

Varicose Worms

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The worms in this story drain the energy of their host and are the perfect representatives of their master. The story is also about magic, shamanism, and poetic justice. And it's a truly disgusting story, so don't try it before a meal.

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Eminescu Eliade's great good luck had been his last name, that and the fact that not only had he been a cultured cosmopolitan and intelligent man when he'd arrived in Paris (named Eminescu after his country's greatest nineteenth-century poet by parents who'd seen to it that he had a thorough classical education, he'd almost completed his studies as a veterinarian when he'd been forced to flee Romania as the result of an indiscretion with a rather highly placed local official's daughter) but that he'd arrived in Paris hungry, practically penniless and desperate. So desperate that when he'd seen a copy of Mircea Eliade's *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* in a bookstore window on the rue St. Jacques, where it had been accompanied by a notice explaining that Professor Eliade had returned to Paris for a limited time to give a series of lectures at the Musée de l'Homme under the auspices of the Bollingen Foundation, he'd gone to the post office and spent what were almost the last of his few coins for two phone tokens. He called the museum with the first and somehow, despite his halting French and the implausibility of his story, convinced the woman who answered the phone to give him the phone number of the apartment in Montmartre where the professor was staying, then used the other token to call the professor himself and pretend to a family relationship that had as far as he knew no basis in fact.

His meeting with the professor a few days later resulted in nothing but an excellent hot meal and the chance to discuss his namesake's poetry in Romanian with a fellow exile, but the fact that he'd found a copy of the other's book on shamanism in a library and had read it carefully in preparation for the interview changed his life.

Because when, some weeks later, he found himself panhandling in back of the Marche St. Germain with all his clothes worn in thick layers to keep him warm and the rest of his few possessions in two plastic bags he kept tied to his waist with some twine he'd found, or sleeping huddled over the ventilation grating at the corner of the boulevard St. Germain and the rue de l'Ancienne Comédie where the hot dry air from the metro station underneath kept him warm, or under the Pont Neuf (the oldest bridge in Paris despite its name) on nights when it was raining and he couldn't get past the police who sometimes made sure no one got into the Odeon metro station without a ticket—in the weeks and months he spent standing with his fellow *clochards* sheltered from the wind against the urine-stained stone of the Eglise St. Sulpice, yelling and singing things at the passersby, or in alleyways passing the cheap red wine in the yellow-tinged green bottles with the fat stars standing out in bas-relief on their necks back and forth—he slowly came to realize that certain of his companions were not at all what they seemed, were in fact shamans—urban shamans—every bit as powerful, as fearsome and as wild as the long-dead Tungu shamans whose Siberian descendents still remembered them with such awe. Remembered them only, because long ago all the truly powerful shamans had left the frozen north with its starvation and poverty for the cities where they could put their abilities to better use, leaving only those whose powers were comparatively feeble or totally faked to carry on their visible tradition and be studied by scholars such as Professor Eliade.

And from his first realization of what he'd found and what it meant, it hadn't taken him all that long to put

the knowledge to use and become what he'd been now for more than fifteen years: an internationally known French psychiatrist with a lucrative private practice in which the two younger psychiatrists with whom he shared his offices on avenue Victor Hugo were not his partners but his salaried employees. The diplomas hanging framed on his wall were all genuine despite the fact that the name on them—Julien de Saint-Hilaire—was false and that the universities in Paris and Geneva and Los Angeles that had issued them would have been appalled to learn just what he'd actually done to earn them. He had a twenty-two-room apartment in a private hotel overlooking the Parc Monceau that even the other tenants now thought had been in his family since the early sixteen hundreds, maids who were each and every one of them country girls from small villages in the provinces as maids were traditionally supposed to be, and a very beautiful blond-haired American wife, Liz, in her early twenties, who'd been a model for Cacharel before he'd married her and convinced her to give up her career.

He took two, and sometimes three, month-long business trips every year, leaving the routine care of his patients during his absences to Jean-Luc and Michel, both of whom were talented minor shamans though neither of them was as yet aware of just what it was that they did when they dealt with patients.

Last fall, for example, he'd left them with the practice while he attended a psychiatric congress in San Francisco where he and his fellow psychiatrists—or at least that sizable minority among them who were, like himself, practicing shamans—had gotten together in a very carefully locked and guarded auditorium, there to put on their shamanizing costumes so they could steal people's souls and introduce malefic objects into their bodies, thus assuring themselves and their less aware colleagues of an adequate supply of patients for the coming year. He'd learned quite a bit about the proper use of quartz crystals from two young aboriginal shamans attending their first international congress, but had done as poorly as usual in the competitions: The very gifts that made him so good at recovering souls no matter how well his colleagues hid them made it difficult for him to recognize those hiding places where they in turn would be unable to discover the souls *he* hid. But he'd had a good time drinking Ripple and Thunderbird and Boone's Farm Apple Wine from stained paper bags on street corners and in Golden Gate Park, where he and most of the other psychiatrists attending the congress had slept when the weather permitted, and by the time he'd returned to Paris Liz had lost all the weight she'd put on since the trip before.

But it was almost the end of March now, time to start readying himself for his next month-long separation from her and from his comfortable life as Julien de Saint-Hilaire. He had to retrieve the lost, strayed, and stolen souls of those he intended to cure, and damage or find new hiding places for the souls of those patients he intended to retain for further treatment.

And besides, Liz was starting to get fat again. It was a vicious circle: They both loved to eat but she couldn't keep up with him without putting on weight, and the fatter she got the more insecure she felt about her appearance, so the more she ate to comfort herself. She was already back to the stage where she was sneaking out to eat Napoleons and lemon tarts and exotic ice creams and sherbets in three or four different tea salons every afternoon, doing it all so surreptitiously that if he didn't know beforehand where she was planning to go, it could take him a whole afternoon of searching to catch up with her; in another month or so she'd be getting worried enough to start looking to other men for reassurance again.

And that was something he couldn't, and wouldn't, allow. He had very precise plans for his heir, a boy whose soul was even now undergoing its third year of prenatal preparation in one of the invisible eagle's nests high up on the Eiffel Tower where since the turn of the century the most powerful French politicians and generals had received the training and charisma and made the contacts necessary to ready them for their subsequent roles. And after all the years he'd spent readying Liz to bear his son he wasn't going to let her negate his efforts with another man's seed. She had her pastries, her wines, cognacs, and sleeping pills, her clothing and her restaurants, her money and her social position, and she'd have to stay content with them for at least the next four years, until his son was born.

On the way to his office he stopped off at his second apartment. It was a one-room windowless garret on the rue de Conde that had obviously been somebody's attic at one time. It now boasted a tiny brick fireplace and chimney that he'd fitted with an elaborate and deadly labyrinth which enabled him to enter and leave as a bird without permitting entrance by any other shamans. He picked up some of the pills he kept for Liz. His supply was almost exhausted: He'd have to write the old Indian in Arizona (John Henry Two Feathers Thomas Thompson, whose father had toured with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show before starting his own medicine show with a white barker for a front) again and get some more.

