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THE UNWANTED GUEST

SCENE ONE

A funeral in an empty room. There's a closed door at the back, but unobtrusive, set away from notice. There are seven wooden coffins, exactly alike, set in a row of six, with one at the forefront. The front coffin is distinguished from its fellows by its gorgeous arrangement of flowers and wreaths. The flowers are all in hues of gold or violet, and are fake. The coffin is hinged open at the front, with its contents hidden from view by the flowers. A tray of meat is rested on the closed bottom half of the coffin. A queue of gaudily masked mourners process past the coffin, slowly, each one taking a strip of meat, then stopping by the head to lean within—kissing or feeding; we can't be sure.

The last queuing mourner stands a step behind the rest. This is PAL-AMEDES SEXTUS, whose mask is distinguished by being plain, of shattered wood clumsily taped or glued back together. He's trying his damndest to look as though he belongs and nearly succeeding. He waits his turn politely until the others leave. Alone, he considers the meat, then thinks better of it.

He looks around: the coast is clear. Palamedes reaches past the flowers, into the head of the coffin.

A hand grabs his arm and the corpse sits upright. It's IANTHE TRIDENTARIUS. Her face is covered in bloody kisses.

IANTHE You're fucked, my lad.

The lights go out.

SCENE TWO

An empty room. The coffins, flowers, et cetera are gone; all that remains is the door at the back and a single ornamental fireplace off to one side, in which no fire is burning. Ianthe is standing by the fireplace in the formal outfit of an early twentieth-century English butler—black tailcoat, grey trousers/waistcoat, black tie, white gloves. She holds a silver tray under one arm.

The door opens and Palamedes enters. He's wearing what must once have been a smart grey suit of a sober and traditional cut, with a matching waistcoat and a deep purple tie. Unfortunately, the suit is completely ruined. Large holes have been ripped in the fabric; one jacket sleeve is hanging off at the elbow; one leg of the trousers is charred and blackened as if by fire. What material isn't damaged is stained with big brownish patches of dried blood. Palamedes himself does not seem injured in any way—there's no blood on his face or hands. He closes the door politely behind him.

IANTHE Good evening, sir.

PALAMEDES Oh—good evening.

IANTHE May I help you?

PALAMEDES I hope so. I'm here to see the lady of the house.

(Pause) Again.

IANTHE You're the gentleman who called earlier.

PALAMEDES I'm all the gentlemen who called earlier.

IANTHE If I may, sir—I believe the master's answer is . . . unlikely to have changed.

PALAMEDES Thank you, but I'd like to hear that for myself.

IANTHE Of course, sir. May I take your card?

Ianthe holds out the tray. Palamedes fishes in his one intact jacket pocket and produces an entire skeletal hand, which he places on the tray, palm up.

IANTHE If you'd be so good as to wait here.

Ianthe gives a very slight bow and retires through the door, closing it behind her. Palamedes walks down to the front of the stage, facing the audience, and folds his hands behind his back.

PALAMEDES You can do a lot of work with "if." "If I may"—that's, of course, a relatively well-documented example of false courtesy. "May I?"—that's how you ask for permission, when you really want it. You only use "if I may" to preface something you're about to do anyway. Its sole function is to gesture, briefly, at the possibility that your interlocutor might not want you to say or do whatever it is you're about to say or do. It actually contrives to be

ruder than if you didn't allude to permission at all. You acknowledge the other person's agency only to make clear that you're disregarding it.

Ianthe enters quietly, stage right, in the costume of a French maid—the ooh-la-la kind with a short frilly skirt and a little white apron. She's carrying an enormous purple feather duster, which she starts flicking vaguely at the fireplace.

PALAMEDES But "if you'd be so good"—now *that's* a piece of work, sociolinguistically speaking. Like all "if" statements it implies a "then"—in this case, presumably, "if you'd be so good as to wait here, *then* I will do what you want." That already carries a sting: if you wouldn't, then I won't. I reaffirm my ability to ignore your request, and place the onus of proper behaviour on *you*—you're the action; I'm merely the consequence. But when it's deployed the way we heard just now—with that audible full stop at the end—it's really nothing more than a command. "Wait here"—brusque. "Please wait here"—civil. "If you'd be so good as to wait here"—so ostentatiously polite that, as with most shows of politeness, it runs right back round into being rude again. A pretty silk glove over a fist of iron. Or, in this case, gold.

He turns to the maid for the first time.

PALAMEDES Don't you think?

IANTHE No, sir.

She drops an exaggerated curtsey and leaves, stage right. Palamedes stares after her for a couple of seconds, then walks over to examine the fireplace. As he's poking at the embers with the toe of one dilapidated shoe, the main door opens and the butler returns, sans tray.

IANTHE The master will see you in the Almond Room, sir.

PALAMEDES Thank you very much.
The butler retreats and closes the door again. Palamedes doesn't move. Instead, robed figures enter from the sides of the stage, wheeling the wooden coffins from before. They set these up standing on end, like doors, in a shallow semicircle facing in toward the centre of the stage. We observe that each coffin now carries a brass number plate on its

closed lid, 1 through 7, in order from left to right. In the middle of the stage the figures position a single chaise longue.

When all the coffins have been set up, the robed figures retire. Palamedes is still standing by the fireplace, having paid no attention to these proceedings. The door opens again and Ianthe enters, this time in a rather daringly unbuttoned shirt and a pair of leather trousers, plus a Lyctoral rainbow robe draped over her shoulders. The whole affect is *louche*; she carries a small clutch bag. Ianthe walks over to the chaise longue and drapes herself along it artistically.

IANTHE Oh—Inspector. How terribly good of you to call so late. Palamedes crosses from the fireplace to stand near the chaise longue.

PALAMEDES It's not that late.

IANTHE It's *extremely* late. (*Gesturing at his clothes*) Five minutes to midnight, I'd say. You can't last much longer, and we both know it.

PALAMEDES You said that three visits ago.

IANTHE What do you want?

PALAMEDES The same thing I've wanted all evening—

IANTHE A new suit? Because suits aren't meant to fit like that.

PALAMEDES —the body of Naberius Tern.

IANTHE Mm. Well, my little snackette . . . you shall have it.

Palamedes stares at her for a couple of seconds as if failing to understand her. Ianthe uses the time to fish the skeletal hand out of her clutch bag and toy with it.

PALAMEDES I beg your pardon?

IANTHE Granted. I'm *bored*, Sextus. You show up, we go back and forth for a bit, I knock out a couple more of your teeth, and I've barely had time to fix my hair before you stagger back in like you're enjoying yourself. Are you enjoying yourself?

