

Prologue

Genesisius was a hate surfer. On his twentieth birthday, he killed his mother and his father. He disemboweled and dismembered them. He spread their remains over the house and garden. He set fire to everything. He watched it burn through the night. The next morning, he set out along the only road he had ever known. It led from the ashes of his childhood. He wanted to find God. He wanted to kill him too.

Who is Genesisius? He came to me in a dream twenty years ago. He lingered. After the dream faded, I remembered only one thing about him: "Genesisius was a hate surfer." I rolled the words over the tongue of my mind, all these years. All these years, I have wondered what they might mean. I held onto those words, all these years, tonguing what they might mean.

Act 1

Jaq approached the crossroads in the thin light of a foggy dawn, followed by Feste. Crossroads always made Jaq uneasy. They were places of possibility. They were also places of evil. Evil always lurked in possibility. The thick fog and thin light added to Jaq's unease. Feste was uneasy because Jaq was uneasy.

The wind shifted. The thick fog rose like a curtain. There, at the center of the crossroads, a young man sat. He was not much more than a boy. He was covered from head to toe in filth. He seemed to be asleep or, perhaps, meditating.

Jaq was delighted to encounter another soul in the loneliness of the bleak morning. Jaq was good natured to his core. His happy voice chimed out respectfully, "Good morning to you, young sir."

The young man's eyes opened slowly. They were very bright and blue next to the filth on his face. They lanced at Jaq. On the ground next to the boy, Jaq noticed the naked blade of a short sword.

Jaq was good natured to his core. He swallowed the fear in his throat. His happy voice chimed out again. It filled the silence. The silence hung oppressively where the sounds of the birds and insects should have been. "Why are you sitting in the middle of the crossroads, young sir?"

The silence extended to the very limits of Jaq's smile. When it wavered, the boy spoke. "I don't know which way to go." His voice was deep, rich, and almost ancient.

Jaq was good natured to his core. He wanted to help the boy. His happy voice chimed out again. "Perhaps, I might be of some assistance to you, young sir." He affected a short but courtly bow. "I know these lands very well and all the lands around them too. Tell me where you are going, and I am sure I can help get you there."

"I'm looking for God," the boy replied.

Jaq, who was good natured to his core, was also very pious. He was delighted by the boy's response. "Oh, in that case, any direction will do, so long as your heart is true." Jaq approached the boy, attracted by his piety.

"I want to kill God," the boy answered. "I want to find God and kill him too."

Jaq stopped. The blood drained from his face. He had never heard such strident blasphemy spoken aloud so brazenly. It sent a shiver through his spine. He instinctively looked over both shoulders. He was worried that someone else might have heard the words, even though he knew they were quite alone. Jaq's mouth struggled to move. He made no sound. Feste began to bark and growl.

The boy stood gracefully. Jaq saw that he was wearing only filth. It covered the boy from head to toe. The boy walked towards Jaq slowly. The sword swung from his left hand. The wind shifted. A horrible stench drifted off the boy. It was like rotten meat and stale ash.

The boy approached Jaq. "Do you know where I can find him, where I can find God?"

Jaq's mind was tangled in a knot of panic and the horror of the boy's stench. Jaq's good and pious nature did not know how to respond to the boy's blasphemy. The dawn broke into morning over the boy's shoulder.

Jaq blurted, "Look for him in your heart! God is in all of our hearts! Everyone of us!"

"I don't feel him in my heart," the boy said. The sword sparked in the fresh morning light. Jaq's tunic was pierced. He felt a sharp prick above his heart. The boy was very close to him now. The stench was deafening. "Should I look for him in yours?"

"It's a manner of speech," Jaq cried. "An allegory! Not to be taken literally."

"I'm not looking for an allegory," the boy spoke into Jaq's ear. "I am looking for God. I want to kill him too. Can you tell me where he is, yes or no?"

Jaq's mind struggled through his panic and the stench. Feste's barking was frantic. The sky was so blue. Jaq had never seen a sky so blue. It was going to be a glorious day.

"I know a man," Jaq blurted. "A conjurer. He speaks with God. He tells fortunes. He must know where to find God."

"Where is he? What road do I take?" the boy asked.

Jaq stepped away from the boy's sword. He felt death's disappointment over his shoulder. The sky was as blue as he had ever seen it. The sun was warm and soft and soothing on his skin. The wind shifted again. It took the boy's stench with it. The air was fresh and clean. The music of nature danced joyfully in Jaq's ears. He had never felt so whole and still and perfect.

