

ENTRE LES BEAUX MORTS EN VIE (AMONG THE BEAUTIFUL LIVING DEAD)

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In the story that follows, he brings to life the beauty, decadence, and dangers that are only to be found in the privileged world of the living dead.

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Le Chateau de la Mort Dorée — known as Fool’s-Death House in the vernacular — was situated halfway up the vertical flank of a mountain not ten minute’s powered flight from Jungfrau, in the region that had once been called Switzerland. Sandwiched between stone and air, the sprawling, rococo structure with its four hundred luxury rooms and five banquet halls looked like a pimple on a granite giant’s cheek. Tunnels, elevators and

airships provided the usual means of gaining access. Only a few people dared to climb in person. The view from the Chateau's tiered terraces was spectacular enough to negate the need for such foolhardy, if courageous, gestures.

Yet some people still made the effort. Ordinary people, of course; never the reves themselves, although this was one of their favourite sites. Of anyone on Earth and off, the reves knew best how fragile life could be. Yet how resilient.

All this passed through Martin Winterford's mind as he stepped off the airship and onto the Chateau's wide receiving platform. Buffeted by the crisp, mountain wind, and with the setting sun hidden behind a mile of solid rock, he experienced a moment of near-*satori*. This, the first time he had visited the Chateau, would possibly be the last — in his lifetime. Although he would no doubt return many times, if he chose to accept his uncle's ultimatum, it would be as a reve, and he would no longer be, by ancient definition, alive.

He tried to reassure himself that, living or dead, by whatever definition, it made no difference to *him* — but the doubt still nagged two hours later, as *La Célébration Annuelle* began.

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“Je vois que vous êtes en souffrance le changement,” said a melodic voice. *“Apprenez-vous déjà le française?”*

Martin turned. A tall woman in a white silk ballgown, complete with gloves, fan and blonde coiffure, had come up behind him. The skin of her shoulders and throat was bare and very pale, flawless. Her eyes were the deepest brown he had ever seen, her lips the richest red.

“I'm sorry, but I don't speak Old French,” he said, raising his champagne flute to cover his uneasiness. Make-up couldn't hide the truth, not from so close. Not that she wanted to, either, or else she wouldn't have left her shoulders and throat exposed. The woman was a reve.

“Pas mal,” continued the woman. *“Vous aurez beaucoup du temps à combler son retard.”*

He shook his head, nervousness becoming irritation at her persistence. If she wanted to be fashionable, why didn't she find someone

else to do it with?

With an amused smile — perhaps at his expense, he couldn't tell — she raised her fan and indicated that he should follow her into the next room. Martin hesitated for a moment, then obeyed. He had nothing better to do. The party, for all its glamour and opulence, had proved to be slightly dull. Its many cliques left him wandering alone, wary of intruding.

"You'll have to pardon me," said the woman over her shoulder as she led him through the crowd, past two tables piled high with exotic hors d'oeuvres and wines, mostly untouched. He caught a hint of delicate perfume in her wake. "We like to have our little games. Someone must educate the newcomers, put them through a rite of passage. That is our purpose here at the Chateau — unofficially, at least. It's important, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Martin simply nodded at first. The woman's perfect English, with its qualifiers and clauses, threw him so off-balance that what she actually said didn't register until they were half-way across the room.

"You *know?*" he exclaimed, wondering what had given him away. He had chosen his outfit carefully: a black suit with ruffs at neck and collars, leather shoes and skull-cap. He had hoped to remain anonymous.

"Of course," said the woman. "I am observant. There are three hundred and twenty-seven guests attending this *soirée*, of which seventy-nine are revenants. Two hundred and forty-five are government officials: doctors, diplomats and examiners, mainly, all known to me either personally or by reputation. That leaves three." Her eyes twinkled. "You are clearly not a waiter, for you cannot speak French. Besides, your age seems about right."

Martin didn't bother denying the truth. If games were her *métier*, then he would acknowledge defeat early. Either that, or risk arousing a deeper interest that he could not afford to indulge.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked, more curious than concerned for the moment.

"Does it matter?" She fluttered her fake eyelashes and pouted like a teenager. "Our table is boring, boring, boring. It lacks interesting conversation — or interesting people to make conversation, perhaps I should say. I was in the process of looking for someone to liven up the

evening when I spotted you.” Her smile returned as they weaved past a cluster of potted palms and through an arched entrance-way. “Would you care to join us?”

Martin side-stepped a waiter carrying a tray of garishly coloured drinks. The banquet hall looked like something plucked from Eighteenth Century Europe, with gilded walls, a string quartet playing in one corner and crystal chandeliers suspended from a high, domed ceiling. He raised his voice to be heard over a mélange of music and speech filling the room.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course. Don’t be obtuse, my dear. You have a choice in everything.”

Again the coquettish flutter that did nothing to ease his disquiet. The echo of his uncle’s words was uncanny. But before he could answer, the woman brought him to a halt with a hand on his chest.

“Ah,” she said, “here we are. Why don’t you take a seat... I’m sorry? I didn’t catch your name.”

Martin faltered. The table before them held six “people”. He stared at them dumbly until he realised that they were all staring back at him just as hard.

He turned to face the woman who had led him to the table. Only then did he realise that her words had been a question. He almost blurted out his full name before natural caution caught up.

“My name is Martin,” he managed. “And —?”

“Allow me to introduce you.” The woman gestured around the table with a flourish of her fan. A fat man in purple robes was Professor Algiers Munton of the Revenation Institute in New York. M. Elaine Bennett, a narrow-faced, female reve dressed in simple grey peasant attire, hailed from Port Moresby. The sexless mod with orange veins glowing under its ceremonial skin and the AI node sporting the usual black suit preferred by the AI conglomerates for formal occasions were Alkis and PERIPETY-WEYN, both from the Moon’s Armstrong Base. An android rem from Attar, judging by its coat of arms, was being ridden by someone called “Le *Comptable Froid*”, or “Count” to his friends, who had been unable to make the physical journey from that remote moonlet to Earth in time for the Celebration. All indicated their pleasure at meeting him with nods, smiles or

brief but sincere hellos.

Only the last member of the small party, a bald young man wearing a blue period suit, remained silent when introduced as “Spyro Xenophou”, and went otherwise — almost pointedly — unexplained.