PALAMEDES No.

IANTHE Of course not—you're not meant to be. But, crucially, I'm not enjoying myself, and that's the one thing I can never tolerate. Attrition is strictly for people who don't know how to win. So! This will be our final, heh, tête-à-tête, and this time we will play a little game.

PALAMEDES (*Accommodating*) It's your house.

IANTHE Here is how my little game will work.
She pauses.

IANTHE (*Encouragingly*) Are you excited?

PALAMEDES (*Dryly*) Agog.
Ianthe manipulates the skeletal hand so its fingers are curled in, with only the middle finger jutting upright. She holds it up to show Palamedes, then puts it down on the cushion.

IANTHE My cavalier's body is in one of these seven coffins. You get to ask me five questions. If, after your fifth question, you can correctly tell me which coffin he's in—you win. If you guess wrong, or you don't know—you lose.

PALAMEDES And if I lose . . .

IANTHE You're out. Door bolted. No longer welcome on the premises. Which *is* going to present you with some difficulties, I won't deny, since *your* cavalier's body . . . well, I missed the aorta, but her spleen isn't one of the better spleens anymore.

This affects Palamedes, but he largely conceals it.

PALAMEDES Five questions?

IANTHE Obviously, none of which can be "which coffin is he in."

PALAMEDES But I can—

IANTHE Nor can you ask me *anything* about the coffins themselves, in fact. That way you could do it in three.

PALAMEDES (*Mildly*) Two.

IANTHE What?

PALAMEDES Assuming they're not yes/no questions—

IANTHE Oh. Two. Yes, all right. You *were* fun at parties, weren't you? So, to be clear: I will refuse to answer any question that directly concerns either the status of the coffins or the location of the body. I'll answer anything else . . . and I do mean anything.

PALAMEDES Are you going to play fair?

IANTHE I never do. Four questions left.
Palamedes pinches the bridge of his nose with one hand, turns away, and walks downstage. The curtain falls behind him—leaving him alone with the audience.

PALAMEDES Ianthe's sparkling personality aside . . . this doesn't really make much sense.

A new VOICE answers from the back of the auditorium. We do not see the speaker.

VOICE Why not?

PALAMEDES Well—question-and-answer puzzles generally depend on a set of rules. You know—one in three answers is a lie, or only one skeleton tells the truth, or something of that sort. Ianthe's said she'll answer five questions—

VOICE —four questions—

PALAMEDES —but she hasn't vouchsafed anything about her answers. She could lie outright all four times, and I'd have nothing to base my conclusions on.

VOICE Try widening your scope. You're treating this as a logic problem. There's no logic involved.

PALAMEDES Then what *is* there?

VOICE Psychology.

PALAMEDES But the solution is factual, not psychological. I don't need—nor, frankly, do I *want*—a long story about Ianthe's relationship with her mother. I need a number from one to seven.

VOICE All facts are psychological. What if you asked her to pick a number from one to seven?

PALAMEDES I hardly think she's going to pick the number she's trying to stop me from—oh.

VOICE Now you're getting it.

PALAMEDES Which of course means she *would* pick that number, because . . . mm. Yes, I see what you're driving at.

VOICE Well, it won't be that simple. The point is—don't try to get Ianthe to tell you the answer. She's a Princess of Ida. She's trained to run rings around you. Try to get her to expose herself enough that you can see the answer for yourself.

Palamedes nods and turns upstage. The curtain begins to rise.

VOICE I mean, more than she's already exposing herself with that shirt. *(Pause)* I'm kind of into the trousers, though.

SCENE THREE

The curtain rises on the same scene as before—seven upright coffins, chaise longue, Ianthe—except that a robed and masked figure is now standing beside each of the coffins. Palamedes walks upstage to stand next to the chaise longue.

PALAMEDES Well. I have my first question.

IANTHE Second question. Go on. (*Gestures*) We're all ears.

PALAMEDES My question is: Do you believe in the permeability of the soul?

IANTHE Oh, for—

The figures move into action. They pick up coffin number 2 and coffin number 6 and bring them downstage, setting them on their backs on the floor on either side of Ianthe's chaise longue. The arrangement is now like a horseshoe of couches facing inward, except that the outer two couches are coffins. An attendant places a purple cushion on each of the two coffins to complete the effect. Palamedes sits down rather awkwardly on coffin number 6 as another attendant places a crown of ivy leaves on top of Ianthe's pale hair and spritzes her with perfume.

IANTHE You're kidding me.

She holds out a hand. An attendant places a golden cup in it, then fills the cup from an ornate golden jug.

IANTHE We're going *this* way?

PALAMEDES You said I could ask anything.

IANTHE That was a hint! A hint that you should ask something interesting, something with a bit of bite! Why not something sexual?

Start with the classics. "Yes, I have; no, I haven't; I tried once but it came off in my hand."

An attendant hands Palamedes a second cup, and offers the jug. Palamedes places his free hand across the cup.

PALAMEDES No, thank you.

IANTHE (*Despairingly*) You don't even *drink*!

PALAMEDES In my defence: I'm dead, and this wine doesn't exist.

Ianthe waves a hand airily, then downs her entire cup in one go and hands it off to an attendant.

IANTHE All the better for it. False things have a piquancy which the real can never match.

PALAMEDES Is that from something?

IANTHE Everything's from *something*. It's called *pétillance*—not fizz, you understand, nothing so obvious. Just the very faintest tingle on the tongue. Did your tongue ever tounge, Sextus? When you were alive, I mean.

PALAMEDES Did my *tongue* ever *tingle*?

IANTHE That's what I said.

Palamedes stares at her. The attendant hands her a refilled cup, which she accepts with casual disregard.

PALAMEDES We're not here to talk about my tongue.

IANTHE I wish I could say I was disappointed.

PALAMEDES My question was—

IANTHE Yes, yes, I remember your question. (*To the assembled figures*) Let it be known: there is *nothing*, positively nothing, that the Sixth House will not try to hijack into a goddamned seminar. One shudders to imagine their pillow talk.

PALAMEDES It might interest you to know that on the Sixth, pillow talk is a science.

IANTHE It did not interest me. (*Turning back to Palamedes, adjusting her garland, and sighing*) All right! If we must. Ahem: "Indeed, Sextus, I do not."

PALAMEDES A direct answer, by the gods, my dear Ianthe. You hold, then, that the soul is both indivisible and impermeable?

IANTHE "I do."

PALAMEDES Permit me to ask another question; do you but answer as well and clearly as you can, and we shall progress together toward a clear and unbiased perception of the matter—toward, in fact, what men call the truth. Is the soul *malleable*—that is to say, can it be altered or deformed by external forces?

