up at his companion sharply. Jack-Jones passed him a full glass.

"There is a little-used staircase at the far end of the balcony," said the wizard. "It descends into a corner of the maze. Shall we explore?"

Marcus smiled experimentally. He felt in control, but beneath the surface of his mind he was the victim of turbulent forces; it was as if the gears of his soul were stripping their teeth and spinning out of control towards a chaotic pursuit of all that was beautiful and meaning-ful in life. "There is so little time left, and so much left to do," he said to himself wistfully.

Together they walked around the terrace, until the table of filigree and shadow was hidden by the curvature of the wall. Jack-Jones showed Marcus the staircase, which had not been there when last he came this way, then they descended into the scented darkness.

Lady Stael watched them walk together until they passed into shadow; then she turned her attention back to the table. Nameless emotions gnawed at her heart, a sense of loss that was entirely appropriate coupled with a slight cold fear of the very dangerous men who sat opposite her.

"You are not in control of events any more than the rest of us, it would appear," said the Last Gambler.

"And you are taking liberties!" she retorted. Despite knowing that it was indecorous, she glared at him. "I did not invite you here: Jack-Jones did that, in accordance with the terms of my fate. Do you take pleasure in your imposition upon my hospitality, or is it simply that you lack the discernment to see -- "

"He is antagonising you deliberately," said the Iron Brain. The light of the ball-room chandeliers reflecting from his cranium lent him an expression of terminally bored amusement. "I do believe he enjoys it."

"Faugh!" She stood, clutching her skirts to her with indignation. "You tire me with your importunities! If you two gentlemen will excuse me, I must needs retire to my boudoir. I have preparations to complete before the end of the world, and I shall return when Bishop Moran and his excellency the Paramage

complete their constitutional."

She did not expect any civilised response to her tirade, but the Last Gambler stood and removed his hat apologetically. "My lady," he said: "I did not mean to offend."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Noted," she replied. Then she stepped rapidly towards the ballroom door, her heels clacking on the flag-stones. An icicle of fear lodged in the small of her back, making her shiver with the realisation that the Last Gambler was correct: that she had lost control, had she indeed ever possessed it.

She swept through the desolate ballroom, past the table of delicacies and the furniture draped in dustsheets until she came to the grand entrance hall and the wide staircase that swept up to the uppermost floor. She gathered up her skirts and climbed the steps one at a time, for her high heels tended to unbalance her and the stairs were very high. Pausing half-way up, she turned and stared back down into the hall. Her eyes narrowed and her vision blurred with nascent tears of self-pity as she thought; <u>he</u> <u>should have been here by my side. It should be on his arm that I ascend these steps.</u> But then she steeled herself. <u>If Jack-Jones had not intervened ...</u>

The door to her suite was already ajar when she reached it. <u>Maid Elenea is in need of chastisement</u> <u>again, the sloven!</u> she thought. Then she paused in the doorway and raised her hands to cover her mouth in shock. <u>But Elenea is dead, she realised. She shot herself! What kind of inner strength did that woman have, to take her own life at the random whim of a gun? A sick wave of envy and dread swept through her, for she knew that if she had possessed half as much resolve she would not be here today. Such ideas were dangerous; it was a good thing that the Church discouraged suicide.</u>

The sensation of satin and lace against her cheeks was uncomfortable. Suddenly she longed to strip off the veneer of civilisation, to touch her skin directly, to disregard the stifling constrictions of her position and upbringing. She began to roll her evening gloves down from her elbows, pausing in annoyance when she realised that the jewelled rings she wore would hamper their removal. <u>Damn</u>, she thought. <u>Why did it have to be my maid and not the dog-handler?</u>

Working the heavy rings along her gloves, she turned and walked into her bedroom. The door to one of her wardrobes had sprung open, revealing the rack of formal gowns that she wore on occasions such as this. Pursing her lips in mild annoyance she sat down on the ottoman beside her dressing table. The rings came free and she dropped them idly beside a crystal decanter of finest vodja: then she rolled off her silk gloves, on their own worth half a year's wages to her maid, and flicked them towards the shado ws that gathered in the far corner of the room.

She frowned experimentally, a grimace that she would never dare to use in public. She was tired and a little depressed, but she could not yet retreat from the public evening; there was still a while to go before the universe drifted to a close, and in any case she would soon have to brave the game again. Then it occurred to her that she had a more immediate problem. She had drunk perhaps two-thirds of a bottle of

strong red wine, and it appeared that she would have to remove her corsetry unaided before sh e could retreat to her chamber and piss.

The hedges rose two cubits above the top of Jack-Jones' head, sufficiently high that Bishop Moran had to crane his neck to see the fan-tastic birds trimmed into the top of them. "I am impressed," he declaimed tipsily, "by your creativity! Either that or the gardener has created a posthumous masterpiece that shall ensure his future immortality among topiarists -- were there any posterity to bestow it upon. Oh dear." He gulped a full mouthful of wine and stifled a belch.

"I do believe you are reaching the end of your self-restraint," said the magician, "and about time too! We need a full and frank discussion this evening, once the tale of Imad and Danielle has worked its way to its logical and terrible conclusion. What say you?"

"I am unaware of the conclusion you refer to," admitted Marcus, "but I should like to hear it. It induces in me pangs of deja vu that are quite disquieting; as if, to draw a gastronomic analogy, I have eaten one of the notorious madrashi dishes to which Baron Heisen is so addicted, and the belches of memory torment the surface of my waking mind for hours afterward."

Jack-Jones walked slowly along the avenue of hedges, until he came to a crossing. "Which way shall I go now, do you suppose?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Bishop Moran consulted the skies. The moons were drifting to one side; either that or his head was nodding.

"Left," he said. "The light is better that way." He breathed deeply of the invigorating night air and tripped after the magician. When he caught up with him they walked together along a turf as neatly groomed as the hair of any dandy.

"It is right and proper that the tale should induce in you some sense of recognition," commented the paramage. "It is an isomyth, after all -- a structure that when decomposed into its component elements holds a mirror to the heroic lays of old. I confess that I myself am moved by it, even though I know it to be true."

"But you said it was a myth!" protested the Bishop.

"An isomyth," corrected Jack-Jones. "Not the same at all, my dear fellow. An isomyth decomposes the stuff of legend, inverts it and exposes it to the light of day. I knew Imad in person, you know. A foolish youth who met his fate just as he was showing signs of maturity."

"Then why not continue the tale?" asked Marcus tetchily, forgetting that to hasten the ending of such a story might spoil the enjoyment of it for more than just himself, the impatient listener.

Different Flesh

Jack-Jones smiled secretively. "Because it is no longer my tale to tell," he said. "I laid an Eye on Imad, and it is true that I was best fitted to discuss the whys and wherefores of his coming to Castle Capeluche, but of his flight and quest there is one far better suited than I to carry the narrative forward!"

"The Iron Brain?" guessed Marcus wildly. "Did he meet them in his travels?" But the wizard merely shook his head silently, and chose another path.

They came to a central grove in which an iron bench sat beside a marble pillar surmounted by a small and disturbing sculpture. One of the ubiquitous stuffed penguins watched them with glassy eyes, its head tilted permanently at an inquisitive angle, as if it was awaiting the reply to some obscure question. The moonlit shadows ran as deep as the lines on Jack-Jones' face.

"You ask many imponderable questions, Bishop," he said heavily. "Perhaps it is time you let go and simply drifted with events. I am aware that self-comprehension is the first step along your Church's path to redemption, but surely there comes a point where rigorous self-scrutiny becomes mere recursive navel-gazing?"

"Yes, by all means," agreed Marcus, trying desperately to regain a measure of self control; "but you fail to grasp that I am disturbed because somehow the story seems to me to be -- "

He froze, and stared at the penguin. It seemed to be laughing at him, and for an instant there was no more sinister entity in his entire universe.

"Yes," said the Paramage after a discreet interval. "I know. You are disturbed because Imad resembles yourself in certain respects. And you refuse to draw the logical conclusion; that the isomyth is not about a deceased magician after all -- but about the participants of this soiree."

Angelica, Lady Stael, stood naked in front of a long mirror that hung inside one door of her wardrobe. Moon-light filtered in through the diamond-leaded panes of the window and fell across the wreckage of her gown. Silk stockings and under-skirts and shoes lay at random; eventually she had taken a dagger to her corsetry, almost crying in frustration because her maid was not there to assist her with the recalcitrant lacework. But now she was free; dark-rimmed eyes stared back at her from the mirror, wreath ed with wild shadows. She lifted the decanter to her lips and threw back a choking, burning draught of vodja, then looked at the mirror again.

"And what have you got to say for yourself?" she demanded of her reflection.

"What indeed?" retorted her dark twin. Her exp ression was contemp-tuous. "Tell me, sister. Don't spare yourself."