He put on his two caps—for something as trivial as what he was about to do he didn't really need the power the rest of his costume would have provided him with—and became a pigeon with orange eyes and naked pink legs. He negotiated the chimney maze, making sure the spirits who guarded it recognized him in the form he'd adopted, to emerge on the roof and fly back to his apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau. He and Liz had been up very late making love the night before, with only a brief pause at two in the morning for the cold buffet he'd had his catering service prepare them, and she was still asleep, even snoring slightly in the way she did when she'd had too much to drink or had taken too many sleeping pills the night before, all of which made things easier for him. As did the fact that he'd left the cage with the two mynah birds in it covered when he'd left the apartment. Liz had bought the birds at the Sunday bird market on the rue de la Cite while he'd been away on his last trip and the birds had never learned to tolerate his presence in any of the forms he took. But though they were alert enough to detect the fact that he wasn't what he seemed to be as either a bird or a man, they were too stupid to realize that despite their dark cage the night was over. So he didn't have to worry about the birds making enough noise to awaken Liz.

He slipped in through the window he'd left open in the master bedroom, plucked Liz's sleeping soul from her body and bruised it with his beak in a way he knew from experience would do her no lasting harm but which would give her migraines for the next few weeks. Then he returned her still-sleeping soul to her body and flew back to his garret, where he took off his caps and locked them away in the sky-blue steel steamer trunk he kept them in. He sprayed his hair with a kerosene-smelling children's delousing spray, to take care of the head-lice that made their home in the inner cap, then used a dry shampoo to get rid of both the spray and the smell from the cap itself. He finally locked the door behind him, making sure when he did so that the spirits guarding the apartment would continue to deny entry to anyone but himself, then went back down the five flights of stairs as Julien de Saint-Hilaire, checked with the concierge a moment, and caught a taxi to his office.

He checked with Jean-Luc and Michel when he arrived, but found that except for a matter concerning a long-time patient who was now more than a year behind on his bills and who showed no signs of being ready to pay (which wasn't their responsibility, anyway), they had everything more or less under control. Too much under control, even: Jean-Luc especially was doing those patients he worked with more good than Eminescu wanted them done, but there was no way to get the younger psychiatrist to stop curing them without explaining to him the true nature of his profession and just what it was he was really doing to get the results he was getting, and that was something Eminescu was not yet ready to let him know; perhaps in another twenty or twenty-five years, when he himself would have to begin thinking about conserving his force.

He sat down behind his desk, pretended to busy himself with one patient's case history while he thought about what to do to that patient who was refusing to pay and waited for Liz to phone him.

The call came perhaps half an hour later. She said she'd just awakened and all she could think about was how soon he was going to be going away, and did he know yet exactly when he was going to have to leave for Japan? He told her he'd received confirmation on his flights, and that he'd be leaving in another six days, on a Monday, very early in the morning. She told him that she had an awful headache, it had

started as soon as she'd awakened and realized he was going to be leaving, and she asked him to bring her something for the pain, since it was obviously his fault she had the headache because he was going away and she always felt sick and tired and alone and unhappy whenever he left her for more than a few days. He said he'd bring her some of the painkillers he'd given her the last time, the ones that didn't leave her too groggy, and she said, fine, but try to make them a little stronger this time, Julien, even if they do make me a bit groggy. He said he would, but that if she was really feeling that bad perhaps it would be better if he came home early, he could cancel all his afternoon appointments. She said, no, that wouldn't be necessary, but if he'd meet her for lunch he could give her the pills then, she'd pick out the restaurant and make the reservations, come by to pick him up when it was time. About one o'clock?

He said that one o'clock would be perfect. When she arrived he gave her the first two of the old Indian's pills, and on the way to the restaurant soothed her headache. For that he didn't even need his caps, he had enough power left over from just having worn them earlier.

It was an excellent restaurant near the Comedie Franchise, on rue Richelieu, and he was enormously hungry—flying demanded a great deal of energy; the iron with which his bones had been reinforced and tied together after his initiatory dismemberment was heavy and hard to lift when he was a bird, for all that the iron-wrapped bones gave him the vitality and endurance of a much younger man when in human form—and both he and Liz enjoyed their meal. Afterward he dropped her off outside Notre Dame (where she had to meet some friends of her aunt's whom she'd been unable to get out of promising to show around), then went back to his apartment on the rue de Conde and put on his entire costume: the raccoon-skin cap with the snap-on tail that John Henry had given him and which he kept hidden under the over-large shapeless felt hat, the greasy false beard and hair (though in one sense they weren't really false at all, since they and the skin to which they were still attached had both been at one time his: more of the old Indian's work), the multiple layers of thermal underwear he wore under the faded work blues that were in turn covered by the old brown leather military trench coat with the missing buttons and half the left sleeve gone, the three pink plastic shopping bags from Monoprix filled with what looked like rags, but weren't, and the two pairs of crusted blue socks he wore under his seven-league work shoes (the ones he had specially made for him in Austria to look as though they were coming apart), so he could trace the pills' progress through Liz's system, and help them along when and if necessary.

It was raining by the time he'd completed his preparations and had begun beating his tambourine and hopping up and down, but he didn't feel like doing anything major about the weather even though he'd planned to go home as a pigeon again. So by the time he arrived back at the apartment he was very wet. But that gave him an excuse to remain perched there on the bedroom windowsill, ignoring the nasty looks the mynah birds were giving him while he ruffled his feathers and looked indignant.

Liz had already gotten rid of her aunt's friends, as he'd been sure she would; she was on the phone again, trying to find someone to go tea-salon hopping with her for the rest of the afternoon. She was having trouble: Very few of her woman friends could keep up with her pastry and sweets consumption and still look the way that Liz demanded the people she was seen with look, while Eminescu had for several years now made a practice of discouraging any and all of her male friends, even the homosexuals, who showed any tendency to spend too much, or even too attentive, time with her.

Not, of course, that he'd ever done so in any way that either Liz or her admirers could have ever realized had anything to do with her husband. The men in question just always had something go horribly wrong when they were with her—sudden, near fatal attacks of choking or vomiting; running into old wives or girlfriends they'd abandoned pregnant; being mistaken for notorious Armenian terrorists or Cypriot neo-nazi bombers by the CRS and so ending up clubbed unconscious and jailed incommunicado; other things of the same sort—with the result that Liz never had *any fun* with them, and began avoiding even those few hyper-persistent or genuinely lovestruck victims who kept trying to see her anyway.

Which reminded him: It was time for her to get her headache back. As a former veterinary student he was quite familiar with Pavlovian conditioning—had, in fact, been writing his thesis on the ways it had been used to train the attack dogs used by the government in quelling the then-recent Polish workers' insurrection when he'd been forced to flee Romania—and his spiritual experience in later years had proven to him how useful a correct application of its basic principles could be to a shaman like himself. Thus, whenever Liz did something he approved of he rewarded her for it, whenever she did something he disapproved of he punished her, but always in ways that would seem to her to be in some way the direct result of her behavior, and not of any interference or judgment on his part. And that, finally, was the rationale for the use of the pills he gave her whenever he went away: Not only did they keep her properly subdued in his absence and insure that she'd have taken off her excess weight by the time he returned and restored her to normal, but they made her so miserable that when he did return she equated his presence—the secondary stimulus—with the primary stimulus of her renewed health and vitality in the same way she'd learned to equate his absence with her misery.

It was all very rational and scientific, a fact on which he prided himself. Too many of his colleagues were little better than witch-doctors.

"You're my whole happiness," Liz had told him once. "My only reason for staying alive." And that, to be sure, was how he wanted things.