IANTHE "Of course, Sextus; for, were it not so, a revenant would be quite incapable of behaving in a manner consistent with its earlier life."

PALAMEDES Because, when a revenant is formed, only the soul is transferred from the original body, and nothing else?

IANTHE "Just so."

PALAMEDES That is well said, my friend. May we, then, proceed a little further along this road and conclude that the soul is not *elastic*—or, at least, only imperfectly so?

IANTHE "I agree with that also."

PALAMEDES For the same reason?

IANTHE "Yes; it is obvious that, if an object is deformed by a force, but is capable of springing back altogether to its original shape, it will not record any trace of the original deformity, but will in every way resemble itself before the force was applied."

PALAMEDES Excellently put. If the soul were perfectly elastic, then, we would expect a revenant to resemble nothing so much as a newborn infant in its desires and behaviours; and yet there are many cases, recorded by our finest scholars, in which revenants were observed to act in ways informed by the experiences of their adult lives. Are we in agreement so far?

IANTHE "It seems so."

PALAMEDES Let me therefore return to my original question. If the soul possesses the capacity for permanent and irreversible change—if it can be deformed, and never recover from that deformity—should we not entertain the notion that it can also be diminished? That, over time, a soul may lose some parts of itself while still continuing to exist as a contiguous whole?

IANTHE "By no means, Sextus."

PALAMEDES You surprise me very much, Ianthe. For is it not the case in nature that most objects that can be deformed can also be diminished? A stone, for example, may be carved into a new shape by a skilled sculptor, and we know that no amount of time will return

it to its original form; but in undergoing this change, it loses many parts of itself into the air and water that surround it. This, in fact, is why a man who works in a stonemason's yard all day ties a piece of cloth across his nose and mouth; the air becomes so full of dust and powder thrown off by the worked stones that he could not avoid breathing it in, and in doing so, he would damage his own body and make it harder for himself to breathe.

Tried beyond her patience, Ianthe takes off her garland and flings it irritably across the stage.

IANTHE Oh, I can't do it anymore. It's just *too* wretched. Sextus, all the homespun analogies the Sixth House archives can fart out will not convince me of this absolute farrago of drivel. The soul *obviously* cannot be diminished. Moved around, absolutely; warped, fine; reduced, no way. Next question.

PALAMEDES But why *not*?

IANTHE Because it's the entire theoretical underpinning of Lyctorhood, you huge clown. The Lyctor uses the cavalier's soul as a perpetual source of energy. Emphasis on *perpetual*. That's why the Eightfold Word works in the first place—the soul is the *only* thing capable of supplying power without being consumed in the process.

PALAMEDES We don't know that.

IANTHE We most certainly do. I'm a Lyctor, Sextus, did you miss the memo? Augustine the First—who I'm glad never lived to see me suckered into trading abstracts—was a Lyctor. He'd been a Lyctor for ten thousand years, and he could toss out theorems that would make you and your entire House shit yourselves to death on the spot. You've got *no idea* what it's like.

PALAMEDES But all that entails is an extremely slow rate of decay, in human terms. Just because there's no *appreciable* decline in output from a bound soul over the course of ten thousand years doesn't mean the output is stable. Maybe it would take another hundred thousand years before anyone saw the difference.

IANTHE So your best argument for the permeability of the soul is “it could be happening in secret, without anyone noticing”?

PALAMEDES Well—

IANTHE “I don’t have any *evidence*, but I feel like it *might* be true.”

Gee whiz, I’m so glad I lived to see those rigorous Sixth House standards in action.

PALAMEDES There’s at least a possibility that—

IANTHE Sextus, I have eaten one soul. You have eaten no souls. I refuse to argue about ice cream with someone who’s never tasted ice cream. Go away, eat a soul, and *then* we can compare notes.

PALAMEDES So *your* best argument boils down to “I know more about this than you do.”

IANTHE It’s a very strong argument. Unless we get into “what’s it like to be weirdly codependent with your dead-eyed cousin,” I’m more or less guaranteed to win. Minions! Clear all of this garbage away; my guest has to go and take some deep breaths for a while.

The robed attendants move forward. Palamedes gets up off his coffin and walks downstage, the curtain falling behind him as he goes. There is a short pause once the curtain is down, during which he stares blankly out into the audience, then seems to shake himself.

PALAMEDES (*Bracingly*) I thought that went well.

VOICE Do you? Because from where I’m sitting it *sort* of seemed like you dragged her into a lengthy academic argument that went nowhere.

PALAMEDES Ouch.

VOICE Sorry, babe, I can’t compliment-sandwich this.

PALAMEDES Well—I wouldn’t say *nowhere*. I have a much better grasp of Ianthe’s theoretical underpinnings now, and she made a couple of assumptions that I’m tempted to exploit.

VOICE Pal . . .

PALAMEDES I thought it was better to pull her off her home ground. You know. Destabilise her.

VOICE If you didn't want to fight on her home ground, jumping into her pet body was not a good opener. Was this Camilla's idea? It doesn't *feel* like Camilla's idea.

PALAMEDES All the more reason to reclaim the initiative—

VOICE You're underestimating her; you're seeing what she wants you to see. My topic of expertise is putting on a show. All that "oh no, how boring" stuff is huge lies, and you ought to know it. If Ianthe hated books and loved parties, she wouldn't be the only necromancer in nearly ten thousand years to ascend successfully to Lyctorhood.

PALAMEDES You mean—

VOICE The Third House are the masters of giving people what they think they want. Ianthe knows your tastes. She's *letting* you pull her into long complicated debates so you'll feel like you're getting the upper hand—all while she avoids telling you anything you want to know.

Palamedes pushes his glasses up his nose.

PALAMEDES All right, then. What do you advise?

VOICE Go deep. You're already on her turf. Stop asking Palamedes questions—she's expecting those and she knows how to send them into the long grass. Start asking *Ianthe* questions.

PALAMEDES I'm . . . not very good at Ianthe questions.

VOICE That's fine. That's the point. Play to your weaknesses. When you're this far behind enemy lines, trying to fall back is suicide. Remember, *everything* here is Ianthe.

PALAMEDES Except the bit that's Naberius Tern . . .

VOICE Which is the bit you're trying to find.

Palamedes considers this.

PALAMEDES Ianthe questions. Okay.

He turns upstage as the curtain begins to rise.

VOICE I believe in you.

PALAMEDES (*Over his shoulder*) You didn't always. I had to fight for that.

