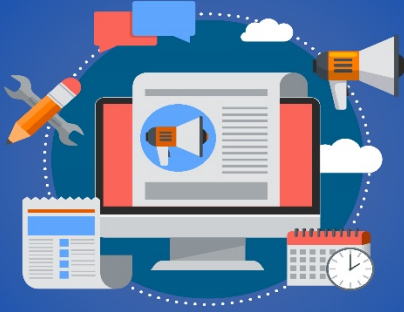


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Unhinged

Jason Constantine Ford

The temple was numb with silence as Antoinette climbed the steps to the highest part of the sanctuary. When she reached the other side of the altar and faced the congregation, every eye was locked on her figure until an amulet appeared in her hands. It was in the form of a pole with a snake coiled several times around it. Antoinette lifted the amulet above her head and it glowed. The congregation immediately reacted to this by closing their eyes and praying to the image of a skeletal goddess that towered above Antoinette from the back of the sanctuary. Victor and Marise, new congregants, opened their eyes to notice that Antoinette's eyes were also closed like the others. Marise gave Victor a slight nudge. He immediately left his pew and moved out of the temple into the car park. A Blue Volvo utility was in sight. Taking his tools out of a bag, Victor was reading to do his duty.

Victor jammed a doorstop between the upper part of the front door on the right side of the ute and the ute's roof. He then inserted a steel rod into a space that was created between the outer rim of the door frame and the ute's roof, before guiding a rod down towards the lock button, and unlocking the ute. Victor entered the driver's seat and looked through the glove box to find a diary among several other items. As Victor held onto the diary with both hands, he felt himself being bitten on the left arm by a mosquito. He took a swing at the mosquito before missing it and concentrating his attention back to the diary. He passed from one page to the next as he took pictures with his mobile phone camera. A few minutes later, Victor returned to the temple where Antoinette and the rest of the congregation remained in a state of trance. Upon reaching his place in the pew, Victor put his mobile in one of the pocket pants of Marise. She opened her eyes and smiled.

After arriving back home, Marise checked through the pages of Antoinette's diary from Victor's phone until she reached the current date.

Thursday October 3 1996

None of the clients who saw the mirror in my office, could detect a supernatural presence. Their blindness is my bliss. I celebrated their blindness by purchasing tickets to Stockholm. I

look forward to celebrate October 21 in Goteborg. On that day, I will see the other side of the mirror.

For several seconds, Marise was undecided about what to do regarding Antoinette's departure for a few days. Being convinced that Antoinette held the secret to the gift of immortality, she was inclined to follow her discreetly to Stockholm but had second thoughts. Her current status of being in debt made her realise that tickets for an airfare would be far too expensive for her and Victor. As she thought about the option of staying in France, she was open to the possibility that her goal could be hidden either in the temple or in Antoinette's office. She lit a cigarette and blowed a blowed a puff of smoke toward the ceiling before turning her attention to Victor.

“What should we do?”

“I'm just as lost as you are.”

“Wonderful.” She shook her head. “You promised to stick with me. Now, you don't even know what to do.”

“We need time to learn. We need more information.”

“You got any ideas?”

“The diary refers to a mirror. If you check other entries relating to this mirror, you might find something.”

Marise flicked through past pages of Antoinette's diary on the photo gallery of Victor's mobile phone as she came across numerous references to a mirror. Nearly all those references were accompanied with descriptions of the back of the mirror that were almost exactly the same. The back of the mirror was simply referred to as utter darkness. Remembering the advice that was given to her regarding the first link to immortality by Chantel, a confidante of Antoinette, Marise felt it was time to make contact with Chantel again. She rang Chantel's number.

“Hello, Chantel speaking.”

“Hi, it's Marise. Are you free this afternoon?”

“Yes, where do you want to meet up?”

“That lake in the Beaumont forest.”

“Mushroom picking? Is that what you want?”

“Yes, that’s definitely what I want.”

“What time?”

“Four O’clock. Victor will be joining us.”

By the time that Chantel arrived at the forest, Marise and Victor had collected more than a kilo of magic mushrooms. The mushrooms were already boiling in a pot underneath a pile of burning sticks. The tantalising smell of mushrooms cooked in water from the lake along with camomile leaves and cinnamon sticks had penetrated Chantel’s sense of smell even before she saw Marise and Victor. Chantel waved to her friends from a long distance away and they waved back to her. As Chantel reached the camp spot, the fire was extinguished and Marise was pouring mushroom tea into a few cups. Marise gave the first cup to Chantel and she thanked her for it. Victor took a cup for himself as he joined the others in touching cups and saying cheers.