It had taken her five phone calls but she'd finally found someone: Marie-Claude had agreed to accompany her, and they were going to meet at the tea room they liked on the lie St. Louis where the ice cream was so good. And the sun was coming out again. He flew there to wait for them.

From his perch in the tree across the street from the tea salon he could see them easily enough as they entered together, though when they sat down away from the window he had to cock his head just right to watch them through the walls. They both ordered ice cream—Bertillon chocolate, coffee, and chestnut for Liz, the same for Marie-Claude but with coconut in place of the coffee—and while they were waiting for the waitress to bring it convinced each other that it would be all right to have some sherbets with their coffee afterward.

Eminescu waited until Liz's first few swallows of chocolate were reaching her stomach to cock his head at the angle that let him see what was going on inside her.

Her stomach acids and digestive enzymes had already dissolved the pills and liberated the encysted bladder worms, and these in turn were reacting to the acids and enzymes by evaginating—turning themselves inside out, as though they'd been one-finger gloves with the fingers pushed in, but with the fingers now popping out again. Once the young tapeworms (as he'd learned to call them at UCLA, and it was a better name for them than the French *vers solitaires*, because these worms at least were far from solitary) had their scolexes, head-sections, free they could use the suckers and hooks on them to attach themselves to the walls of Liz's intestines, there to begin growing by pushing out new anterior segments—though he'd be back to deal with them before any of the worms was more than five or so meters long, and thus before any of the worms had reached its full sexual maturity.

Three specimens each of three kinds of tapeworm—*Taenia solium*, *Taenia saginata*, and *Diphyllobothrium latum*, the pork, beef, and fish tapeworms, respectively—he allowed to hook and sucker themselves to Liz's intestinal walls, though not without first ensuring that the individuals he favored would all be fairly slow-growing, as well as unlikely to excrete excessive amounts of those toxic waste products peculiar to their respective species. The myriad other worms whose encysted forms the pills had contained he killed, reaching out from his perch in the tree to pluck them from her intestinal walls with his beak, pinch off and kill their voracious little souls. It was all very well controlled, all very scientific, with nothing left to chance.

He watched her the rest of the afternoon, at that and three other tea salons, to make sure the nine worms he'd selected for her would do her no more damage than he'd planned for them to do, and that none of the other worms the pills had contained had escaped his attention and survived.

When at last he returned to the apartment on the rue de Conde he was weak with hunger. He took a quick shower and ate a choucroute at a nearby brasserie before going back to his office to make sure nothing unexpected had come up in his absence.

And every day until the time came for him to leave, he checked Liz two or three times, to make sure the worms now growing so rapidly inside her would do no lasting harm. He valued Liz a great deal, enjoyed her youth and spontaneity fully as much as he valued the son she was going to bear him, and he had no desire to be unnecessarily cruel to her.

On the morning he'd chosen to leave he went to his second apartment and checked on her one last time as she showered—thinner already and beautiful for all the fatigue on her face and in her posture—then returned to the windowless room and resumed his human form. He was hungry, but for the next month he was Eminescu Eliade again, and there was no way he could use Julien de Saint-Hilaire's money to pay for as much as a merguez-and-fries sandwich from one of the window-front Tunisian restaurants on the rue St. Andre des Arts without destroying much of his costume's power.

The rat he was to follow was waiting for him as arranged at the bottom of the stairs, behind the trash cans. He put it in one of his plastic bags, where it promptly made a nest for itself out of the rags that weren't really rags. Then he went out to beg the money for the three things he'd need to get started: the bottles of wine he'd have to share with his fellow shamans as long as he remained aboveground, the first-class metro ticket he'd need to enter the labyrinths coexistent with the Parisian metro system, and the *terrine de foie de volailles au poivre vert* from Coesnon's which the rat demanded he feed it each time it guided him through the city's subway labyrinths.

There were a lot of clochards he didn't recognize behind the Marche and on the streets nearby, even a blond-haired threesome—two bearded young men and a girl with her hair in braids—who looked more like hitch-hiking German or Scandinavian students temporarily short of money than like real clochards, for all that they seemed to know most of the others and be on good terms with them. What it added up to was an unwelcome reminder that he'd been spending too much time either abroad or as Julien de Saint-Hilaire, and not nearly enough staying in touch with his city and its spirit world—and that was an error that could well prove fatal to him unless he took steps to correct it. He'd have to stay in Paris that October after all, and miss the Australian congress that had had him so excited ever since he'd begun to learn the kinds of things one could do with quartz crystals.

It took him five days to get the money he needed: He was out of practice at begging and every few hours, of course, he had to put most of what he'd earned toward the wine he shared with the others. And Coesnon's had tripled their prices during the last year alone. But by the fifth evening he had what he needed, so he walked down the rue de l'Ancienne Comedie to the rue Dauphine, where he bought the four-hundred-and-fifty-franc ter-rine despite the staff's and other customers' horrified disapproval when he squeezed himself and his bulging sacks into the narrow charcuterie, knocking a platter of blood sausage with apples to the floor in the process, then spent another four hours listening to the mutterings and arguments of the future shamans awaiting birth in the hundreds of tiers of invisible pigeons' nests that completely covered the green bronze statue of Henri IV astride his horse, there on its pedestal atop the little fenced-off step pyramid on the Pont Neuf. But there was nothing useful to be heard—Tabarin and his pompous master Mondor arguing as usual in the nest they shared, Napoleon pleading to be rescued from the tiny statuette of himself that the overly zealous Bonapartist who'd been commissioned to cast Henri's statue had hidden in the king's right arm, thus inadvertently imprisoning his hero's spirit there until

such time as someone should destroy the statuette or rescue him—and so after listening a while he proceeded on diagonally across the lie de la Cite to Chatelet where he entered the metro system.

He bought himself a first-class ticket and pretended to drop it as he went to insert it in the machine so he could release the rat. It scurried away from him through the thick crowds and he had to run after it as soon as the machine disgorged his enigmatically stamped ticket, plastic bags, rags and leather overcoat flapping as he ran. Four or five times he lost sight of the rat—once because some fifteen- or sixteen-year-olds thought it would be fun to trip him and see how long they could keep him from getting back to his feet before somebody stopped them—but each time he found the rat again and at last it led him in through one of the urinals to the first of the labyrinth's inner turnings. There he fed it the first half of the terrine and the stamped metro ticket.

The corridors were less crowded when he emerged from the urinal, the light dimmer and pinker, and with each subsequent turning away from the public corridors into the secret ways which led through the land of the dead there were more and more of the German shepherds whose powerful bodies housed the souls of those few dead who'd been granted leave of the Undercity for a day and a night in return for guarding Paris itself, fewer and fewer people, and those few only the dying and mentally ill, the North African blacks who worked as maintenance men and cleaners in the metro system, and shamans like himself—plus once a politician whose name he couldn't recall but to whom he'd made the proper ritual obeisances anyway.

When he regained his feet and wiped the filth from his forehead he found the corridor around him had changed yet again. The murky and polluted bottom waters of the Seine flowed sluggishly past and around him without touching him, and his guide now wore the baggy bright-red shorts with the two big gold buttons on the front that told him he'd finally escaped the outer world entirely and entered the land of the dead.