"Sixty years old; forty years married, thirty-six of them a widow (don't interrupt!) to an eccentric Lord whose polar obsession was almost certainly the death of him. Sixty years of gentility, and what have you

achieved? You don't even know where your own pantry is!" She flung the decanter to the floor; it landed upon the cyanide-blue skirts of her dress and began to leak.

She snatched up the knife from her dressing table. It glinted, flashing reflections of steel across the darkened space within the mirror. Her twins' eyes tracked it carefully, as if assessing the hand of the madwoman behind it.

"If nothing else, you should think about the last thirty-six years," she said carefully, the bitterness in her voice sufficient to curdle milk. "Think of the years wasted: the years wrapped in black velvet, the years of self-deprivation, the decades of shameful neglect. Look at yourself!"

She stared at her reflection unselfconsciously. Her breasts were small and high, her waist slim, and her skin showed no blemishes. She might as well have been twenty years old: the magic of the physicians ensured that no member of the aristocracy need ever look their real age.

"A third of a century," she mused, abruptly thoughtful. She deposited the knife on top of the rest of the damp detritus, and raised one sweating hand to her breast, the other to her groin. She felt hot. "Damn!"

A wave of dizziness swept through her head, making the room waver as if in a mirage. She saw herself as she might have been: as one of her former incarnations had been. Accomplishments, freedom, none of the claustrophobia of aristocracy. Her skin was hot, her nipples icy cold. "Damn!" she repeated, staggering slightly because she felt sick. Then she glanced through the window. The moons were nearing the zenith; there was no telling how long she had been in seclusion for. When they began to set, the world would come to an end.

Another dizzy spell gripped her, and suddenly she felt her stomach turn over in rejection, preparing itself to expel the alien spirits that had entered -- or been inserted into -- her body. "Oh god," she gasped in disgust, half-panicking and clutching at her stomach as she realised that she was about to be sick. Then she bent double and vomited over her ball-gown.

Marcus and Jack-Jones returned to the moonlit staircase in silence. It was not that there was nothing to say, merely that Marcus dared not permit himself to say it. It was a warm night, but even the heat could not account for the sweat that trickled from his brow. He repeatedly glanced at his magical colleague in the hope of starting a conversation, but the uneasy silence lingered on in the night air. Somehow he did not feel like starting a dialogue about the rich odours of the night-flowering plants; it would be too close to admitting defeat, to confessing a desire to surrender his insights to the mysterious and imposing Paramage. Like most members of his profession, Marcus harboured a vague distrust directed at all practitioners of the magical sciences; for although priests relied on the tenuosities of insight, the paramagi had a more readily demonstrable method.

When they reached the balcony Jack-Jones paused suddenly and looked at him.

"What is it?" asked Marcus, suddenly glad of the excuse to break his silence.

"I must warn you," said Jack-Jones, "that what you are about to hear may be even more distasteful to you than what has gone before, especially considering the lips from which it will come. I should advise you to fortify yourself with spirits; it will cushion the blow, and perhaps render your memories of this evening more tender."

Marcus shrugged uncomfortably. "Why bother?" he asked. "It is the end, after all -- "

"That might be so," warned the Paramage; " but then again, there is also the chance that what we are about to witness is no less than a new beginning. Consider the miracle of reincarnation -- if human souls migrate, what then of the world-soul itself? Might it not bear us, its children, to safety in some other continuum of joy? Or might the prophecies indeed be wrong? Marcus, Bishop Moran, you should not assume the worst merely because it is the most convenient basis on which to determine your conduct!"

Marcus shivered. "In that case, I should like another glass of wine," he said. "And, for whatever record there might be, I am sorry for my treatment of you."

"What treatment?" asked Jack-Jones obliquely, passing him a full glass. "Come, let us take our seats."

When they returned to the table, only two of the chairs were occupied. "What has happened to Lady Stael?" Marcus enquired nervously. "Where has she gone?"

The Iron Brain turned its head and looked at him. "I believe she wished to repair her cosmetics," it said coolly. The Last Gambler continued to shuffle his deck listlessly. "Why don't you sit down? I am sure she will return presently."

Marcus forced himself to relax, restrained his hands from fidgeting. Jack-Jones stood, staring across the garden: then after what felt like only a few seconds he turned and looked at the ballroom door. "My lady," he said.

"My estraordinaire," she replied. Marcus turned, saw her, and rose to his feet. She approached the table and nodded to them; "are we ready to resume?" she enquired brightly.

"By all means," said Marcus. "My lady, your dress is very -- "

Her nose-gem flashed a warning light in his eye. "Thank you Marcus," she said. "Perhaps you would be so good as to let me to sit beside you."

He pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down. She had changed into a black tunic with a cowled neck and puffed sleeves: everyday wear among the courtiers whom provincial fashion aped. What was less usual was the short length of her skirt, and the clinging leggings she wore beneath it; and her boots.

They had definitely been crafted with uses other than court appearances in mind.

"Perhaps it is time for you to draw the next card, Gambler," suggested Jack-Jones, returning to his seat.

"Very well, then," said the Last Gambler in a jaded tone. He moved a finger to flip the top of the deck, but the Iron Brain reached a skeletal hand across the table and restrained him.

"Wait," said the skull.

"Why?" he asked.

Marcus noticed that Angelica was staring at him intently. He also noticed that her nose-diamond was now the only bauble she wore; and that she had neglected her corsetry.

"It's my turn," she said, in a curiously detached tone of voice. "I never thought it would come -- never -- but it really is my turn, and now I will not be ignored." She sounded as if she was baffled by some incomprehensible riddle that had been posed.

"Are you sure you are well, my Lady?" enquired Marcus.

"Never felt better," she replied rapidly. "Gambler, please remove your hand. Let me ... "

Both the Iron Brain and the Last Gambler let go of the tarot pack, and Lady Stael flipped the third card onto the face-up stack. Strange; it was a picture of a naked forearm, the veins bulging. Hovering above it was a hand, the fingers of which were wrapped around a tiny barbers' syringe blown from glass. The barrel of it was filled with some clear fluid, while the needle was embedded in a vein. "That doesn't make sense," said Marcus. "If it's drawing from a vessel, why is the vein distended? And why is t he fluid clear? It should be the colour of blood."

"Perhaps it is not drawing, but injecting," said the Iron Brain. It stared at the card for a long time.

"That's disgusting," said Marcus.

"I've heard of worse," replied Lady Stael; he looked at her sharply, but her expression was serious. "Is it my turn now?"

The Gambler looked at her and nodded, slowly. "I fear it is," he said. "If you want to let -- "

"No," she interrupted. "I'll do it my way." She reached out to drag the card of the syringe across the strange knight, and Marcus saw that her hand was shaking slightly. "I've wanted to tell this tale for years."

She looked around at the expectant faces. "It's the part that wouldn't be told otherwise," she said sharply. "None of you think too much about the world of women, do you? After all, we are nothing to you now that reproduction has been replaced by resurrection; nothing but ornaments to grace the beds of our lucky owners, is that not so?" Marcus blinked. Does she mean us? he wondered. Why, what could be further from the truth! But he saw that the Iron Brain, replete with the knowledge of the ancients, was n odding: and Jack-Jones looked chastened.

She stared at Marcus challengingly, then nodded to herself as if some deep suspicion was confirmed. "I must tell you what happened the night before Capeluche sacrificed his bride," she said. "Then you will understand."

6. The End of the World, Reversed

Shaken by his master's warning, Imad returned to his hay-filled tick and slept uneasily until dawn. It was not the quality of the warning that dismayed him, but the pointlessness of it; as if Capeluche believed that everyone was as thick-skinned as himself. In his disturbing dreams, Imad saw himself as he would become after thirty years of living with such a master. Cruelty would become not a means, but an end -- an extreme that struck him as both indecent and inelegant. And what Lord Capeluche expected o f him! It was not that he was incapable of the action, but the thought of simply butchering the countessa Danielle as a method of attacking her father struck him as wasteful in the extreme.

That morning he began his preparations. And by nightfall, he was ready to attempt his escapade. But meanwhile:

As she had done every morning for the past three years, Danielle awakened with the dawn to find herself alone. She could not remember shedding the tears that stained her pillow, and her manacles chafed at her wrists despite the calluses that she had built up over the years. She sat up and rattled her chains loudly, her eyes dry and cold with the hatred she had felt upon waking every day since her marriage.

There was an answering rattle from the door. One of the guards entered, bearing a bucket and a platter on which was heaped an unappet-ising mound of cold stew. Careful not to get too close to her, he placed the bucket on the floor beside the bed then backed out of the room. There was a click as he locked the door, and then she was alone again.