Martin swallowed, his mouth dry, after greeting them all in return. What had his uncle said when news of his application had arrived? No true aliens, but plenty that *seem* alien ...? As a summary of his current situation, that would do as well as any other.

“Sit, sit.” The woman — *reve*, he reminded himself, although the distinction seemed like splitting hairs in such a crowd — ushered Martin towards a chair. “Or leave. If you’re going to make a fool of me by declining my invitation, then at least do so quickly. Don’t allow me to waste any further breath. Air is rarefied so high in the mountains, you know.”

“I beg to disagree,” broke in the Count via his rem, its artificial voice smooth but eerily inhuman. The lag between Earth and Attar was much smaller than Martin would have credited, so-called instantaneous transmissions still usually taking a second or two. “Had I access to atmosphere as ‘rarefied’ as yours,” the Count said, “I could increase my profit by four hundred percent.”

“Don’t be such a wet blanket,” chided the woman with fleeting *moue*. “And don’t interrupt. I haven’t finished introductions yet.”

Martin lowered himself with a sigh of relief into the only available seat, either a genuine antique or a very good copy of a Louis XIV. “Please,” he said. “I’d be grateful.”

“Of course. I, dear Martin, am the Reve Guillard — although you can call me Marianne if you prefer. I am most pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Without the slightest self-consciousness, the immortal woman extended her hand to be kissed.

The only other *reve* at the table, Elaine Bennett, smiled at the expression on Martin’s face as he reached out to clasp the cold, perfect fingers. The Reve Guillard had been a contemporary of Paul Merrick — the world’s first *reve* and founder of the Plutocracy. Her age was therefore somewhere between four hundred and eighty and five hundred years. Martin felt like he was touching a precious work of art, or a shrine. His lips

tingled when she withdrew her hand, as though some of her had rubbed off on him.

“I am honoured, M. Guillard,” he said.

The woman waved her fan; in another age, another body, she might have blushed. “*C’est peu de,*” she said. “And please do call me Marianne. I’d hate to have to insist.”

“Thank you.” He felt dizzy; the rush of blood to his face threatened to overwhelm his brain. As he tried to regain his composure, he was acutely aware of the silent young man watching him closely, almost resentfully. It bothered him, but he couldn’t afford to let it distract him.

Perhaps sensing the new arrival’s discomfort, the AI node stepped in to fill the silence. “We were discussing the latest trend,” PERIPETY-WEYN said. “*Le mode du temps,* as it were. M. Bennett noted some interesting parallels between it and the French Revolution.”

“Naturally she would,” M. Guillard said, assuming control of the conversation with confident ease. “And she is correct: there *are* superficial parallels. The term ‘plutocracy’ was not chosen lightly, you know.”

“And not without a sense of humour,” said the mod, Alkis.

“Yes.” M. Guillard cast the cyborg an ambiguous look. “Paul always liked puns. But the similarities run no deeper than that. The trend for things Old French is deliberate, not symbolic of some deeper human conflict. How could there be a French Revolution today when the members of the ruling class, no matter how wealthy they might be, are already dead? Besides, next year it might be Twenty-First Century America that takes our fancy, or White Russia.”

“Each with its own revolution,” the mod observed.

“Yes, yes, Alkis. That too is deliberate. We gravitate towards potent times in order to stave off boredom —”

“Or to allay subconscious guilt,” interrupted M. Bennett with a grimace. “Or fear.”

“Nonsense. You imagine cause in a world of effects.”

“I feel it.” M. Bennett met the Reve Guillard’s stare unflinchingly. “In

my youth, I felt it too.”

“*Naturellement, ma chère.* And that is why you are here: because you are something of a radical. We require diversity and dissent if we are to remain vital.” M. Guillard flapped once with her fan, and sighed theatrically. “Do you see what I mean now, Martin?” she asked, pinning him with her wide, brown eyes. “These are old arguments, centuries-worn and boring, boring, boring! Why don’t you tell us about yourself instead? Who invited you here this evening?”

Martin leaned forward and chose his words with care. “My sponsor, ah, Gerome Packard, thought it might be a good idea.”

“Did he, now? That sounds like uncommonly good sense from dear Gerome.”

“He said it would help me acclimatise.”

“Socially, yes. Physically, probably not. No-one can predict with certainty the effects of revention on a given individual.”

“I take it, then,” put in the mod, “that you are aspiring to the Change?”

Martin felt sweat bead on the back of his neck. *Maybe one day, I’ll be like her — the Reve Guillard.* “My application was approved five weeks ago,” he said to avoid a direct answer.

“Interesting.” The mod folded its glowing hands on the table. “Of all the alternatives presently available, revention remains the only proven means of achieving extreme human longevity. I envy you the opportunity.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Coming from a mod, that was candour indeed. “Sometimes I wonder whether it’s really going to happen.”

“No doubt. You must be nervous,” said Professor Munton. “I would be, in your shoes.”

Seeking a distraction, Martin hailed a waiter. One appeared instantly at his shoulder. He offered to pay the round, but only Professor Munton joined him in ordering a drink. None of the others required fluid intake, being either self-sufficient within themselves or partial to other means of gaining nutrients.

“How long until your birthday?” asked the AI node when the waiter had

departed.

“One month,” Martin answered, realising that the topic would not be so easily evaded.

“I presume you are cognisant of the risks, then?”

“Yes.” That Martin could answer with certainty. His Uncle Arthur had more frequent dealings with the Plutocracy than most people; he had made sure that Martin knew what was at stake. “Of every ten thousand inductees, one will never wake from the death-sleep.”

“And a dozen others will experience difficult transitions,” added M. Bennett, glancing at the bald young man. “Even today, after hundreds of years of research, a sound awakening alone is no guarantee of success.”

With a jolt, Martin suddenly realised what Spyro Xenophou was. Braving the young man’s dark stare, he asked him directly: “When was *your* birthday?”

“In June,” M. Guillard answered for him. “You’ll have to forgive my ward, Martin. He woke six weeks ago and hasn’t spoken since. Part of him resists; the fear of death is strong in him still.” She shrugged. “It is often that way with the more established families, although that seems paradoxical.”