He fed the rat the rest of the terrine and began retracing the route he knew should take him back to the place where he'd hidden the soul of the first of those patients whom he intended to have make a miraculous recovery upon his return, a retired general suffering from the delusion that he was a young and bearded bouquiniste making his living selling subversive literature and antique pornographic postcards from a bookstall by the Seine.

But Hell had changed, changed radically and inexplicably in the year he'd spent away from it, and it took him almost seven weeks before he was able to escape it again by a route that led up and out through the sewer system. Because someone, somehow, had found his patients' souls where he'd buried them in the river mud and filth, had dug them up and left in their place small, vicious but somehow indistinct, creatures that had attacked him and tried to devour his soul. He'd been strong enough to fight them off, though they'd vanished before the mud cloud they'd stirred up had settled and he'd had a chance to get a closer look at them. But though he'd found his patients' souls and recovered them from their new hiding places without overmuch trouble, none of his usual contacts among the dead had been willing or able to tell him who his enemy was, or what the things that had attacked him had been.

He'd planned to stay Eminescu Eliade for a while after his return to the surface so he could try to locate his enemy where he knew the man had to be hiding, among the clochards who had not yet achieved professional recognition in a second identity (because while professional ethics allowed stealing other psychiatrists' patients' souls, even encouraged it as tending to keep everyone alert and doing their best, leaving creatures such as the things that had attacked him to devour a fellow psychiatrist's soul was specifically forbidden by the *Ordre des medecins*)—but when he took the form of a pigeon and returned to the apartment he shared with Liz to see how she was doing and make sure the tapeworms in her intestines hadn't done her any real harm in the extra weeks, ready to perhaps even kill one or two of

them if they were getting a little too long, he saw that something further had gone wrong, horribly wrong.

Liz was in the kitchen in her striped robe, spooning chestnut puree from a one-kilo can frantically into her mouth as though she were starving, and his first impression was that he'd never before seen her looking so disgustingly fat and sloppy. But then he realized that though her belly was distended and she looked as though she'd neither slept nor washed in a few days she was if anything skinnier than she'd been when he'd seen her last. Much skinnier. And that the swollen puffiness that so disfigured her face came from the fact that she was crying, and that her legs—her legs that had always been so long and smooth and beautiful, so tawny despite her naturally ash-blond hair that she'd always refused to wear any sort of tinted or patterned stockings, even when her refusal had cost her work—her legs were streaked with long, twitching fat blue veins. Varicose veins, as though she were a fat and flaccid woman in her sixties.

He cocked his pigeon's head to the right and looked in through her abdominal walls to see what was happening within her intestines, in through the skin and muscles of her legs to understand what was going on there.

Only to find that the tapeworms had reached sexual maturity despite all the careful checking he'd done on them before his departure, and that not only had their intertwined ten-meter bodies almost completely choked her swollen and distended intestines, but that their hermaphroditic anterior segments had already begun producing eggs. And those eggs—instead of having been excreted as they should have been, to hatch only when and if stimulated by the distinctive digestive juices of the pigs, cows, or fish whose particular constellation of acids and enzymes alone could provide their species of worm with its necessary stimuli—those eggs were hatching almost immediately, while they were still within Liz's digestive tract, and the minute spherical embryos were anchoring themselves to the intestinal walls with the six long hooks they each sported, then boring through the walls to enter her bloodstream, through which they then let themselves be carried down into her legs. There, in the smaller vessels in her calves and thighs, they were anchoring themselves and beginning to grow, not encysting as normal tapeworm embryos would have done, but instead developing into myriads of long, filament-thin worms that were slowly climbing their way from their anchor points up through her circulatory system toward her heart as they lengthened.

His enemy, whoever his enemy was, had planned the whole farce with his patients' stolen but easily recoverable souls and the things that had been lying in wait for him in their place just to keep him occupied while *he* played around with the worms in Liz, modified them for his own purposes. He must have had her under observation long enough to have known about the fear of all other doctors but himself that Eminescu had long ago conditioned into her, known that he'd have a free hand with her until Eminescu got back. And if Eminescu'd stayed trapped in the secret ways even a few days longer she might well have lost her feet, perhaps even her legs, to gangrene and so been ruined as the potential mother of his son. A week or two beyond that and she could have been dead.

She was constantly moving her legs, twitching them as she gorged herself on the puree, kneading her calves and thighs. Keeping the circulation going as best she could despite the filament worms waving like strands of hungry kelp in her veins, the worms that had so far only impeded, and not yet blocked, the flow of blood through her legs.

It was all very scientific and precise, masterfully devised. Whoever'd done it could have easily killed her, done so with far less effort and imagination than he'd expended on producing her present condition. The whole thing was a challenge, could only be a challenge, traditional in intent for all that the way it had been done was new to him. And what the challenge said was, I want your practice and your position and everything else you have, and I can take it away from you, I've already proved that anything you can do I can do better, and I'm going to go ahead and do it unless you can stop me before I kill you. The challenge was undoubtedly on file with the *Ordre des medecins*, though there'd be no way for Eminescu

to get a look at the records and learn who his challenger was: The relevant laws were older than France or Rome, and were zealously enforced.

But what he could do was take care of Liz and keep her from being damaged any further while he tried to learn more about his opponent. He reached out with his beak, twisted the souls of the filament worms in Liz's legs dead. They were much tougher than he'd anticipated, surprisingly hard to kill, but when at last they were all dead he pulled them carefully free of the blood vessels in which they'd anchored themselves, pulled them out through Liz's muscles and skin without doing her any further damage, then patched the damaged veins and arteries with tissues he yanked from the legs of a group of Catholic schoolgirls who happened to be passing in the street. They were young: They'd recover soon enough. The stagnant and polluted blood, slimy with the worms' waste products, began to flow freely through her system again.

He watched Liz closely for a while to make sure the waste products weren't concentrated or toxic enough to be dangerous to her in the time it would take her liver or other organs to filter them from her blood. When he was sure that any harm they might do her would be trivial enough to be ignored he reached out to take and squeeze the souls of the tapeworms knotted together and clogging her intestines, snatched himself back just in time to save himself when he recognized them: the creatures that had attacked him in the land of the dead. But fearsome though they were on the spiritual plane—and now that he had a chance to examine them better he saw that their souls were not those of tapeworms but of some sort of lampreys, those long eel-like parasitic vertebrates whose round sucking mouths contain circular rows of rasping teeth with which they bore their way in through the scales of the fish they've attached themselves to, so as to suck out the fish's insides and eventually kill it in the process—physically they were still only tapeworms despite their modified reproductive systems. And that meant that he could destroy them by physical—medical—means. Quinacrine hydrochloride and aspidium oleoresin should be more than sufficient, if there hadn't been something better developed recently that he wasn't aware of yet. But to make use of any kind of medicine he'd have to resume his identity as Julien de Saint-Hilaire, if only long enough to return home, soothe Liz and prescribe for her, then make sure she was following the treatment he suggested and that it was working for her.

But before he did that he had to try to learn a little more about his challenger, so he returned to his apartment on the rue de Conde and resumed his human form. His efforts in the Undercity and just now as a bird had totally depleted his body's reserves of fat and energy; he was gaunt and trembling, so that those passersby he approached after making his way down the back stairs to the street who weren't frightened away by his diseased look were unusually generous. After he'd made the phone call that confirmed that, yes, an official challenge had been registered against Julien de Saint-Hilaire, he was able to buy not only the wine he needed to approach his fellow clochards but some food from the soup kitchen behind the Marche as well.

