

Examination Night

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Midsummer night, and a thin haze of mist rose from the gutters. Vendors and peddlars hawked their wares by the light of guttering oil lamps, long after most would normally have been abed. A strange bustle of business kept them busy, tradesmen and fishwives and dragoons and whores strutting and shrieking and haggling with forced vehemence beneath the posies hanging from the eaves of taverns and shops; meanwhile balls and soirees ran on late into the night among the scented gardens of the rich.

There was a dark undertow of fear among the revellers in the streets, and some of them muttered prayers and cast out the evil eye with fetishistic regularity. It was a custom of the city that on solstice night one must not sleep; for according to the legend anyone who closed their eyes between sunset and sunrise would awaken to find themselves in the abyss. Midsummer night was a time when the slings and arrows of fate were supplemented by the guided missiles of demonic malice, for the University held its graduation exams this evening. It would therefore have been quite inexplicable to the ordinary town-dwellers to see Sebastian wending his way through the alleys and smokey tavernae of the Lower City on the dog-watch of this festival of grimness. Nevertheless, there was an entirely reasonable explanation: for he would not be graduating tonight. Sebastian had decided to refuse his baccalaureate, and having reached the limit of his tenure he would inevitably be sent down.

"Pissed as a newt," he sang tunelessly, wobbling from side to side in the narrow Shambles, narrowly avoiding the dungheap in front of old Vladislav's tannery: "Pissed as a salamander of the eleventh order of syrinexae! Stoned as a basilisk's boy-friend! Drunk as a student, for tomorrow they will send me down! Hic." He leaned against the wall, flask in hand, and took a mighty swig from it. Frowning, he up-ended the vessel over the cobbles; what remained of its contents dripped across the stones, glittering like blood in the light from the leaded windows of the tavern opposite. "Fuck me, I must be mad! Worms on the brain. A bit more balls and I could have – could be –" He looked up at the swirling clouds overhead, saw complex shapes forming and dissolving among them with unearthly speed, and shuddered. "Bastards." He spat the word venomously then heaved himself up and, dusting down his tunic, stumbled over to the tavern door and banged hard upon it.

The door swung open, and Sebastian squinted at the gnomish shape of the bouncer, Old Flog. "Loads a dosh," he sang, waving his limp purse; "More wine, and faster!"

"So you think the master's going to let you back in here again after what you and your catamite did to the cobbler's daughter last month?" Flog sneered at him. "Think again, you swiving whoreson bastard nebbish offspring of a scholar's quill by a goose's bum! I'll give you a sodding drink! Unless you can pay for the table and the pickled lampreys." He thrust out an upturned hand, yellow nails clicking impatiently. "Give me the purse, shit-face. Now!"

"There's three groats and a copper bit in there," said Sebastian, dropping the purse in the bouncer's palm; "I want to stay drunk all night. Why don't you –"

Flog wasn't listening. He pawed his way through Sebastian's lucre like a miser searching his ledgers for a bad debt, then shook his head. "You've got enough here, right enough. Seeing you've got the money to pay for your past sins, I can't keep you out; but I can –" a sharp-nailed claw jabbed hard at Sebastian's cod-piece – "promise you a rough ride if you throw up on the cat again! Comprenez?"

Sebastian belched. "Of course; just show me to the bar and I'll be good." The gnome nodded grimly and stood aside to let him enter. He stepped indoors without so much as a nod at the bouncer, and the heat washed over him like a monsoon shower.

The Gibbet and Felon was not the lowest dive that the grand city of Rask could offer, but it could certainly pass for such in refined company. It was distinctly unwise to enter and linger there should one be a stranger to these parts; Sebastian, however, was safe. Students of the Academy were recognised in this tavern, and although tempers ran high on Examination Night no-one would ever dream of waylaying him. Scholarly pranks could be vicious to the point of malice, and the prospect of waking up in the arms of a century-old corpse one morning – or worse, of waking up as a century-old corpse – could do wonders for those of even the most villainous disposition. So it was that when Sebastian marched right up to the bar, wobbled ever so slightly, crowed "a pint of sack! a pint of sack!" at the landlord, and subsequently collapsed across the rough-hewn timbers of the bar, all but one of the clientele knew enough to ignore him.

"What do you mean by a pint of sack?" asked a fluting voice from the vicinity of his left shoulder. It spoke with an outlandish accent, curiously musical and unsettling to Sebastian's ears. He blinked and stopped tittering. Gonna throw up, he realised: the thought was instantly sobering.

"You needn't trouble to answer right away," added the owner of the voice; "you appear to be a little intoxicated and I would be most displeased if your reply came in the form of a regurgitation across my boots."

Bloody foreigners, he thought resentfully. It somehow slipped his befuddled brain that he himself had been a foreigner no less than four years ago, and would shortly be one again. He mustered a reply: "Sack, sirrah, is the fermented juice of the vine, blended and ice-cast from the barrel. It's called sack because that's what they did to the city it came from, y'see. Now are you ready to defend yourself or must I see my stomach and my honour slighted by a coward?" He straightened up aggressively, turned round, and stopped dead in his tracks.

"You are mistaken: I offer slight to neither organ," said the stranger. She smiled faintly and a shock of electric recognition flew through him: a wandering wysard! He breathed in sharply and muttered a quick incantation for a lesser ward, but she merely shook her head. "Really, as if that would do you any good, you scoundrel! Mind you don't spew over my cape, though. And when you finish purging your bilious humours if you'd be so good as to order me a drink... I shouldn't take it amiss, I warrant you."

Her presumption upon his familiarity was so great that Sebastian would have laughed at her had he not first glanced into her eyes, and seen there a certain steadiness of gaze. "Two pints of sack," he called to the barman, surprising himself. Then: "and get me a bucket," he added, gulping. "I'm going to be —"

How the door came to be open, and how he came to be doubled over beneath the lintel with his stomach spraying the street and the rain spattering his hair, was a complete mystery to Sebastian. How the woman came to be holding him by the shoulders was another mystery. When he was done he straightened up, wiping his lips. Inebriation and water conspired to bedraggle him so that he presented only a palid shadow of the infamous student ruffian Sebastian de l'Amoque when he turned to address the woman. "I think I would appreciate your company more if you had introduced yourself to me in the traditional manner. What do you want of me, and why?"

She stepped back into the tavern, one hand resting lightly on the pommel of her sword. Her lips quirked, so that if he ignored her eyes he could almost convince himself that she was smiling like a coquette. "I am Anya of Tigre, and you are the Sieur de l'Amoque of the Academy, lately apprenticed to the High Lord Wysard Vargas Escobar," she said, still smiling that curious smile. "If this is so I am pleased to meet you, for I have been searching this metropolitan midden for you for some time. But now would you care to drink at my expense, and let me trouble you for the answer to some minor trivia; or would you rather satisfy me with respect to the insult you rendered to my honour?"

Sebastian cleared his throat and spat in the gutter. A flash of sudden sobriety showed him the gravity of his situation. "No offense was intended, madame, and it is my sincerest hope that none should be taken at my earlier incoherence. If you would care to share a table with me, the landlord will see to our provision while we discuss those matters you would quiz me upon. However, I think it would be best if you waited for a while before you tax my head overmuch; it's ringing like a bell and my hands are still shaking."

Anya nodded, then turned and retreated to a shadowy table in a nook at the very back of the tavern. Sebastian followed her, still shaky, beginning to wonder just what this maid — no, this un-woman killer bitch of Tigre — wanted. Oh yes. He'd heard about wandering women and what they did to men who crossed them any way but one. He thought fuzzily: it's a tough life being a wife and mother, but that's no excuse for brigandage.

The table Anya selected was strangely empty, and the bag of possessions she had left there was still untouched despite the raucous congregation of orc-browed night-soil attendants who hooted and gambled with manic intensity at the next table. She sat down beside her baggage and smiled gratefully as the cobbler's daughter planted a jug of wine and two tankards on the table. The barmaid looked round, saw Sebastian coming, and her eyes widened: her ears flushed a hot coral pink as she picked up her skirts and fled for the sanctuary of the cellar. Sebastian sat down and shook his head in disappointment, charting her progress with resentful eyes. Whorespaw bitch-cow ballock-ripper ... "I didn't mean it but for fun," he said unconsciously, "how was I to know the silly strumpet was still a maiden?"

"You should be more prudent." Anya's expression was neutral as she poured the dark wine into each tankard and pushed one towards him. Her sobriety was nevertheless clear: she didn't spill a drop. "If you dishonour her further in the eyes of her family, you might

find more than just a debt of dowry to restore this time. Someday you will meet a victim with teeth, young fox; then where will you be, eh?"

He looked up and met her gaze. There was no mistaking what he saw in it. "What do you want of me?" he asked, his throat suddenly as dry as any desert. "I'm just a humble student, about to be sent down by his betters for refusing to take the baccalaureate. How can I serve you, and in what way can I offer the hospitality of my lord Vargas to your honour?"

Anya took a long draught of sack and smacked her lips in a most un-ladylike manner, then placed her tankard on the table and carefully scanned the tavern. "If I choose to bind you to my purposes, you will stand as little chance as an imp-spawn before your master's wrath. But it's not proper that an agent of those I serve should behave in such a manner, so –" she made a small gesture of irritation, flicking imaginary reins away from herself, and Sebastian shivered. Then she pushed the lace cuff of her left sleeve up her arm, brazenly presenting the back of her wrist to him. "Consider yourself honoured," she said drily. "The Invigilation rarely concerns itself with those who merely study the daemonic."

Sebastian's pulse hammered and his vision grew dim. *She's one of THEM!* His knees turned to jelly and his skin shrivelled before the heat of an invisible sun: his eyes were ready to melt in his head and his ears sang a song of guilt. The Invigilation! But Anya of Tigre, if that was really her name, seemed not to notice the effect she was having on him. "I would like you to tell me precisely why you refused to take the Examination," she said, then took another draught of wine. "After that I want you to take me to see your master. Come, scholar, there is little time."