“Not really,” said the AI node. “Social evolution, albeit relatively rapid in the last five hundred years, still has a long way to go before it eradicates the base impulses present in every human. The concept of passing through death is still paralysing, I am told, even among those for whom reversion is a common occurrence.”

“That would not be the case if it were available to all who wanted it,” said M. Bennett. “By restricting the process, we perpetuate a class system that is both prejudicial and morally abhorrent.”

“The system of Houses makes perfect sense, and you know it,” M. Guillard insisted. “Otherwise there would be chaos. Even with the present ratio of one reve for every four thousand natural humans, there are problems.”

“I must concur,” said the android. “By removing the tools of government from the hands of the shortlived, Earth and the rest of the System has achieved the kind of long-term stability only dreamed about in

pre-history.”

“But at what cost?” M. Bennett accentuated her point with one finger on the table-top. “The Plutocracy is in-bred and constantly at risk of stagnation.”

“Hence the revolutionary trends,” said the mod. “Balance, feedback, homeostasis.”

“*Desperation,*” retaliated M. Bennett. “We may reach for the stars, but inside we are all still frightened children in need of reassurance.”

Martin sank back into his seat, glad that the spotlight had drifted from him. Both his sponsor and uncle had warned him to steer clear of such debates, to be wary of associating with any one camp among the reves. There would plenty of time for that after his induction. If things went as planned, he would have centuries in which to grapple with the arguments for and against — although he believed that he already understood it well enough to reach his own conclusion. The problem was that it kept changing.

Revenation was an expensive process, restricted by necessity to the few. Applicants had not only to demonstrate fitness but ability to pay their way through the process and out the other side. A single immortal life would be an expensive burden upon the welfare system if that person proved to be unproductive. As result, only wealthy families could afford to raise a member to reve status. And the wealthiest families already contained significantly large numbers of reves; some had even brought their line to an end in order to spare a single member from death, although this practice had waned over the years.

Hence the appearance — illusory or not — of inbreeding, and of decadence.

Watching M. Guillard speak, with her many gestures and flourishes, the often direct way she manipulated conversation to suit her own agenda, Martin was reminded of his school-years, and the rumours that had circulated among his fellow students. The reves were vampires, he had been told once: un-dead and un-living creatures frozen forever in a state of inanimate animation. Infrequent glimpses had confirmed this impression: of pallid, beautiful people riding past in patient comfort; aloof and isolated, even dismissive at times. Although information was wide-spread about the truth, it had only added to their mysteriousness: cut a reve and it failed to bleed; bury another, and it could be exhumed without damage a month or a century later; expose a third to deadly viruses and its pseudo-animate cells

would be completely unaffected.

Yet inflict upon any reve a magnetic field of more than a few thousand Tesla and he or she would experience spasms, even unconsciousness. Or put it to the flame and watch it burn like summer kindling to nothing, as though its life had vanished in a single, sudden flash.

Reves were potentially immortal, and some — such as M. Bennett, a reve herself — would add *immoral* to the charge. In his younger years, Martin had hated and feared them. But now he was among them, potentially about to become one of them. He found the thought wildly disorienting.

The string quartet playing in the background had acquired a singer. To the tune of an ancient folk-song, she began to recite:

*On the golden hill where the sun once stood,
and the blood-red man with hearts for eyes
sold words that sung of forever, forever,
Paul Merrick found his first love, and died.*

Martin wondered to himself whether the man who had given immortality to the world had felt the same confusion when choosing life over mortal passion. Perhaps he was still feeling it today. Sadly, Martin was unable to question him directly, since the reve had departed for Capella two hundred years ago. And in the end, he supposed, there could only be one answer.

Humanity's ambassador to the stars was only nominally human. That fact alone spoke volumes.

Survival of the fittest...

"To which Familial Affiliate do you belong, Martin?" asked Professor Munton, startling him out of his reverie.

Martin inwardly cursed himself for not paying attention. The question, easily anticipated once the subject had been brought up, was one he had nonetheless hoped to avoid. Confronted with it, he mentally tossed a coin, and honesty won. In the back of his mind, he heard his uncle curse in turn.

"None," he replied to the fat man's question.

"Impossible," stated M. Bennett. "There hasn't been a foundling

House for three hundred years.”

“That’s correct,” said M. Guillard. “Unless — wait! Martin, you wouldn’t be the son of that engineer we’ve been hearing about, would you? Alex Winterford, wasn’t that his name?”

He shrugged. There was no use denying it. “At your service.”

“Oh, tremendous!” The fat scholar clapped once. “Marianne, what a coup! The founding father of the House Winterford, right here at our table! You couldn’t have brought anybody more interesting to talk to had it been Paul Merrick himself! Tell me, Martin —”

“*Attends*, Algiers.” M. Guillard raised a finger to her lips. “Don’t jinx the poor boy before his time. Let him tell his own story at his own pace.”

“Do I have to?” Although Martin didn’t want to sound churlish, he couldn’t help it.

“Of course not, as I said before.” M. Guillard winked. “You can leave if you’d rather not talk.”

“I’d rather not do either, to be honest.”

“Tish. What do you fear? That we will embarrass you, or judge you? If the latter, please bear in mind the diverse natures arrayed at this table. Surely you realise that our opinions will be firmly divided?”

“Too true.” The mod’s skin rippled a pale green.

“And you shouldn’t be afraid of your innocence, if that’s the case,” said M. Bennett, regarding Martin with intense eyes. “It is your very naivety we crave. So much time has passed since someone new joined our ranks that any uncorrupted viewpoint is welcome.”

“‘Uncorrupted’, Elaine?” asked M. Guillard. “By what, exactly?”

“By *reves*, of course, Marianne.” M. Bennett scowled across the table at the older woman. “Or *‘tous les beaux morts en vie’*, if you prefer. There are none in his immediate family. The only one he’s ever met in person, prior to now, would be his sponsor — and then only after his application was approved. His viewpoint will be quite external to our affairs, and all the more valuable for it.”

“Is that true, Martin?” asked the rem. “You came this far without a patron ward, or even a beneficiary?”