“You told me that the boundary between life and death begins with the power of darkness. Since that time, I haven’t heard you come up with anything else.” Marise said.

“You know Antoinette. You know what she’s like. It’s so hard to get information from someone as secretive as her.”

“I’ve been given new information.”

“What did you receive?”

“Another congregant informed me that the power of darkness begins at the back of a mirror.”

“Which congregant told you this?”

“I can’t give you his name. But I can give out the information he gave to me.” Marise lied. She continued on. “He told me that there is a mirror at Antoinette’s compound that transmits utter darkness from the back of it. Do you know of such a mirror?”

“Yes, Antoinette has a standing mirror in her office but there doesn’t seem to be anything supernatural about it.”

“Have you seen her do anything to it.”

“Yes, from time to time, I see her sprinkling glitter onto the back of it.”

“Can you get me some of that glitter?”

“I’ll do what I can when she’s busy and not looking.”

“Do you know of any significance associated with Goteborg?”

“No, why do you ask?”

“That same congregant told me that October 21 is an important date among occultists in this city.”

The next two weeks came without any positive results for Marise and Victor with the exception of Chantel obtaining some of the glitter from the back of the mirror in Antoinette’s office. This one solitary form of good news was far outweighed by issues that revolved around both the financial and emotional wellbeing of Marise and Victor. The parent company of the commercial meat processing plant where they worked was losing profit and reacted to their losses by reducing the hours of work among their employees. The days of work for Marise and Victor were reduced from five to three days a week. On top of this, they were three weeks behind in their rent and Marise owed money to Pierre, a dealer in cocaine. In Marise’s frustration, she felt like breaking into a shop and taking enough cash to pay for the debts that were becoming hard to deal with from day to day, but held herself back from doing so. As she stood in the kitchen, she looked out the window, hoping to turn her attention away from the problems she faced until she saw Lenny, a customer who frequently bought magic mushroom tea from her. Entering the foyer, she opened the door and waved to Lenny who waved back to her.

“I haven’t seen you for a few weeks. What have you been doing?”

Lenny made his way to the door with a cheerful expression on his face. “I was away in Calais for a holiday.”

Marise took a step back from the door and made a gesture for Lenny to come in. They passed into the kitchen where three one litre bottles of magic mushroom tea were ready to be taken. Marise opened the lid for one of the bottles and inhaled its’ aroma before looking back to Lenny and sealing the bottle.

“Is it the smell, the taste or the hallucinations?” She asked.

“It’s everything.”

“If you’re after everything, I’ll need the money first.”

“I’ve only got forty euros.”

Marise shook her head. “That’s no excuse. If you want three bottles, that’s sixty euros.”

“Can’t you just give me a concession? I’ll pay you back the remaining euros on Monday next week.”

Marise was silent for a few seconds before responding. “O.K., I’ll let you have the third bottle but you’ll have to pay me back in full next Monday.”

Lenny nodded his head. “I’ll pay you back ASAP. Thanks.”

Lenny gave forty euro notes to Marise as she handed him the three bottles of tea. From there, she led him to the foyer and out of the house without saying good bye. She regretted making her deal with Lenny but realised that she had no other choice but to take what was given to her. That amount of money would be enough to pay for the next electricity bill. Marise left the foyer and passed into the lounge room where she buried her head in her hands. *What I am going to do?* Monday was the deadline for her to pay eighty euros to Pierre. After that, the debt would increase to ten euros for every week that she was late in payment as well as the burden of being behind in the rent by three weeks. As Marise was alone in the house with Victor away in negotiations with the local Triad to become a debt collector, she had no one to give her advice. Only one option came to mind. She looked through her list of fortune tellers and saw the rates that they charged. The cheapest option was Simon Bernard, a druid who lived in close vicinity to the Beaumont forest. His price tag was only twenty euros. Marise rang his number.

“Hello, Simon speaking.”

“Hi, are you available for appointments this weekend?”

“Yes, I have an available time slot this Sunday night at eight o’clock. Are you available then?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your name?”

“Marise Campion.”

“What’s your contact number?”

Marise was silent for a few moments before providing her number. After this, the rest of her words were hardly audible in such a way that Simon had to repeat himself by asking her several times if she had an emergency contact number. She eventually gave him the number of Victor and assured Simon that she would attend the appointment before hanging up. With the burden of impending deadlines for debt and a mission that she was unsure of, Marise felt even more insecure than ever before. She walked away from the phone and looked at herself in the mirror. The empty features that she saw in front of her, made her wonder if the mirror in Antoinette’s office would be the same as the one she was staring into. In her state of confusion, she looked away from the mirror and started crying.