He slept that night in the metro, curled up on the benches with three other clochards, one of whom was a woman, though as much a shaman as himself or the other two. The woman had a bottle of cheap rose; they passed it back and forth while they talked, and he listened to them while saying as little himself as possible, trying to find out if they knew anything about his enemy without revealing what he was doing, but either they knew nothing about his opponent or they were siding with him against Eminescu and keeping their knowledge hidden. Which was quite possible: He'd seen it happen that way a few times before, with older shamans who were particularly arrogant and disliked, though he'd never imagined it could happen to him.

The next day he spent sitting on a bench on the Pont Neuf, panhandling just enough to justify his presence there while he tried to learn something from the spirits in their nests on the statue of Henri IV. He even promised to free Napoleon from the statuette in which the former Emperor was trapped and promised

him a place in one of the highest eagle's nests on the Eiffel Tower from which he'd be able to make a triumphant return to politics, if only he'd tell Eminescu his enemy's name or something that would help him find him. But Napoleon had been imprisoned there in the statuette in King Henri's statue's right arm pleading with and ranting at the shamans who refused to so much as acknowledge his existence for too many years and he'd become completely insane: He refused to reply to Eminescu's questions, continued his habitual pleas and promises even after Eminescu had begun hurting him and threatening to silence his voice forever unless he responded rationally.

Eminescu finally left him there, still ranting and pleading: It would have been pointless to waste any more of his forces in carrying out the threats he'd made. He had enough money to pay his entry to the Eiffel Tower, so he flew there as a pigeon, cursing the unaccustomed heaviness of his iron-wrapped bones, then transformed himself back into a clochard in the bushes and went up to the observation deck in the elevator, there found his son and General de Gaulle in their respective nests and asked their advice. De Gaulle—perhaps because the nest in which he was preparing his triumphal return was next to Eminescu's son's nest and the two had come to know each other fairly well—was always polite to Eminescu, wherein the other politicians and military men, able to sense the fact that he wasn't truly French and themselves chauvinistic to the core, refused to even speak to him.

But neither de Gaulle nor his son knew anything useful, and his son seemed weaker and less coherent than the last time Eminescu had spoken to him, as though the forces conspiring against his birth were already beginning to make him fade. Still, at least he was safe from any sort of direct attack: The invisible eagles that guarded his nest allowed no one not of their own kind to approach the tower in anything but human form, and would have detected and killed any mere shaman like Eminescu or his enemy who'd attempted to put on an eagle's form to gain entry.

He returned to the rue de Conde so he could beat his tambourine and sing and dance without danger of interruption, and thus summon the maximum possible power. It was night by the time he felt ready, so he took the form of an owl and returned to the apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau, perched outside the bedroom window, terrifying the mynah birds, and killed the tapeworm embryos that had made their way into Liz's bloodstream again. It was easier this time: He had a lot more strength available to him as an owl, though it was harder to hold the form and he paid for that strength later on, when he regained his humanity.

He examined the worms in Liz's intestines with the owl's sharper eyes to see if there was some way he could destroy them without harming Liz or risking his own safety, saw that even as an owl he didn't have enough concentrated spiritual strength at his disposal to destroy all the worms together. There would have been a way to do it with quartz crystals, replacing those sections of her intestines to which the tapeworms had anchored themselves with smooth crystal so they'd lose their purchase and be eliminated from her body, but he was far from skillful enough yet to carry out the operation without killing her, since loose quartz crystals in her body would be like just so many obsidian knives, and he lacked the experience needed to mold the quartz to her flesh and infuse it with her spirit so as to make it a living part of her.

He could have done it if he'd had a chance to go to that Australian convention he'd planned to attend in the fall. As it was he'd have to try to find another way.

That night he slept under the Pont Neuf on some sheets of cardboard a previous sleeper had left behind him, satisfying the tremendous hunger his efforts as an owl had awakened in him as best he could from the garbage cans behind Coesnon's and some of the other gourmet boutiques on the rue Dauphine.

The next morning he flew to his offices on Avenue Victor Hugo as a pigeon and spent a long time watching Jean-Luc and Michel. It had been months since he'd last been there as anything but Julien de

Saint-Hilaire and he wanted to make sure that neither of them had developed the kind of power his challenger so obviously had. They were, after all, the two persons most likely to covet his position and the two most prepared to fill it when he was gone, despite the fact that a challenge from either of them would have been a clear violation of medical ethics and that his challenger had registered his challenge with the *Ordre des medecins* in thoroughly proper fashion.

He watched them working, soothing souls in pain, coaxing lost or strayed souls back to the bodies they'd left. They were both small, slim and dark, both immensely sincere, and they were both fumbling around blindly in the spirit realm for souls that they could have recovered in instants if they'd known what it was they were really doing. No, their instincts were good, but they were still just what he'd always thought them to be, talented amateurs with no idea of the true nature of their talents, even though those talents seemed to be growing, in Jean-Luc's case in particular.

Since he was there Eminescu used the opportunity to undo some of the good Michel had done a young schizophrenic he had no intention of seeing recover, then returned to the rue de Conde, and from there, as Julien de Saint-Hilaire, to his apartment overlooking the park, stopping only briefly on the way to buy and eat seven hundred and fifty grams of dark chocolates.

Liz was asleep, passed out half dressed on the living room sofa with a partially eaten meal cold on a tray on the table beside her. The kitchen was littered with empty and half-empty cans and bottles.

The servants were all gone and he knew Liz well enough to be sure she'd sent them away, unable to bear the idea of having anyone who knew her see what had happened to her legs, just as she would have been unable to face being examined by another doctor.

She twitched in her sleep, shifting the position of her legs on the sofa, then moved them back the way they'd been. The blue veins in her thighs and calves looked perhaps a little less fat and swollen than they'd seemed when he'd first found out what'd happened to her, but only slightly so: Even though he'd gotten rid of the worms in the veins themselves and replaced a tiny fraction of the damaged vessels it would take a long time for the rest to regain their elasticity. He might even have to replace them altogether.

He'd stopped at a pharmacy run by a minor shaman he knew on the way over to order the various medicines he'd need to deal with the tapeworms as well as a comprehensive selection of those sleeping and pain pills which Liz had a tendency to abuse when he failed to keep her under close enough supervision but which would serve now to keep her more or less anesthetized and incapable of worrying too much for the next few weeks, until his present troubles were over one way or another. And there was at least the consolation of knowing that if he did succeed in discovering his opponent's identity and destroying him, the other's attack on Liz would have served to further reinforce the way Eminescu'd conditioned her to associate his every absence with unhappiness and physical misery, his return with health and pleasure.

He picked up the phone, intending to awaken her with a faked call to the pharmacy so as to make it seem as though he'd just entered, taken one look at her lying there with her legs all swollen and marbled with twitching blue veins and had immediately and accurately diagnosed her condition and so known exactly what he'd have to do without needing to subject her to the indignity of further examinations or tests. It was what she expected of him: Liz had always had a childlike faith in doctors and medicine for all her fear of them. But at the last moment he put the phone down again and went back into the bedroom to take a careful look at the two mynah birds in their cage.