Martin studied the faces watching him expectantly, and realised just how expertly he had been trapped. To refuse an answer now would be insulting, and to answer incompletely would only encourage more questions. Still, just because he had been backed into a cul-de-sac didn't mean he had to abandon common sense. He would be better off revealing a measure of the truth before all of it was pried out of him, hoping all the while that they would grow tired of him sooner rather than later.

“Yes,” he said, “A paternal great-uncle ran a water mine on Titan for a while, I think, and my grandmother helped design a starship, but none of my blood ancestors came close to meeting the fiscal requirements.”

“What changed?” prompted the mod.

“My Uncle Arthur and Aunt Sue both forewent their reproductive rights to further their careers,” he explained with deliberate paucity of detail. “At the same time, my father followed my grandmother into aerospace design and patented an improvement on the Komalchi drive. These three incomes combined were enough to guarantee either myself or my sister a hearing from the Applications Board.”

M. Bennett frowned at that. “I've heard of whole families pooling their resources — large families, too — and not coming close.”

“Didn't you catch the names, Elaine?” asked M. Guillard, her smile as cutting as a shark's. “Arthur Winterford, despite his short-lived status, is Chief Executive Officer of the American Multi-Immersion Conglomerate, which currently controls twenty-seven percent of the System's broadcast media. And Martin's mother's sister, Susan Firth, prefers to operate under the *nom de plume* ‘Jenny Martinez’ in order to avoid accusations of nepotism.”

Among the raised eyebrows, where allowed by physique, and the silent surprise evident in every stare, only one voice stood out:

“Jenny who?”

M. Guillard pursed her lips in annoyance. “Really, Count. You can't be that isolated, can you? M. Martinez is the author credited with the resurgence of the novel — the planet's first best-seller in four hundred years.”

“News to me, I’m afraid.” The rem turned to face Martin. “The AMIC and Komalchi connections both make sense, though. Your grandmother must be proud to have such successful children.”

“She would have been, I’m sure. She died when I was fifteen, just before I made my primary application.”

“I’m sorry. Is there a connection between the two events?”

“Obviously there is,” said the AI node before Martin could answer: “*Mortality.*”

Martin confirmed this with a nod, unwilling to elaborate how close to the mark the AI node’s guess was. His uncle’s grief had been profound at the death of his mother. Restricted by breeding laws to families no larger than four, with only one child inheriting that generation’s right to reproduce in turn, mortal humanity had become well-used to uncles and aunts leaving their estates to siblings’ progeny. In Martin’s case, and his sister’s, that had amounted to a fortune almost too vast to comprehend. When his uncle had first suggested that they should use this capital to advance one family member to reve status — thereby removing him or her forever from the threat of age and natural death — he had in part been motivated by that grief, and fear that another loved-one would succumb before he did. At least this way, one child would have a chance of avoiding the fate awaiting the remainder of his family.

In part, anyway. The rest Martin had no intention of even thinking in such company.

“You mentioned a sister,” said M. Bennett. “You were chosen above her, is that correct?”

“No. I’m older and therefore theoretically first in line, yes, but that wasn’t really an issue. She wants to have children, you see.”

“And you don’t?” The question was playfully put by M. Guillard.

Don’t I? Martin asked himself, although he knew the only answer he could give: “Whether I failed the examination, or fail at the Change, or not, is irrelevant. I was sterilised at thirteen, and have always expected to be childless. Perhaps a niece or nephew will follow me, one day, if I succeed.”

“Nobly put.” The ancient reve touched his arm lightly. “Indeed, once a

family is established, subsequent revelations from that line become more likely with time. The chances are you will have blood relations to keep you company before long.”

“I hope so.”

“*Certainement.*” M. Guillard pulled away. “But look, Martin, your glass is empty. Spyro will top you up while you tell us about your plans for the future, if you have any.”

“I haven’t really thought that far ahead,” he lied, handing his glass over. The bald reveler took it from him without comment and collected the scholar’s as well before heading off through the crowd.

“No?” M. Guillard expressed her disappointment with a sniff, then brightened. “I know what we’ll do, then. We’ll advise you now. What do you think, Elaine? Plutocrat or star-voyager? How best should Martin while away eternity?”

M. Bennett shrugged noncommittally before suggesting the former. PERIPETY-WEYN, the AI node, immediately disagreed, and went on at length to explain that, in his opinion, the System government was stable, and would be for a very long time; what was needed was not more politicians, but explorers with courage enough to venture into the dark.

“Courage is for the young,” said M. Bennett, with which M. Guillard solemnly agreed.

* * * *

Martin settled back into his chair to listen while his future was dissected; when pressed for an opinion, he hinted at the possibility of becoming an artist. That was a vocation he had considered as a child, before the death of his grandmother, when life had seemed so much simpler.

Until he made his decision, all he really had to do was watch, and learn. After that, his uncle and fate could toss coins to see what happened next. At least for the moment, he had managed to avoid M. Guillard’s probing curiosity.

When the time came, four gruelling hours later, to announce that he had decided to retire for the night, he declined the offer of stimulants from the bar. Although he had enjoyed the company of M. Guillard’s friends, he was no match for them — intellectually or physically. He had heard that

reves could party for days on end; certainly they could discuss a single topic for hours without losing interest. When one's life was measured in centuries, he supposed, the everyday passage of time became somewhat trivial.

He wasn't yet at that stage, and Professor Muntou never would be. The fat scholar had left an hour ago, wishing Martin the very best of futures and expressing sincere hope that they would meet again another day.

As Martin bade his own farewells around the table, shaking hands with all but the mod, who deferred physical contact for a simple bow, M. Guillard saved herself and the enigmatic mute deliberately until last.

"It has been a pleasure, Martin," she said when it was her turn, curtsying expertly.

"The honour was mine," he replied, although he hadn't failed to notice the way she had deflected conversation from her own affairs. He knew as little about her now as he had before: that she was a multi-faceted enigma twisting like a bauble in one of the chandeliers above their heads, casting brilliant reflections wherever she pleased.

"*Mais oui,*" she purred, gracefully kissing him on both cheeks. "The Celebration will last another three days. Maybe we will meet again before it ends."

"I doubt it," he said. "I leave on the first flight tomorrow morning."

"Well, it was a nice thought." She turned to her companion. "Spyro will walk you to your rooms. I hope you have a pleasant night."