Danielle sat up and worked her way to the edge of the bed. Although she was manacled at ankle and wrist, her chains were looped through holes in the bed-posts so that she could -- by dint of careful manoeuvre -- reach any part of the bed itself, and even extend a limb at a time beyond it. This she did, drawing back her lips in a feral snarl until her fingertips brushed the handle of the bucket and, closing on it, dragged it towards her. She carefully removed the platter and put it by her pillow, for later consumption; the bucket she hoisted onto the bed and placed under herself. Then she pissed in it.

Different Flesh

The guards had learned through experience that it was a bad idea to leave her victuals too close to hand. She had broken the skull of the last man to do so; she still had the whip-marks to remember the incident by.

Having evacuated herself, Danielle picked listlessly at her food with a soiled finger. It had galled her at first that she was not allowed to bathe, and she had been enraged when her clothing was forcibly removed and she was chained in this -- <u>this elevated dungeon</u> -- but now she had lost sight of her origins so thoroughly that she was oblivious to her condition except when her sores wept, or the lice that swarmed in her matted hair drew blood. It is a dungeon no less for being high above the ground, she reminded herself for the millionth time. My father will rescue me! But it was a hollow mantra, for she had long since abandoned all hope of rescue from the madman who claimed the right to control her body and soul, who had condemned her to this life of degradation and imprisonment.

Presently her platter was bare. She looked around dully, but there was nothing of interest; the furniture beyond the bed might as well have graced the surface of one of the moons, for her chains did not permit her sufficient freedom even to reach the chest where her garments and dowry were stored. And besides, nothing ever changed. She could not remember how long she had been a prisoner in this tower; it could have been three weeks or three centuries for all that she could tell. Truth be told she was hers elf becoming slightly insane, for the only man who was permitted to speak to her was himself a lunatic who paraded in the skins of his victims and who took pride in the eating of human flesh.

Her day passed with excruciating slowness. A few hours after she had eaten, she pissed in the bucket again and added some dark stool to it. Then she pushed it to the floor, not heeding which way it went, and rolled over onto her belly to spare the healing sore on her left buttock. The chains tightened but she was used to them by now, and ignored them. She drifted in a light trance in which she held the severed head of her husband high on a scaffold before a roaring crowd of onlookers, then awakened to dis cover that it was afternoon and a second platter had been placed beside her while she slept.

She shoved it on the floor. She was no longer hungry; she was trying to learn to live without eating. If she could last long enough, she reasoned, her hands might slip through her manacles and she could free herself. She had realised several months ago that if she tried to cut her arms off at the wrist she would be unable to release her legs, and ever since then anorexia had been her policy.

Meanwhile, she exercised as best she could in her restraints. This was her other obsession: that although she must be thin, she must be wiry and agile -- for how else was she to beat off her husbands' advances, if and when he ever made them? In her isolation she had become paranoid, for the daughters of counts were chaperoned from earliest childhood and she was still virginal, at least with respect to the opposite sex.

Finally, she dozed again until dusk. She was awakened by the creak of footsteps within the room; every muscle tensed, but she didn't open her eyes. She hoped he would think she was asleep.

"Don't be silly," said her husband. "Open your eyes and look at me, whore."

Danielle opened her eyes and glared up at him. He seemed to fill her universe, a monstrous void at the end of the tunnel of existence; nemesis writ large upon her tombstone. "I'm not a whore," she said in a dangerously low tone.

He smiled oddly, his face askew as if the muscles connected to one cheek had been severed by accident and failed to reconnect properly."I know what you're thinking," he said, in a lilting tone of voice; "you're thinking how to kill me, to bury me, so that you can dance upon my grave. Say it isn't so, whore?"

Her vision blurred momentarily with tears of rage and hatred; but gainsay him she could not. Her verbal co-option was one of his most savage weapons against her, for the truth was this: Lord Capeluche was afraid to so much as touch her skin. He believed that she was contagion itself, the personification of his doom, and that if he -- or anyone else -- touched her then the spark of her malice would track him down and slay him wherever he stood. And perhaps he was right.

She stayed silent. "Very well then," said Capeluche. "As you were." He giggled slightly; "enjoy your dinner." He left the bedchamber, and she spat at the door as it closed behind him. That was another of his regular jokes. It meant she was going to starve for a day.

Presently it grew dark. Danielle exercised, continuing a program of press-ups and sit-ups that might have daunted a stevedore, marking time with her silent litany of rage. When she was too tired to continue, and all her muscles were shivering and weak, she lay back and placed her head upon the pillow and shut her eyes. Silent tears trickled down her cheeks unnoticed, as they had every evening for a thousand days.

At some point, her husband returned. He entered the room quietly, turned and ensured that the door was locked, then walked across to his chair beneath the window and sat in it with his feet upon a cushion. It was not the noise of his entrance but the intensity of his stare that awakened her, as usual.

"What is it?" she murmured, still half-asleep.

"Tomorrow," he whispered. "Tomorrow I shall be rid of you for ever. Sleep well, my princess. Sleep well and deep."

"Good riddance," she whispered, too drained by hatred to wonder what he meant. She rolled over again, rattling her chains in their sockets, and buried her face in the bolster. Perhaps one day it would stifle her; if so, it was something to look forward to. One small mercy among few, the greatest of which was that the madman dared not touch her with his filthy body, not even one square inch of it.

Now she fell into a deep slumber and dreamed, just as her psychotic husband had bidden her. In her dream, a dark and shadowy rescuer was approaching. He came by stealth, lurking in dark tunnels beneath the castle walls; he brought with him a sack of clothing, a sword, a pouch of arcana, and a bright

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new set of immaterial manacles. He came clothed in darkness, and he paused at a door in the foundations of the tower to whisper words of power that caused the lock on her door to spring open, then other words that came down upon her head like a hammer of velvet-black night.

Somewhere in her subconscious, hope stirred. Her fingers flexed, broken nails poised ready to gouge.

Then she was permitted to awaken.

"What -- " she murmured, then felt a palm clamped unsteadily across her jaw. Realising that her dream was reality, she refrained from biting it.

"<u>Patience</u>," he whispered, and removed his hand. There was the faintest of clicks at wrist and ankle, and an intoxicating sense of freedom overcame her. She shivered uncontrollably. Her rescuer was a dark shadow against the night; did he know about her husband?

"My lord -- " she whispered, sitting up.

" -- don't worry," her rescuer said quietly. "Will you come with me?"

He was a man: she said "yes" as she had been trained to, before she even considered what she was doing. Despite all her experiences. "In the chest, over there," she said, pointing. "He keeps my belongings in it. Take the bag on top, leave the rest. Have you fast horses waiting? My father will be grateful -- "

"No horses," whispered her rescuer, holding up something that glittered in the faint moonlight. "Tonight we fly by magic."

Her spirits soared; freedom by dawn! She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, wincing at the strangeness of the sensation. "Still, be careful. We don't want to wake my husband."

"Your -- " her shadowy rescuer froze then turned to face the window, the chair: the sleeping lunatic therein. "<u>Shit</u>," he said.

Danielle was dizzy; it was the first time she had stood up -- except upon a bed with her arms bowed to slacken her chains -- for more than three years. She stumbled towards the chest and opened it, grabbing at her bag: she didn't notice the empty platter on the lid until it crashed to the floor.

Lord Capeluche grunted and stiffened.

"Quick! Hold me tight," said her rescuer. He threw back his head and drank from the small vial that he held; she reached around his waist and linked her arms tightly, keeping hold of the neck of her bag. He uttered words that caused her skin to itch as if termites were burrowing within it, then he fell silent with

his head thrown back in an attitude of intense concentration.

"Halt!" mumbled Lord Capeluche. "You cannot do this -- " he jerked, and one eye opened. Her feet left the ground and her stomach lurched: she was flying, and there was a faint inhuman shrieking in her ears as if her rescuer was turning into a giant bat. "You'll miss the execution!" shouted her husband.

They rose over Capeluche's head as he struggled to his feet: the glass burst outwards before them as if a giant fist had punched into it, and then there was nothing below her feet for a very long way except the moonlit crowns of trees and a scream of pure and chilling rage that welled up through the window behind them.

They flew into the night, and she realised that perhaps her rescuer was not an agent of her father after all. That, perhaps, she had been abandoned to her fate. "Who are you?" she asked, holding tight to the waist of her rescuer; "what made you rescue me?"

He turned his face to her, but his lips were sealed as if he was holding back words. The strangeness of it, of the wind across her naked skin and the vast emptiness around her, made her laugh until the tears flowed freely and acknowledged for the first time. Then they began to descend towards the midnight forest beyond Castle Capeluche.

As the trees loomed up to either side, Danielle looked around in fascination. She had not been outside for years, and it still seemed unutterably strange. Then the rough grass of a clearing came up and batted her across the soles of her feet and she let go of her captor, staggering as she held her sack of dusty possessions.