But Sebastian was unable to control himself; he nearly bit his tongue as he stuttered in dismay, "But why? Why now? Why me? What's wrong! What have we done to offend your honour ..."

"Nothing: at least not as yet," she said. "But the hour has arrived and I am here on an official investigation decreed by the Ministry of Lost Souls. If you do not help in my investigations it will be necessary to compel you. So talk, young man. Time is short, and the Invigilation requires your cooperation in its enquiries."

Mopping the cold sweat from his brow, Sebastian cleared his throat and began to recite his tale. The story was a lengthy one and full of digressions, but Anya made no attempt to hurry him; after all it was going to be a long night ahead, and she was well aware that there was no better defense against sleep than a lengthy conversation followed by a brisk walk. And this was one night when it would be a very good idea to stay awake, perchance to greet the dawn alive...

Two weeks previously:

The communicants were gathered in the chapel. It was night and a ritual of highest jeopardy was commencing; their voices wafted in harmonious key from behind the fluted bone partition at the far end of the chamber. Golden runes glowed upon the darkened floor within the nave, fading whenever the lightning flashed outside the narrow windows, and the sacrifice – condemned for membership of a forbidden cult – struggled with her silver chains upon the altar.

Sebastian surveyed his fellow scholars with the gloomy satisfaction of the perennial pessimist. Their numbers, twelve this time, were down by half: it seemed that more and more of them absented themselves with excuses. Shadows flickered along the walls of the academy as the masters, those who remained, raved and cursed. Still the spate of unexplained frightfulness continued. Three students had died this month, and master Frankenburg had been found charred to grey ash in his own study. Who would dare exercise their scholarly arts when it might lead to such unforeseen consequences? Of one thing Sebastian was sure: that the interrogation of dark entities was becoming far more dangerous than usual, and that the daemons alone were not responsible.

"Aharseus, Zycor, Ixtal! I commend thee to the wardens of the three points," intoned Lord Kerein. The only wizard present, he was also the only person permitted in the body of the chapel during this earnest and deadly rite. The interrogation of the forces of darkness – a ritual rarely mandated by the Invigilation – could only be entrusted to one who was beyond reproach; the temptation to go further was one which any mage might feel, and few could be trusted to resist. He scattered powdered colchicum across the censers and uttered three further words of power. "Hear and obey! I bind thee to the three points of power!"

"We who witness do bind thee," chanted the conclave of students behind the partition, word-perfect despite their inexperience and fear. "Let thy lips be sealed, let thy eyes be sealed, let the five orifices of thy anatomy be sealed, lest the soul of thy body be expelled to the seven corners of the abyss and thy body sealed against thee for eternity."

The flames in the censer leapt higher, casting a pale glow across the walls of the chapel. Let this succeed just once, and I will reconsider, Sebastian decided. The awe and the sanctity of the ritual combined to capture his spirit; the legal questioning of the most fearsome daemons of the abyss by a mage was the high point of his training, only to be surpassed before graduation by the demonstration in which he, himself, alone, would conduct the ritual.

Kerein cried out again. "Aharseus, Zycor, Ixtal! I abjure thee to enter thou this consecrated vessel! Speak, as thou art commanded. See, as thou would be shown. I abjure thee! Enter thou this vessel!"

The sacrificial victim thrashed and spasmed as the inscriptions around the circle of power pulsed bloody red for an instant: then she lay still within the circle, and Sebastian saw with a sense of visceral awe that her skin was shimmering with the heat haze of an unconstrained furnace.

"Speak! I command you!" snapped the wizard. The assembled conclave incanted a verse in an ancient tongue, words that spoke of binding and despair and the iron will of the magus. "You are Aharseus, and Zycor, and Ixtal, the three-in-one. Answer me!"

The sacrifice turned her head and grimaced at him, her face writhing in a ghastly parody of allure. "I am the ones whom you summoned," said the daemon, voice like the rattle of breaking stones. "What would you have me do, human? I can only obey you, after all. We both know the rules ..." the body the daemon wore drooled and rolled its eyes, still grinning like a lunatic.

"I know this for the truth." Kerein seemed taken aback by the mildness of the daemon's repose. "But why are you so placid, breaker of mountains and bringer of hurricanes? Answer me, I command you! You who writhe and thunder at the touch of flesh yet quietly smile from within that cage of bone, what is the meaning of your current behaviour?"

Cold sweat prickled on Sebastian's brow. He's tempting fate, he noted carefully. Holding a dialogue rather than demanding answers to simple questions! He's too bloody confident tonight, is Lord Kerein.

The daemon shrugged amidst a rattle of chains; the runes around the altar flared ruby-bright then faded again. "Your time is come," it rumbled softly; "of that I am assured."

"Who told you of that?" demanded the mage. "I forbid it! Speak, Aharseus! I command you! Who has promised you –"

The daemon smiled frightfully. The flesh on its stolen face rippled and distorted, tore away from itself with a dreadful noise; bones cracked beneath the skin. "One among you dislikes your kind," it creaked, in a voice like trees breaking before a gale.. "You will know them again by their ways and by their whiles, when the candles of flesh burn low and the sands of night expire! Now forgive me, mortal, for I tire of this conversation and I'm still hungry –"

Lightning flashed outside, and the runes glowed black and hissed. There was an astounding clap of thunder that smashed the windows from their frames, and the daemon vanished from the altar with its unfortunate host. Sebastian blinked and someone screamed in agony. He started and peered through the holes in the filigree screen. Where the magus Kerein had been there stood a lumpy parody of humanity that appeared to be sculpted from grey blebs of cauliflower. It staggered briefly and screamed once more, tearing at its robes with clawed hands. Then it stood shivering for a moment as if racked by the most exquisite agony, and fell backward across the altar. Spreading rings of dark blood began to seep through the front of its robes, dripping from the warty blebs that covered its naked skin.

There was a rising hubbub of voices from the students, then one cry which rose above the others: "It's the work of the daemon! That's Lord Kerein – he's been afflicted unto death by tumours of brain!" The move to evacuate the chapel was fast, not to say unseemly. Nevertheless, by the time the mass of panicking students reached the door Sebastian was already outside the building, retching upon the cold stones of the courtyard.

Suspicion fell upon the magi first and upon the student body second. Panic of a most ugly and undignified kind took root in the hallowed corridors of the academy; it was accompanied by a kind of feverish determination not to be intimidated by the traitor, not to let one's activities be circumscribed by the unseen hand of the malign practitioner who was undoubtedly responsible for the distortion of the recent conjurations. That this invisible presence was also responsible for the death of Frankenburg and the abominable accidents that had recently befallen the student corpus was not in doubt, for it was unthinkable that two such curses should descend upon the academy in a single month. The daemon's description served to sow more confusion than it dispelled. Nevertheless, everybody took precautions; and in some cases this reached the stage of refraining entirely from certain dangerous

activities or questionable pursuits...

Sebastian drained his tankard of wine and was about to refill it when Anya reached out and placed her hand across the mouth of the jug. "Repeat once more for my ears, what was the purpose of the ritual at which Lord Kerein was so misfortunately cursed? That you failed to tell me. What was his incentive for indulging in such a fatal conjuration?"

Sebastian shuddered. "It was an interrogation, nothing more. The palace had a surfeit of conspirators to dispose of and considered the scaffold too inflammatory in the current climate of opinion. Lord Kerein was entrusted with the teaching of the highest and darkest arts, and the summoning of the three-in-one was apparently mandated to the University by your own – by the Invigilators. For purposes of forewarning, should there be another unspeakable invasion plotted in the abyss, your order has instructed us to pursue a series of summonings and interrogation of daemonic forces. Not to control the daemons, you understand – nothing so questionable – just to summon and interrogate. We receive a bursary, and in return if we learn anything of the Dark we pass it on."

Anya removed her palm from the jug and Sebastian filled his tankard. After a moment he remembered to glance up at her; she nodded slightly and he emptied what was left of the wine into her cup.

"Now tell me," the Invigilator continued, "what is your own status in these events? As sole incumbent student of the diabolic arts, not to mention apprentice to the dean, it seems spurious to suggest that suspicion logically falls upon your neck..."

"Never." Sebastian took a deep draught of dutch courage and collected his scattered wits. "Oh, the inquisition questioned me, but they decided that my heart was pure and my strength was that of ten righteous men, or somesuch nonsense."

"Which would tend to suggest that the righteous are going to get their heads kicked in," Anya observed drily. "Pray continue. What cause would you attribute to the inquisitor's death?"

"I don't know," Sebastian mumbled. "His skin turned into many little cancers of the brain. They think he died of the pain; all those nervous sinews... I didn't do it. Why should I look into their heads? It's none of my business; I'm to be sent down on the morrow for refusing my exam, isn't that enough for you?" He shook his head, refraining from making any mention of his own worst problem. "All I want to do is drown my frights and forget my troubles and you come and drag me up from the gutter and pour acid truth in my ears! Where do your demands end?"

"Not here," she snapped, momentarily letting her anger show. Sebastian recoiled from her. "You forget that I have a task to accomplish, and it is not to be countenanced that a lack-liver apprentice shall refuse the holy duty of Invigilation!" She moderated her tone before the other customers had time to more than turn their heads. "Remember the specifics of the academic charter you studied under. Your tuition was given to you without fee because the treasury of the Ministry of Lost Souls, the Invigilation, paid for the upkeep of the University. The term of reference was that you should in return render to the Invigilation such services as could reasonably be required of you while you study within the said institution. Do you now repudiate that vow, scholar? You, who as the sole scholar of the daemonic arts are undoubtedly aware of the cost of such a broken oath?"