Before Martin could protest that he could find his own way, M. Guillard had whispered something into the ear of the mute reve and glided swiftly away, leaving the two men awkwardly facing each other.

"You don't have to," Martin said, hoping against hope that he would be allowed to leave alone. Whatever had happened to Xenophou before or after the Change, he didn't want to know. The thought was heavy in his mind that *he* might be like this in a month's time — that he too could come out the other side disadvantaged or, worse still, truly dead.

Xenophou shrugged, the only form of communication he had made the entire night, and indicated the exit.

Martin gave in. Xenophou followed him through the crowd, then came abreast as they entered the empty corridor beyond the banquet hall. Martin's suite lay on the windowless second floor, well-appointed for someone yet to undergo reversion, but not immodest. Most of the rooms on that level were unoccupied, as testified by the silence around them. Their footsteps were muffled by the thick carpet, smothered in the rich crimson impregnating the weave.

At the door to his rooms, Martin fumbled for the key in his pocket and turned to face his silent companion.

"Thanks, Spyro. I know you probably didn't want to do this, but ... she is hard to resist, I realise, and I appreciate the gesture anyway. So thanks. I hope things work out for you in the end."

Martin turned to open the door. The air inside the suite was clean and smelled of flowers. The lights were already on, and the bed, glimpsed through the opposite doorway, had been turned back in anticipation of his arrival.

Xenophou nodded, but didn't leave. When Martin took a step forward, he followed.

"You want to come in?" Martin asked.

The bald reve shrugged again.

"I guess that means yes." Martin sighed, resigning himself to the situation. "Come on, then. Take a seat, make yourself comfortable. I'm going to slip out of my shoes and jacket, if you'll excuse me for a moment."

Martin strode through to the bedroom while his guest moved towards the sofa. He shrugged out of his jacket and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, then tugged off his tight leather shoes. Relishing the feel of air on the soles of his feet, he took a moment to reflect upon the situation.

His overnight valise lay in one corner, ready to be repacked before he went to bed. The trip had been fleeting but productive. He already had two names for his uncle: Elaine Bennett and *Le Comptable Froid*, the latter being, he was almost certain, another reve. Both had demonstrated themselves to be removed from the core politics of the Plutocracy, the sort to entertain innovative thought rather than to blindly follow the current trend. Whether they would prove to be allies depended on what happened in the future, and whether Martin met his side of the bargain or not.

He stared grimly at the reflection in the mirror. Rejuvenation, except in highly unusual circumstances, always occurred at twenty-one years of age, and his birthday was only a month away. If he chose to proceed, his tanned skin would become pale; his hair would fall out and not grow back anywhere on his body; his eyes would dull and crystallise unless he used eye-drops or had artificial tear ducts installed. He would cease to be human, and become something altogether different.

A reve.

Sudden tightness in his stomach caught his breath. Silently, he mouthed the most offensive word anyone could utter in an immortal's presence:

Zombie ...

"I don't really have anything you might want," he called through the doorway, remembering his guest, "but help yourself anyway. Perhaps we can talk. If you *can* talk, that is."

Only silence answered him. Whatever Xenophou wanted, it obviously wasn't conversation. Slipping his skull-cap off and putting it on the dresser, Martin stepped out of the bedroom and into the lounge, half-hoping to find that Xenophou had departed.

Instead he came face to face with two women he had never before seen in his life.

"Hello," said one, a brunette with short hair and a slender figure, wearing a sheer, silk dress. "Are you Martin Winterford?"

Martin glanced past the women to the door. It was open. *Fool*, he chided himself. Xenophou's presence had disturbed his usually impeccable sense of security.

"Yes," he said, wary of sudden moves. The other woman moved closer, her long blonde hair swaying with the movement. He didn't recall seeing her at the party; he would have remembered if he had.

Xenophou stood between them, frozen but attentive, as tense as an animal about to bolt.

“I’m Martin Winterford,” he reaffirmed more loudly, trying to bluff his way out of whatever situation he had blundered into. “How can I help you?”

“You’ve got it the other way around,” said the blonde, smiling and keeping her eyes fixed on his. Her skin was refreshingly pink, and patently human.

“We’re here for you,” said the brunette. To Xenophou, she added: “Both of you, if you like.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” he protested, backing awkwardly into the wall as the blonde approached him.

“Sssh.” One finger touched his mouth, followed shortly afterwards by her lips. Too stunned for the moment by the boldness of her advance, he was unable to resist. It wasn’t until the lock snicked shut in the doorway that he finally forced his hands to push the blonde away.

“Wait,” he gasped, reeling. “What’s going on?”

The blonde shifted a shoulder. “We’re yours for the night, if you want us. We can’t force you to do anything.”

“No, no — of course not.” Martin glanced at the mute reve, who silently echoed his own puzzlement. Not a conspirator, he decided; caught in the cross-fire. “Who sent you, then? Can you tell us that?”

“No,” replied the blonde. “But they said you’ve earned a reward. And we are it.” She slid a hand across Martin’s shoulder. “Well? Do you want us to stay?”

Martin found it hard to think through the alcohol in his system. But part of him rebelled, discomfited by Xenophou’s presence.

Sensing his awkwardness, the blonde’s hand tightened. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go into the other room. At least I can give you a massage. You look very tense.”

He did as she suggested and, despite the cliché, was grateful for the reprieve. She guided him to the bed, and indicated that he was to lie face down upon it. He did so nervously at first, ready for any unexpected moves. He didn’t anticipate an actual attack — not in the high security of the Chateau, where weapons were confiscated immediately upon arrival — but he found it hard to let his guard down. The simple act of being there made

him feel guilty and vulnerable.

Gradually, however, he relaxed. He let her strong fingers worry at the knots in his back and shoulders while her voice whispered soothingly in his ear. Her smell was tantalising, part perfume and part natural female. Whoever had sent the women had certainly paid for quality.

That in itself helped convince him. If she wasn't a professional sex worker, then she was maintaining a skilful performance. Which only made her all the more difficult to resist.

In that day and age, prostitution was both legal and perfectly safe, and he wasn't a prude by choice. Although young and fair-looking, he had avoided serious relationships ever since his primary application had been accepted — at the age of sixteen — for fear of heartbreak when and if the final approval was granted. One night stands had been few and far between since then, however. The offer was therefore extremely tempting.