SCENE FOUR

The curtain rises to reveal the stage back in its "neutral" state: Ianthe on her chaise longue, the seven coffins upright in a semicircle, one attendant standing by each coffin. The order of the coffins, however, has changed: left to right, 7, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 1.

IANTHE Feeling better?

PALAMEDES Not feeling very much of anything, to be honest. I suppose it's the being dead.

IANTHE Poor baby.

PALAMEDES I've got my next question.

IANTHE Oh, Lord. Something juicy about pneumatic apocope, I expect. I feel like I'm playing strip poker with Harrow; shyly unbuttoning her baggy black robe to reveal a baggier, blacker robe underneath . . . *(Pause)* Yuck. I hope that hasn't awakened anything in me.

PALAMEDES Do you regret the murder of Naberius Tern?
All seven figures strike their hand flat against the lid of their adjacent coffin, simultaneously, once.

IANTHE Ooh.

The figures move into action again. They pick up coffins number 2 and 3 and lay one on top of the other, on their backs, stage left—forming a waist-high barrier. They repeat the process with coffins number 5 and 6 on the other side of the stage. Palamedes walks over and stands behind the left-hand barrier, Ianthe behind the right-hand barrier, so they're both facing inward toward centre stage. The figures retire to the edges of the stage.

IANTHE Murder? Is *that* what we're calling it now?

PALAMEDES Well, if you have a better word for killing another human being, intentionally and with malice aforethought, I'm happy to swap it in.

IANTHE "Malice aforethought." Marvellous. We should make that the Third House motto. *Malice* . . . No, I wouldn't say there was any malice involved. I have a very loving, generous nature.

Palamedes slams both hands down flat on the lid of the upper coffin, then thrusts his arm out to point an accusing finger at Ianthe.

PALAMEDES You're avoiding the question!

Ianthe is somewhat taken aback. So, after a second, is Palamedes.

IANTHE I've got to know. Why did you . . . do that?

PALAMEDES I'm not sure. It felt right. Anyway—do you really deny that you murdered Naberius Tern?

IANTHE No. It's a fair cop, gov'nor. But, in this instance, society really *is* to blame.

PALAMEDES So in your mind the killing was—what? Sanctioned by custom?

IANTHE Well, yes. The cavalier's job is to die for the necromancer, after all. In Hect's case there's an element of horse/stable door confusion going on, but her principles are sound.

PALAMEDES The cavalier's job is to *protect* the necromancer. If protecting their necromancer entails their own death, then they're expected to accept that. What exactly did Tern die to protect? Your ambitions?

IANTHE I am my ambitions, Sextus. This is why I am a Lyctor, and why Harry, although a half-assed and self-defeating specimen, is a Lyctor, and why *you* are a little bag of bones. She and I both understand that the goal is always worth the cost. If it's not, you ought to find a better goal.

PALAMEDES You must be very popular with salespeople.

IANTHE Because I'm obscenely wealthy and have exquisite taste?

PALAMEDES Because you never stop to check the price tag. You just pay whatever's asked, up front, and walk away. If you came into my shop, I'd charge you triple for everything, and you'd be too careless even to notice I'd swapped the labels.

IANTHE Whereas if you came into *my* shop, you'd try to haggle over pennies, and I'd have security throw you out of a hatch. . . . The cost is the cost, you purse-mouthed little sophist. In the end blood always has to be shed, and you only demean yourself by fussing over just how much.

PALAMEDES So that's your answer? Tern had to die, so you regret nothing.

IANTHE It's so funny hearing somebody call him *Tern*. Don't get me wrong; I was very fond of poor old Babs, and I like to think he was fond of me. (*Off Palamedes's look*) Does that surprise you?

PALAMEDES Does it surprise you that it surprises me?

IANTHE Oh, Babs had his good points. Dressed up nicely. Sewed a fine seam. Provided a rich resource of romantic drama. He never could believe that anyone would ever cheat on him, and of course everyone did.

PALAMEDES I'm surprised. He was very good-looking.

IANTHE Was he your type, Sextus? I doubt it very much. . . . No, that was the tragedy of Babs. He looked as though he *ought* to be interesting, and he really very much wasn't. His was a tepid, domestic, profoundly boring soul. Yet he mixed a very creditable cocktail. And he was loyal, of course.

PALAMEDES To a fault.

IANTHE Not *my* fault. It was Corona he was loyal to, even when it hurt him. God, he worshipped Coronabeth. Now, me, I never really hurt him. I was a figure of consistency. I ruled him through fear and poison and he relaxed into it like a warm bath.

PALAMEDES From what I know of cavalier vows on the Third, he must have been assigned to you at a very early age.

IANTHE Naturally. At birth.

PALAMEDES At *birth*?

IANTHE He was a prince in his own right, you know. From a branch family. They'd have put the blood on his lips as soon as he was in his cradle.

PALAMEDES That's absurd. The Eighth selects cavs for genetic compatibility, but the Third has no need—

IANTHE What—you thought we held a big tournament, and invited poor stable-hands from all across the kingdom?

PALAMEDES But if he'd grown up with no talent—

IANTHE It's called *training*.

PALAMEDES Or a physical disadvantage—

IANTHE We'd have fixed him. Babs had to be the perfect cav, so he became the perfect cav. It's the only safe way to do things. Thankfully he worked his little butt off, which made life simpler all round, but it wouldn't have mattered in the long run. Did you know Harrowhark's original cav couldn't come to Canaan House because he was too sad? The jaw simply *drops*.

PALAMEDES I heard he couldn't come because he got blown up.

IANTHE Yes, blown up for being sad. These things are important, Sextus, you can't just trust them to a roll of the dice. I mean, look at the Fifth! Abigail Pent *literally* brought her husband, and look where that got her.

PALAMEDES So—hold on. You're telling me that you knew Tern, that you were paired with him, for even longer than I've known Camilla—that he must have sat next to you in the nursery and been at every single one of your undoubtedly insane birthday parties—and you don't in any way regret the fact that you *killed and ate him*?

There is a pause.

IANTHE No.

Ianthe claps her hands.

IANTHE (*Brightly*) That's all, folks! Back after the break.

Palamedes comes out from behind his coffins and wanders downstage, looking distracted. The robed figures start to reset the stage as the curtain descends.

PALAMEDES Do you know the worst part?

VOICE Tell me.

PALAMEDES From her point of view, it all makes sense. Tern was shaped over years to be nothing more than—than—

VOICE A perfect tool?

PALAMEDES —a *resource*. Something to be saved up and then spent at just the right moment. Why would you hesitate to play an

ace if it's going to win you the game? Sentimental attachment from all the time it spent tucked up your sleeve?