Sebastian stared at her, and felt the noose tighten around his throat. "But I'm to be sent down."

"Yes, but not yet. Need I remind you of the termination codicil to the charter?"

He bowed his head. "You are signing my death warrant," he whispered. The fingers of his left hand traced an esoteric shape in the air above the table: a thin smoke drifted from his fingernail beds as he began to shiver in the grip of a premature hang-over.

"At least you can do one thing right," Anya said, begrudging even a suggestion of approval. "But a heavy drinker like you must have frequent recourse to that skill, no doubt."

Sobering up, Sebastian gave a climactic shudder and gasped; his teeth rattled in his jaws and his vision popped into sharp focus, then blurred again. The iron band around his forehead relaxed and the taste of carrion slowly departed from his mouth. "It only speeds things up," he said hoarsely. "By the seven-fingered sisters of Hyss, I feel worse now than I did a minute ago." He buried his face in his hands and coughed repeatedly. "This is a very bad idea," he mumbled.

Anya banged her tankard on the table. "By the grace of Eris, will you stop protesting your cowardice and show the good manners not to disgrace your commission so lightly in public? You're pathetic! Look at you. You aspire to practice the Art as a master but you can't even hold your grape juice! You disgust me!"

Sebastian sat up and stared at her. His eyes were bloodshot but sober. "Shut up and let me think, or I'll show you just what I think of your commission," he said bitterly.

A moment later: "It's not my fault, you see. Vargas chose me because no student was willing to be his apprentice after he flogged and expelled his last apprentice, Zevon, for laxity and moral corruption – accusations both baseless and without proof, I'll warrant you. Zevon was among the most brilliant and fascinating – well. Vargas never accepts scholars who threaten his position, you know; he uses the system to maintain a steady supply of high-born body servants. Or worse." His grimace softened in to a sly smile. "I showed him." The smile faded. "Zevon would have shown him, the bastard whoreson villein ..."

Anya stood up. "Very well then," she said, her expression neutral. "I should like to meet this master of yours before the night is out, Sieur de l'Amoque. Perhaps –" her lips twitched – "you'll learn something about how to deal with your superiors in the process. But only if you keep your eyes open. Now forward, bravo, and show the way, for I have a mission – and if my intelligence is correct there is only this night left in which to accomplish it!"

The chambers of Vargas di Escobar were located in the west wing of the House of Ambrose Nulcompare, high on the north slope of College Hill. The House presented a forbidding face to the city. Soot-stained by time, its arched casements stared gloomily out from beneath eaves supported by stone gargoyles. Rumour had it that they were the family of the original architect who, upon completing his work, had demanded an extra twenty gold groats from the Chancellor of the day. Nobody who dwelled in the building could see any point in debunking this myth, for its probity could not in any way moderate the grim reputation the building had earned since its construction. The mob gave it a wide berth, not so much from sympathy as from fear; even when lord Lynch was riding through the city the fires of anarchy generally left the University untouched.

It was to this grim and ill-hallowed heap that Sebastian escorted the Invigilator Anya of Tigre. The rain had diminished to a light drizzle that pattered upon the cobble-stones like the memory of some mythical deluge: it chilled to the bone, and by the time they reached the blackened oak doors Sebastian was damp through. Anya, in contrast, was dry. "How is it that the rain doesn't touch you, but seems attracted to me like filings before a lodestone?" he grumbled to her.

She grinned. "I walk between the drops. It is a skill you would do well to master, scholar."

"Hah. I should be so fortunate." He spat in the gutter and glanced back down the hill. Lights still glimmered in every upper window, and faint music drifted from beneath a pavilion on Fiddler's Green. "If I know my master he will be at his studies even now," he said, changing the subject to one with which he was more comfortable. "If it pleases you to disturb him then I shall not stand in your way."

"It so pleases me," said Anya. She adjusted her cloak, settled her sword belt around her waist, and motioned him forward. "Pray lead the way, my lord."

Sebastian could tell when he was being mocked. He mumbled the word of Unbinding and shoved the door open rudely: the hinges groaned like a seditionist upon the rack.

He swept up the grand staircase without heed to his escort, who was paying unnecessary attention to the statuary and decorative finish of the magesterial mansion. Anya followed at her own pace, pausing to stare at her reflection in a beaten brass mirror set in a gallows-wood frame. Dark oil paintings of former Deans and Chancellors stared disapprovingly down as she paused on her way upstairs. Candid appreciation, they seemed to suggest, was not the response that this hallway was intended to induce in visitors.

At the uppermost landing Sebastian marched straight along the passage and threw open a wide pair of doors at the end. Another staircase lay beyond them, a twisted corkscrew of black iron that resembled a dissection of the spine of a felon broken upon the wheel. It tolled like a bell as Sebastian's boots thumped from step to step. She followed him lightly, her gait as quiet as that of any cat. Finally he reached the top of the spiral and paused. "We must knock first," he hissed. "My master has a short way with intruders."

"I don't think so," Anya said lightly. Brusquely shouldering him aside she rapped a brief tattoo on the mahogany panel, then turned the brass handle and pushed on through.

"Well, you took your time," said Vargas, looking up from his lectern. "What kept you?" Sebastian, heart in mouth, followed her into the room. "Oh, I see," his master continued, replacing the brass nut-crackers he had been using in the bowl on his desk. "Well then. What can I do for you, my lady? Was your journey easy?"

"Sufficiently so." Anya strode over to the window and perched upon the trunk in the casement. Sebastian closed the door silently; meanwhile, Vargas shuffled across to the tall

book-case beneath the stuffed crocodile and withdrew a crystal decanter from the shelf reserved for spirits. "I discovered your apprentice in a tavern, by the way. He was busy consigning his academic career to oblivion in the hope that a lifetime's inherited mastery over a dung-heap infested with serfs was in some way superior to seeking the world's salvation."

"Hah. I can't say I expected any better of him."

The student felt his ears burn as he stood by the door, watching while Vargas poured two crystal goblets full of liquid fire and offered one to the Invigilator.

"There has been a degree of truancy this past month that has startled even the Chancellor. (Complacant fat bastard that he is.) I suppose you could put the blame firmly at the feet of Kerein or Frankenburg for dropping off at the altar and on the throne respectively, save that they did so the very same week and under surpassingly suspicious circumstances. Not to mention the other deaths. And then there's the matter of the gargoyle that didn't fly."

"It had wings, didn't it?" said Anya.

"That, my lady, is exactly the point." Vargas raised his glass to his nose and sniffed, delicately, then unexpectedly threw back the entire contents in a single gulp. After much smacking of lips and a small belch, he continued. "Two students in a single day is a bit much, you will agree. And it was only a parenthetical summoning, at that, the interrogation of a lost shade from the depths of the eleventh segmentation of the abyss – if, that is, you adhere to the nomenclature and conventions proposed by the upstart di Michaelis. The gargoyle was a different matter. It took wing, it's true, after gathering moss for a matter of some centuries, and that suggests a degree of enthusiasm for flight on its part. Nevertheless, animations of stone are not easily endowed with the lightness of feathers, and a young oneiromancer happened to be practicing her cardinal divinations beneath it at the time. If only it had learned to flap its wings on the way down ..." he shook his head morosely then blew his nose on the stained black sleeve of his gown.

"Was anything discovered around the joist from which the gargoyle leapt?" asked Anya.

Vargas sniffed. "Pigeon droppings," he said, his voice muffled by a double layer of damp velvet. "Perhaps the birds were of subversive intent, but I do believe our inquisitors might have a difficult time inducing them to confess."

"You really ought to adopt the pocket-kerchief," Anya suggested; "you've been snuffling like that ever since I met you, and I assure you that it is not considered the most elegant of habits in polite society." She twisted her scabbard round across her thighs and swung her legs back and forth. "What steps you have taken to identify the miscreant, and what success have they met with to this date?"

"I've taken every step, my lady – and to no avail. The witnesses to the death of Kerein – "here Vargas' eyes swept across to Sebastian, and focussed unblinkingly upon him for a while – "were not able to spin a right consistent tale. Frankenburg died unwatched and alone. And there's the matter of the Royal charter, which has absorbed so much of our energies of late –"

"The charter. You are aware that the interventions of my agency take precedence? Even over Royal fiat?" Her expression was one of mild curiosity, as if she failed to comprehend the dangers of Vargas notorious ill-temper.

Sebastian steeled himself for an explosion, but it failed to materialise; instead, Vargas bowed his head in meek acknowledgement. "Were it not for your agency, there would be no empire to trouble us with it's decrees," he said gravely. "We deeply appreciate the vital nature of your mission to seek out and destroy the taint of Darkness wherever it lingers. Nevertheless, you must understand that with two members of the hidden faculty elsewhere, pursuing the whims of a princess in search of a dragon –" he snorted. "You must excuse me, though, for there is one matter in which I can and must make further enquiries. Now!" He turned to glare furiously at Sebastian. "You dissolute rascal! What have you got to say for yourself? Five years of study and then you refuse your obligation and spit on your tutor's honour! Explain yourself, pray, to this humble servant. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Sebastian had been steeling himself for this moment ever since Anya forced him to attain sobriety; even so, he was unable to manage even the appearance of contrition. "I'm staying alive, old man. The curse that has descended upon this academy won't be cast out by the immolation of one more drudge who, born the second son to a lord, is forced to earn his bread as a grinder of inks and a cleaner of floors! You've treated me like shit these past four years, and I'm not about to stake my life on your good nature. Send me down, see if I care! My devotion to my art is such that no gown can make me more than I already am; why should I suffer for your profit? That's all there is to it! As you have sown, so you are about to harvest

in bloody spades. It looks to me very much as if there's a Dark Pretender aspiring to immanence, and I'm not about to involve myself in that!"