And, if the truth were told, he really didn't want to think about it at all. He had no enemies yet, that he was aware of. What did he have to fear, except, as they said, death itself?

When she asked him to remove his shirt, he didn't resist. He rolled over and she straddled him to work on his chest, temples and throat. Her thighs were warm, and growing warmer as she worked. His own hands began to move, stroking her calves in return, revelling in the feel of warm skin beneath his fingertips. With every stroke, her hips swayed, ground languidly against him.

Then she was undoing his trousers, and he had forgotten all thoughts of resistance. He helped remove her dress. They coupled smoothly, he revelling in the wetness and practised muscles of her vagina. Her breasts swayed before his face, and he reached upwards to cup them, brought one nipple down to his mouth. She shuddered and began to move more urgently. If it was an act, it was a good one. His hands wandered to her buttocks. With one in each palm, kneading gently with every thrust, he felt the passion build. And when it erupted, his mind went blank ...

Afterwards, they played less seriously; teasing coyly, arousing sated flesh, exploring. For her, he was sure now, he was just another client, but for him she was something special. A time to be enjoyed, a celebration of life — of *le petit mort*, the little death — however he had earned it.

For an hour they did nothing else. They might have for longer had it

not been for the noises coming from the other room.

“Let’s go see,” the blonde eventually whispered. He, both relaxed and emboldened by then, agreed that they should.

The lounge looked as though a small but effective storm had ripped through it. Clothes lay everywhere, and cushions had been scattered across the floor. Clearing a seat on the sofa, where they spooned together with legs entwined, Martin and the blonde settled back to watch the show.

Xenophou was naked but for his unbuttoned shirt; his pale, hairless skin shone a pearly white, marred by shadows when his muscles flexed. The brunette was covered only with sweat, glistening on her buttocks and back. The bald reve had penetrated her from behind and was maintaining a steady, firm stroke, neither speeding up nor slowing down unless his partner requested it. With every thrust, the woman gasped for breath, in time to the movement of her own fingers on her clitoris.

Both seemed oblivious to the spectators on the couch. They looked, the blonde whispered into Martin’s ear, as though they had been fucking for hours. The sight clearly aroused more than an academic interest.

Martin watched less pruriently. He knew that reves were unable to sire or bear children, but this was the first hint he had received that they might still enjoy sexual congress. Certainly the activity of the couple was as vigorous as and even more prolonged than that between fully mortal partners.

Xenophou’s mien, however, was one of intense concentration, not enjoyment, as the brunette’s hands guided his to her breasts. Her mouth opened in ecstasy, and she arched her back. Her heels clasped Xenophou’s tightly, rocking her hips with every thrust. Riding high on a wave of constant stimulation — and perhaps with the help of drugs — she looked as though she was about to achieve orgasm — the latest of many, if the sounds she made were anything to go by. The only sound Xenophou made was his breathing, fast and heavy.

Then the blonde woman’s hand found Martin’s stiffening penis behind her, encouraged it, guided it home. For the next few minutes, he completely forgot about Xenophou and the brunette. His second orgasm of the evening took longer to achieve, but was even more intense than the first. It seemed to last forever.

When he was spent, he sagged back onto the couch and stroked the

sweat-sheened skin of the blonde's hips and stomach, filled with a sense of satisfied peace. The room was silent, the stillness after a storm, and he felt like sleeping.

A moment passed before he realised what was missing: the brunette's gasping had ceased.

He belatedly turned to see. Xenophou and the woman had stopped moving, although they were still coupled. As Martin watched, the reve levered himself backwards and slid his erect penis from the woman's pouting vagina. The brunette made a small noise deep in her throat, and, breathing heavily, sank back onto her haunches. Xenophou stood just as wearily, his legs shaking. By the time he was upright, his erection had completely vanished.

Looking around the room — at the brunette, at Martin and the blonde, still entwined — the reve blinked his dark eyes once and shook his head.

"Enough," Xenophou said, his voice soft and filled with what might have been sadness.

Martin stared up at him, remembering what the Reve Guillard had told him. This was the first word the new reve had spoken in weeks.

Before Martin could think of anything to say in response, Xenophou had gathered his clothes in a bundle and moved for the door. Hastily disentangling himself from the blonde, Martin leapt to grab his arm. The reve's flesh was uncannily dry and cold. Xenophou looked down at his hand, and Martin removed it.

Without another word, the reve opened the door and left the room.

Martin made sure the door was locked before turning around. Behind him, the brunette had taken his seat on the sofa. Stretching her limbs, ignorant of the significance of what had just happened, she whispered softly to the blonde: business talk. Martin caught a few fragments of the conversation as he walked to the bedroom to regain his composure.

The brunette was exhausted, as was only to be expected. The reve's performance had been far more than she had anticipated; nothing had prepared her for this, although she had heard occasional rumours. The blonde sounded almost jealous, until one item of gossip caught her attention.

“Not once?” she asked, obviously disbelieving her ears. “After all that?”

“Not even a trickle.” The brunette sounded deeply puzzled. “And you know, I don’t think he ever would have.”

Martin nodded silent understanding to his reflection in the bedroom mirror. No sweat, he thought. No fluids of any kind. Even if they had continued for an hour longer, neither the brunette nor Xenophou could have coaxed so much as a drop from his desiccated, dry flesh.

Even if he’d wanted to.

Enough ...?

Martin went back into the other room to ask the women if they wanted to leave. When the blonde smiled up at him and said no, the brunette agreed. They had been paid for the night and, whether anything else happened or not, his bed was more comfortable than either of theirs. Martin, although his mind was torn between conflicting impulses, didn’t doubt that something *would* happen, if he was up to it. It wasn’t every day he had the chance to spend the night with two beautiful women. Besides, sleep would be a long time coming, and he wanted to be spared the involuntary wakefulness.

Finally, with the brunette beneath him and the blonde stroking his stomach from behind, he managed to forget about Xenophou and remember himself again — hairy, sweating and above all alive ...

And when sleep did come, it was black and empty, like death.

* * * *

Sudden movement woke him an hour before his alarm was due to go off. Rolling over with a grunt, he realised that the lights were on and the bed was empty.