VOICE (*Reproachfully*) Cam would have smiled at "perfect tool."

PALAMEDES Yes—she would have.

He reaches absent-mindedly into the inner pocket of his tattered jacket and produces a small flat metal tin. He opens the tin, takes out a cigarette, and tucks it into the corner of his mouth. He replaces the tin and takes out a matchbox; extracts a match, strikes it, and lights the cigarette while cupping his other hand round the flame. Then he shakes the match out, drops it on the stage, and puts the box back in his pocket. This ritual complete, he takes a long drag on the cigarette and exhales shakily, staring into space.

VOICE I didn't know you smoked.

PALAMEDES Hmm?

He takes the cigarette out of his mouth between two fingers and glances at it. Something about it seems to hold his attention.

PALAMEDES No, of course I don't. I just . . .

There is a pause. Palamedes keeps staring at the cigarette between his fingers.

VOICE (*Comforting*) Never mind. Unusual circumstances. That was good—you made her give up some ground. But you've only got two questions left. Any ideas for the next one?

PALAMEDES (*Distracted*) Yes. I think so.

VOICE (*Warningly*) It needs to hit home, Pal. You can't afford another impasse. If this doesn't shake something loose, she's going to win the game.

Palamedes seems to come to life again. He drops the cigarette hastily and squashes it under his shoe. Then he wipes the hand against the side of his jacket.

PALAMEDES Right. Yes. Next question. Don't worry. I just . . . I wish I had more time to think.

He turns upstage as the curtain rises.

VOICE Oh, you used to say that a lot.

SCENE FIVE

The stage is back in neutral position once more, the attendants by their coffins. These have once again changed their order: 3, 2, 7, 4, 1, 6, 5.

IANTHE Tick, tock. Two minutes to midnight. Have any insights dawned?

PALAMEDES Question four. Back when we were at Canaan House . . . what did you make of Gideon Nav?

Ianthe tilts her head on one side.

IANTHE That's a curveball. I thought it was Babs you were trying to sniff out. Why the sudden interest in Nav?

PALAMEDES Well, I have a question spare. Thought I'd use it on idle curiosity.

Ianthe stares at him.

IANTHE Sextus! That was *unmistakably* trash talk. It's much too late in the game to become interesting, you know.

As she finishes speaking, the attendants start to move. They pick up the first four coffins in line—numbers 3, 2, 7, and 4—and place them on their sides in the middle of the stage, sketching out the sides of a rectangular open space: that is, two coffins running parallel to the front of the stage (the “long” sides) and two coffins running front to back (the “short” sides). Ianthe stands up and dusts off her trousers. Two attendants pick up the chaise longue and carry it upstage out of the way, placing it in front of the door; a third attendant brings an ornate rapier and a small golden bell from the wings and hands the rapier to Ianthe. She moves to stand in the “ring” created by the coffins, and gives the rapier a couple of desultory practice swishes.

Another attendant brings a second, less ornate rapier and offers it to Palamedes, who refuses it politely. The attendant pauses, as if thrown off, and then moves into the ring and faces off against Ianthe in a duelling stance.

IANTHE Well, then. Let us talk of sweet Gubbins. Where should I begin?

PALAMEDES First impressions?

The attendant with the bell rings it once. The attendant with the rapier makes a rather awkward lunge—a trainee's move, not a master's. Ianthe parries and touches her point to the attendant's collarbone without appearing to pay attention.

IANTHE (To attendant) You began in the wrong stance. Disqualified. *The attendant falls back, bows, and leaves the ring, handing the rapier to a second attendant, who enters in turn.*

IANTHE I mean . . . I was intrigued. Everyone else was so . . . *scripted.* The Second were dull, the Fourth were stupid. The Fifth were dull *and* stupid. The Sixth . . . as expected. The Seventh were creeps; the Eighth were freaks. And then the *Ninth*: there's Harry, playing it to the hilt, swathed in black and glowering, and who's she got dawdling behind her but *that* creature—tugging visibly at her leash like an overeager dog. Very much *not* the brand.

PALAMEDES "Harry"?

IANTHE It's my little name for her, you know.

PALAMEDES I can't think of a single thing she'd hate more.

IANTHE You lack imagination.

The second attendant lunges. Ianthe sidesteps and prods them in the belly.

IANTHE Didn't wait for the bell. Disqualified.

The attendant falls back, bows, and changes places with a third attendant.

PALAMEDES What struck you as . . . off?

IANTHE Everything! The shades. The ludicrous vow of silence—the way she kept opening her mouth to say things and then hastily shutting it again. The way she handled her sword: too good for a *Ninth* cav, but not good enough for an *actual* cav. She swung that damn thing around like it was a racquet! She didn't understand duelling—how to start, when to stop, any of it. Every time she saw Corona her eyes crossed and a thin strand of drool hung from the corner of her mouth. Just . . . honestly, if Nonagesimus had slapped a black robe on a skeleton and introduced it as the *Ninth* primary, I'd have accepted it without question. But *that*

idiot? And we were meant to think she was trained to a lifetime of service? She wandered around like she was the protagonist and we were all there to give her something to look at. Golly, real necromancers!

The bell rings. The third attendant lunges. Ianthe flicks their blade contemptuously to the side and tucks her point up against their throat.

IANTHE (To attendant) Awful. Disqualified.

The attendant falls back, bows, and changes places with a fourth.

PALAMEDES When did you realise you'd underestimated her?

IANTHE Underestimated her? From the moment I laid eyes on her, I estimated Gideon Nav exactly right. The first thing that popped into my head when I saw her at the bottom of that shuttle ramp was, "Ah . . . a hilarious moron," and she lived up to my expectations *magnificently*.

PALAMEDES I actually think Gideon was smarter than even she realised.

IANTHE You are, of course, entitled to your mildly patronising opinion. Gideon was a dope . . . and she died a dope.

The bell rings. This time, Ianthe lunges—fast and fluid. The attendant just about manages to parry, but Ianthe disengages, loops her blade neatly over, and digs the point into the attendant's chest. The attendant staggers back.

IANTHE And that's your lot. I have no idea what you hoped to glean from it, Sextus, but I hope you had fun.

PALAMEDES Yes, actually—that was tremendously helpful. Thanks. *Ianthe looks at him suspiciously, but he has already turned away downstage, and the curtain is already falling.*

Palamedes walks to the front of the stage and puts his hands in his pockets.

VOICE Poor Gideon. *I think she sounded fun.*

PALAMEDES Mm. You'd have liked her, I suspect. I did, once I stopped being jealous.