"Can you speak yet?" she demanded.

"Yes," he said. "The spell is flown ... " he looked up towards the branches, through which the stars were barely visible.

"Good," she said. "I believe we shall have to make good our escape before my husband calls out the hunt. If he find us he'll kill us. You do realise that, don't you?"

Looking at him as her eyes adapted to the darkness, Danielle realised that her captor was little more than a youth; barely older than herself, shabbily dressed and unsophisticated. "You <u>are</u> prepared for this, are you not?" she prompted.

He stared at her in apparent confusion. "Not exactly," he said. "You talk ... "

She felt the pine needles beneath the soles of her feet, the breath of owls and night violets in her lungs; long grass tickled her calves, while a gentle night breeze dried the sweat from her body as she continued to breathe deeply, trying desperately to soak up as much of this natural world as possible before the

universe of men reached out again to imprison her with its restrictions. The dead leather weight of her bag dangled from her fingers. "You had no idea?" she asked disbelievingly.

"No," he said quietly. "It seemed a waste."

"What did?" she demanded.

"He wants your father dead. He wanted me to strike him down by necromancy, using you as a portal vessel. Your father should be grateful."

There was something disquieting about this young man, she decided; perhaps he was inexperienced in pain, unaware of the significance of what he was talking about. "My father can go hang for all I care," she said softly. "But now, will you help <u>me</u>?"

"I -- " he looked at the ground. "Yes."

"Then stop staring at me," she said. "I must clothe myself."

He turned away, just as he was told, and something inside her relaxed slightly. <u>Maybe, just maybe</u>, she thought, <u>this is a sane one</u>. Squatting, she opened her bag and drew out the travelling clothes she had worn habitually before her enforced marriage, her bride-sale of three years past. Her boots were there, too, and the short knife she had carried on her person. "You may look again," she said. "I would not like to be responsible for an adder biting you while your eyes were shut."

He blinked "You are -- " he paused. "These are your clothes?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Why do you think my father wished to dispose of me?" she asked, savagely. "I was more trouble than he was used to." She hefted her knife meaningfully, then thrust it into her belt. "Now. You say you brought no horses or provisions?"

"Provisions, yes," said the youth. "I have brought enough travelling food for us both to last a week, with care. And I have a book that might be of use under certain circumstances." He looked at her curiously and she laughed.

"You're hardly cut out for the raping and pillaging business, are you?" she asked. Reaching deep into her pockets, she drew on knuckle-rings surmounted by brazen pyramids sharp enough to cut leather. "Who and what manner of rescuer are you, and where do you hail from, oh chivalrous one who comes by night?"

"I am called Imad, and I was recruited -- forcibly -- to be your husband's magus," said her rescuer reluctantly.

"And why did he recruit you?" she asked. "Were you all he could afford, or did you come free from one who wanted to dispose of you too?"

"Neither," he said sharply, turning away as if stung. "I am an exile. My master sent me away after telling me that my aptitude was of less than no worth whatsoever, and that he did not wish to train me further."

"Then it was the latter case, just like me," she said wryly, hiding from him the secret calculations that trickled through her mind like drops of blood along a blade. "And what is your gift?"

He looked at her knowingly. "I am very good at dealing with pain," he said.

She smiled. "I can see that we are going to get on very well," she replied, removing her claws from her pockets. "Now, Imad, shall we walk, or would you like to guest at my husbands table in an entirely undesirable capacity?"

If Danielle had had her way they would have ridden out the night, but without horses or torches that would have been foolhardy; instead they sat with their backs to a fallen beech tree and discussed, in quiet voices, what they were going to do. Certain subjects were avoided (the question of motives in particular) for Danielle was still wary of Imad, and for his part Imad was taken aback by her self-assertive manner.

"How far from the road are we?" she asked, idly paring strips of bark off the tree with her knife, collecting it for tinder.

"Not far," he said. "I followed it as I flew, but the bat's blood was thinning rapidly and had I continued much further we'd like as not have fallen."

"That sounds interesting," she said. "Bat's blood? Is that how -- "

"A symbolic philtre," he interrupted. "The higher the screams, the higher the altitude; sympathic powers obey a law of proportionality, though I would not expect you to understand -- "

"My training was in the arts of reading and writing," she interrupted. "No-one bothered themselves with what I read."

"And what did you occupy yourself with?" he asked, chastened.

"At first with heroic myths, and epics of the hunt. Then I realised that my sex proscribed these, and I would be better applying myself to romance and comedy."

"So what did you do?"

She rammed her dagger into the tree. "I went hunting."

Imad shivered. "What is it?" she asked mockingly. "Am I alarming you? I assure you that at my fathers' court there are plenty of refined and ineffectual ladies to plight your troth to, should you so desire!"

"That was not what I was thinking," he said shortly. "It was simply this; you say Lord Capeluche -- "

She spat. " -- That scum -- "

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" -- is afraid of you? Why, then, will he come after us?"
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She gazed into the night woods. Already, although she might have been imagining it, it appeared to be growing less dark. "Because he is afraid," she said. "He thinks that I am his nemesis, that my spirit will pursue him to the ends of the earth and haunt him to death." She turned and looked at Imad, who flinched only slightly under the full intensity of her stare. "Maybe he's right."

She retrieved her dagger. "We had better take the road," she said. "He will follow us at break of dawn with all of his men. Neither of us can expect any mercy, you know. He's got an excuse to kill me now, without my father being oblige d to take reluctant revenge: he can accuse us of adultery together. What do you say, sheltered magus? Do you realise what desperate situation you have insinuated yourself into?"

He looked gloomy. "Perhaps we have a future together," he said. "And perhaps I was naive to stand in the way of your husband: but I've prepared this thorny bed for myself, so I suppose I must now lie in it." She could see inside his head; and I doubt that he would forgive me, even were I to return you instantly. She nodded to herself. Such thoughts were to be expected.

"Our match would certainly seem to be fated," she said drily. "Now come. Let us move; we have a long distance to go before we can consider ourselves safe, and a sensible start might be made by the stealing of a pair of horses!"

"Agreed," he said. And together they set off for the ends of the world, to liberate themselves from their respective demons.

Against the Expanding Night

The table fell silent.

"Well I must say," said Bishop Moran, "this is not what I had expected to hear!"

Lady Stael looked at him and shook her head. <u>I wonder how he's going to take it when he realises what</u> <u>he is</u>, she thought. "I didn't think it was," she said sharply. "The truth is often unpalatable. You didn't think about it very deeply, did you? The myth of the maiden imprisoned in the high tower, who waits for nothing more than her rescuer ... how true does it have to be? Might it not perhaps be the malicious propaganda of her captors themselves, who conspire to drug and imprison her so that her l ife becomes meaningless, given direction only by proxy through her children?"

She realised abruptly that the anger she was showing was out of place, that in other company it would have had terrible consequences for her social status: but this time it no longer mattered. A wildness without joy filled her; she could do whatever she wanted. She looked at the balustrade and understood what it was that Elenea the maid had sensed, that as the universe was drawing to a logical conclusion suicide was as sensible an option as abandoning a sinking ship. She glanced at Marcus. "Think," she sa id determinedly, "for once in your privileged, insulated life! Don't you see what it must be like? The myth, the story that we are constructing, is from the time before we remembered all our other lives, before we knew that transamnemsis was possible: before the determinism of history became overt! The dead did not hatch again, to stride the earth in renewed bodies: they were <u>dead</u>! And women, despite all the abuse that they suffered, had a vital function: for without them there would be an end to al l exp

rience."

"But now, as the world winds down, the mechanism is disrupted," said Jack-Jones heavily. "Is that what you mean, my Lady?"

"Where is my life?" she cried. "Why am I entrapped, deprived of any function save decoration? There was a time when -- "

"Overpopulation," said the Iron Brain, as coarsely as a turd cast upon the floor of heaven. "Time has run its mill-race, and now the flow becomes turbulent. How else do you explain the thinning rate of incarnation of previous lives?"

"That was not what she was referring to," said Marcus tetchily. "I do believe -- "

" -- I will speak for myself, thank you," said Lady Stael, irritated by his blind protectiveness. "This game is a valuable prompt to my memory, although some things still do not become clearer; why did the countessa have no recollection of her previous lives, for example? I would like to find out, but I fear that time is running short. It will be necessary before long to hasten the end and free the ghosts, otherwise we might well be too busy to appreciate the final act of the cosmic drama taking place out side."

