

Narrator: The past, as well as the present, begins with a Dramatis Personae:

- First we have me, the NARRATOR.
- Our first of four is ALPON CAROMARC, a driven young alchemist, heir to the County of Vieland, an imposing figure with a serious mien and already greying hair.
- Second we have PETROS LORRIMOR, a brilliant but lazy young mage, with an easy smile and sparkling green eyes.
- Third is HEINZLARR KOCH, a quiet young alchemist, thin and precise and trying unsuccessfully to grow a moustache.
- Fourth and last is TORSTEN WERNER, a kind-hearted young mage with a friendly face, currently troubled.

Narrator: The curtain rises on a dark and cold laboratory, underneath the earth. Stone slabs make up the floor and walls and the shadowed faces of the first three of our students can be seen. Heinzlarr Koch, dressed in a lab coat, works by a complicated apparatus of tubes, beakers, flasks and bubbling liquids, overseen by Alpon Caromarc who looks on with a frown. Petros Lorrिमor sits nearby on a wooden chair; his feet on the table, surrounded by sheets of paper full of arcane calculations.

Alpon Caromarc: Steady Heinzlarr, steady. Just a few more drops. Wait until it turns green.... there, stop! Now add mandrake root, brimstone, crushed basilisk bone and five drops of saltpetre solution.

Heinzlarr Koch: The ammonia or the sulphuric variant?

Petros Lorrिमor: <looking up from his notes> The ammonia one. And hold off on the basilisk bone?

Alpon Caromarc: <turns to Petros with a raptor-like glare> No. The basilisk bone is needed to petrify the mandrake root. Without it, the formula will overburn.

Petros Lorrिमor: True, but it will stupify the brimstone. The overall power of the formula will be reduced.

Alpon Caromarc: I should remind you that I have read all 17 volumes of *Hugenot's Properties of Alchemical Components* and committed them to my extensive memory. My knowledge of components exceeds that of most of the professors in college. In none of these volumes is it stated that basilisk bone will do what you describe. Your remit is the arcane calculations, not the alchemy.

Petros Lorrिमor: I'm not claiming knowledge of alchemy Alpon, nor to have read *Hugenot's* (truth be told, I've barely read my own texts). I'm just saying the basilisk bone will stupify the brimstone. Seems obvious to me.

Heinzlarr Koch: Um, it is possible that under the extreme temperatures we are dealing with here that basilisk bone will exhibit properties not covered by *Hugenots'*, at least I think so. Um...

Alpon Caromarc: Very well. We will proceed without the basilisk bone. Add cockatrice liver instead. That should have a similar petrification property, although we will need to obtain more liver. That is, unless our mage, has any objections?

Petros Lorrिमor: Sounds good to me. <he smiles>

Narrator: Koch completes the additions, as prescribed by Alpon and the solution begins to bubble furiously, emitting clouds of green and orange smoke. Koch stands back as the apparatus shakes violently; several beakers fall off and smash on the stone floor. After a few seconds of this reaction, the smoke and the shaking stop, and the now-purple liquid calms to a rest. Alpon steps forward and inserts a small brass rod, taking a measurement. A half-smile escapes his normally dry lips.

Alpon Caromarc: Better, much better. But still not perfect. More work is needed before we can proceed to the re-animation phase for a larger subject. Where is Werner? We need his input.

Narrator: As if on queue, the heavy oak and iron door to the laboratory swings open and Torsten Werner enters. His footsteps echo around the cavern as he descends. He leaves the door slightly ajar, and a shaft of torchlight shines down from above into the gloom.

Alpon Caromarc: You're late Werner. Explain yourself. You have the calculations I presume?

Narrator: Torsten reaches into his coat and removes a wedge of papers which he drops softly onto the table. Lorrिमor picks them up and begins leafing through them.

Torsten Werner: Don't worry, they're all present and correct Petros. I even solved the abjuration problem in the outer flesh.

Petros Lorrिमor: Mmmmm....mmmm.... <he is engrossed>

Alpon Caromarc: Very good. But that doesn't explain your tardiness.

Torsten Werner: Does it matter? If you must know I've been discussing some things with Gaby. Both she and I have some reservations...