VOICE Can you do this with one more question?

Palamedes stares out across the audience for a few seconds.

PALAMEDES Yes. *I think* so. It's not a sure thing . . . I'd have liked a little more rigour and a little less, um—

VOICE Psychology?

PALAMEDES Yes.

VOICE Remember, my child, there's no shame in a bluff.

PALAMEDES Shame . . . Do you know, I *do* feel ashamed of all this.

Digging around in a dead man's body . . . trying to grab hold of his strings so I can usurp his puppeteer. I didn't like Naberius Tern on brief acquaintance, and I don't think I'd have liked him better on long acquaintance, but . . . he deserves better than this.

VOICE "Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?"

PALAMEDES (*Surprised*) I like that. Is it from something?

VOICE Yes. It's complicated.

PALAMEDES Do you really still think of me as a child?

VOICE My problem was reminding myself you *were* a child. I told you this. In almost every letter.

PALAMEDES I really am sorry I couldn't save you, or Protesilaus . . . or avenge either of you in a way that meant anything.

VOICE Oh, Palamedes, the very best of Palamedeses. I couldn't save you either. She didn't even let Pro get a shot off . . . which I think he took as a compliment, honestly. And look . . . at least we both got killed by the same person.

PALAMEDES That's not as comforting as you make it sound, honestly.

VOICE Don't worry. It'll all come out in the wash.

PALAMEDES Let's hope so. (*Pause*) I want to believe you are who I think you are. You shouldn't be here. There's no way for you to have travelled here, even via the River. That's why I can't trust this.

Or you. How are you here?

VOICE I gambled on the truth.

PALAMEDES Good. Then what?

VOICE I died.

PALAMEDES You died . . . again?

VOICE Truly, wonderful news for my haters.

PALAMEDES Will I ever know what happened?

VOICE Yes. But I'm really not allowed to tell you. It was something awful . . . in the old sense of the word. I know this means you can't trust me. And that's fine. You got very badly burned.

PALAMEDES Just, if you were able to . . . I don't know. Give me *something*—

VOICE In your second letter to me, you asked for my physical data. I didn't give you a lithograph. I'd lost so much weight and I wasn't responding to fat regrowth. Outside thalergy was giving me a rash. I felt incredibly down about myself, so I gave you a *very* silly description instead, along with measurements, and in your twenty-eighth letter you sent me a copy of the drawing Camilla had made to my particulars. Oh, it was so beautiful! That drawing looked nothing like me. I loved it. You don't know this so it doesn't help, but I included it in my will and put down that I wanted to look like that after I died. I thought maybe it would give you a laugh at the funeral, you know? *(Pause)* Is that enough?

PALAMEDES *(Pause)* Look—I doubt I'll get another chance to say this, so . . .

VOICE Don't. You don't have to.

PALAMEDES I loved you. I love you still. I would have worked out how to love you better over time.

VOICE It would have been very beautiful. Camilla would have had to cook. But I didn't just want *beautiful* . . . I wanted it to last, and I wanted to wait, and I knew I couldn't have either. It's not that you were young and foolish, you know? It's just that you were *young* . . . and I didn't want to steal any more youth from you. It made me feel rotten.

PALAMEDES This again? From you and her both? That merely by loving you, I added to your torments?

VOICE *(Encouragingly)* Yes, and also my agonies.

PALAMEDES Dulcinea . . .

DULCINEA You two were my best friends, and that was real. I loved real, ugly, unfinished things. Gracelessly uncompleted things.

There's freedom, too, in not ever being completed. And now I'm not in the River and I won't ever be again.

PALAMEDES If you're on the shore, then I'll find you.

DULCINEA Which shore?

PALAMEDES Pardon?

DULCINEA It's a river. There are two shores. If this ends well, you'll find that out.

Palamedes pushes his spectacles up his nose.

PALAMEDES May I see you?

DULCINEA Are you sure?

PALAMEDES For the first time, and the last.

DULCINEA *(After a long pause)* All right.

Blackout on the stage. Then a light on Palamedes—a Palamedes who is completely dazzled, and staring blankly outward, at nothing in particular.

PALAMEDES *(As if reciting)* "And her body was like the chrysolite, and her face as the appearance of lightning, and her eyes as a burning lamp: and her arms, and all downward even to the feet, like in appearance to glittering brass."

Blackout again, then the lights return to normal. Behind Palamedes, the curtain begins to rise.

DULCINEA Was I cute?

Palamedes turns and moves upstage.

PALAMEDES You're perfect.

SCENE SIX

The curtain rises. The stage is back in neutral position. The four coffins that were used to form the "ring" have been replaced, but in reverse order—making the sequence now 4, 7, 2, 3, 1, 6, 5. Ianthe is lolling on her chaise longue.

IANTHE Oh, the tension is killing me. No, I'm sorry; it's killing Hect. My mistake.

PALAMEDES I have one question left.

IANTHE And it's going to have to be a real monster of a question, my duck, because right now I'd say you have jack shit. We've used up a few precious heartbeats on subjects as varied and irrelevant as pneumatodynamics, regret, and Gideon Nav, and I can't wait to see how you're going to squash *those* together into saving the day. You look to me like a small boy holding a tail when he doesn't even know where the donkey is.

PALAMEDES Are you ready?

IANTHE Am I ready, he says. Oh, it's like a cheap serial. Does it all come down to this attack, my precious little lad? Come on then; let's see what you've got.

PALAMEDES All right. At Canaan House—

IANTHE Don't you *dare* ask me what I thought of Colum Asht. I will weep.

PALAMEDES —let's say Naberius had died by misadventure, before you were able to master the Eightfold Word.

IANTHE Misadventure? What—he tripped and fell down some stairs?

PALAMEDES I was thinking killed by a rampaging bone construct, but as you please. The point is—if he had died prematurely, and left you without a cavalier—would you have used your sister instead? *The seven attendants all strike their coffin lids, simultaneously, once.*

IANTHE Coronabeth?

The attendants move. They pick up the last three coffins in line—numbers 1, 6, and 5—and set them on their backs in the middle of the stage, parallel to each other, with their feet pointing downstage. Palamedes moves and sits on the left-hand coffin as if it were a bench, facing inward. Ianthe gets off her chaise longue and sits on the right-hand coffin, also facing inward. Two attendants pick up the chaise longue and carry it completely offstage. Another attendant steps forward and gives Ianthe a deck of playing cards, which she begins to shuffle slowly between her hands.

IANTHE By *used* . . . you mean, would I have killed Corona and consumed her soul?