"I doubt that very much," said the Iron Brain. It grinned at her darkly and she looked away, disturbed. She still remembered her outburst about freedom, but somehow it seemed hollow when she considered the words from the speaking skull. <u>And what is really going on in Marcuses head?</u> she wondered. "It is becoming cold," she announced. "I intend to go inside, and will shortly meet you in the western drawing-room, where we may continue the game in relative comfort. If we finish in time we can come out here again for the final event." She pushed back her chair, rose, and walked away without so much as a by-your-leave. It was a minor triumph, but sufficiently irrelevant to leave a bitter taste in her mouth. <u>So many lost years!</u> sh e wondered. <u>Am I in time</u>?

She entered the ballroom, where the chandeliers were burning down dark and the shadows crept along the floor even as she watched. The sideboard of delicacies seemed to be caught in a frozen instant of motion even as she watched; approaching it, she saw that the snails themselves were returning to life, hatching and writhing among the shells of their corpses, renewing themselves with impossible speed. There was a faint twittering noise from the dish of pickled lark's tongues. She stared at it, simultaneous ly fascinated and disgusted. It reminded her of sexual intercourse with her husband, in the days before she remembered from her previous lives what it was that she should have been told prior to her marriage.

Turning away, she walked lightly towards the grand hall and the staircase to her rooms. She had a wild urge to set light to the carpets and dance upon the blazing pyre of her deranged and repressive past: she suppressed it and climbed the stairs instead. Something was tugging at the edge of her mind and she was not sure whether she wished to become fully conscious of it, of a dangerous obsession left over from a previous journey through the halls of life. <u>It's strange</u>, she thought. <u>I could almost believe myself to be Danielle; not merely her transamnetrix, but her very flesh and soul!</u> It was exciting and frightening, not least because she had so little time to get used to it -- the world was due to end in only two and three quarter hours. <u>Perhaps that's why</u>, she brooded, walking along the corridor past her suite, towards another room that she had not visited for a long time. <u>Perhaps as time runs down the barrier between past and present is thinning. I am becoming my own ghost</u>, like the Iron Brain

Her skin was tingling. As she looked about she realised that she had come to her vanished husband's bedroom. The door loomed in front of her, its casement limned in faint blue fire.

"I'm not your toy," she said quietly. "I'm not afraid." The years draped themselves heavily across her shoulders as she turned the handle and entered.

The dead Lord Stael's room was identical to her own, save only that the dust lay thick within it. Drifts of pale ash heaped the picture frames, hung in the shafts of moonlight that shone through the windows; she sneezed, then turned to the bed. A counterpane lay across it, dusty and faded. She turned it back, and sat on one corner of the mattress. It creaked beneath her weight.

"May I come in?" asked Marcus.

She peered at him in the gloom. He appeared somewhat dishevelled, and although it was very dark his eyes were screwed tight. He held something behind his back.

"Only if you show me what you're holding," she said cautiously.

"A bottle of wine, nothing more." He brought it out and she saw that it was not just any wine: it was the most ancient vintage of Schloss Stael, stored in the cellars so that the bottle was dusted with a powdery crust that had accumulated over a full century. It was quite an appropriate vintage, she thought, for it was lych-wine, drunk only at noble funerals: the cellar where it was stored tunnelled into the catacombs.

"That is a sensible choice," she said. "Did you have any body in mind to anoint with it?"

"Only myself," he said quietly. "I've been a fool, Angelica. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

She licked her lips. "Yes, Imad."

"Don't call me that!" he said angrily, and she shivered. "I'm not Imad, and you're not Danielle any more either. Don't forget that or we're lost." He sat down on the chaise longue opposite her and placed the bottle between his knees. He looked haunted, as well he might.

"We still have our memories," she reminded him. "We still remember our other lives."

"Don't." He stared past her shoulder, broodingly. "Have I made a fool of myself?"

She swallowed bile and memories. "Only for the past fifty years, Marcus. You have made no more a fool of yourself than I have."

"But why?" he demanded. "Why did I refuse to remember -- "

She smiled grimly. "If you remembered, you would understand why you wanted to forget. Perhaps we should call an end to the game at this stage: after all, it is your turn next."

"Hah." He looked round. "Is there a corkscrew here?"

"There's a sideboard," she said. He stood up and opened the wine, then returned with two glasses, the bottle breathing the dusty air. She looked up at him. "Sit by me?" she asked.

Marcus sighed and sat down next to her. Dust rose from the bedding but the frame was solid. "We share our memories," he said, pouring a glass of fluid that was as black as congealed blood in the moonlight: "what else do we have in common?"

"I don't know," she said, staring at the veins on his hand. "We could grow old, not understanding one another, or -- " Her fingers closed on the stem of the glass. "I put on this dress because it was as near to her old hunting garb as I could find," she added softly. "Anything closer is alien to my status, Marcus. I

am entrapped, and yet I was told it is a privilege. Where did the lie begin?"

"That's a dangerous question to ask," he said. She found that she liked his new candour, whether or not it was born of despair: it was more than just a drunken counterweight to piety and intellect, the two poles around which his personality seemed to revolve. "I don't know where it started. Maybe when the first man told the first woman that she was beautiful, as a means of persuading her to hold his baby rather than as a statement of bald truth."

"His baby?" she asked, raising an eyebrow; "even the language we speak turns against us!"

"You include me?" he asked; "aren't I excluded by my sex?"

She thought for a moment, then took in a mouthful of thick, dark wine. "No," she said. "For what belittles any person belittles all. Don't you see?"

He seemed puzzled. "I think so," he said, a pained expression on his face. "I didn't realise it meant so much to you."

"It didn't. Not until the game commenced, and I began to remember who I am."

She drained her glass carelessly, and watched him through a haze of moonbeam possibilities. He took a sip. "What are we doing here?" he asked.

"The dead have friendships," she said, feeling her pulse race as she considered her next words carefully. "It's been a long time. Who are we to restrain them, at the end of the universe?"

His back straightened. "That is an improper suggestion to -- " he stopped, then took a mouthful of wine, made a face, and put the glass down on the floor. "I sounded just like a Bishop then, didn't I?" he said, a desperate fear visible in his eyes. "Come here -- "

Angelica leaned close and kissed him. Their lips met and parted, tongues eagerly renewing an acquaintance that was both ancient and new together. "Quickly," she said, pulling away from him. Her eyes watered with fear that the moment might be lost. "There's so little time! We must finish the game."

For a minute they were all fingers and thumbs, feverishly stripping each other bare until skin shivered under moonlight. Then Marcus reached out and ran a finger across her tense-skinned breast. "No," she said, feeling her nipples contract and harden. "I want you to lie down first."

"Is it -- " he did as she said -- "that important?"

"Yes," she said, not quite able to remember why it was that she had to do this. "On your back -- "

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She bent over him, and endeavoured to rub every part of him with all of her anatomy; as if to fuse their frail bags of protoplasm, so that their identities too might be merged. He gasped and she sealed his mouth with her lower lips, moving her hips in narrow circles until she felt as if she was about to scream. Then she leaned forward and took him into her mouth, licking back and forth with gentle motions. "Please," he gasped. Somehow, smiling blindly at the expanding night, they switched ends and she finally lowered herself onto him. The shock of feeling ran right through her core, thrilling her and setting every inch of her on fire: they began to move together, tenta-tively at first, then faster, in a rhythm older than their species.

Angelica began to come. As the shuddering contraction rippled through her she drew up her legs; and at that moment she distantly felt a warm release as Marcus added his climax to her own. It ended almost simultaneously and, temporarily exhausted, she lay down on top of him. Closing her eyes, she felt his arms around her: not imprisoning, not protecting ... simply there. So late, but so good, she thought tiredly. Why can't it be so easy in every respect? But it wasn't. If it had been, this mi ght have taken place forty years ago. Or even earlier.

The table on the balcony was deserted, the detritus of an evening abandoned around it. A leaf, harbinger of an autumn that would never arrive, blew across it and lodged in a cranny between welds. Perhaps if time held its breath, a tree would grow through the table: and perhaps not.

The Iron Brain ignored it, moving through a night as thick and dark as inner space. The Last Gambler had already occupied the drawing room, and had lit a fire in the grate -- for reason of comfort as much as temperature -- and was now sunk deep in a leather chair that was as overstuffed as he was thin. Jack-Jones stood and studied a painting on the wall, a devotional depicting Our Lord working in his study, a copy of the works of Jung at his side. The Iron Brain swayed slightly as it entered the room, pau sing in the doorway like a spectre.

"Where is the Bishop?" It asked unemotionally.

"Praying, I think," said Jack-Jones.

"Restoring her make-up," suggested the Gambler.

Jack-Jones turned cold eyes on him. "If you cannot be polite, be silent," he said. "Without them, none of us would be here. Besides which, it is now the Bishop's move. What say you, Brain?"

The Brain turned its pitiless photoreceptors on him, soaking up all the light as if in search of the dawn of the new age. "I say that they will come to us in their own time," it said. "What does it matter if they reenact their romance, or express their affection? They are alive, and we are dead."