His presence alarmed them: They started hopping nervously back and forth between their perches, making little hushed cries of alarm as if afraid that if they were any louder they'd draw his attention to

them. But hushed as their cries were they were still making more noise than he wanted them to, so he closed the heavy door behind him to cut off the sound and keep them from awakening Liz. Without his cap and costume he couldn't examine them to find out if they were just the rather stupid birds they appeared to be or if one or even both of them were spies for his enemy, perhaps that enemy himself in bird-form. (But could two shamans together challenge a third? He had the impression it was forbidden, but that there was perhaps a way for a challenger to make use of a second shaman's aid.) In any case, the mynah birds were living creatures over whom he exercised no control and which had been introduced into his home with neither his knowledge nor his permission at a time when he'd been away, and he couldn't trust them.

He opened the cage door, reached in quickly with both hands and grabbed the birds before they could escape or make more than one startled squeak apiece, then wrung their necks and threw them out the window, aiming the bodies far enough to the right so that Liz wouldn't see them if she just took a casual look out the window. He could retrieve them later and take them back with him to examine more closely at his other apartment before Liz'd had a chance to leave the house and discover them dead.

He left the cage door open and opened the window slightly, to provide an explanation for their absence when Liz noticed they were gone, then covered the cage to keep her from noticing it immediately.

He went back into the living room. Liz had turned over again and was scratching her right calf in her sleep, leaving angry red scratches all up and down it. He played out the scene he'd planned beforehand with the faked call to the pharmacy, reassured her as soon as the sound of his voice awakened her: He was back, he'd known what had happened to her as soon as he took one look at her, it was a side-effect of certain illegal hormones that people had been injecting dairy cows with recently and which had been showing up, for some as yet unexplained reason, in high concentrations only in certain cremes patisseries used in such things as napoleons and eclairs, and he knew how to cure her condition, it wasn't even really anything to worry about, she wouldn't need surgery and in a few weeks she'd be completely cured, there wouldn't be any scars or anything else to show for the episode but some unpleasant memories, her legs would be as beautiful as before and she shouldn't worry, she should just trust him.

She'd burst into tears as soon as she'd seen him there, was holding on to him and crying with relief by the time he'd finished telling her not to worry, that everything was going to be all right.

The bell rang: the pharmacy, one of the few in Paris willing to deliver, with the medicines he'd ordered. He paid the delivery man, tipping him extravagantly as always, then went back into the bedroom where Liz'd run to hide herself when she heard the bell and gave her two sleeping pills and a pain pill. Only when she was completely groggy and he'd tucked her into bed did he explain his absence, telling her about the two weeks he'd spent completely isolated in a tiny village in the mountains where the Japanese government was carrying out an experimental mental health program and from which it had been impossible to phone her, though he didn't understand how she could have failed to receive the long, long telegram he'd sent her from Tokyo after he'd tried so many times to get her on the phone without once succeeding.

She started nodding out near the end of the explanation, as he'd intended: She'd never remember exactly what it was that he'd told her but only that he'd explained things, and he could always modify his story later and then tell her that the modified story was exactly the same as the one he'd told her before. Though that was probably just an unnecessary precaution: She always believed even the most implausible stories he told her, just as she seemed to have believed his story about the hormones.

He got her to take the various pills, powders, and liquids he'd obtained to treat the tapeworms with—there'd been a number of new medicines he'd been totally unaware of on the market, yet another reminder of how out of touch he'd been allowing himself to become—then gave her two more sleeping

pills to make sure she'd stay unconscious for a while. He waited until she was asleep and snoring raggedly, then left.

He retrieved the two mynah birds from the bushes, put them in a plastic sack and caught a taxi to his other apartment, where he put on his costume to examine them.

But the birds were just mynah birds, as far as he could tell when he took them apart, and when he returned once again to his other apartment as a pigeon and flew in through the bathroom window he'd left open for himself he saw that the medicines he'd used were having no effect whatsoever on the tapeworms—no effect, that is, except to stimulate them to a frantically accelerated production of new eggs.

Once again his enemy had anticipated him, known what his next move would be long before he himself had done so and had arranged to use it against him. He was being laughed at, played for a fool, a clown.

But for all the anger that knowledge awakened in him there was nothing he could do about it yet. He had to stay there beside Liz on the bed for hours, stalking nervously back and forth on his obscenely pink legs as he plucked embryo after embryo from her bloodstream and destroyed them, until he was so hungry and exhausted he could barely keep himself conscious. Then he had no choice but to return to his other apartment—resting every two or three blocks in a tree or on a window ledge—so he could resume his identity as Julien de Saint-Hilaire long enough to pay for a large meal in a restaurant.

He ate an immense meal at an Italian restaurant a few blocks away, followed it with a second, equally large, meal at a bad Chinese restaurant he usually avoided and felt better.

He tried telephoning John Henry Two Feathers Thomas Thompson but was told that the old Indian's number was no longer in service and that there was no new listing for him. Eminescu didn't know if that meant he was dead, or had moved, or had just obtained an unlisted number. But there was no one Eminescu could trust who lived near enough to his former teacher to contact him, and he didn't have the time to fly to America and try to find him himself, either as a bird or by taking a plane as Julien de Saint-Hilaire. So he sent the old Indian a long telegram, and hoped that he'd not only get it, but that he'd have something to say that would help Eminescu.

He bought a sandwich from a sidewalk stand and ate it on the way back to the rue de Conde apartment, then resumed his caps and costume and returned to the Pare Monceau apartment yet one more time as a pigeon to try to deal with the embryos, yet despite the huge meals he'd eaten and the hours he'd spent in his other identity he was still too hungry and too exhausted to keep it up for more than a few hours before the embryos started getting past him despite everything he could do. And the worms in Liz's intestines seemed to be producing their eggs ever faster now, as though the process he'd begun when he gave her the medicines was still accelerating.

Defeated and furious, he returned to his other apartment, passed out as soon as he regained his human form. When he reawakened he barely had enough strength to crawl over to the sink where he'd left the two dismembered mynah birds and strip the meat from their bones and devour it.

There was no way he could hope to save Liz if he continued the way he was going. All he was really doing was destroying himself, using up all the forces which he'd need to protect himself from his opponent when it finally came to a direct attack on him. For a moment he was tempted to just abandon Liz, give up his identity as Julien de Saint-Hilaire and let her die or be taken over by the challenger when he moved into the Julien de Saint-Hilaire role in Eminescu's place. But he'd come too far, was too close to the true power and security he knew his son would provide him with, the assurance that he himself would be born in one of the Eiffel Tower's eagles' nests, to abandon everything now. Besides, Liz still

pleased him, though it wasn't just that, just the kind of sentimental weakness that he knew would destroy him if he ever let it get the upper hand. No, what mattered was that Liz was *his*, his to dispose of and no one else's, and his pride was such that he could never allow anyone else to take her away from him. That pride he knew for his strength, as all sentimentality was weakness: Without his pride he was nothing.