“I’m sorry to disturb your *ménage a trois*,” said a familiar voice from somewhere near his feet, “but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

He sat up and rubbed at his eyes, fatigue dulling his reactions. The Reve Guillard was a pale blur crouched at the end of his bed, poised like a ghoulish to steal his soul. The elaborate ball-gown, along with her airs and graces of the previous night, was gone; in its place she wore a white

one-piece suit folded and draped with sashes to hide her figure. It was hard to tell where the fabric stopped and her deathly pale skin started. Her head, like Xenophou's, was completely bald; the angles of her skull were sharp.

Not a chandelier any more, Martin thought. Rather, a shellfish grown old and crusty beneath its carapace. He wondered whether he could ever come close to the innermost substance of the Reve Guillard, if there was any left at all.

"What are you doing here?" he managed.

"I dismissed the girls so we could be alone," she said, avoiding the question. Her dark, cold eyes regarded the tangle of sheets about his legs. "Their services were adequate for the price I paid, I gather. Certainly their effect on M. Xenophou was worth every cent."

Martin slithered along the mattress until his back was flush with the wall. From that position, he watched his visitor closely. "*You* paid them, then? Why? To make your friend speak?"

"My ward, not my friend," she said, her face closed. Again she avoided the question. "The Change isn't always easy, and it's sometimes very hard. The body is a machine, easily upgraded; the mind, sadly, is not. People either want to be a reve or not, and sometimes the only way to find out is to go through the process: when you stand on the other side and look back, knowing that you can't ever return ... that's when you know for certain."

M. Guillard's potent gaze had drifted across the room as she spoke, and returned to him at that point. "Many choose the fiery path, more than you'll find in the official figures. Self-immolation is not difficult to achieve, if you have the right equipment at hand. All it takes is a nice, clear flame, and plenty of oxygen, and —" she looked sad for a moment "— *gone*. What might have been centuries, ended in a second."

"Perhaps that's what worries him," Martin said, wondering if he was dreaming. "Spyro, I mean. The 'centuries' part. The more I learn about being a reve, the less attractive it seems. The thought of being a..." He swallowed the word *zombie* barely in time. "Being immortal, I mean, does have its drawbacks."

"Yet *you* want it, Martin," she said, her voice forceful. "I feel the desire in you more strongly than I have ever felt it before — even if you yourself aren't yet aware of it, or of what it means."

“I’m not?” he asked, confused. “That is, I do?”

“Of course. And mod Alkis agrees. Having studied the Change in more detail than most reves, his opinion played no small part in my decision to talk with you here and now.”

Martin thought this over. She and the mod had discussed him after his departure. She and who else?

“Talk to me, then,” he said. “Get it over with. As honoured as I am at warranting such undivided attention from someone as busy as yourself, I object to being rudely wakened when I have company.”

“That’s fine thanks for the fun I gave you last night, Martin.” The reve almost smiled, although the expression was thin. “Fine thanks indeed. But I take your point. I have committed a serious breach of protocol, and should expect brusqueness in return.” She turned away for a moment, and laughed once.

Martin waited in silence.

When her attention returned to him, the smile was gone. “The thing I have to say to you is this: there’s more at stake here than family pride. Whatever you and your uncle have planned, think carefully before committing yourself to it.”

“Plans?” he countered, feigning innocence although his stomach had instantly turned to ice. “What plans?”

“How could there not be one, Martin?” she shot back. “PERIPETY-WEYN, with its heightened attention to detail, has plotted extrapolations of your development given the creative and business acumen of your family’s germ line. *Le Comptable Froid* watches human affairs from afar and sees a world ripe for change. Elaine Bennett agrees: that there is something fundamentally exciting about the idea of a new House to which both reves and mortal humans cannot help but respond. Not even Professor Muntun himself, the dear old fool, could possibly miss this one.” This time the smile was real. “You are in a pivotal position, my boy. And the one in the best place beside you to influence future events is the very person behind your application for reversion: your uncle. Coincidence? I think not. You’re up to something, or being forced into something, and it’s my job — no, my *responsibility* — to make certain that you know exactly what you are putting at stake before you even begin.”

“And what’s that, exactly?”

“Why, *you*, of course.” She frowned at him as though he had said something stupid. “It still hasn’t struck you yet, has it? What it means to be a reve?”

“Well —”

“Consider it now. How do you think it will feel to watch your parents grow old and die? Your sister, her partner and her children? Your aunt and uncle? *Especiallly* your uncle. What will happen if you balance your long future against his short-term gains and come out the loser in the end? Letting a mortal man pull your strings is the most dangerous thing a reve can do, for the time will inevitably come when the strings fall slack and leave you dangling. Regret is the widow of opportunity, as they say, and eternity is a long time in which to regret your mistakes.”

“What mistakes?”

“You’ll know if you make them, I promise you that.”

“Is that a warning, M. Guillard?”

Again, the abbreviated laugh. “Nothing so crude: just stating a fact. There’s every chance we’ll still know each other in a thousand years, no matter what happens in the next hundred, and every time I meet you I’ll be sure to remind you of the actions you are considering now. Persistence alone can be a very effective form of punishment.”

“I’m sure,” he agreed, “if you’re the one behind it.” Then another thought occurred to him: “But that still doesn’t explain why you’ve come to me now. The urge didn’t strike you from nowhere. You must have known where my room was in advance in order to send the women here so quickly. Which means you knew who I was all along.”

“Yes, yes.” She dismissed the allegation with a wave of a hand. “Whether I knew who you were or not is irrelevant. It wasn’t until my team had taken a good look at you, and confirmed my impression, that I knew we had to talk. And why not now, when your memory of last night is so strong? Before your uncle has had time to twist your impressions to suit his will.”

Martin opened his mouth to protest, but she didn’t give him the opportunity.

“He will tell you, no doubt, that we are decadent, fossilised creatures in need of a good shock; that five hundred years of imposed stability has suffocated the Earth and all its living children. But I disagree. It is not change we fear, but *undirected* change. Consider the trends, Martin, and how we embrace them instantly throughout the System. Study how progress *has* been made, in an orderly, rational fashion, without revolution and bloodshed to give it impetus. We acknowledge the need for evolution without allowing chaos to reign supreme, and thereby ground inevitable tensions into constructive endeavours. The short-lived have never had it so good.