"Speak for yourself," said the Gambler. "I'm -- "

" -- <u>All</u> of us are dead," asserted the cyborg. Firelight glittered from its vertebrae, which whirred faintly as it moved. A perfect skeleton modelled in wolfram and ebony plastics, wrapped in a caul of mummified flesh: "you do not recognise the truth for it describes a wider context than your soul, a context in which you are embedded. This <u>universe</u> is dead, yet you will not admit it! You earn your name well, Gambler, for no other statistician would remain to test the odds on the future of th is continuum."

"Statistics are not about gambling," said the Last Gambler, somewhat nettled by this reproach: "they are about certainties. Or at least the statistics <u>I</u> study are concerned with certainty and its absence."

"A funny thing," said Jack-Jones. "In the old world, before I gained my second soul and passed beyond the grave, it was said that the one branch of the mathematica that had not been mapped was the study of certainty. I am unsure of the significance of this, but your theories must be uniquely advanced to carry you so far! Imagine that, a calculus of confidence."

"I need no confidence," retorted the Gambler: "faith is all I require. An <u>ad hoc</u> preparation to banish all doubts. Now do you understand why I am a gambler?"

The Iron Brain looked at him steadily. "Yes," it said. "You have no alternative. Just like the rest of us. Are you by any chance a lapsed clergyman?" The Last Gambler bristled.

Before blood or bone could be spilt, the door opened again. Marcus and Angelica stood there; but they no longer resembled the widowed noble-Lady or the middle-aged Bishop who had started the evening together. There was something wild and terrible about Angelica's eyes, an expression of freedom brought at any price: she wore her eccentric tunic and trousers as before, but the hilt of a dagger protruded from the top of her left boot and she had restored her foetal earrings to her apparel. As for Marcus, his expression was knowing: no longer the benign mask of a sacred fool. He appeared to have experienced some private apotheosis that had conferred insight upon him, so that when he stared at the Last Gambler that individual froze and looked guiltily away.

"It is time to continue the Game," said Angelica. "I believe we have very little left, if we are to complete on schedule." She sat down on an overstuffed sofa, brazenly crossed her legs, then looked around. "Marcus."

The Bishop sat down beside her and openly put his arm around her shoulders. The Iron Brain noted with something approximating amusement that his shirt was a size too large: evidently it was looted from the dead Lord Stael's wardrobe. "Let's resume," he said. "I draw this time, I believe?"

His sudden change of confidence was remarkable. The Iron Brain watched as the Last Gambler, careful not to meet his eye, placed the deck of cards on the small occasional table where Marcus could reach it. He picked up the deck and shuffled it for himself, then took a card from the top and placed it face-up on the other three (which the Iron Brain had itself carried through from the table on the balcony).

"How interesting," said Angelica. She stared at it closely, and the reddish light from the fireplace betrayed a faint sheen of sweat upon her brow.

"Yes it is, isn't it," commented Marcus. His face was remarkably pale. The picture depicted a pretty young woman, naked but for a brief jewelled wrap around her hips: she sat with her head bent back and her eyes shut, straddling a young man in a position that left little to the imagination. Yet the background, rather than depicting a bedroom scene, showed rows of faces: unsmiling, obsessive faces, bored faces, sweating faces, row upon row of them all focused upon the copulating couple. Above the spectator s, a row of multi-coloured lights painted scene all the colours of hell.

If the Iron Brain had still possessed a nose, it would have been willing to wager that it could smell the stale sweat and alcoholic breath of the club or brothel which the scene depicted. It shut off it's visual cortex temporarily, giving in to a rush of nostalgia for the time when it had possessed a full complement of glands and a fleshy brain with which to enjoy them. "I think you should continue, Bishop," it said. "I do not wish to leave here without learning the end of the story."

Marcus looked up. His face was like a death mask, rigidly composed and expressionless. Angelica glanced away from the card and put her arm tenderly about his waist, but he showed no sign of recognition: he was battling some internal demon instead. Presently he licked his lips. "Very well then," he said. "I shall tell you the end of the story. And then -- " he looked at the Iron Brain -- "you will tell us why you are here."

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>Love and Executions

They walked until they came to a stream, which Danielle insisted they follow for a short distance. This was a wise move, for at mid-morning they heard the far-off baying of dogs. But the hounds had no scent to follow, and by early afternoon the escapers were more than twenty miles from the castle. They were close to the edge of the Marches, where the ground began to rise and the trees to thin, and it was unlikely that Capeluche would venture this far without first ensuring the security of his home before he set out.

The weather was hot but not unbearable, and the trees shaded them from the worst of it. Imad lost himself in thought as he walked; his behaviour was strange, he reflected, for he could have made quite a name for himself had he stayed with his erstwhile employer. Why did I reject the opportunity? he wondered, his earlier vision of a warped future already fading in his memories. All I had to do was kill <u>her</u>. He glanced surreptitiously at his companion. While they paused for lunch, she had hack ed off most of her hair with her dagger; then she had rinsed what was left of it in the water of the stream. The enchanted prisoner was gone, replaced entirely by this purposeful stranger. Was she ever like that? Imad wondered. Or was I deluding myself? Like many men he lacked sufficient will-power to turn the rhetorical question on its head and make a truth of it: he had been trained not to expect women to act of

their own accord, and consequently he half-expected to see some hidden master l urking in her shadow

As the sun passed the zenith Danielle asked him a question that she had spent two hours considering, rolling around her tongue, and tasting from every angle before she dared utter it. "Tell me," she said, "what is it that you expect from life? I am aware you were apprenticed and your master rejected you -- but surely you could have made something of yourself without too much difficulty, even in the service of my husband?" She kept her hand close to her knife as she waited for him to reply. Imad noted this with mild dismay; what did she expect of him?

"I don't know," he said, playing for time. "Will you give me a moment to think about it?"

She didn't reply, so he thought about it as they walked, and it seemed to him the longer he thought about it that he had been completely right -- that he didn't know what he wanted, except that he did not possess it.

"I'm looking for something," he said finally.

"What?" she asked, maintaining her grip on the dagger.

"I don't know." It was frustration that made him scowl, but so fierce was his expression that it made her look around sharply for enemies. "If I knew I would not be seeking it."

"Is it wealth?" she guessed. "Or a long-lost relative? Or power?" Her cheek twitched: her imprisonment had not cured her of a certain romantic imagination, but had tempered it with cynicism.

"None of those," he said listlessly. "I would say it was un-derstanding, or fulfilment, but those terms are inadequate; nothing can describe what I seek. I doubt that I shall ever find it in this life."

"What then?" she hazarded. "Is it love? Or religion?"

He smiled wryly. "If I knew I could tell you," he said. "I think it is some of all of those, though. I mislike the waste and inefficiency of a vast fortune: it seems so incredibly futile. I am not sure about children, for what good is a lineage to a corpse? Comfort perhaps, but comfort is an illusion that can be shattered at any moment. Maybe you appreciate that better than I do; it's merely verbiage, after all."

She seemed content with that for an answer, and they walked on in silence. Presently they came to a road that was better maintained than any in the Marches, and in the distance a plume of smoke that rose from a fearless chimney. "Is it an inn, do you suppose?" he asked, but she didn't reply.

They approached it, and presently saw that indeed it was an inn. Danielle touched his arm lightly. "A warning," she said, a faint smile at the edge of her lips. "I mislike me the treatment of women in these parts, and so soon after my confinement I do not wish to be taken for ... " she shook her head. "I am your

brother. Do you understand me?"

Imad considered for a moment, then nodded. "If that is your wish," he said.

"Good." Now she smiled properly, and Imad noted that she <u>was</u> somewhat boyish in appearance: but to his eye she somehow merged with his memory of the imprisoned maiden of the tower. "We must make enquiries after horses, and the next town."

"But what will you do?" Imad asked suddenly. "I mean, do you not wish to return to your father?"

She stared at him. "Whatever for?" she asked.

"But you -- " he paused, sensing that he was treading upon dangerous ground.

"Say it," she challenged. "Why should I not do as you do? You seek for what you will. Say then that I am disillusioned with my life to date, and would go in search of fulfilment! Not to speak of the death of my bastard husband, should his neck ever present itself to my blade."

Imad breathed deeply and looked at her anew. "How will you earn a living?" he asked.

She looked straight at him. "What makes you think I cannot?" she challenged.

He nodded. "Very well, then. You are my younger brother: I am a journeyman magus, and you are travelling with me as bodyguard and tutee. Is that to your satisfaction?"

"It'll do," she said shortly, fingering the pommel of her knife. "Do you know how to use that sword you wear so inexpertly?"

"No," he admitted.

"Then give it here before you do yourself an injury."