He had to save her life, but he couldn't do it as a pigeon, nor even as an owl. Yet they were in the heart of Paris; the only other animal forms he could put on safely—cats, perhaps ducks or other small birds, insects, rats, and mice—would be equally ineffectual. If he tried to put on an eagle's form the invisible eagles atop the Eiffel Tower would detect him and destroy him for his presumption, for all that he had a son they were raising as one of their own; if he put on a wolf's or a dog's form the dead who patrolled the city as German shepherds would bring him down, for only they were allowed to use canine form, and Paris had for centuries been forbidden to wolves. And if he tried to put on a bear's body—a bear's form would be ideal, as far as he knew he was the only shaman in France who knew how to adopt it and there'd be no way his enemy could have been prepared to deal with it, but there was also no way he could shamble the huge, conspicuous body across Paris undetected, nor anyone he could trust to transport it for him, and for all the force that being a bear would give him, the dogs would still be able to bring him down if they attacked as a pack, and he'd be vulnerable as well to humans with guns.

Unless he was willing to give up the complete separation of his two identities which he'd always maintained for his own protection, and took his costume and tambourine with him to the other apartment, and made the transformation there. The problem wasn't just the basically trivial difficulty of explaining his clochard-self's presence to Liz and the domestics (and that, anyway, would be no problem at all with the servants gone and Liz full of pills) but that the more people who knew he was both Eminescu Eliade and Julien de Saint-Hilaire, the less safe he was. Both identities were, of course, registered with the *Ordre des medecins* and there were a very few of his French psychiatric colleagues who knew him as both, though most knew only that he was both shaman and psychiatrist, but those few who did know were all men to whom he'd chosen to reveal himself because he was satisfied they posed no real threat to him, while at the same time they knew he in turn would never threaten them, thus rendering mutual trust possible. The clochards with whom he spent his time as Eminescu Eliade, of course, knew that he was a shaman, just as he knew which among them were also shamans, but though they knew that he had to have some sort of second identity, none of them, as far as he was aware, knew that that second identity was that of Julien de Saint-Hilaire. Thus none of them could attack him while he was in his psychiatrist's role, far from his caps, costume and drum, and so virtually defenseless.

It was Julien de Saint-Hilaire, and not Eminescu Eliade, who'd been challenged and who was under attack. Yet even so he knew that as long as he kept his unknown enemy from learning that the two were one and the same (and his opponent *couldn't* know that yet, or Eminescu would have already been dead) Eminescu Eliade would remain, if not safe, at least always free to escape to safety and anonymity. All of which would be lost if the other caught him taking his costume and drum to the other apartment.

Lost, unless he could destroy the worms in Liz and get his shamanizing aids back to the rue de Conde before the other realized what Eminescu was doing. Or unless he managed to kill the other before he'd had a chance to make use of the information he'd gained, and before he'd had a chance to reveal it to anyone else.

And Eminescu was tired of having to defend himself, of worrying about his safety, tired and very angry. He wanted to hurt his enemy, not just avoid him or survive his attacks. The other had to have a lot of his power—and that meant a lot of his soul—in the worms: If Eminescu could destroy them he might well cripple his enemy so that he could finish him off later, at his leisure. And too, this was the only way he could save Liz, and his unborn son.

He took his father's skull from the silver hatbox in the trunk, held it out at arm's length with both hands and asked it whether or not he'd succeed in saving Liz without betraying himself to his enemy. There was no reply, the skull became neither lighter nor heavier, but that proved nothing: His father rarely responded and those few times that the skull's weight had seemed to change Eminescu had been unable to rule out the possibility that the brief alteration in its heaviness he'd felt had been no more than the result of unconscious suggestion, like the messages he'd seen Liz seem to receive when she played with her Ouija board.

He put the skull and the rest of his shamanizing equipment back in the trunk and locked it, then went downstairs as Julien de Saint-Hilaire. He ate yet another two meals at nearby restaurants, then found the concierge's husband and got him to help move the heavy steamer trunk downstairs. Back at the other apartment he tipped the taxi driver who'd brought him there substantially extra to help carry the trunk up the rear stairs. When the driver left he dragged it into the apartment and locked it in the unused spare bedroom at the far end of the apartment, where Liz was least likely to be disturbed by the noise he'd make beating his tambourine and chanting, and where she was least likely to realize that a door to which she'd never had the key was now locked against her.

She was still in the bedroom, asleep. He called his catering service and asked them to deliver cold cuts for a party of fifteen in an hour, then went downstairs and bought a side of beef and a half dozen chickens from his butcher. The butcher and his two assistants helped him up the stairs and into the kitchen with the meat. When they were gone he dragged the beef into the spare bedroom, followed it with the chickens.

The caterers managed to deliver the cold cuts without waking Liz. He ate some of them, laid the others out where he'd be able to get at them easily when he made the transformation back to human, though since he wouldn't be flying he at least wouldn't have to waste the kinds of energy it took to get his iron-weighted body airborne. Then he locked all the doors and windows carefully and turned off the phone and doorbell, so as to make sure that nothing disturbed or awakened Liz before he was finished with her.

It was good to put his caps and costume on in the Pare Monceau apartment for the first time, good to beat his tambourine there in the spare room with the late-afternoon sun coming in through the curtains screening the window. Good to put on the bear's form after so many years of forcing himself to stay content with being no more than a pigeon or owl or rat. It had been fifteen—no, seventeen—years since he'd last been a bear, there in that box canyon in Arizona with John Henry Two Feathers Thomas Thompson, and he'd forgotten what joy it was to be huge and shaggy and powerful, forgotten the bear's keen intelligence and cunning, the enormous reserves of strength its anger gave it.

Forgotten too the danger of losing himself in the bear, of letting the seeming inexhaustibility of the forces at his disposal seduce him into going too far beyond his limits, so that when the time came for him to resume his human form he'd lack the energy to animate his body and so die.

Outside a dog began to bark, and then another. He couldn't tell if they were just dogs barking, or some of the dead who'd detected his transformation, but even if they were just dogs they were a reminder that the longer he stayed a bear the more chance there was that his enemy would detect him, realize what he was doing and counterattack.

More dogs, a growing number of them living animals now, howling all around his building and even within it: He recognized the excited voices of the thirteen whippets the film distributor on the first floor kept, the sharp yapping of the old lady on the second floor's gray poodle and the deeper and stupider baying of her middle-aged daughter's obnoxious Irish setter. Lights were beginning to go on in other buildings. Which meant he had to hurry, leave the meat and chickens he'd planned to eat before he began for later, so he could get to Liz and soothe her immediately, before even drugged as she was the noise woke her.

Soothe her and then destroy the worms before the disturbance the dead were making brought his enemy. If he wasn't already here, or coming.

He'd left the door to the room he was using slightly ajar. Now he pushed it open with his snout, squeezed through the narrow doorway and shambled down the long hall toward the master bedroom. He was already hungry, though he still had some margin before he'd be in danger.

Halfway down the hall to the bedroom he knocked a tall glass lamp from a table. It hit the parquet floor and shattered loudly, and for a moment he was sure that the noise would be enough to awaken Liz after all: She metabolized her sleeping pills very rapidly and would already be beginning to get over the effects of the ones he'd given her. But when he reached the bedroom and poked his head in to check on her she was still asleep, though the howling outside and within the building was still getting louder and louder. There had to be fifty or sixty dogs out there by now, perhaps even more.

He shambled the rest of the way into the room, reared up and balanced himself on his hind legs at the foot of the bed, then reached out and plucked Liz's soul from her body, locked it away from all pain and sensation in her head. As though her skull were a mother's womb inside which she lay curled like a haggard but voluptuous foetus, her whole adult body there within her head, filling it and overflowing it slightly, one hand dangling from her right ear, a foot and ankle and short length of calf protruding from her half-open mouth.