A deathly silence descended within the room. Anya looked at Sebastian and shook her head: something approaching admiration could be seen in her expression, but there was also a judgement there – and it was not favourable. Vargas, for his part, also stared at Sebastian, but there was something in his gaze that wholly unnerved the apprentice.

"I think it would profit you mightily to think longer on that issue, and decide whether you mean it before I decide whether to take it seriously," Vargas finally said. "I smell insubordination in your anger: do you truly think I have mistreated you like that? After all this time?"

Sebastian shrugged his shoulders. It's all over now, that's for sure. "I never asked to be adopted as your apprentice," he snapped, careless of his discretion. "You have a certain reputation among the students, my lord. After you whipped my predecessor Zevon around the quad with lashes of frozen storm, after you had the scholars Quayle and Azmar expelled from the conclave for moral corruption, and after you announced that true enlightenment could only come through diligent study and self-mortification, and in view of your marked prejudice towards those less skilled than yourself ..." he shrugged again. "Once, I wanted to study here," he concluded.

"Then you shall study here no more," Vargas said casually. He reached into the bowl on his desk and pulled out a walnut and the brass calipers he had been using when Sebastian and Anya arrived: the kernel shattered loudly in the silence. There was a glint of lofty amusement in his eye as he contemplated the broken shell lying in the palm of his hand. "I presume that this has been troubling you for some time. In that case, and given your issuance of due cause, by casting slanders against your lawful master, I hereby notify you that I can no longer accept your tutelage. However, you have a contract with the University which remains undischarged: and as dean of the School of Diabolism I feel it wise to see that all scholars are appropriately supervised by one of suitable skill and puissance. So! My lady, will you ..?"

Anya stood up. "He's a cowardly oaf. Even if he does know what's going on. Why would I want him? What's in it for me?" Sebastian stared at her, confused. Something didn't ring true.

"You would receive my gratitude, and that is a commodity of which it has been said that I have far too little." Vargas grinned malevolently. "You have a new master, Sebastian de l'Amoque. I hereby apprentice you, as is my duty and privilege – to Anya of Tigre, mendicant practitioner of the final arts and agent of the Invigilation – on pain of violation of your contract! At least until the close of your tenure, at dawn tomorrow. Dare you refuse?"

Sebastian glanced from face to face. "You've got me," he said, flatly. In a voice of desperation, he added: "but I'm still not going to enact the examination of high jeopardy!"

"You don't have to," said Anya, walking across to him. She rested a hand on his shoulder and steered him inexorably towards the book-case. "If you survive 'til dawn I think I will vouch for your graduation regardless. In the meantime – how good are you at tracking down ex-students?"

"What? Why?" He demanded. "What ex-students?"

Anya paused and looked at Vargas. "Is he really this stupid?" she asked. Vargas shook his head.

"What do you want me to do?" Sebastian asked tensely.

"Your predecessors," she said. "You know why I want them. Why I started by looking for you: to ensure first that the Dark Pretender who has so evilly started this program of ritual sacrifice is not one of the adepts trained by this very college. You know what I want. Go away, find your predecessor – what was he called? Zevon? And bring him to me."

"At once," added Vargas.

Sebastian nodded. Not trusting his traitor tongue – not a single word – he turned and left the room. Half way down the stairs he caught at the bannister, discovering to his shame that his hand was trembling with fury. Damn them! he thought furiously.. Damn the Ministry of Lost Souls and their catspaw Invigilators! Who would forever hold down honest scholarship in the name of caution, and seek everywhere for seeds of imaginary evil! But, truth be told, it was not principally the Invigilator he was most afraid of right now. Anya had told him to bring Zevon to her: and Sebastian was extremely worried by this. He could well imagine Zevon's response to being summoned by the Invigilation, and it would not be pleasant. Nevertheless – he reached the bottom of the stairs and paused, indecisively – the oath she held over him was too powerful. He would have to at least try. Shaking his head, he walked out into the road and turned for home: where, probably, Zevon would be already waiting for him. In bed.

Anya of Tigre poured herself another drink. It was not alcohol she sipped, but an elixir the formula of which was a tight-held secret of the University. "You don't think he's guilty?" she asked interestedly.

Vargas shuffled over to his throne and sat down. "No, if you mean is he guilty of enacting a forbidden ritual. Nevertheless, I would hardly go so far as to say he's innocent." He spoke with such heavy irony that for a moment Anya thought he was contradicting himself.

"How so?"

"Because I've seen his type before," grumped Vargas. "His predecessor Zevon: now he had balls. That's why I had him sent down, you see. It was a forgone conclusion that if he stayed he'd try something silly. But Sebastian is a lily-livered weakling if ever I've seen one. A nasty piece of work, but too scared of shadows to kill his elder brother and take his father's castle by force: he'll probably end up as privy councillor to some scheming duke, or wind up gracing some dungeon, I don't doubt. But he isn't a conqueror: he doesn't have the cast-iron gall for it. Not like most of the lunatics and villains who come to me for teaching!"

"Your students sound a marvelous bunch," commented Anya. "With lieges like that, who needs enemies?"

"I do!" said Vargas, grinning humourlessly. "If I didn't I'd go soft in the head. At least it keeps me in on my toes. Your predecessors didn't have so much trouble, and look where they wound up!"

"The predecessors of my order," she corrected. "Things are very different now. I was a babe in arms when the Dark Pretender took to the field and the clouds rained blood for a week. Do you remember? The crows were too fat to fly, and the stench ... afterwards I had only to look at my father's face to see what that did to people."

"We can't all have parents like that." Vargas hiccuped violently and frowned. "I well remember his service. But tell me, what brought you hence today? We had barely realised that there was a Pretender to the dark powers commencing the rite of binding when you arrived –"

"There's synchronicity in all things," said Anya. "Word came to us from afar, you realise. Three innocents died to put me here, five hundred leagues in an eye-blink. We judged it sufficiently important."

Vargas turned pale. "You don't mean ..?"

She nodded. For the first time this evening she looked her age: the final battle of the war she had been born in was a good four decades past. "In the defense of good, it is sometimes necessary to use the tools of evil," she quoted. "If our ancestors had not been so high-minded, things would never have reached the point of war. If the Invigilation had been set up earlier ..."

"Hindsight is easy," said Vargas. "In those days we didn't have the same sense of urgency, you understand. It had been centuries." He picked up and drained his wine glass. Then he hiccuped again. "I hate this age," he said gloomily. "To be compelled to brutality against one's better nature –"

"Is that the only reason you consort with devils?" demanded Anya: "ask yourself, is it really?"

Vargas nodded, then reached for a walnut. Picking up his brass callipers, he remarked: "Not all of us are mad, you see. But I suppose it's easier for those who are to succeed at this unfortunate profession. Of the past seven students I have taught only two have graduated with honour. And of the past eleven, two have died insane. I don't hold myself to blame; if the other five had only been pure of mind ..."

The walnut disintegrated in shards of black corruption.

"They all concealed a rotten heart, and that led to their downfall."

"I see," Anya said drily as she stared at the wormy mass. Why are they always optimists? Even in the most unlikely guise? "I see that it's been a full two bells since I sent that student of yours to pry out his crony. Do you suppose I should go and find out what's happened to him?" She stared at Vargas with such intensity that he blinked and looked away.

"I think so," he said. "I really think so. That catamite of his was a nasty piece of work."

Anya stood up. "What catamite?"

Vargas blinked again. "Didn't you know?" His face sagged, as if all the muscles supporting it had been severed. "I thought you must! The way you sent him – Sebastian and Zevon are notorious. They live together openly, you see, although it's a crime hereabouts; the men of the city watch refuse to detain scholars of the art. They've been scandalising the burghers ever since –"

He didn't finish the sentence. Anya was no longer around to hear it, and there wasn't

any point. "I hope she succeeds," he said quietly to the swinging door; "I hope she finds him before it's too late."

Sebastian stumbled into the streets and wandered down the hill in a self-absorbed trance. It had stopped raining and a thin fog was rising from the open sewers; it bore with it the stench of spent dinners. The damp cobblestones offered treacherous footing, and he found that he was tired and headsore from the events of the past hour. I need to think he decided, although his circumstances were not altogether suited to this activity.

For one thing there wasn't enough time, he realised, as his unwilling feet carried him home. Damn and blast the bitch, he thought angrily. Why Zevon? He wouldn't do a thing like that – would he? To try to become a Dark Pretender by the ritual of Mummu – he tried to recall the details by which an adept might bind the forces of the abyss to obey their naked will without treachery and malice. Certainly a vital preliminary step for any who would aspire to true mastery of the diabolic arts – and totally forbidden by the Invigilation ever since the last Last Battle. Something about there being seven sacrifices; one of them arbitrary, the rest subtly structured ...

The area where Sebastian lived was particularly rough, adjoining the district where the mercantile warehouses hulked along the banks of the river. Many of the poorer students lived there, scattered among the struggling tradespeople and ne'er-do-well's of the lower city. The houses overhung the narrow alleys and little light reached the ground to guide the intrepid traveller past piles of muck and the verminous hovels of the poor. He traced his way to his home and unlocked the door with a three-fingered gesture and a strange word. Of burglars he had no fear; students of the Art had more serious causes for concern than human intrusion upon their property.

It was a small studio, beams blackened by the resinous smoke of a thousand candles. His possessions were strewn all about, mingled promiscuously with those of Zevon; here an oak chest full of cloth, there a sack full of potatoes. A grimoire, possibly stolen, lay open atop the odd-legged desk that Zev had filched from the office of the richest merchant prince of the city whilst under a spell of deception. "Zev?" Sebastian called quietly. "Are you awake?"