Imad was reluctant to part with the blade, both because it was valuable and also because he had a nagging mistrust of her intentions, but the logic of her statement was inarguable. "Very well," he said. "I suppose you won't trip over it?"

She frowned and drew it carefully. "The balance is poor," she said, "but it will do."

They continued towards the inn and reached it at twilight. It was nearly empty, little more than a roadside farmhouse with boarding rooms in what had once been a hay-loft, and a surly farmer and his sickly wife who served up rancid scrumpy and pie and little in the way of conversation. It transpired that

Different Flesh

the nearest town was ten miles further along the road and there were no horses to be had for love nor money: so in order to reduce the drain on his half-empty purse Imad arranged to share a room with his brother, who seemed less than keen on the idea.

It grew dark before long, and Imad retired upstairs. Presently Danielle came in and stared at him coldly by candle-light as he lay on the straw-filled tick, massaging the aches out of his calves. "Why did you do this?" she demanded, sitting on the other side of the bed.

"Because you're my brother," he said tiredly, not wanting to think why he did it. "If it means so much to you I'll sleep on the damned floor." He shut his eyes and yawned. After a moment he added: "I didn't think you'd mind." Then honesty forced his tongue further. "Truthfully, with Himself in pursuit I didn't wish to spend a night alone. I have troubled enough dreams as it is."

He sat up and shook his head. "I'm to bed," he said, and rolled out his blanket on the floor.

Various thoughts ran through his head, not all of them noble, as he heard her removing her outer clothes behind him. Then he heard her pull the quilt up over her, and all thought of intimacy fled before a tide of sleep. He yawned a final time and closed his eyes.

After an eternity of drifting on the edge of sleep, a voice whispered at the edge of his hearing: "wizard, why did you rescue me?"

So tired was he that he could barely reply, but some agency seemed to open his mouth for him. "I saw a part of my solution," he mumbled, "lying chained in a tower with a north-facing window. Then I heard screams at night. I couldn't sleep."

A slim hand touched his shoulder. "Come here," she said.

"What?" he rolled half-over and looked up at her face.

"You heard: there's room for two in this bed. You won't sleep any better on the floor."

"But you're not what I was looking for," he protested, even as he sat up and dragged himself under the quilt. <u>You're not the imprisoned princess of my dreams</u>, he thought confusedly; <u>you're too real</u>.

"Maybe," she whispered inp his ear, "but perhaps you are what <u>I</u> was waiting for!" He shivered as he held her, uncertain of what he was doing: and she shivered too for quite different reasons, altogether too sure what she was doing for comfort. They shivered each other to sleep and neither of them were plagued by dreams of their insane pursuer, clad in the skins of his victims. Neither did they make love, then or on the next night or the one after that; but there came a time when their intimacy pres sed closer than any chaste embrace, and they rolled upon the floor of a room in a city inn one afternoon until the inkeep was like to denounce them as sodomites and Imad looked into her eyes and saw laughter and joy

reflected in them. But there were no dreams of Capeluche -- and all the while they moved closer to their destiny.

The year rolled slowly round to autumn, and the illusions began to hang heavy around them. Imad was forced to seek intermittent employment as a healer of warts and a diviner of wells, which galled him for he longed to wreak impressive works by which he would be remembered. More than once Danielle deterred a casual thief or bag-man from making an attempt on his life as they worked their way northwest, beating a more or less direct path away from the March lands. For his part, Imad was confused by her. He had stolen a countess and discovered a brooding huntress, who went for days without speaking to him -- other than to discuss the requirements of the road -- then suddenly imposed astonishing demands upon his stamina and emotions. It was not what he had been led to believe conjugal relations were about, although it had its compensations. Then they crossed the frontier into the Alfine mountains, generally regarded as an uncivilised wasteland; and Danielle became pregnant.

It was almost inevitable. Imad had been an apprenticed magus, not a hedge-wizard's disciple; and Danielle, who should have known better, had too much pride and self-possession to think of consulting some village witch on her travels. It caused them to become fractious, turning on one another, for pregnancy clashed with both of their plans. Danielle brooded for a week, refusing to talk to him, and Imad in turn withdrew into his own head. Presently they came to a town half-way up the side of the Avilnian Pa ss, and Danielle gave in to her own unvoiced ultimatum. "We shall have to find somewhere to stop," she told him. "I shall be a woman again, for I cannot pass for your brother like this: and either we shall have a family or not."

Imad looked at her sadly and shook his head. They sat together in a cramped room they had rented above a tanner's shop, and the bitter smell of the vats rose up through cracks in the floor-boards to assail his nostrils. "I don't understand how you can be so calm about it," he said, for he had learnt a lot about her in the past four months -- but not enough, perhaps.

"One confinement is much like any other," she replied tartly. Then she caught his hand and his gaze and shook her head sadly. "Dreams are not destined to come true," she said. "When you rescued me from the castle of the madman, did you ever wonder what would happen next? People do not live happily ever after, not in real life. You are seeking something special; I wish for freedom of a kind that my position forbade me. Maybe there was a way out of it for us both, once, but I fear the moment is long flown." She stroked his hand, for he obviously did not know what to say next.

"I'm going to bear a child," she said, trying to keep her statements simple and disentangled so that she could fit them between her lips; she knew it bothered him when she became distant or vague or could not communicate her feelings by verbal means. "I might die. Or I might become a fat, blowsy housewife, unable to travel. The child might die. Or it might live; and we will have a family, if you want. But things cannot be the same between us as they were before this happened."

Imad turned away, for a great cry of sorrow was welling up inside him; he wanted to stifle it, but he

knew that he could not succeed.

"Is this what they mean by responsibility?" he asked bitterly.

She didn't answer. She knew that he understood, and that he would grow cold and distant over the years if they remained together as man and wife. That much was fore-ordained. But she didn't care. She felt totally numb: just when she thought she had found herself, she discovered that she had been lost from the beginning.

The next day, Danielle visited a cloth merchant and began stitching herself a dress; she shaved her head so that Imad barely recognised her, so changed was she from the huntress who had travelled three hundred miles by his side. The silences grew deeper and more meaningful between them, for each of them bore a certain bitterness about the way events had turned, and neither was willing to concede that it might be for the best. Danielle had a certain fear of marriage -- and who, knowing her history, could b lame her? -- and Imad realised that at some stage he had betrayed himself, surrendering his lofty and arcane goals in return for a romantic illusion. So they lapsed from high romance to grim domesticity and Imad hung his sign, <u>Wisard and Scrivener</u>, outside their rooms, and they became to all intents and purposes a young emigrant couple of the merchant class.

One morning at the time of the spring festival, when all the town trades were shut and there was no other call upon his services, a wealthy farmer summoned Imad out to his estate. He was to supervise the enchantment of a new barn, that it might not harbour vermin and insects -- for Imad still excelled at such tasks, despite his increasingly settled ways. Danielle now spent much of her time indoors and was swelling visibly with child.

"I hope your work's as good as rumour has it," said the farmer; "if so, perchance I might have need of yon sorceries again."

"Oh?" asked Imad with mild interest.

"Aye," said the landlord, beaming widely. "Drink you this, a most excellent cider of my tenant client. Yes, for you see I intend to expand. Such as you are worth your weight in silver to an honest farmer such as I, do you see? The savings in grain be enough to pay for a new farm in only five years ... "

The farmer rambled on like this at some length, and Imad paid half an ear to it because his future welfare depended on it: he might soon have a family, he reasoned, and if he failed to look to his trade how would he feed them? He blinked. <u>Feed</u> them? <u>A family</u>? He shook his head, bemused.

"What be it?" demanded the landlord. "Are you tired, is that it?"

"No sir," said Imad good-humouredly. "I was simply thinking that what's good for you is, in turn, good for my family."

"Aye, I see," said the farmer. A shadow crossed his face, then vanished abruptly. "You be married?"

"Yes," said Imad. "We are expecting."

"Aye well, that be good. Well indeed! Now you look towards your wife, young feller. Don't spare the strap and spoil the brat, keep a tight rein on your household; and if you take my advice you'll have dutiful children to support you in your old age! That's what I say," he added.

"I suppose so," said Imad, somewhat vacuously. Something the farmer had said kept circling through his skull; <u>spare the strap and spoil the brat, spare the brat and spoil the strap</u> ... he shook his head. "Well, I must be going," he said, and smiled and made his apologies and left. It was two miles back to the town and clouds were building up over the mountains, and he thought for a while. <u>Do I really want to become like that farmer?</u> he wondered. <u>A fat sullen wife who does what I say only because I beat her as a matter of principle? A rich, bloated landlord whose clients eat barely enough to live and yet who intends to buy up a new farm every five years? He shook his head. <u>I don't have to do that</u>, he decided. <u>I don't have to live like that</u>. Neither does Danielle. But we'll have to be ready to move as soon as the babe comes. We can't live as we wish among people like these, there is no room ...</u>

As he walked past the largest inn in the town, he caught sight of a number of horses hitched to the rail outside; evidently a party had arrived for whom there was insufficient accommodation in the stables. <u>This town is too prosperous</u>, he thought; <u>it's probably some rich merchant and his bodyguards</u>. Another thought struck him. <u>Maybe we can enlist</u>, a journeyman wizard and his wife, or his brother even. If they're going east ... East?