He turned her over with his paws and made a quick incision in her belly with his long claws, pulled the flesh apart so he could reach in and flip her intestines free of her abdomen. He ripped them open and seized the worms in his teeth, ripped them free of her intestinal walls and then tore them apart, killing the scolexes and each and every segment before he swallowed them. It was easy, amazingly easy, like the time John Henry Two Feathers Thomas Thompson had taught him to flip trout from a stream with his paws, and though the tapeworms were lampreys as well as worms they couldn't get a grasp on his shaggy body with their sucking mouths, their concentric circles of razor-sharp rasping teeth, so it was only a matter of moments before he'd killed them all and devoured their dead bodies.

All eight of them, where there should have been nine.

He cursed himself for the way he'd let the noise the dogs were making outside the apartment rush him into beginning without examining Liz very, very carefully again first, realized that at no time since he'd returned from the Undercity had he thought to count the worms in her belly, that he'd just assumed that all nine were still there.

But there was no time now to try to solve the problem of the ninth worm's escape or disappearance; he had to try to get Liz's intestines back together and inside her and functioning before she bled to death, and before the hunger growing ever more insistent within him reached the point where it could be fatal.

He licked the insides of her intestines clean with his long tongue, making sure he got each and every egg and embryo and crushed the life out of them between his teeth before he swallowed them. Then he pushed the ripped intestines back into shape with his nose and tongue, licked them until they'd stopped bleeding and begun to heal, licked them a little more and then nosed them back into place in her abdominal cavity, licked the incision in her belly until it closed and healed, continued to lick it until no further trace of its presence remained.

Then he reached into her legs and bloodstream, pulled the embryos and filament worms he found there from her body, killed and devoured them.

And it had been easy, almost too easy. He would have thought the whole thing another diversion, only a means of luring him here in his shaman's self, had it not been for the fact that there was no one else in

France who knew he was able to take on the form of a bear. There were very few people left anywhere in Europe who knew how to do so, and those few were all far to the North, in the Scandinavian countries.

Besides, there was still the missing tapeworm to consider.

Liz's soul still filled her head. He very carefully checked her body to make sure it was now free of worms, eggs, embryos, and toxins before he released her soul, let it begin slowly filtering down out of her head into the rest of her body.

The veins in her legs were still blue and fat, undoubtedly painful: The filament worms had damaged all the tiny valves in the vessels that kept the blood from pooling there. But all that was, now that the worms had been removed, was ordinary varicose veins; he should be able to heal them easily enough, and if they proved for some reason more difficult to deal with than he expected them to be he could always steal healthy veins from other people's legs for her. From that patient who was so late paying his bills, if his blood type was right and his circulatory system in good condition.

His hunger had passed the danger point, especially with his human form weakened as it was by his previous efforts, but he forced himself to go over the bedroom and both the attached bathrooms meticulously, looking for the ninth worm. It wasn't there. Perhaps the medicines he'd given Liz had destroyed it; perhaps the first worm's death had been the signal which had stimulated the other worms to their accelerated egg production. In any case, the worm was gone.

Liz was sleeping soundly now, would remain asleep for another five or six hours while her soul reintegrated itself with her body. More than long enough for him to change the bloodstained sheets and blankets and mattress cover.

He fell once on his way back through the corridor to the spare bedroom, got a good look at himself in the hall mirror as he was getting back up. He looked almost dead of starvation, a bit like a weasel or wolverine, but with neither the sleekness nor the grace.

He made it back into the spare bedroom and pushed the door closed behind him, though he had no way to lock it before he regained his human form. He devoured the cold cuts on their platter, ate the chickens and began ripping chunks of meat from the side of beef.

And when he'd cracked open the last bone and licked it clean of the last of the marrow it had contained he triggered his transformation.

He lay there, Eminescu Eliade, too tired to move or do anything else, just letting the strength begin flowing gently back into him from his caps and costume. There'd been enough energy in the food he'd eaten to keep him alive, just barely enough, but it would be a while before he'd be strong enough to pull his tambourine to him, tap out the rhythms on it he could use to summon the strength he'd need to get to his feet and change back into Julien de Saint-Hilaire, then get something more to eat from the kitchen and finally clean up Liz and the bed.

Everything was silent, completely silent, both within the apartment and outside. He had a throbbing pain in his head and he felt dizzy and a little nauseated and very hungry. The floor was too hard for him now that he'd lost the flesh that had formerly cushioned his bones and it hurt him even through his many layers of swaddling clothing. He'd have to find a way to explain to Liz the twenty kilos or more he'd lost so suddenly.

He lay there, half-dozing, letting the strength return to him.

And then he must have passed out, because when he opened his eyes again Liz was kneeling over him, still covered with dry blood but dressed now, her robe wrapped around her. He tried to tell her something, he wasn't sure quite what, but she shook her head and put her fingers to her lips. She was smiling, but it was a strange, tight-lipped smile and he felt confused.

The door opened behind him, letting in a current of cold air. Jean-Luc and Michel came in together, holding hands.

Liz snatched Eminescu's two caps from his head and put them on her own before he'd had a chance to realize what she was doing, and by then it was too late to even try to change himself back into a bear, or into anything else.

She motioned to Jean-Luc and Michel. They bent down to kiss her on both cheeks in greeting while she did the same to them, then took up their positions, Jean-Luc kneeling across from her on the opposite side of Eminescu's body, Michel down by his feet. Jean-Luc helped her strip Eminescu's leather coat from him while Michel took his seven-league shoes and his socks from his feet. Without his caps he had no strength with which to even try to resist them, and with each article and layer of clothing they stripped from him he was weaker still, until at the end he no longer had the strength to so much as lift his head.

When he was naked and shivering in the cold air Liz took off her robe and gave it to Jean-Luc to hold while she dressed herself in Eminescu's many layers of rags. Then together she and Jean-Luc wrapped him in her discarded robe while Michel picked up Eminescu's tambourine and began to beat it.

Naked and weakened as he was, he could sense nothing of the power they were summoning and using. He had never felt it, not even in the end, never detected in any of them the slightest sign of the power that had defeated and destroyed him, and in a way that was almost as bad as the fact of the defeat itself, that he would never know if Liz or one of the other two had been his true enemy, keeping his or her powers hidden from Eminescu in some way he would never now get the chance to understand, or if all three of them together had been only the instrument for some challenger whose identity he would never know.

Liz knelt down beside him again, pulled the beard from his face and put it on her own. She leaned over him then, began nuzzling his cheek and then kissing him on the mouth.

Without ceasing to kiss him she brought her hands up, jammed her fingers into his mouth and pried it wide, held his jaw open despite his feeble efforts to close it while she stuck her tongue in his mouth.

Her tongue explored his mouth, then uncoiled its flat, twelve-meter body and slid slowly down his throat into its new home.

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"Varicose Worms" started as a title, inspired by the combination of someone I saw walking on the street and a long-standing fascination/revulsion for internal/intestinal parasites. Since I had been immersed in the Ashlu Cycle, in which I had been trying to treat shamanism with total seriousness, for a number of years, I felt like having some fun with the ideas I'd been using and treating them more ironically for a change.

Scott Baker