As Marise held out the palm of her hand in the middle of the table, Simon slowly traced his forefinger through the lines in her hand. When his finger came down to almost the end of a curve at the bottom of the hand, he was frozen. He looked Marise in the eyes with an expressionless stare. As Simon did this, Marise felt like taking her hand away but returned the kind of gaze that was given to her. Suddenly, Simon shook his head at Marise. She responded to this by taking her hand away from him.

“What are you doing? She complained.

“I had to stop the session because the energy coming out of your bag is different from the energy coming out of you.”

“That’s not true, there’s no energy in my bag.”

“I don’t think so. You’ve got glitter immersed in black magic.”

Upon hearing these words, Marise was frozen, unable to speak.

Simon continued. “If this session is going to work, you’ll need to take the glitter out of your bag and allow me to balance its’ energy with your own.”

Marise responded to this request by removing a small container from her hand bag and placing it in the centre of the table, near the position where her hand was held out. Simon

opened the container and took a good look at the glitter before making a gesture for Marise to return her hand to its' previous position. Marise placed her hand on the table as Simon resumed his duty of tracing through and around the lines in the palm of her hand. Without any kind of warning, Simon used his other hand to collect a few grains of glitter and sprinkle them onto the area of Marise's palm where his forefinger was moving at a slow pace until he pressed his finger hard into the bottom of Marise's hand. There was a slight jolt in Marise's body before Simon let go of her. In that split second, Marise realised that she felt physical pain but it was not in her hand. The pain was in her spine. Marise leaned back in her seat.

“What happened?”

“The energy from that glitter is taking you down the path of darkness.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You may not realise this but you're gaining an attraction to human blood.”

She shook her head furiously. “No.”

“After this session, you'll know what I'm talking about.”

Marise shook her head again. “I didn't come here for you to lecture me on the glitter. I came here to know where my fortune lies.” Anger was building up inside of her. “Don't waste my time, just me what I need to know. Can I become rich?”

“Yes, there is a strong chance of you becoming rich but the power making you rich could end up taking your life.”

She turned her gaze away from him in frustration but managed to return to giving him eye contact. “I don't care about probabilities. I just want to be wealthy.”

“If wealth is what you want, you can gain it with the glitter.”

“How will the glitter give me wealth?”

“It will give you wealth by opening your eyes to the future.”

“How's that possible?”

“If you follow my instructions, I'll show you the future.”

Simon took out a crystal ball from a cupboard underneath the table and placed it in front of Marise. He took a hold of Marise's right hand and put it on the top of the crystal ball. He then opened the container with the glitter.

"Open your other hand." Simon requested. Marise did as she was asked. Simon sprinkled some glitter onto her left hand. "Close your eyes and think of nothing, absolutely nothing."

After closing her eyes, Marise could only see complete blackness. All her senses seemed to be numb as she could no longer hear and smell anything. She felt like opening her eyes again to escape this void of emptiness but remembered the instructions that were given to her. With each second weighing down upon her, Marise looked around in every direction inside her mind but the atmosphere of darkness did not change until she saw a mirror a few feet away. She walked up to it and touched its' frame. Suddenly, a man appeared in the frame with a female grim reaper statue beside him. Marise immediately reacted to this by opening her eyes. To her surprise, that same image appeared in the crystal ball where her right hand was placed. Marise took her hand off the crystal ball, left her chair and walked in the opposite direction until she reached the door. She then turned back towards Simon.

"What the hell have you done?"

"What you asked me to do?"

Marise was about to turn around again and leave but realised that her container of glitter was with Simon. "I've given you your money's worth. I'm through with this." Reaching the table, Marise collected her container of glitter and was about to leave but Simon put his hand out and held her wrist before letting go.

"Don't you want to know who that guy is?"

"What's his name?"

"His name is Dietrich Bergman. He is the high priest of your religion, the one that worships Time as a goddess."

"How do you know him?"

"I was with him one year ago in Gotteberg when he had that same statue blessed by a druid of an order higher than my own."

“What else do you know about him?”

“I won’t be telling you. You need to find out for yourself.”

Pierre leaned back on the sofa and shook his head in frustration as he looked at Marise. “It’s been three weeks. What excuse are you giving me this time?”

“Both my hours and those of Victor have been reduced. We’re struggling.”

“That’s not my problem. You owe me money.”

“I’m getting my pay slip this Friday. I’ll pay you first thing on Friday.”

“Remember our deal?” Pierre took a puff of a cigarette and blew a few rings into the air. “On Friday, you owe me ninety euros instead of eighty. Meet me at my place first thing after work on Friday. Also, you’re not getting any new crack until the debt has been paid.” Pierre lifted himself off his seat as Marise escorted him to the foyer and out of the house.