PALAMEDES Yes.

Ianthe deals seven cards to Palamedes and seven to herself, onto the lid of the middle coffin, in silence. Only when she has put the rest of the deck on the "table" and picked up her own hand does she resume speaking.

IANTHE Well, that would have been a rather peculiar thing to do under the circumstances. Wouldn't it?

PALAMEDES I don't immediately see why.

IANTHE *(Playing a card face up on the table)* You . . . do understand the purpose of the cavalier in the Lyctoral process.

PALAMEDES *(Playing a card)* A power source.

IANTHE *(Playing a card)* But also a defensive system. The cavalier's combat reflexes are used to protect the Lyctor when their consciousness is . . . temporarily elsewhere.

PALAMEDES *(Playing a card)* Yes, I'd figured out that much.

IANTHE *(Playing a card)* She's not here, so let me be fully honest, Sextus: my sister is *not* a swordswoman. She loves to wear big boots and wave a sword around, and she looks wonderful doing it, but her actual competence . . . well, put it this way: she'd lose to Magnus Quinn.

PALAMEDES Magnus Quinn was a cavalier primary.

IANTHE No, I mean Magnus Quinn *now*.

PALAMEDES Oh.

Palamedes looks at the table, frowns, and picks up one of the cards that's already been played, adding it to his hand.

PALAMEDES But as a power source . . . I know we, ah, differ on the technicals, but you have to admit that Coronabeth's soul would have been extraordinarily compatible. Far more so even than Tern's. That's simple affinity theory.

IANTHE *(Playing a card)* It doesn't matter. Any extra power I might gain would be entirely compromised by the loss of defensive capability.

PALAMEDES *(Playing a card)* Defensive capability can be trained. Camilla noticed just now that your sword work has improved since Canaan House.

IANTHE (*Playing a card*) You're not listening. It doesn't matter how much a Lyctor trains their skills *consciously*. Once the autonomous layer takes over, it's the cavalier's abilities that have to hold the line. And the cavalier is static . . . frozen at the point of death.

PALAMEDES Are you sure?

IANTHE Oh, *no*. We're not going through this again. The soul is a diamond, Sextus. You can leave it in a glass of wine for as long as you like, it's never going to soak anything up.

PALAMEDES (*Mildly*) I thought you objected to analogies.

IANTHE The point is—I would never have used Coronabeth's soul, because it simply wouldn't have done the job. It's mathematics.

PALAMEDES (*Playing a card*) So what would you have done? In our hypothetical scenario. Admitted defeat? Tried to use someone else's cav instead?

IANTHE Using someone else's cav would be tremendously inefficient—

PALAMEDES (*Pressing*) But better than *nothing*, right? You'd still be a Lyctor. As you pointed out to me earlier, Harrowhark's ascension was . . . unorthodox . . . and I understand it's given her a lot of difficulty, but she still has access to power on a scale the Reverend Daughter of Drearburh could scarcely have imagined. A defective Lyctor is better than no Lyctor at all.

Ianthe reaches out and, with no very good grace, picks up a card from the table.

IANTHE Okay. Yes. In this ludicrous counterfactual where Babs ate a bad clam and died, I would *probably* have tried to perform the Eightfold Word using someone else's cavalier. Hmm. Let's think. Not the Fourth . . . I'd never eat a whole child at one sitting. Dyas, at a guess. I suspect her soul would be the easiest to force into line. Is *that* what you were driving at?

PALAMEDES No. Canaan House was a disaster, Ianthe. There were seventeen of us at the start, and how many at the end? Five? But it could easily have been worse. If Harrowhark had been killed . . . if *Camilla* had been killed . . . So what I want you to imagine now is

a situation where you've mastered the Eightfold Word, you understand the path to Lyctorhood, but Cytherea the First is coming up the stairs and you and Coronabeth are the only—two—survivors.
He plays a card.

PALAMEDES Do you fold . . . or raise? Do you kill your sister and ascend?

IANTHE *(Playing a card)* No.

PALAMEDES Why not?

IANTHE She's my *twin sister*, Sextus. I know you're an only child—and hence, prematurely middle-aged and insufferable—so I don't expect you to understand what it's like—

PALAMEDES *(Playing a card)* No, Ianthe. You've used that trick on me before and it won't work twice. "You wouldn't understand" is the last defence of someone who knows they can't justify their own position. Tell me why you wouldn't kill your sister.

Ianthe plays a card and says nothing.

PALAMEDES The goal is always worth the cost. So, logically, there are two possibilities. Either that was a mere piece of bravado, and there *are* costs that even Ianthe Tridentarius won't pay in pursuit of her goal. Or . . . Coronabeth herself is part of your goal. You can't spend her, because you'd invalidate the very thing you were trying to buy.

Palamedes plays a card.

PALAMEDES Are you going to tell me which it is? Or do you want me to guess?

Ianthe slaps down a card with an air of finality. It's her final card; she has nothing left in her hand.

IANTHE *(Softly)* You can think what you like. I've won. You're out of questions, and you still haven't the first idea which coffin Babs is in.

PALAMEDES You haven't answered my last question.

IANTHE Yes, I have.

She stands up. An attendant moves forward and starts clearing away the cards.

IANTHE You asked me whether I would have killed Corona at Canaan House. My answer is no. I don't have to justify that answer or explain my working.

Palamedes stands up wearily. Attendants come forward and begin to manhandle the three coffins back into their normal upright position.

PALAMEDES I suppose that's true.

IANTHE So . . . one-in-seven odds. (*Gesturing at the coffins*) How are you going to do it? Eeny-meeny-miny-mo? Throw a dart? Even you ought to get lucky eventually.

Palamedes surveys the row of coffins. The last three have been put back in reverse order—making the final sequence 4, 7, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1. The attendants, this task completed, exit one by one into the wings, leaving Palamedes and Ianthe alone on the stage.

PALAMEDES All right. Look. I'll ask you one more question—(*Off Ianthe's reaction*) No, hear me out. I'll ask you one more question, but it'll be a yes-or-no question. And if you can answer it—I'll surrender right here. I'll walk out of that door, and whatever happens to me after that will be for me to worry about.

IANTHE If I can . . . answer it?

PALAMEDES Yes. I don't care what the answer is. All I care about is whether you can say yes or no. Tell me either of those things—and mean it—and I won't fight you any longer.

IANTHE This is ridiculous. There are all sorts of yes-or-no questions I'd have no hope of answering. You could ask me something about the Sixth House—

PALAMEDES It's a question about Naberius.

Ianthe stares at him.

