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FREE

ALL FOR ONE

Régime Diabolique

The Headless Woman

❧ Introduction ❧

Pride has been the downfall of many people throughout the ages. Among the most terrible stories of those whose pride has laid them low is that of Anne-Louise Bellerose, Baroness de Tournay.

Born in the tumultuous era of the Hundred Years War, the baroness' surname, which translates into English as "beautiful rose," was a case of serendipity, for she among the most beautiful of God's creations. Although she never married, she had countless suitors, for men were drawn to the young woman like moths to a flame. Possessed of sharp wit and astute men, many were burned by her flame.

Time, though, is a harsh mistress. Despite her beauty, not even the baroness could stave off the effects of old age. Possessed of immense pride in her youthful looks, the baroness recoiled in horror when she first noticed a stray gray hair and a slight crease at the corner of her eyes. Slight though these imperfections were, men began to turn their attention to younger women. The baroness became convinced that her wasting looks were the cause of their wandering eyes, but in truth it was her reluctance to pick a husband and the diminishing chances of producing a healthy heir that drove men into the embrace of her younger rivals.

Although still attractive, she convinced herself she was a hideous crone. In a fit of rage bordering on insanity, the baroness had all the mirrors in her home destroyed, began eating off plain wooden plates to avoid seeing her appearance in silver platters, and kept the curtains tightly drawn, lest she catch her reflection in a pane of glass.

One dark and stormy night, after downing a bottle of wine, she cursed God for stealing her looks, and, without thinking, cried aloud that she would do anything to regain her youthful appearance. Her anguished cry did not go unheard.

Within a week, she received an unexpected visitor. M. Louis de Ferrer spoken brazenly to the noblewoman, asking what she would sacrifice to have her youthful appearance restored. "Everything!" she replied. The smile that crossed the visitor's lips would have chilled the blood of a sane person, but Baroness de Tournay had long stepped beyond the boundaries of sanity. M. de Ferrer drew a bejeweled dagger from his cloak and asked the baroness to summon her most attractive serving girl, one whose beauty she envied.

The serving girl duly arrived, and knelt before her mistress as M. de Ferrer ordered. With a sudden swish, her head was severed by the enchanted dagger. Baroness de Tournay opened her mouth to scream, but no sound issued, for her head lay on the carpet a moment later, her eyes staring vacantly at the heavens.

Baroness de Tournay awoke at dawn, having apparently fallen asleep in a chair. Memo-

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ries flooded back, but there was no sign of the decapitated serving girl or M. de Ferrer, nor was the rug stained by blood. At first the baroness thought her memories a dream, until she spotted the bejeweled dagger resting beside her bed. Next to it was a brief note, unsigned and written in an unknown hand. It read, "I shall claim my reward in due course."

Suddenly hungry, the baroness rang for her breakfast. What happened next was most unexpected. The maid hurriedly placed the tray on the table, ran across to the baroness, and slapped her hard around the face. Outraged, the baroness demanded to know the reason for this impudence. It took her a moment to realize that while she spoke the words, the voice was not hers.

Undeterred by the rebuke, the maid began tearing at the baroness' clothes, demanding she remove them before the mistress discovered her. Now angry beyond measure, the aristocrat struck out, knocking her servant unconscious. Confused and a little alarmed, the baroness ran through the chateau in desperate search of a reflective object, for a dark and terrible thought gnawed at her mind.

At last finding a silver platter hidden away in a cupboard, she raised it high and stared at her reflection. Quickly biting her lip to conceal her scream, she dropped the platter and recoiled—the visage that greeted her was that of the dead serving girl. Tearing off her starched collar, she saw a ragged red line running around her neck. The last vestiges of her sanity fled into the darkness.

Although pleased at having her beauty restored, the baroness knew she was cursed. Too many people knew her, and thus she could not appear without masking her altered appearance. That their mistress suddenly took to wearing a veil surprised none of her staff. The final loose end was quickly tied—her staff were informed that the serving girl caught wearing the baroness' clothes had been caught and immediately dismissed from service.