Son of a bitch. With the door having been slammed in an impolite manner, Marise walked into the kitchen, ready to make breakfast. Despite the stress that her debts had caused her, she could clearly see the solitary form of hope that existed in her life. Her grains of glitter were resting inside a bowl near her collection of cutlery. Without even thinking, Marise took out a grain of glitter and consumed it. It was completely bland but it gave her hope. She contemplated the possibility that consuming it could have the result of merging its’ power with her inner being. In a few seconds, she waited for a result but nothing happened. *Last night was a waste of time.* In her frustration, Marise shook her head, attempting to remove the problems from her life but awareness of her debts would not disappear.

She took a cutting board and began slicing a tomato for her toast. Having forgotten to remove the middle part of the tomato before cutting it in slices, Marise made a single slice and was ready to cut off the middle part. Suddenly, there was cut on the forefinger of her other hand. The sight of blood, made her turn her head away. *How could I be so careless?* She opened a drawer and took out a band aid. As she wrapped it around her finger, she saw Victor enter the front of the house with his car. Instead of waving to him, Marise turned away from the window. She put a few slices of bread into the toaster and leaned against the wall. As she waited for the toaster to do its’ job, Marise remembered how Lenny was due to pay off the rest of his debt on this day. She looked at her watch. It was a quarter past nine. Lenny

was supposed to have rung her an hour ago. The thought of Lenny made her angry to such an extent that Marise felt like punching him in the face.

“Good morning sweetie.”

Marise turned to her left to see Victor smiling at her. She did not return a smile. “Good morning.”

“You’re not in a good mood.”

“What do you expect? We’ve got debts to pay.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I had another interview with the Triads. They’ve accepted me as a debt collector. I’m starting my first shift tonight.” As Victor looked into the eyes of Marise, he could see no response. “Aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

“I’ll do it when I’m in a better mood. Besides that, you won’t be joining me tonight.”

At that moment, Victor remembered how he had agreed to join Marise in the act of breaking into Antoinette’s office. As the situation become clear to him, he realised that it was October 21. “I’m so sorry, I forgot all about it.”

Marise turned away from him and shook her head. She pressed the flip button for the toaster to find her slices of bread already burnt. Instead of removing the slices of bread from the toaster, Marise slammed her fist onto the table. “Nothing’s going right, nothing at all.” She walked away in frustration. Victor followed her into the lounge room as she cried. As Victor looked at Marise, she turned away from him again.

“You don’t need to be so stressed. I’m going to bail you out.”

Marise turned away, refusing to look at Victor. “That bastard, Lenny. He’s the problem.” She lied.

“What did he do wrong?”

“He’s been spreading lies about me to other people.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t worry about what the lies are. He’s been slandering me.”

“How do you know that he’s been doing this?”

“I’ve got a credible source that I won’t be mentioning.”

Victor turned around to the front of Marise so he could give her eye contact. “What do you want me to do to him?”

“I want you to pay him back.”

As Marise sat in the driver’s seat of the car with Victor beside her, she waited patiently for Lenny’s arrival at his house. It was already half past seven in the evening when Lenny would usually return from work. The only thought on Marise’s mind was to get back the twenty euros that were owed to her by Lenny. Her mind was already made up that she would retract her lies regarding Lenny as long as she was given her money. With each passing second, she kept thinking back to the reminders that she sent to Lenny through text messages at lunch time and in the afternoon. *Why isn’t he responding? Doesn’t he have the money?* As Marise was feeling impatient, she stepped out of the car and lit a cigarette.

Marise blew out a puff of smoke into the air. “The bastard’s late.”

“You still haven’t told me what you want me to do to him.”

“I’ll tell you what to do when we get inside.”

At that moment, a car came into the street. From behind her windscreen, Marise recognised who it was. It was Lenny. He made eye contact with Marise but did not wave to her. As Lenny’s car parked into the driveway, Marise walked towards the house with Victor following behind her.

“Lenny.”

Lenny turned around to see Marise and Victor approaching him. “Where’s the money?” Marise asked.

“You’re not going to believe me what but I’ll tell you anyway.”

“What is it? I’m ready to hear anything.”

“I spent today’s pay at the casino but I’ll still pay you back. Just follow me in. I’ll open my internet banking and put the money into your account.”

They passed into the foyer as Lenny escorted Marise and Victor to the dining room. He made a gesture for them to be seated and they did so. “If you just wait there, I’ll get my lap top and sort this out.” Lenny immediately left the dining room. As they were seated, Marise lost all interest in getting her money back. There was only one emotion inside her mind. That emotion was anger.