“But watch what happens when something takes us by surprise. See how strongly we fight back ... even those of us who may have initially welcomed the change.”

“You’re reactionary by nature,” he broke in, speaking his mind for the first time in her presence. “Nothing I can do will alter that, so I have no choice but to fight it.”

“No. Change is inevitable, and House Winterford may yet prove to be the catalyst for something new and exciting — but do let *us* be the judge of that, not your uncle.”

The Reve Guillard regarded him with something approaching pity, and rose gracefully to her feet. “That is what I came here to tell you. I have no official role in the Plutocracy, but I am not without influence. Nor am I close-minded. If you choose to confide your plans in me, and I find wisdom within them, then I will support you in every regard. I make just as winning an ally as I do an enemy.”

Martin stared at her, stunned by the offer. Discuss his plans with a reve? With *her*? Did she think he was stupid?

His thoughts must have been plainly visible on his face, for she smiled and patted his naked foot. “Do think about it, Martin, at least. I will always be available to talk to you, should you take me up on my offer. But we won’t meet again until after you awake from the Change — when, as one reve to another, we can discuss this properly. If we cannot come to an agreement even then, we will have no choice but to go our separate ways.”

“And if I choose to forgo the Change?”

She blinked once. “Why ever would you do that?”

He took her point. In her eyes, why *would* he?

“Agreed, then. We will talk afterwards.”

“Good,” she said, and suddenly the conversation was over. With a curt nod, she turned and headed for the open door.

“Wait,” Martin called after her. “What about Spyro? Is he still talking? Has he recovered?”

She stopped in the doorway. “Spyro Xenophou is dead,” she stated flatly, her eyes revealing nothing. “*Truly* dead. He killed himself at 06:50 hours this morning.”

“How—?” Martin stopped himself with difficulty. That wasn’t the right question — he could guess the answer: the fiery path. Through his dismay, he forced himself to think clearly. “*Why?*”

“If you cannot answer that question,” she said, “then your understanding of what it means to be a reve is incomplete, and your ability to make an objective decision hopelessly inadequate. *Adieu.*”

The only sound she made as she left the room was the rustle of silk on the carpet, swishing softly like a breeze out of his life.

* * * *

Ten o’clock came slowly, but eventually the ponderous airship docked at *Le Chateau de la Mort Dorée*’s departure platform. Thick cables tethered it to ancient wooden posts as the whining of its electric fans ebbed. The massive, rocking balloon shuddered once as it surrendered itself to earth-bound will, then became still.

Martin, standing in a chill draft blowing straight down from the mountain’s snow-capped summit, watched the gondola’s ramp unfold towards him with half a mind. The rest was still in his room, catching up on the night’s events. It was hard to believe that he was already leaving. The short flight to Jungfrau connected with an orbital shuttle leading half-way around the world where, on his ranch in Texas, Arthur Winterford waited. His uncle would want a detailed report of every event, every word, every insinuation. Martin, as would-be reve, had been in a privileged position to

gather information.

What *had* he learned? That the Change was fraught with danger, yes, and that the reves were afraid of what he might do to upset the delicate balance of world affairs, when he emerged from the Change the founder of a new House. Nothing new, in other words, nothing critical. Even in one of their many homes, the reves had been judicious with their secrets.

In a perverse way, that made the Reve Guillard's offer tempting. It almost made sense to consult a reve when plotting their downfall — although his uncle would kill him if he took advantage of it.

The more he thought about it, the more tempted he was to cut ties with everyone and to continue as a free agent, following whatever impulses he felt at the time, or none at all.

But... Freedom? As a reve? He doubted it.

"We can't force you to do anything," the blonde had said, and for the first time he truly appreciated what the words meant to him. And to Spyro Xenophou — for whom volition hadn't even entered the equation.

Suddenly, Martin understood.

Reves were dead. The fact that they could still participate in the world of the living was irrelevant: the nanomolecular agents behind the mystery of reversion ripped the life from them as surely as a forty-metre fall would kill a mortal human. All biological needs were left behind in the process, including the need to eat, drink, breathe, sleep and die; to a certain extent, the senses, particularly those of taste and smell, were also muted. In exchange, they received total mastery over their flesh — the ability to produce an erection at will, for instance — and potentially eternal life. But the oldest parts of the psyche sometimes refused to accept the bad things with the good, and compelled them to fight the thought of death being something to accept and to put behind them, rather than something to dread.

Where that fight would lead him, Martin had no way of telling. What he *did* know was what must have gone through Spyro Xenophou's mind mid-coitus with the brunette. Faced with one single, yet fundamental, aspect of his new incarnation, the battle had been won. Or lost, depending on the point of view.

Only then had Xenophou realised what he had done.

Enough, he had said. A farewell, certainly — but to what? The brunette, or life? Or an eternity existing only as a poor facsimile of what he had once been, driven by needs and urges that had risen to fill the ones he had left behind forever?

The conductor whistled from the gondola, and the few passengers began to make their way towards the ramp. Martin picked up his suitcase and did the same, bidding farewell, for now, to the reves of Fool's-Death House.

One month to go. There was so much to see and do before he closed the door on the mortal part of his life. And he didn't want to miss out on anything, while he still had the chance.

It was going to be a long month. He would make certain of that. And a very long afterlife to follow.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

“Entre les Beaux Morts en Vie” owes much to two writers: Rob Hood, Australia’s own “Zombie King” (among other things), and Terry Dowling who, particularly in his Tom Rynosseros stories, is a master at hinting at wonders lying just beyond the frame, I met Rob and Terry for the first time in Sydney in 1995, and was deeply inspired by both encounters. Upon returning home, I immediately set about writing a “non-horror” zombie story.

In the space of a fortnight, egged on by one writer with a penchant for a particular myth and by another who knows how to write his own, two tales came into existence. “Entre les Beaux Morts en Vie” was the first, the second was my story “Passing the Bone”. The same personal crises that gave “Bone” its vitality kept this story in a drawer for two years. Until now ...

Even though it has little in common with either Rob or Terry’s works (and all the mistakes and inelegances are mine), I’m grateful to both of them for nudging this story into existence. May they continue to inspire me for many years to come.

— Sean Williams