Baroness de Tournay soon discovered that having to conceal her restored beauty in public was but a lesser curse. Within a week her face had aged seven years. Furious, the baroness pulled at her hair. She was most surprised when she found herself staring down at her head, but likely not as surprised as the head was.

Over the next few days she began experimenting. Removed from her shoulders, the head no longer aged. However, it did not become dormant—whatever dark magick had been worked, the head reverted to its original personality, that of a murdered serving girl. It could see, hear, smell, and speak (the latter requiring it to be gagged to stop it screaming). Worse, for the head, it could remember its death and was fully aware of its new state of being. Thanks to the fell magick used in the ritual, the baroness retains her senses, as well as the power of speech, even without a head on her shoulder.

Two centuries have now passed, and the baroness still lives. Her altered form no longer requires food or drink, nor does her body ever age. The pride that led to her damnation demands she have a beautiful appearance, and that requires her to commit an act of murder

with great regularity. With her appearance ever changing, the baroness now travels across France, adopting new identities, surviving as best she can, and moving on once a new head or three have been acquired.

As far as the locals are concerned, the chateau remains empty, abandoned by the baroness but still in the family. Every few decades, a new female member of the family arrives to claim it as her home, though she rarely stays long. If the villagers were ever to learn the succession of owners were in fact the same person, they would burn the baroness at the stake. Concealed in the basement are her gagged disembodied heads of old, callously discarded after their beauty has faded. Thoroughly mad, they spend their days quietly moaning and praying for death.

The true price of her immortality and eternal youth is yet to be paid. Her soul is dark and twisted beyond redemption, stained by hundreds of murders and her excessive vanity and envy. Sooner or later she will die, and then Satan will have eternity to torment her.

Her punishment will be especially fitting, for Satan intends for her to have her eyelids cut away and her body placed in a circle of mirrors. Each day, she will watch her body wither into a rotten, worm-eaten corpse, only to grow young again and the process repeat itself over and over and over.

The Headless Woman

Archetype <i>Demonic Noble</i>		Motivation <i>Survival</i>	
Style: 3		Health: 8*	
Primary Attributes			
Body: 3		Charisma: 4**	
Dexterity: 3		Intelligence: 4	
Strength: 3		Willpower: 4	
Secondary Attributes			
Size: 0		Initiative: 7	
Move: 6		Defense: 6	
Perception: 8		Stun: 3	
Skills	Base	Levels	Rating (Average)
Con	4	4	8 (4)
Diplomacy	4	3	7 (3+)
Empathy	4	3	7 (3+)
Investigation	4	2	6 (3)
Melee	4***	2	6 (3)
Performance	4	3	7 (3+)
Stealth	3	3	6 (3)
Talents			
Captive (Can use Performance to entrance foes)			
***Bold Attack (Uses Charisma for Melee)			
Resources			

Refuge: Security 1, Size 1 (Her old chateau)

Flaw

Homicidal Vanity (+1 Style point whenever she is the center of attention. She gains +1 Style point whenever she acquires a new head with Charisma 4+, but loses 1 Style point whenever an existing heads drops to Charisma 1 through aging.)

Weapons	Rating	Size	Attack	(Average)
Dagger****	1L	0	7L	(3+)L

* *The baroness' Health is based on Willpower + Charisma, and thus drops as her current head ages. She can only be slain by Called Shots to the head she is currently wearing on her shoulders. While she still suffers Stun and Knockback from other attacks, she never loses Health.*

** *For each day she wears a head, it ages one year. For every two weeks it is worn, the head's Charisma permanently drops one point, to a minimum of 0. At Charisma 0 it is a baggard visage, blighted by heavy wrinkles and liver spots beyond that of an ordinary woman of advanced years.*

**** *The dagger unerringly strikes at the neck of female opponents. When attacking a female victim, the dagger allows the wielder to make a Called Shot to the vitals with a bonus equal to double the victim's Charisma rating. A victim slain by this attack is always cleanly decapitated.*

For example, against a woman with Defense 5 and Charisma 4, the baroness' Melee rating would be 10L (Melee 7, -5 for the full Defense rating of her opponent, +8 for her Charisma).