He realised as soon as he'd said it that this was a mistake. Bat-shadows fluttered against the diamond-leaded window panes, blue-spark silhouettes illuminating the floorboards: "Not now!" Zevon snapped in a voice as brittle as glass. "Come not in that form!" he chanted, in a tone that made Sebastian's hair stand on end and his teeth rattle in their sockets. "I command thee! Come not in that form! Quick, oaf – into the sanctum! Your life depends on it!"

Sebastian, who was not so slow-witted as to remain confused for long, jumped to obey as Zevon plucked a handful of ivory-tinted powder and cast it into the glowing crucible on the stove. "What in the seven names of hell do you think you're –" he began..

"Come not in that form!" Zevon screamed. There was a bang not unlike thunder and the crucible shattered. "Fuck! Now look what you've done, Seb! Zycor, Aharseus, Ixtal, I dismiss thee! In the name of Septuat, begone!" Of a sudden the atmosphere in the room lightened. Nevertheless, the smell lingered: burning brimstone mingled with a hint of old, dried blood.

"Is it safe?" Sebastian looked down at the powdery circle of chalk that ringed his trembling feet. The line was unbroken: if his jump had been miscalculated he would not now be alive enough to understand what had befallen him.

"It is, now." Zevon stood up, stepped out of his warding circle, and slammed the cover of the grimoire shut angrily. Dust spurted from the spine of the book as he turned to stare at Sebastian. "You really screwed that up! Another second –"

"You were Coercing." Sebastian's throat was peculiarly dry, and there was a strange ringing in his ears. "Why, Zev? What do you think you're doing?"

Zevon laughed. "Don't be a fucking moron. It's examination night tonight, isn't it? And you know who else is paying attention?" He was wearing a dark robe, Sebastian noticed, the gown of a wizardly scholar. The sign of rank that he had been stripped of three years ago by Vargas di Escobar. There were sweat-rings under his armpits and the hem was ragged and grey, as if scorched by a terrible heat.

Sebastian sat down heavily on the bed. "You never told me," he said, as quietly and evenly as he could manage. "You've been following a forbidden ritual, and all the while I've been terrified to study –"

"More fool you." Zevon walked over to the battered cupboard next to the bed and pulled out a dusty bottle of wine. "You'll be needing some of this, I warrant. Here, have a

glass." His manner was quiet again, but the temperature in the room dropped several degrees when Sebastian reached out and took hold of his wrist.

"I want an explanation," Sebastian said. "Why are you following the rite of Mummu? Why you want to mess everything up by going for the big one! It's too soon and too dangerous! Don't you know they're still watching and waiting for any who should try their luck?"

Zevon tugged his arm away impatiently. "It's only seven sacrifices. One arbitrary, the others sensory. And only two to go before the night is out, Sebastian, I'm nearly there. Here: drink." He filled a chipped tumber from the dusty bottle and thrust it at Sebastian.

"That's not the point," said Sebastian. "So you think you can do it? Fine. See if I care! But the Ministry of Lost Souls – they are watching. The Invigilation. They haven't slept since the Dark Pretender claimed two gross of thousand lives. Maybe in ten, twenty years ..."

"You're only young once," said Zevon. It was as near to an apology as Sebastian had ever heard from him. He raised the bottle to his lips: "Cheers!"

Sebastian took a mouthful from the cup. The wine was full-bodied and fruity. "If you love me, tell me you'll give up this folly for the time being?"

"No."

Sebastian sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that." He took another mouthful. "The Invigilator found me."

When Zevon stopped spluttering, he put the bottle down with exaggerated care and sat next to Sebastian. He put one arm round his shoulders. "Would you care to repeat that?"

Sebastian shut his eyes. Relax. Remember what you've shared – everything – "Vargas summoned her. It was the ritual nature of the killings that attracted attention. Now they know I'm not the guilty party so they use me as their pawn. I was cheap, you see. I'm still an enrolled schollar, for tonight, and you remember the oath –"

"Would you foreswear yourself for me?" asked Zevon, lightly touching his cheek. "You know I can do it, don't you? After this night I'll have total mastery of the dark forces, as great as any prince of the night. Even those bumbling ruthless do-gooders will be unable to touch me. I'll protect you! But will you break your oath for me? First?"

Sebastian opened his eyes and saw Zevon, leaning very close, a look of intense concentration about his face, as it had been in better times when they made love in this very bed. "I can't," he said with difficulty, dropping the words into a stony silence. "I can't. They will send their nightmare minions after me, things that swarm in the infinite night between stars and dream of flesh that tears and screams to sing – as is their right –"

"So you're working for the good guys now," said Zevon, without a trace of mockery in his voice. "Have they scared you that much?"

Sebastian tried to stand up and failed, due to a curious weakness in his ankles. "It's the Invigilation," he whispered defensively. "The good guys. If they'd been around forty years ago the Dark Pretender would have shit bricks – would have –" he was unable to finish. A dark realisation came over him as he tried to look at Zevon, found that his neck muscles would not obey.

Zevon stood up. "Well, well, well," he said tightly. "So it's like that, is it?" He looked frighteningly serene as he leaned over Sebastian. "They've broken you like a puppy. Their stupid fetish about dark agencies – you can look but you can't touch. The creeping secret police, the minions of mediocrity! And you're scared of them." He didn't sound contemptuous; but there was a terrifyingly casual tone to his voice as he continued. "I'm leaving now, Seb. I've got business to attend to and I dare say we won't be meeting again afterwards. At least, not for a very long time. What do you say?"

Sebastian managed to work his numb jaws sufficiently to speak. "What was it?" he croaked, a dull ache of fear eating away at his innards.

"Toad venom. In the wine; I leave you the antidote." He gestured at a pot of unguent upon the cupboard. It was tantalisingly close, had Sebastian even been able to lift an arm. "Eventually it will paralyse your lungs; then you will die. Not part of the main plan, I'm afraid, but we can't all be omniscient and I did –" his voice cracked slightly – "hope you'd be prepared to join me."

Sebastian managed another question. "But what of our oath?" he whispered desperately.

"That?" Zevon held up a carving of an ivory heart, inscribed with symbols. "You mean our foolish love-knot? Oh, that. I'm afraid I won't have time for that kind of thing any more. Being Lord of Darkness is apparently rather demanding. Still –" he dropped it casually – "beggars can't be choosers." He paused in the doorway and glanced back, just for a moment. "See you in hell, lover boy," he said, smiling as he pulled the door to.

Then Sebastian was left alone in his terror, with only the candle and his laboured breathing for company. As he desperately tried to work his fingers he saw that the candle was guttering. Soon, if no one came, he would be joining it.

Trying not to think too clearly about what she was doing, or about the probable outcome of her actions, Anya removed a small purse of powders from her belt pouch. She shook out a tiny pinch in the palm of one hand and sniffed it up each nostril in turn: a great and silent sneeze shook her as she mumbled an obscure incantation then stabbed the ball of one index finger with a needle and smeared the resulting drop of blood upon the tip of her nose.

The light began to die away around her, and the night fell unnaturally silent. Her skin grew numb and she noticed a strange scent of smelly flesh about herself; leaning forward, she pawed at the bannister rail on which Sebastian had rested his hand. The smell, skin, stench of the man forced its way into her nostrils like the taste of fresh excrement and the smoke of burning nail clippings. Gasping, Anya straightened up and blindly fumbled her way towards the door. The scent was still present, although faded and diffuse. She traced his way through the hall and out into the alley, bumping into a number of doors and walls along the way: then she stood and smelt the cool night breeze for a long minute.

There he was. The bloodhound magecraft carried a tiny emanation of desire to her nostrils. They flared instinctively; got you! The trail was old, half masked by the presence of other, riper odours, but her fugitive student had come this way for sure. Stumbling like a sleepwalker, Anya followed her nose down the hill, past the drunken revellers and somnambulists, through the twisting rookeries and shambles of the lower city, past the heady stench of the bakers preparing for the next day's business, past the diffuse emanations of a hundred thousand bodies, following the trail of the missing student. All the while, clutching at her guts, was a horrible sense that she knew exactly what was happening; that it would all slide into place like some grand and evil game of chess at any moment and that she would discover that she had missed a move, or her opponent had cheated while her back was turned ...

The city blurred around her, all colour draining into the tired darkness of the dog-watches. Moving through a realm of charcoal shadows and unlit windows, Anya drifted towards her target. Passing the ornamental cherry groves of the wealthy merchants, Anya followed the trail of her victim: past the gibbeted felons too, and the sinister white-walled college of the Inquisition. The odour of the fleeing man led her back up the wall of the valley towards the heights of the University until after an eternity of seeking she found herself outside a building where, according to her nostrils, Sebastian's trail vanished. Rubbing the blindness from her eyes, she mumbled the phrase that banished his unnatural acuity of smell. This must be it. He'll be hiding out here for sure. She rapped sharply on the door; when there was no response she bent and tapped a finger on the lock.

It was dark inside, but for the glimmer of a dying candle-wick. A stench of rich warm rotting belched forth, assaulting her still-sensitive nostrils. Chalk dust floated in the air, dry and ticklish in her throat as she recoiled. "Damn —" her eyes, freed now by the repression of her magic, adjusted to the darkness. Deep in the recess, barely more than a lump on the bed, she saw his hunched form.

Time stood still: she was beside him in an instant, hand flexing for the hilt of a dagger that intellect told her would be useless. The thin rattle of his wheeze was as laboured as that of any dying animal. Only his eyes twitched, rolling. She followed the direction of his gaze to the pot. "Is that it?" Reaching out, she touched his forehead. He was burning hot, as if in a fever's grip: "Or is it a cunning antidote?" Sweat burst out beneath her fingertips. He was trying to form words, but had too little control over his throat to lend the syllables shape and meaning.

"It would be like your friend to leave an emollient close to hand, but out of reach," she said. "Or he may have left the poison itself as a sign, and in case an interfering Invigilator might happen upon the scene. Don't you wonder about that?"

