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## Illusion of Youth

**Jason Constantine Ford**

Charlotte remained silent as her fellow sisters chatted among themselves at dinner. Every now and then, another sister would give Charlotte a passing gaze before looking away. This kind of behaviour did not bother her. Instead it fed her pride, filled her with a sense of importance among other members of the White Lotus Society. Charlotte knew she had something they would never have: a portal back to youth was already in her grasp and it would not go away. Charlotte left the tea room and proceeded to the bathroom where she stared at herself in the mirror. Wrinkles from forty years of existence were gone. In another week, she would look like a teenager. Charlotte felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to her right to see Penelope smiling at her.

“I’m fascinated by your diet. It’s making you younger but nobody else sees you eating. You can tell me what you eat, I won’t tell anyone.”

Charlotte vigorously shook her head. “This subject is closed.”

She immediately walked out of the bathroom and would not be in contact with any of the other sisters until evening mediation at nine o’clock. When meditation began with all of the sisters gathered in a circle in the lotus position, a portrait of the late Bernadette Salle was placed in the middle of the circle with a candle burning beside it. The portrait was in honour of this former member who disappeared without a trace more than a month ago. While the other sisters were doing their own personal prayers and meditating with their eyes closed, Charlotte simulated the words of prayer with her lips as she knew that the dark magic she had been practising in the past few weeks was contrary to the prayers of the White Lotus Society. When meditation was over, the sisters were required to return to their rooms with Charlotte reluctantly going back to a room that she shared with Penelope.

After the lights were switched off, Charlotte was already in bed, pretending to sleep. Being aware of the rule that no sisters were allowed to be awake until daylight, Charlotte knew that she had to be careful. Underneath her blanket, Charlotte paid close attention to her mobile phone as minutes ticked away. When she was convinced that Penelope was fast asleep, Charlotte left her bed and changed into her usual clothes. Charlotte left the sister house, convinced she would not return, and proceeded to the forest where she collected resin from the bark of a sycamore tree before placing it in a small container. From the corner of her

eye, Charlotte could see a hooded man approaching her with a lamp in his hand. It was Lucien. After exchanging greetings, the two of them travelled in Lucien's car to the location of an underground cavern.

The minutes on Charlotte's clock were ticking away so quickly that it was already five minutes to midnight when they arrived at the cavern. They passed through a door and entered into a section of the cavern that was known as the Chamber of Enchantment. The chamber was illuminated by four lamps on each corner of it, as a cauldron was boiling in the middle with twigs underneath it, while it was flanked by two chests. Lucien opened the first chest and took out an elastic substance that expanded like spider webbing. He extended his right hand as Charlotte gave him the container of resin. Lucien mixed the resin with the elastic substance to form a sheet that looked like a piece of glad wrap. He dipped the sheet in the cauldron for a few seconds before taking it out and then hanging it on the wall to cool down. He returned to his position with Charlotte.

"Are you ready for the next stage?" Lucien asked.

"Yes, what am I required to do?"

"You must rub the skull of my latest victim and pray the prayer of darkness."

"Do you know who this person was?"

"No, I don't but I'll show you a picture of her." He took out a picture from his pocket and handed it to Charlotte. Upon seeing the picture, Charlotte was filled with fear. It was a picture of Bernadette. Deep down inside of her, she immediately felt like running away but persuaded herself not to do so. After a few seconds of silence, Charlotte returned the photo back to Lucien. "Are you still interested in the ritual?"

"Yes."

Lucien opened the other chest and took out a skull that he handed to Charlotte. For a few seconds, Charlotte was completely motionless as she stared at the object she held. Being afraid of the possibility that Lucien could look upon her as a coward, Charlotte recited the words of the prayer of darkness.

“Come Darkness, Come, envelope in you power.  
Release me from all doubt as I commit myself to  
you.”

Charlotte kept repeating these words as she was reluctantly using one hand to rub the skull of a former friend who had always been good to her. As the roughness of the skull’s surface was becoming uncomfortable for Charlotte’s hand, memories of Bernadette were returning to her conscious mind. Various images of her in places like the courtyard and the meditation room were entering in and out of Charlotte’s thoughts until she handed the skull back to Lucien. He then collected the transparent sheet and gave it to Charlotte. She then firmly pressed the sheet into the contours of her face before looking into a mirror held by Lucien. What she saw was absolute horror. Her former beauty was replaced with an image of a wrinkled old woman. Charlotte looked down on her hands to see that they were the same. In her distress, Charlotte ran away. In her passage from the chamber through the rest of the cavern and then away from it, she could hear a sinister laugh being repeated, over and over again.