IANTHE A question about Babs . . . that *you* think I can't answer?

PALAMEDES I am, in the most literal possible sense, betting my life on it.

IANTHE You're trying to buy time.

PALAMEDES If I were trying to buy time I'd start another argument about how souls work. I'm ready to ask my question, right now, and get this over with. You're the one who's dragging it out.

IANTHE So, what—if I *can't* answer this question of yours, am I expected to do the decent thing? Applaud politely and retire?

PALAMEDES Ianthe, I've been in your head for what feels like a week. I would never insult you by expecting you to do anything either decent or polite.

Ianthe inclines her head in graceful acceptance of this point.

PALAMEDES If you can't answer this question . . . well, it won't much matter what you do.

IANTHE To be clear: there is no reason for me to give you this. You're on the very brink of falling apart.

PALAMEDES So what the hell have you got to lose? You're a Lyctor. Nothing I do here can possibly change that. I'm a ghost who hasn't quite given up yet . . . and one way or another, my time is running out. And, anyway, you owe me a question from before.

IANTHE I owe you nothing, Palamedes Sextus.

They look at each other.

IANTHE Fine. Ask your final question . . . but don't expect me to be amused if it's some tedious logician's juggle.

PALAMEDES Do you know where Naberius Tern's body is?
Ianthe does not react in any way. Palamedes turns and walks over to stand at the left-hand end of the row of coffins, next to coffin number 4. Ianthe slowly moves to stand at the other end, by coffin number 1.

PALAMEDES Honestly, the tie bothered me right from the start. Grey suit . . . purple tie. But I've never done this sort of thing before, and I assumed that you were—setting the rules, so to speak.

He opens the lid of coffin number 4, which swings outward easily, like a door. The coffin is empty.

PALAMEDES The cigarettes, though . . . that was where I really started to worry. Cigarettes don't exist on the Sixth, for obvious reasons. Not only do I not smoke . . . I don't know *how* to smoke. I've never seen anyone do it. I understand the basic principle that one sets the cigarette on fire and then puts it in one's mouth, but the precise series of movements involved is a mystery to me. And

yet, standing just over there, they came to me as naturally as if I'd been doing them all my life.

Ianthe opens the lid of coffin number 1. It's empty.

PALAMEDES Puzzling, but . . . I suppose one could conjecture that I was unconsciously following some sort of script. That in the same way as you put me in a purple tie, you somehow equipped me with the knowledge I needed to smoke a cigarette. So I still couldn't be sure of my ground until question four.

He moves inward and opens the lid of coffin number 7, the next from the left. It's empty.

PALAMEDES Ianthe . . . how did you *know* that Gideon Nav used her rapier like she was, quote, using a racquet?

IANTHE Why, I saw her fight. At Canaan House. Cytherea—

PALAMEDES No. Remember, Camilla filled me in on everything I missed. By the time Gideon fought Cytherea's construct, she'd regained her two-hander.

IANTHE Yes, but I watched her at the duels. The sporting ones.

PALAMEDES I'm afraid not. Gideon only fought two duels against other cavaliers—one against Magnus, and one against Naberius. I didn't see her fight. I only know what happened because Jeannemary Chatur regaled me with the story at breakfast. The only people present apart from the combatants were your sister and a couple of other cavaliers—Jeannemary and Marta Dyas, I think. I wasn't in the room . . . and nor were you. And there's no other time when Gideon would have been likely to use her rapier in front of an audience. I suppose it's possible you were spying on her while she was attempting one of the trials, but given the Reverend Daughter's extraordinary—ah—over-caution in such respects, I find it very unlikely.

IANTHE Babs told me about the fight. Afterward. So did Corona.

PALAMEDES (*Gently*) Again . . . unlikely. Or, at least, I'm sure they told you that the duel *had happened*. But your vivid description of Gideon's sword style . . . If you were quoting, you'd have said something like, "I gather she wasn't much good with a rapier,"

or something along those lines. The comparison to using a racket was firsthand observation from someone who'd been in the room . . . someone who's played sports themselves, recreationally, as part of an athletic lifestyle. In other words, that wasn't you speaking at all. It was Naberius Tern.

Ianthe opens the lid of coffin number 6. It's empty.

PALAMEDES But that's not even the clincher. Why would you care so much about *rules*? You delight in not playing fair. You said so yourself. And yet in your sudden—and, may I add, already uncharacteristic—outpouring of Gideon's shortcomings, you specifically singled out that she "didn't understand duelling." I assume that's a reference to Gideon punching Naberius at the end of the duel—but I suspect Ianthe Tridentarius would once have found that punch funnier than anyone else did.

He moves inward and opens the lid of coffin number 2. It's empty.

PALAMEDES You only got one question wrong, Ianthe, and it was the very first question. You can't admit what's happened here because you're fixated on this idea of the soul as inviolate and inviolable—this perfectly solid, impervious *thing*, the diamond sitting in the glass of wine. But souls *are* permeable. When they rub up against each other, they bleed—they mingle—they contaminate each other. Just from the handful of real-life seconds I've spent wrestling you for Naberius's body, I've picked up the knowledge of how to light a cigarette and a disturbing new enjoyment of trash talk.

Ianthe opens the lid of coffin number 5. It's empty. She and Palamedes are now facing each other from a few feet apart, standing on either side of the last remaining closed coffin, number 3.

PALAMEDES It's all so messy . . . so much messier than we ever imagined. I've been in Camilla's body for months now, and I've started remembering things I never saw. This is the real truth of Lyctorhood, Ianthe—it's not some bloodless swapping-out of batteries. It's grafting; transplantation. When you absorbed Naberius Tern's soul, you didn't swallow a diamond. You swallowed a piece

of meat . . . and the longer you digest that meat, the more its proteins and lipids and molecules mix in with yours, until you can't tell them apart anymore.

He raps two knuckles on the lid of coffin number 3.

PALAMEDES You can easily prove me wrong, of course. Just open that coffin. *If* Tern's body is inside, whole and entire, I'll be ending my chequered career with a truly spectacular cock-up, and death will seem like a welcome escape. But if it isn't . . . well. I wouldn't bother looking for it anywhere else.

Palamedes turns downstage and starts to walk away from the coffins. Ianthe remains staring at coffin number 3.

PALAMEDES There's no body left to find, Ianthe. Or, as I gather they call you now . . . Ianthe Naberius.

Palamedes keeps walking, away from the stage toward the back of the auditorium. Ianthe stands like a statue next to coffin number 3. She reaches out and places one hand against its closed lid as the curtain falls.

Hell Will Break Loose In

ALECTO THE NINTH