She picked up the jar. "That's what happened, wasn't it?" she asked, not expecting any kind of reply. She sniffed; the ointment within smelled foul, bitter. "There's no telling," she added. "We'll just have to see which it is. A lesson, either way." Digging one index finger into the jar she scooped up a dab of the ointment and pulled down his lower lip; she smeared the finger across the exposed gum then wiped Sebastian's drool from her wrist and the remaining medicine from her digit. "Unreliable bastard," she said, not unkindly. Then she became aware of a rasping sound. His teeth were grinding together.

Five minutes later Sebastian jack-knifed forward and dry-heaved across the rug and

the broken pentacle of chalk inscribed in the middle of the floor. Anya grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, to keep him from falling. "Thanks," he whispered.

"My pleasure. Just don't let it get to be a habit." She let go of him, stood up, and walked over to the closed book on the table. After reading the title she turned to stare at him. "You've got a lot of explaining to do," she added. "Don't let me keep you from starting."

Sebastian tried to frown. His face, still partially paralysed, transformed the expression into a deranged grin; when he spoke his voice was soft and hoarse. "He's a swine. No such thing as a quiet life. Didn't even tell me until I walked in on him."

Anya rummaged around on the desk. "Candle. Ah, got it. What was he doing?"

Sebastian's cheek twitched. His left hand performed an involuntary jig on his thigh; a patch of darkness was spreading in his lap. He no longer looked deranged, merely tired and sick and revolted by his own loss of control. "The ritual you mentioned. A conjuration of the three-in-one who took Lord Kerein the other night. He's crazy!"

"Very probably. Why did it take you so long to figure that out?"

"He's not always been like this," Sebastian retreated into self-defense. "He was always the bright spark – no, a flame of intellect – denied his rightful place by the narrow-minded windbagery of the high table. I can see why he wants it –"

"The urge to control has always followed the urge to understand," Anya said quietly. Sebastian managed to turn his head far enough to look at her, then shut his mouth. Very slowly, he began to wiggle his fingers. "That's why I was sent here. Now do you understand?"

"I understand less than I thought I did," he admitted. Anya held her breath, never having expected such a confession of him. "Zev's motivation is as shallow as his power is great. Why couldn't he do something really big?"

"The banality of evil is proportional to its magnitude," stated Anya. "If you'd been around at the time of the Dark Pretender –" she stopped. "Damn," she said quietly.

"What is it?" asked Sebastian.

"How many has he killed?" she demanded suddenly.

"Only five, to my knowledge. He's executing the Ritual of Mummu. I interrupted his sixth summoning, but doubtless he will improvise." Sebastian raised a hand painfully and brought it down on his thigh, began massaging cramped muscles. "I didn't realise the antidote would be this effective. I thought –"

"Does everything close look blurred?" Anya demanded. "Is your mouth dry and your heart racing, and pins and needles in your flesh?"

"Yes –" he looked puzzled. "Oh, a lesser toxin. I see. But no, it had to be the antidote. If I was his sixth victim, and slain by poison, it would have broken the required pattern."

"No it wouldn't," said Anya. "The Ritual of Mummu permits one random and creative slaying among the seven, so long as the rest are sacrificed by means of their own sensory organs. The symbolism, you see: senses, knowledge, power, and an element of caprice. It makes the daemons sit up and listen. How did he trick you into imbibing the poison?"

"He –" Sebastian tried to stand and failed. "The toad! The worm-brained gutless –"

"Hardly," interrupted Anya. "Those accusations are baseless, and you know it. It takes more guts than you or I know to risk the fires that befall those who take his chosen path. That, or a kind of blindness. But what would you know about those mysteries? You're only a scholar, not a true diabolist. If you were the latter I'd be beholden to kill you where you sit."

"Are you talking about the Upper Mysteries of Noctis or the Five Circles of the Duat?" Sebastian retorted sharply: "or are you referring to the Banal Sufficiencies of the Fundic Assumption?" He tried to stand up again, and succeeded in grabbing hold of the cupboard before his knees gave way beneath him.

Anya snorted. "I should have known. An expert on necromancy, and not even graduated in the school of life yet! You'll go far as a sorcerer and farther as a corpse if you make a habit of speaking of those mysteries in public. Nevertheless, you know the names. Tell me though, from what substance are these nocturnal terrors stitched? To the best of your knowledge."

Sebastian straightened up painfully. "If you mean do they pose a threat to the twenty-four kingdoms right now, the answer is probably not. But in the past – and perhaps in future times – they could be the death of us all. All they need is a leader, a malevolent force to give shape to their undirected evil. And that's what you're sworn to destroy, isn't it?"

"Yes. And what would happen if one should accede to the Dark Throne tomorrow?"

"Oh, they'd follow him to the abyss and back." Sebastian was looking at the chest containing his clothing, so he failed to see the stare that Anya turned on him.

"Tell me what you know of the Dark Lord," she said.

"The Dark Committee, more like," he muttered. He stopped, took a tentative step towards the chest, and frowned. "First there was the Representative of Aharseus, then the Nameless Maurauder, then the Gang of Five and the last, the Midnight One who fought our parents in the last Last Battle To End Last Battles forty years ago. Meantime, while none of them is physically present the mission of their sponsors is maintained in this world by those conspiracies I mentioned. Not to mention free-lance lunatics, such as my late beloved. Do you want a detailed description of them, or can I leave it by saying that more illuminated scholars than I generally agree them to be mad, bad, and dangerous to talk too loudly about?"

"You can," said Anya, sounding mildly amused. He reached the chest and began to rummage around in it. "Would you rather I turned my back?" she asked.

"Don't patronise me!" Sebastian snapped. He began to ease out of his soiled breeches, a look of extreme distaste on his face. "If you want a slave, go down the market tomorrow! What more do you want of me anyway?"

"Your cooperation," she said quietly. "And your understanding. I assume you felt strongly for Zevon?"

"Felt?" He looked puzzled for an instant, then a strange expression came to his face. "Oh, I felt strongly," he said. "I want none of this! Just show me a way out. I never asked for adventure. Just a quiet corner and a comfortable life free from the curses of responsibility and boredom."

"Didn't you ever aspire to something ... more?" she asked. "A higher cause, a positive good?"

Sebastian towed at his crotch with a filthy rag, then pulled a pair of much-patched trousers from the chest and began to tug them on. "Don't make me vomit," he muttered. "Join you? You've got me over a barrel – a small matter of a most puissant oath – for tonight, only. But that's all. What more do you expect me to do? Kiss your ass? You're riding your ideals along a wide road that ends at the gates of Castle Death, woman. Don't expect me to join you on it." He tied a belt around his waist, then bent over and picked something up; a small ivory heart. "I've ridden down enough blind alleys already," he said bitterly.

Anya turned away. "So young, and yet so little idealism. What does the world lack, that it is of so little value to you?"

"Innocence," he replied. And to that she had no reply.

Presently, when Sebastian was able to hobble without support, they left the house. It was late on Midsummer's Night: the rain had ceased, and although it was near morning the city still hummed. It was a darkly frenetic sort of life, though; beneath the strangely writhing clouds the raucous screams and laughter sounded as forced as feasting on the eve of battle. Spirits that refused to be still forced the night into abeyance, dancing dismally until tired muscles screamed for sleep and only the frantic, driven urge to stay awake kept heads from nodding and souls from flying in the grip of daemons.

They came upon College Road. Richly-dressed passers-by strolled between the houses of the rich mercantile lords and the hall of the burghers; they spared no glance for Anya and Sebastian, nor for the beggars and prostitutes and the fire-eater performing his searing art beneath the eaves of the scholarly house. Sebastian stopped outside the low side-door of that building. "Open it," said Anya. "I think we will find your friend within, and you would mislike it if he was to complete his enchantment before we intercepted him."

"Tell me why first," said Sebastian. He stared at her uneasily: the light of the fire-eater's brand reflected from his eyes. "I want to know what's going to happen inside before I go one step further. After all, your college sacrificed much more than three lives to send you here. Their principles; they're meant to be opposed to that sort of thing, aren't they? Such hypocrisy –"

"Do not the ends justify the means?" Anya had a dangerous gleam in her eye. "Of course it was bad! Of course consorting with demons and necromancers is wrong! Dolt. What could be worse than facilitating the rise to power of a Dark One? I tell you – what we have here is nothing less than your lover staging a very special graduation ceremony, a ceremony all of his own! And planned at your expense, moreover. The symptoms are exact, and the pattern is heading to a climax which will occur at dawn unless we can slay him first! Should he succeed, far more than seven innocents would die. We would be looking at the death of scores – of nations, that is – should he attain the dark throne he aspires to."

"So it seems." They paused a moment in the street, loitering outside the door of the Faculty. In the street behind them, the fire-eater downed a flaming cresset and bowed for a

round of applause that was not forthcoming. Sebastian turned reluctantly and spoke a secret word to the door. It creaked, but failed to open. "That's funny," he began, just as Anya grabbed his arm and wrenched him aside and off-balance. "Unhand me!" he demanded as he fell over, not seeing the black flower of un-light unfold from where the wooden door had been; nor seeing the stars in the void, but slowly registering the rise of the wind blowing across his shoulders. "Hey –"

The lotus-bloom of emptiness crept outwards from the door frame, eating through the wood and stone of the house in a hideous parody of life. Sebastian heard a scream, felt hands fasten around his ankle: he kicked out instinctively. The wind was building, turning into a gale of tempest force, and even as he clung to the cobblestones he could feel a sheet of ice forming across his face. Others were trapped in this vortex of hell; the fire-eater screamed incoherently as he clung to Sebastian's legs, and a lady of doubtful breeding fetched up against a stone buttress below him with a crack of breaking bones. Above him Anya uttered a powerful invocation, but it was clear that there was no time for her defence to take effect. Reduced to an ecstasy of terror for the third time this evening, Sebastian perceived his circumstances with a clarity that everyday life could never provide. The fire eater's hands around his left ankle felt like the grip of death itself: the wind was building into a wall of frozen ice, the breath of a god sucking him into the abyss.