Alpon Caromarc: Yes, I've heard quite enough of your girlfriend's thoughts on matters she is clearly unqualified and ill-informed to pass judgement on. In fact, we have been having a discussion in your absence and the three of us are in agreement that women - or to be particular relationships - are a distraction to our work here. We think it is time you began seeing less of Gabrielle.

Torsten Werner: WHAT?! You cannot be serious. I love Gaby.

Alpon Caromarc: You love science!

Torsten Werner: That is... that is a different kind of love. It is possible to hold both. But I don't suppose any of you three would understand that. I can just about fathom this nonsense from you Alpon, but Petros and Heinz: you agree with him?

Petros Lorrिमor: <puts the notes aside> My dear friend, it's not a matter of abstinence, oh dear god no. It's just that, well, we need to keep our priorities straight. We are making real progress here, we can't lose our focus.

Torsten Werner: And Heinz?

Heinzlarr Koch: Er, well. Um... I think that, um...

Alpon Caromarc: Heinzlarr wouldn't know a woman if it jumped up and bit him. His thoughts are irrelevant.

Torsten Werner: Well this just makes what I can here to say all the easier. I came to confess two things to you all.

Alpon Caromarc: Confess? Not found religion, I hope. Ha ha ha.

Torsten Werner: Religion, no. Morality, possibly. <he pauses> I have destroyed the homunculus.

Alpon Caromarc: WHAT?! YOU DID WHAT?! That was our greatest triumph, our first step on the stairs of destiny. You dare... you dare... what gives you the right?

Torsten Werner: I give me the right. It was in constant pain; in suffering. It cried out, every day, begging us to kill it and you three did nothing, nothing. A life as broken and twisted as that... it's no life at all.

Alpon Caromarc: You would dare betray us like this! Thousands of hours of work; who cares what pain it was in? <he smashes his fist on the table> Get out! You will leave this laboratory and never return!

Torsten Werner: No, I get to go first. My second confession is: I quit! I'm choosing to walk out of here, you're not making me.

Narrator: At this point, both Alpon and Torsten start shouting at each other, arguing over who said what first. Petros gets up out of his chair and tries to calm the two of them down. Torsten accuses Alpon and the others of trying to play God, and Alpon accuses Torsten of being weak of will. Petros offers both of them a drink, which they bat away. The shouting continues. All through this Koch stands, quietly looking at his shoes.

Torsten Werner: That's it, I've had enough. I'm leaving, and Heinz is coming with me.

Alpon Caromarc: Heinzlarr is staying right here, you will not tempt him with your betrayal!

Torsten Werner: <looks to Koch> Heinz, we talked about this...

Alpon Caromarc: <looks to Koch> You... you knew about this? You knew about the homunculus!

Heinzlarr Koch: No, no. I mean, yes, we talked, but I didn't know Torsten would destroy the creature. I swear. We talked... that's all. It's just that... well, I didn't know it would go this far. If we are found out... it would be the end of our degrees.

Alpon Caromarc: And? Ignoramuses, the lot of them.

Heinzlarr Koch: You... you don't understand. My parents are poor. My tuition, it's all their savings. This degree is all I have.

Petros Lorrimer: Heinz, dear friend. Our degrees are valuable, no doubt, but what we are seeking here is something more. This is your chance to do something great, something amazing. Don't you want to make your mark on the world, to do some good?

Heinzlarr Koch: I ... I ... of course... but...

Alpon Caromarc: Where is your ambition Heinzlarr? What does the university offer us; 50 years of books and blackboards? Your life spent just passing on dry knowledge from one generation to the next, your brain nothing more than a beaker of water, a wasted receptacle. Is that what you want? Is it?!

Heinzlarr Koch: I ... I ... think I can live with that.

Alpon Caromarc: Then go, but never return. You do not deserve the destiny that awaits us.

Narrator: Slowly, but deliberately, Koch removes his lab coat and walks up the stone stairs to where Torsten now stands, the shaft of torchlight illuminating his moves. With a last sad look he glances back down into the laboratory where Alpon and Petros stand, shadows across their faces. Torsten waves him forward and the two of them exit, the oak door shutting behind them.

Petros Lorrimer: Oh, well, just the two of us now. Chin up friend, most of the calculations are done. Two should be enough.

Alpon Caromarc: <to himself> Or perhaps even just one. I have seen where 'friends' have got me.

Petros Lorrimer: Say what?

Alpon Caromarc: Nothing, nothing. As you say, back to work. The future beckons.