His stomach lurched. The door to the tannery above which they lived was ajar.

9. The Central Dogma

Marcus stopped talking. Angelica rested her face in her hands. She did not sob aloud, but her shoulders shook until he stroked them gently.

"What of the ending?" enquired Jack-Jones, discreetly inquisitive.

Marcus shook his head. His face was ashen. "I will not tell it," he said. "Some things should be left unremembered."

"It still remains a part of you," said the Iron Brain coldly. "You are the self-same lovers, rediscovered in different flesh. How conven-ient! My felicit-ations."

"Shut up," said Jack-Jones tensely.

"I would merely like to understand what happened in the end," said the Iron Brain. "I believe I have a right to know," it added a touch petulantly.

The Gambler stared at it darkly, and cast another card upon the table. This one was drawn from a more conventional tarot deck: the hanged man.

"When Imad entered their room, his heart was pounding," said Marcus. His own voice was unsteady. "The first thing he saw was her feet. There was dried blood on her left ankle. She had been hanged."

Marcus blinked and looked away. There were tears in his eye; tears of suppressed rage. "Give me a drink, for the love of mercy," he snarled; "and get one for Angelica too!"

She raised her head and rubbed her eyes, then looked about. "It's all right," she said quietly. "Remember it's long gone."

"No it isn't," he said, cutting the air with his hands; "it isn't over for <u>me</u>! Maybe it never will be. Because I remember -- " his face contorted in naked grief. Jack-Jones passed him a glass of blackish wine, and it took him a few seconds to notice; then he took it and gulped it back in a single swallow. He shuddered. Angelica put her glass down in concern and raised a hand to his wrist.

"You needn't tell them the rest," she said softly. "The game is over."

"But there's no winner," he said, sounding unconvinced.

"There never is," said Jack-Jones. "It's a zero-sum game after all, isn't it?"

"Bastard filth," said Marcus, glowering up at him. "I know exactly what you are!"

"And so do I," said the paramage, a mild note of amusement in his voice. "Such resentment, locked up for so long in so refined a Bishop and noble Lady! Such fantastic fatalism, incredible romance, beauty, tragedy, variety ... it gives me fresh hope for life after all."

"With barely an hour to go," reminded the Last Gambler. "It's a shame that truth and beauty cut no ice with entropy: I had better be leaving, all things considered."

"Where to?" asked the Iron Brain.

"The next universe." The Gambler frowned. "Statistics are comforting, but I'd rather not gamble with my own existence, if it pleases you! Goodbye." So saying he faded slowly into thin air, leaving behind him only his esoteric deck of cards.

Angelica picked up her wine-glass and took another mouthful. "Good riddance," she said tactlessly. "He gave me the creeps."

Marcus raised an eyebrow at her. "Danielle, you're not supposed -- " he began.

"Gather up his cards," she said tersely. Then; "I shouldn't answer to that name, you know. The memory runs deep."

"I suppose so," said the Iron Brain disinterestedly; "I wouldn't know. No synapses, you see, just squitterons and fibre optics."

"Then what are we?" she asked.

"Don't start that now," said Marcus. "I have enough trouble managing my own memories as it is. Why does remembering have to be so painful?"

"That's a much more interesting question," said Jack-Jones approvingly. "Ask again!"

Marcus stood suddenly. "I don't want to have anything more to do with this," he said angrily. "The world is ending: what's the point? I'm going outside!"

He headed for the door before anyone could say anything more. As he passed it he turned and flung his empty glass into the fireplace. Angelica stared at Jack-Jones. "Why did you have to start this?" she demanded.

Jack-Jones shrugged. "It's a nonlinear system," he said. "Sometimes the attractors must exert such colossal force that the entire structure spirals in on itself before an equilibrium point is attained. Do you have any idea how rare a phenomenon this meeting of minds might be?"

She stood up. "I don't," she said tightly, "and I don't need to. You have tilted the world on its axis, opened up the whole universe to question! And yet I can see no benefit in it. You have turned my dreams to ashes by revealing these memories, and to what end?" She turned away. "If you will excuse me, there's still time for me to find Marcus before the end."

Only the Iron Brain was left now, to confront the paramage with its toothsome grin. "It appears we may not hear the ending after all," said Jack-Jones mockingly. "Or would you care to stalk these two young love-birds from the other side of the hedge?"

The cyborg stared at him. It had a slight overbite, Jack-Jones noticed, and the fine cables surrounding its photosensors gave it the appearance of a skull with two fat spiders nestling in its eye sockets. "I don't understand why we were both summoned," it said slowly, as near to puzzlement as he had ever seen it. "Are we both really necessary to the closure of this text?"

Jack-Jones sighed. "Your trouble is that you have no soul," he said, "whilst I am afflicted with two. Will you not take it from me that a certain balance is essential to the re-interpretation of these lives?"

With a faint hum of stepper motors, the Iron Brain stood and paced the room. "I will concede that for the moment," it said, head bowed towards the infinite fractal design imprinted on the woollen carpet. "You know more about souls, about state vectors, than I: but even you must admit that when it comes to entropy I have no rival!"

Jack-Jones glanced up at the window. The huge, foetal heart that was rising in the east blotted out half the sky; the end was beginning. "Agreed," he said. "Let us examine the cards together. Perhaps then we can deduce the truth?"

The mobile skeleton turned towards him and nodded. "Very well." It sat down on the other side of the table and scooped out the bottommost card with a bony digit.

"First," said Jack-Jones, "we see the symbol of destruction. I believe it was known as the cruise missile: an icon that never fulfilled itself, but which promised such a disastrous rebirth as we have seen approaching tonight."

The cyborg looked past his head, towards the rising viscera. "I agree," it said. "Repressed destruction: vicious rebirth."

Jack-Jones flipped over the next card. "Now we have the Astronaut. A voyager into a meaningless and unfulfilled void; the seeking after purpose of Imad the journeyman, the urgent desire for escape held by countessa Danielle of Capeluche. They coincide at every turning, you see."

"On the contrary," said the Iron Brain. "I merely see a harbinger of travel."

The Paramage stared at it. "You would, wouldn't you," he said. "Will you leave to me the analysis of souls?"

"Ah, conceded." The skeletal figure emitted a rattling buzz which might, in other days, have been a rich laugh.

"Your turn."

The Iron Brain slipped the third card from the pile; a syringe.

"Control," it said. "A needle dripping Peace into a vein; the absence of language. Alternatively, escape."

"Of a morbid kind," Jack-Jones agreed. "And the next?"

There was no need to turn the card over. It rested alone, on top of the table. "The stripper: the truth revealed. All the banality of destiny. A quick fuck in public. Is that <u>all</u> it means?"

"No," said the paramage. He spared a quick glance for the window. The beating heart was growing larger, and now it was evident that it was no physical organ; rather, it was the manifestation of something less substantial, of some idealised pulse of life itself. "It also stands for renewal."

"But there are no happy endings!" protested the Iron Brain. "At least, not outside of stories!"

Jack-Jones smiled mysteriously. "But <u>this</u> story is an isomyth," he reminded his companion. "And, in all honesty, would you wish to deny them their reincarnation outside of the system? That, after all, is what this game is about."

The Iron Brain, devil's advocate assigned to be the hand of one who had no hand -- and no awareness, actually being the negation of such -- stared at the paramage. "You are stepping beyond the bounds," it said. "The central dogma that souls know their assigned places."

Jack-Jones stood up. "The central dogma is nothing but words, a construct. Maybe it's time for me to leave," he said. "Will you deny this tormented couple their union in flesh?" The skeleton did not reply. "Because if not, I beg you, await me in this room. I must seek them in the garden to inform them of the final verdict."

He turned and walked from the drawing-room, to leave death's emissary alone and speechless by the fire. He strode out into the garden, and the night air was cool on his cheeks as he began to search for the haunted couple. His heart was light, as it always was when the powers that determined his trade allowed him to choose his desired outcome: above him the fiery pulse of a new being crept across the horizon, threatening to drown the world in unborn light. The eyes of the stuffed penguins pointed the way f or him as if they were eager to convey the good news themselves, despite being mute and speechless. Unlike Jack-Jones. As he entered the maze, he carefully rehearsed what he was about to tell them.

"If one more soul entered the world, the universe would explode. But there is a way -- "