There was only one solution. Sebastian steeled himself and lashed out with his free foot. It connected solidly, jarring his ankle; the weight on his leg slipped away and the gale died as suddenly as it had begun. "What have you done?" demanded Anya, sitting up and brushing away the hoar-frost on her face. "Where's –"

"It wanted feeding," Sebastian said candidly. "Any more questions?"

"No," replied Anya. She stood up and turned to face the door, then discharged the forces that she had gathered to herself during the onslaught of the void-storm: green fire spat at the wood, blistering centuries-old oak and splitting rivets with a crack of tortured metal.

"How many stages are there to go?" He stepped forward, but stopped just short of the lintel.

"Seven sacrifices. Only one to go. The last two to take place on the same night of the year, this being the designated eve. In this way the postulant can cause the motivation of evil to cohere and serve them – and so the evil tradition is passed on."

Sebastian carefully ran his fingers around the wood of the door-frame. "Why should he bother with such a blunt instrument? Surely there must be other ways –"

Anya shoved him aside gently and pushed at the door. It fell inwards and disintegrated in a shower of seared ashy flakes. "There are so many of them, and they're so unoriginal. Evil is so common in this world that it would be funny if it wasn't tragic; all the dolts who want to be Lord of Darkness, King of the Midden." She spat upon the heap of ashes and stepped over it. The corridor beyond was encrusted in cobweb shadows, even though the oil lamp hanging from the roof was flickering. "Come on, scholar. You can identify the villain for me. Maybe you'll learn something about innocence in the process." Without warning, she stepped forwards, disappearing into the unnatural darkness.

Mouth dry and heart pounding Sebastian stared after her, thinking furiously. It seemed cruel, not to say paradoxical, that in evading his hazardous matriculation he had cast himself into such mortal danger. If only Zev and I hadn't argued. If only he hadn't started this ... he shook his head, wondering at how it was possible to feel embittered and numb simultaneously; then, gathering his nerve, he spat on the gently hissing remains of the door and jumped over it.

Once inside the hall, Sebastian could feel the pressure of magic gathering about his brow. He had come this way many times before but the aura of darkness that now clung to the fabric of the building lent it a character of self-obsession that was new and frighteningly disorientating. This was an historic manse, but the normal accretion of time seemed to have been twisted and subtly replaced with a new dimension, one full beyond bearing with unrestrained cruelty. It made his skin crawl, for there was something scornfully familiar about it: the spiteful rage of a wronged innocent who has brooded long and deep until they are innocent no more.

The corridor through which they walked led to the servant's staircase. On any other night there would have been at least the watchman on duty, but by long tradition the house was deserted now except for the master, who tomorrow would preside over the graduation of those students who were being examined this night. Anya ghosted from shadow to shadow like an assassin, and Sebastian hurried to keep up with her: "Where are you going?" he whispered as she paused at the foot of the stairs.

She turned so that he could see her face in side-profile. "I think the will of this evil is

directed towards an end connected with your former master. Who else? Isn't he the logical target of one who has started with scholars and graduated to dons?" She blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear a dust-mote from her eye.

"Then perhaps I should leave now," said Sebastian.

"Pray don't add cowardice to your list of idiocies. Think how long you'll last if Zevon succeeds in his ambitions! Come on, time is short. Perhaps the stairs will be safe –" she probed repeatedly at the air in front of her with her sword, to the hilt of which she had fastened a silver wire: when nothing happened she advanced a step and repeated the procedure, whispering arcane mnemonics under her breath. After making some minor progress, she beckoned to him. He needed no further admonition; brooding – for he believed that he now knew the true nature of the situation, and was most unhappy – he followed her.

At the top of the stairs, Anya's sword sparked, once; a fat thread of light drifted down the wire and flared against the banister. "Damn," she breathed, dropping the abruptly bladeless handle: "Curse the fool for an ignorant swinish backwater piss-drinking poppy-headed vandal! I'll have his head for that!" Of the coil of wire that had been fastened to the sword there was no sign. "Take heed, scholar," she commented, visibly asserting her self-control, "for if there's one way of angering me it's the want on destruction of good metal."

Sebastian stared at her incomprehendingly, then climbed the remaining steps that separated them. "Do you believe there'll be any more traps?"

"Hubris, always hubris," she whispered. "No, I don't think so," she added, raising her voice. "His kind likes to gloat, and it's passing hard to mock a cinder; base elements accept abuse in silence. No, if your friend wishes to crow, he'll do so in our living presence. Is that reasonable?"

She stepped onto the landing and placed one hand upon the gleaming cranium adorning the banister. A shocking screech rent the air, and Sebastian nearly jumped out of his skin; she laughed. "See, he's only trying to scare us," she said: "A child making fun of his betters!"

They walked along the twilight landing, and when they passed beyond range of the guttering oil lamp Anya called mage-fire to her fingers and lit their way. Presently they came to the iron spiral staircase, and found evidence there of nigromancy; for the iron was blackened and scarred as by a great heat, and there was a sense of lingering guilt that hovered in the air until it burned with a taste like copper when Sebastian breathed it. "Obviously not very experienced," commented Anya. "Only a novice would try to enchant cold iron."

She sniffed, then climbed the staircase two steps at a time. At the top she paid Sebastian the unusual courtesy of waiting for him. "I suggest you enter after me," she said. "I think we'll find both Lord Vargas and Zevon in this chamber, alive and well – at least at first." She smiled, a devilish light dancing in her eyes. "If you would be so kind as to open the door, perhaps you would care to observe the auto da fe? Guaranteed to keep you awake all through this demonsnight, I do assure you."

"What makes you so certain of victory?" whispered Sebastian, his skin crawling tiredly. He rubbed at his eyes, which were sore with sleeplessness. "He's a student of darkness! You have no idea how skilled he –"

"Relax." Anya laid a hand on his wrist. "I've done this before, and to this moment it has followed the classic pattern. Just do as I say and I will consider your oath discharged, should both of us live to see the sun rise."

"Thanks," Sebastian said cynically. "I'll remember that."

Anya released his hand. "I do believe we are anticipated," she said as the door swung silently open. She turned to face the room. "Show yourself!"

"There's no need to shout," replied Zevon. "You can come in if you like; you too, Sebastian. I won't eat you ..." Anya stepped over the lintel. "Just yet."

That voice – Sebastian instinctively reached for the ivory charm in his pocket. "Zev – what's going on?" he asked, sliding through the doorway. "What are you doing here? Where's Vargas?"

Without the presence of the Dean to lend it a focus the study felt curiously empty. It was as if somebody had scooped out the soul of the room, turning it into a parody of itself; a mockery of the magician's parlour, a theatrical set of cardboard furniture and empty book spines and poisoned decanters. Zevon had commandeered Vargas' high chair and sat there, facing the door with a brimming glass of port in one hand. As Sebastian entered, he raised it in mock salute then winked at him, his saturnine features framing an expression of good-natured bonhomie. "His lordship will be here in the blink of an eye and two ticks of a forked tail. In the meantime, would you care to join me in sampling the delights of his excellent wine

cellar? And you too, my lady. I should hate to have to dispose of you without obtaining your opinion on this most marvellous vintage."

Anya of Tigre walked over to the window casement and sat down, just as she had when Vargas had welcomed her earlier in the evening. "Why are you doing this?" she asked Zevon.

Zevon took a mouthful of port then put his glass down. Sebastian found that he was barely able to breathe: so much to decide, and so little time! The ivory heart. Zev had carved it with him that day, sucked blood from the ball of his thumb and rubbed it into the base of a sympathetic charm. He'd done likewise. How could he have done this without telling me? Sebastian shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his inner eye. I should have felt it in my thumb.

"It's not so much why as what," Zevon announced, to Sebastian's discomfort. He stared at Anya with frank curiosity. "I've never met a member of the Invigilation before," he added disingenuously. "How did you enter your profession?"

"With difficulty," she said drily. "It's even harder than becoming a dark lord. Yourself?"

Zevon tilted his head on one side and looked at the tome which lay open on the lectern beside him. "After due provocation I decided that there was no future for me in the University. This academy of spite and pedantry is no place for seekers after truth. Sebastian here, he'll have told you all about that. He's always been more of a whiner than a do'er. Otherwise he'd have been running his big brother's duchy years ago." He flipped a page, and the gold-encrusted runes gleamed in the lamp-light. "So I decided to act on my own behalf; to purge the filth from the halls of wisdom and to enlighten myself in the process. What do you say to that, mistress examiner? I continued my studies on an extracurricular basis. That I have now attained the zenith of my power is self-evident. The question I would ask you is what you intend to do about it? Assuming, that is, that you have not yet given in to the black dogs of despair. Don't think I don't know all about the geas you have placed upon my dear friend –" at this point he cast Sebastian a glance that filled him with burning dread – "who would not, I assure you, normally be inclined to serve your order. I've thought of everything ... I am merely curious to discover the extent of your intelligence."

"My intelligence?" Anya laughed. "The Invigilation doesn't have intelligence; it is intelligence! Do you really believe that after the events of forty years ago those who struggled for good would dream of pinning their hopes for collective security upon a half-senile greybeard and a collection of hair-footed halflings? Your presumption is equalled only by your folly!"

She stood up and stared unflinchingly at Zevon. "Now I say to you, produce Lord Vargas di Escobar, alive and well, and surrender your soul to my mercy, and I shall exercise the prerogative of amnesty: renounce your calling and I will even let you live on and practice as a hedge wysard. Otherwise –" she made a sharp cutting gesture with one hand – "it will be necessary to destroy you. We can afford no more dark lords. The world has no more innocence to lose."