New Head: When she dons a new head, she gains all the memories of her victim. She retains her own Intelligence and Willpower rating, no matter that of the person whose head she now wears. Her Charisma is always based on that of the head on her shoulders, but as noted above it quickly deteriorates, forcing her to kill an innocent to gain a new head in order to retain her beauty. Her listed Charisma rating assumes a very fresh head.

While wearing a head, she gains the Skills, Talents, and Resources the head's original owner possessed in life. If the head and the baroness have the same Skills, then the highest rating is used. Resources are gained only so long as the baroness impersonates her victim.

No Head: Not having a head on her shoulders does little to hamper the baroness. She can still hear, smell, see, and talk, though her Charisma rating drops to zero.

Without a head, she is effectively immortal, able to shrug off any injury. Unless a head has Charisma 4+, she thinks nothing of abandoning a head to save her body. One devious combat tactic is for her to remove her head and continue fighting. Killing her then requires her to be subdued and one of her heads placed on her shoulders. More subtly, she might voluntarily have her head fall off her shoulders, giving the impression she has been decapitated. She can then wait until her attackers have left before getting up and finding a new head.

Using the Baroness

The baroness makes for a truly dastardly recurring villain. A cold-hearted murderer, she kills not out of greed, vengeance, or lust for power, nor to attain the wisdom of her victims, but simply to retain her beauty forever.

However, making the baroness nothing more than a psychotic serial killer is doing her an injustice. While she needs to commit murder (in her eyes), it does tend to draw the attention of the authorities. Furthermore, even her most cherished heads wither into old age after a month of being worn. If she could find a way to stop her head aging when on her shoulders, she would never grow old again.

Her ability to take the knowledge of her victims makes her a most versatile foe, and allows the GM to adjust her Skills and Talents to challenge any party. She might take the guise of a beautiful fencing master one adventure, locking steel with the heroes as an equal. Later, she might return as a noblewoman, using her Charisma and social Skills to destroy their reputation out of revenge for thwarting her plans, or invoking the dark arts through the memories of a powerful witch.

In most campaigns she has no real reason to target the heroes unless seeking revenge for a previous thwarting of her plans. Rather, they will probably go looking for her once a string of headless corpses comes to light. If they get close to tracking her down, she can simply switch heads and thus identities, disappearing into the masses, only to resurface when the heat has died down. However, if one of the heroes happens to be female and have Charisma 4+, then the baroness may desire the character's head. Armed with a deadly blade, her chosen victim's life, and mortal soul, is greatly imperiled.

Adventure Seeds

* **Headless in Paris:** The baroness kills a lot of women, and their bodies have to be dumped somewhere. The heroes are alerted after a cache of decapitated bodies are found in an abandoned building. Depending on the nature of the group, they may be given orders to quietly investigate the killings by M. de Tréville, be the ones who discover the headless corpses, or receive a tip-off from a friendly thief (maybe even a lackey) who stumbled across the grisly remains while carrying out his occupation.

* **Spurned Lover:** A hero has been courting a beautiful young woman. Things were going well, but suddenly his would-be lover severed all ties, refusing now to see her paramour. The unfortunate girl has been murdered, and her head taken by the baroness. Curiosity is the main adventure hook here, though lust may play its part.

* **An Old Friend:** A hero spots an old friend in the crowd, a beautiful woman he knew from his youth. Depending on the character's age, and thus how long ago the two knew each other, she may not have aged more than a year or two (the baroness has not used the head much) or be decades older than she should be (if the head was popular).