“What do you want me to do to him?” Victor whispered.

“Hold him while I punch him in the face.”

“How many times do you want to hit him?”

“Enough to make him bleed.”

As soon as Lenny entered the dining room, he loaded up his computer. When he reached the home page for his internet banking, Lenny looked at Marise. “What’s your account number and BSB?” To Lenny’s surprise there was no answer as Marise simply looked at him without speaking. Before he could come to terms with this, Lenny felt himself being gripped in a bear hug by Victor. Not long afterwards, a fist came crashing down on his face. This was followed by several other blows until Marise stopped throwing punches. She used her left hand to rub the knuckles on her right hand as she looked at Victor. Before she could say anything, Lenny was screaming.

“What are you doing? I was going to pay you back. Now you’re hitting me.” He shouted.

Marise responded to this by pointing to the floor as she looked at Victor. Victor immediately threw Lenny to the floor before punching him in the jaw and knocking him out.

Marise and Victor proceeded to the kitchen where they served themselves a few glasses of vodka from the fridge. As they were drinking, Marise heard a voice in her head. *Drink Blood.* Marise looked around the kitchen and saw nobody else except Victor and herself. The discomfort caused by the voice was enough to persuade her to put her glass down and turn away from Victor. Victor reacted to this by walking up to Marise and tapping her on the shoulder.

“What’s wrong now? You’ve got your revenge.”

Marise turned around. “I need more. I need blood.”

“Blood?”

As Victor spoke, Marise could see a mosquito on Victor’s left forearm. She took a swing but the mosquito had already left Victor’s arm by the time that Marise’s slap had landed.

“What are you doing? It’s only a mosquito.”

“It’s a bloodsucker.”

Marise opened a drawer where she saw a large assortment of cutlery. As she rummaged through the collection, she found a butcher knife and held it out triumphantly before her eyes. Victor reacted to this by taking a step back as he feared the possibility that Marise could attack him. To his relief, she left the kitchen. He followed her from a distance to see a sight that filled him with disgust. The butcher knife fell down on the neck of Lenny, again and again.

With the use of a hexagonal wrench in the knob of the front door, Marise was able to enter into the compound of the second highest order of the Waldensian sect. She felt a sense of triumph as she held a bag in each hand. In her right hand, Marise had a bag with the severed head of Lenny while her other hand held a bag with tools that could be useful for her. She walked down a corridor, past the foyer, and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. As a Waldensian, Marise was fully aware that her actions were in violation of the rules associated with her religion. Despite her knowledge of what she was doing, she was not troubled by any sense of guilt. Having been dumped by Victor only a few hours previously, she no longer cared about human company as long as her criminal acts were covered up.

Victor’s generous deed of helping her to clean up the blood, his destruction of all evidence of a murder and his agreement not to inform others about the killing was all that mattered regarding her ex boyfriend. As Marise walked along another corridor on the second floor, she heard that voice which spoke to her at Lenny’s house. *Go to the room with the snake image.* Marise did as was requested of her. As she was about to turn the knob to enter the room, the knob turned by itself and the door opened. Marise switched on the lights to see herself in an office that was adorned with images of occult symbols, pictures of Antoinette, a statue of Time as a female grim reaper and a mirror in the middle of the room. She approached the other side of the mirror and touched the glitter. As soon as she did this, the voice inside her head returned. *Take the head out and make it touch the glitter.* She removed

Lenny's head from the bag and she rubbed his face against the glitter. As soon as this happened, two blurry faces appeared on the other side of the mirror. Within a few seconds, the faces became clear. They were Dietrich and Antoinette.

“You're searching for immortality! Am I right?” Dietrich said.

Marise did not respond. She was so overcome with shock that she let go of Lenny's head, but instead of it falling to the ground, the head was suspended in the air. It turned around and looked Marise in the eyes. Marise was about to run away but felt an invisible force pull her to the wall until she was unable to move.

“Let me out of here.” Marise cried.

Antoinette smiled at Marise. “You're the one who wanted to search my office. Am I right?”

As Marise heard these words, she felt a mosquito bite her left forearm. She took a swing at it but missed the target as it flew away.

Antoinette resumed her conversation. “Time is life and Time is death. Tonight, you will feel the power of Time.”

As Marise was pinned to the wall against her own will, a headless figure with a butcher knife entered the office. It was the headless body of Lenny. Suddenly, the statue of Time spoke. “Kill her.”

As the headless figure walked towards Marise, she attempted to move herself either to the left or to the right but could not do so. With one full swing of the butcher's knife by the headless figure, Marise's head fell down hard upon the ground as the floating head of Lenny smiled with glee.