Sebastian, who throughout the conversation had been standing frozen in front of a cabinet of proscribed books, cleared his throat. "Why didn't you confide in me, Zev? Did you think I would misunderstand what you are doing? I swear to you, I am here now only because of their coercion; had I evaded this leech for another night they could not have invoked the retributive clause –"

"Oh shut up!" Zevon grinned humourlessly. "I know full well why you're here. You're here because this bitch-destroyer wants a hostage against me and she thought she could use you. Isn't that right?" He jabbed a finger in Anya's direction: she nodded imperceptibly. "But she took too long finding you, which was a mistake: because I'm not interested. I can't afford to be. Now if you'd foresworn yourself when I asked things might be different ... but anyway, I have my own hostage. Which is to say, Lord Vargas di Escobar. Now what do you say to that, my dear?" He stared at Sebastian, who began to sweat; it can't be true, can it? Does he mean the offer's still open? How? My oath of apprenticeship –

"You swore a certain vow when you came to the University," said Anya, as if reading his mind. "The substance of that vow included the terms of your apprenticeship, the conditions of your graduation, and the degree of forfeiture you should experience should you knowingly disobey the contract. Now Zevon is obliged to conduct one final sacrifice should he still desire to bind the forces of darkness to his service, and I order you to prevent it by any means at your disposal. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Sebastian leaned back against the book-case, clasping his hands behind his back in order to still their shaking. "This is unmerciful," he whispered, trying to make sense of his shattered loyalties. "you can't mean it. Where's Vargas?" he demanded, glaring at Zevon with

slowly-growing anger. "Have you killed him already?"

Zevon stood up. "No." He made a move towards the window seat where Anya was waiting, then visibly forced himself to stillness. He stared at her. "Bitch!" he said. "Do you think I won't do it? Do you really believe you can stop me by turning my catamite against me?"

Anya shook her head slowly. "You're too foolish to know any better. Something you should have established before starting this duel, necromancer: justice is on the side of the intelligent."

Zevon traced a triangle in the air in front of his face; it glowed like amber for a moment before fading in a shower of sparks. "Then think however you will, fool. The game is mine! Defend yourself!" He uttered a word of power and stepped back as the hideously altered person of Vargas di Escobar appeared on the floor just in front of him.

Anya of Tigre snorted. "You just sealed your fate," she said: "idiot!" With a flick of her wrist she drew her dagger and advanced on him.

Time slowed to a crawl. Many impressions sucked at the fringes of Sebastian's perception, clamouring for his attention. Zevon: yes, he can do it, he realised. He could take me with him, too. I can be his right hand; the right hand of darkness. He's ruthless and powerful, it's true, but what we had – His gaze fell upon Vargas, and abruptly he realised the extent to which he had been manipulated by both of them. Damn them to hell! he thought, suddenly feeling icy cold as a barrier in his heart gave way. Yes, a hostage indeed, and to both sides! The forfeiture would be mortal, should he lay a finger on Anya while still her apprentice. They must have guessed which way his loyalty would blow when he saw Zevon's strength, even after what Zev had tried to do to him. With Zevon, such minor tantrums were mutable; he could be worked around. But even as Sebastian saw all this, Anya lunged –

Straight into a whorl of darkness, a loop of abhorrent vacuum that spun itself out of Zevon's mouth like a gust of fetid wind. There was a bright flash as it touched her blade, and a haze of silver flakes spread out to engulf both of them. For a moment Sebastian expected the clouds to vanish on contact, but they confounded him, condensing instead into the densest of mists until both the combatants were shrouded completely from view.

Warily skirting the cloud, Sebastian sidled around the walls of the chamber until he stood over Vargas. He knelt down beside the magus and reluctantly touched his shoulder. "Are you awake, my lord? Can you hear me?"

The thing which had been Vargas bubbled wetly. Ochre vines and pulsing fruit, a grey cauliflower adorned by twin white pebbles balanced at one end of a skeletal frame of bones and throbbing viscera. The organ-sculpted abomination tried to sit up, then slowly subsided again; when it twitched against the floor it left a thin smear of bloody slime. Mesenteries pulsed pink across knotted bundles of muscles and tendons as it tried to breathe. Sebastian studied it with minute interest. "Zevon must have been practicing since he did for Lord Kerein. Did you know that Kerein barely lived long enough to realise what had been done to him? Yes, Zev's been getting very creative."

Vargas tried to say something. The air hissed through his trachea, the yellow plaques of cartilage interlaced with blood vessels rising and falling as he wheezed. "Control yourself!" Sebastian snapped furiously. "There's only one service I can render you, but first you must acknowledge me as your apprentice again. Then –" he stopped and rubbed at his twitching cheek. His eyes were very wide, with hatred or satisfaction or some far less certain combination of the two. "It's very difficult. You'll have to absolve me completely. Then ask before I can lay a finger on you."

More wheezing. Vargas tried to say something: he seemed to be agitated, although it was hard to tell – he was sticking to the floor in many places, and it must have been excruciatingly painful. "What? You'll have to speak up," said Sebastian. "Look, I believe the aura around them is thinning. What did you say?"

Blood vessels burst, fringes of red shimmering across his exposed rib cage as Vargas hissed something that might have been a yes. His exposed eyeballs dripped red, rolled up in their sockets as his flayed body sprawled backwards across the carpet. It twitched unpleasantly as it lay there, a slow stain spreading outwards around it. "Less than a minute," Sebastian muttered to himself. "Zev needs to practice a bit more." But then he stood up, inwardly exultant: the oath is transferred!

Reaching into his pocket Sebastian retrieved the ivory love-charm that he and Zevon had carved for each other, that Zev had so churlishly thrown away – that had drawn enough of his blood and life to become a part of him. He walked over to Vargas' desk and picked up the brass calipers from beside the bowl of nuts. Everything around him was cold, as icy as the steel that had so recently entered his soul; he knew exactly what he must do. Mentally he

consigned to the fires of his lover's fury everything he had ever believed in, what precious little of it there was. That, after all, was the only way he could hope to survive these tortured seconds. And survival, in the absence of innocence, was everything.

He didn't have to wait long. The cloud thinned rapidly, a faint crepitation carrying from within it as if raindrops were spattering across a surface of red-hot steel. Shadows crept out from beneath the cloud which glowed with a faint radiance even as it lost substance, until Sebastian could see the two figures inside it.

Zevon crouched on all fours. His gown smoked, great rents torn in it as if by the talons of unseen messengers from the Duat, and he stared unblinkingly at Anya of Tigre. She stood upright in front of him, but Sebastian noticed suddenly that her hair was bleached as white as straw, and her face was as lined as an ancients. Chains of paralytic light bound her hands and feet, and the floor around her was scorched to grey ash: it was clear who counted himself the winner.

"Doom, agent of the Invigilation, comes to everyone in time," croaked Zevon. His voice, normally vibrant with life, was reduced to a desert rasp. He turned his head and grinned at Sebastian, triumph and malice glowing in his eyes. "I graduate!" he hissed. "Come dawn, I'll have the power! Even the Invigilation will shudder before me!"

He pushed himself upright and Sebastian's skin crawled as he saw what Zev had done to himself in order to win. "Look at me!" he crowed. "I don't need it any more! All flesh will be dust beneath my heel! And you –" he saw what Sebastian held in his left hand, and his tone abruptly changed. "Don't be a fool, Sebastian. Please, you know it wasn't me, not really. You wouldn't really do that, would you? You mean so much to me, it was just a little joke – what do you think you're doing?"

Sebastian held up the nutcracker, clamped around the bloodstained ivory heart. He grinned at the bone-white atrocity that stood before him with mingled fury and regret. "You really think I'd take you back after what you did?" he asked, not waiting for Zevon to answer; "suck on this!"

Zevon raised an arm, his calceous digits pulsing with an eerie luminance as Sebastian squeezed, bringing all his strength to bear upon a heart of ivory which had been abused too harshly and for too long to withstand further pressure. Zev screamed, his jaw dropping open to reveal the dry white palate of a mummified corpse. The glow intensified and Sebastian felt the ivory crumble and break in his grip: inside the charred circle of carpet it began to rain blood.

Sebastian, who had no desire to be drenched, stepped backwards. It was, he noted, quite spectacularly messy. The combined tableau of Lord Vargas di Escobar and Zevon – or what was left of them – resembled in its extremity the wet-dream of a torturer, or perhaps the abstract art of a master of assassins. Anya of Tigre stood frozen in position as if she had been petrified by her assailant. The spattering of red trickled down her hair and face and skin, turning her doublet the colour of sin: "Anya," he called softly from the margins of the destruction, "has he done for you, too?"

"Help me," she pleaded. Her voice was ghostly, as if she had seen the future and been unable to find any place for herself in it. "Please get me out of here, Sebastian. I beg you; I need help –"

"Ask someone else for it," he said flatly. "I'm not your slave any more."

"What –" He stepped closer, the better to see the expression of bewilderment that crept across her withered features. He had thought he would enjoy this as much as his triumph over Zevon, but somehow things had changed with Zev's death: the idea of yet another killing – at least so soon – depressed him.

"They'll find you soon enough, Invigilator; you don't need my help," he said. She watched him silently as he turned and walked across to the window casement then threw back the shutters. "I discharged my obligation to the University. Tonight, I graduated: now I know exactly what I am." He stared at her coldly for a moment, then walked over to the door. "Don't think to look for me," he added. "I'm done with bleeding hearts and seekers after good; and evil, too. The only law is survival, at any cost. But one thing –" he tapped the side of his nose with the tip of his dagger; "Don't come after me. Or I think you'll live to rue this night." With that, he turned and left the death chamber.

Meanwhile, outside the window, dawn was breaking.

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