He surprised himself, when he answered, "No, I will take you there. "

It had been a slow morning. Oswald had expected it to be slow. It was normally slow the morning after the Holy of Holies. Old women and young people were Oswald's most frequent visitors. After the holiest day of the ecclesiastical calendar, they were always too full of God to have their fortunes foretold. The priestesses understood the power of ceremony. The Holy of Holies was their most powerful ceremony.

Fortunately, for Oswald, not everyone belonged to the one true faith and not every one of the faithful practiced it purely. The morning had not been entirely wasted. One worried old woman had insisted on three increasingly complex castings. A handful of young men had dropped by for their normal gambling tips. A young woman also wanted to know if she had surrendered her maidenhead in vain. Blessedly, the casting revealed to Oswald that her heart had not picked falsely.

The lilacs were also in full bloom. Their perfume filled Oswald with joy. Their colours delighted his eyes. In his quiet corner of the busy market, Oswald was happy to sit with the lilacs and watch the comings and goings. It would not matter to him how many visitors he had that day, he told himself over and over again.

A gnawing anxiety confused the serenity of the spring morning. In the time between Oswald's few visitors, he had already cast his own fortune four times. Oswald knew it was dangerous to cast his own fortune. If a casting was not considered objectively, one could never be sure who or what was talking through it. He understood the dangers all too well, and yet he couldn't help himself. Before he realized what he was doing, he was already puzzling over the results. It was an unconscious scratch at the itch of his anxiety.

"Calm yourself. Calm yourself. Calm your doubts," Oswald muttered. He quickly dabbed essence of sandalwood on his forehead, eyebrows, and earlobes. "You have the gift, you have the gift, you have the gift. You are the eyes and ears of the Lord. You are the eyes and ears of the Lord. God is great, and he loves you. God is great, and he loves you. You have the gift. You are the gift."

He cast five coins and quickly covered them with a plain wooden bowl. Over the bowl, he tore fresh basil. He breathed deeply and counted slowly to five in the Father's tongue. "Bring light into my darkness, oh Lord," he whispered to himself. Then, he uncovered the coins.

His first impression of the casting was confused and uncertain. Like before, he knew there was a message, but he could not see it. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and looked again. He looked for the meaning that was within and between the coins rather than the meaning in the coins themselves. Again, for the fifth time that day, he discerned something evil and menacing in the casting. It failed again to coalesce into a clear vision. He didn't know if God was unwilling to share the foretelling or if Oswald was incapable of understanding it. To complete the casting, Oswald opened his heart and ears for the third and final impression. He looked for meaning in

the world of the coins. His head fell back, he thrust his chest out towards the sun, and he let his arms hang limply by his sides.

“Magi Oswald!”

Oswald jerked violently at the sound of his name and almost upended the little table at which he worked. He turned to the voice, his knee aching.

A tall man with a kind and familiar face walked towards him. He carried on his shoulder the stick and bundle of a holy wanderer. His tunic was well worn and faded. Oswald could just make out the stars and white roses. They would have been very bright the day the man had first started on his unending journey. He was followed by a small white dog and, a few paces further back, a young woman — no, a boy with short hair — who wore ill-fitting clothes. A short sword hung awkwardly at his right hip.

“Good and gracious morning to you, magi!” the kind looking man called out again. “I am so very glad to see you again!”

Oswald, still muddled from the confusion of the casting, did not recognize the man, even though he seemed very familiar. Oswald blinked his eyes quickly and shook his head to release the hold of the casting. He thought he heard his godsvoice mutter, “Do you see? Are you listening?”

“Magi Oswald,” the kind looking man chimed again. “Do you not remember me? We prayed together not one week ago. You cast for me too.”

Oswald was sure he recognized the man. He could not find a name or a memory to go with his kind face or strange gait. It seemed impossible that he would forget such a man. The man approached Oswald’s table. His hand was outstretched in blessing. Oswald saw something like concern in the eyes of this friendly and familiar stranger. It might have been fear, but Oswald saw nothing for him to be afraid of.

“I’m Jaq! Do you not remember me? How strange.” Jaq motioned to the little white dog. “What about my little friend, Feste. He is not so easy to forget!”

Oswald lied, “Yes, I remember you, Jaq, and little Feste too.” He leaned over his table to peer at the little white dog. It also seemed to be — almost imperceptibly — nervous and afraid. “I am sorry for my confusion. You arrived as I concluded a casting. I am yet somewhat lost in it.” He cupped his hands and held them out to receive Jaq’s blessing. He spread the blessing over his face, hair, ears and arms in one motion.

The boy approached the table and stood a few paces away from Jaq and the dog. He was tall and long of limb. His thick brown hair was cut short in the fashion of a girl. He looked a little older at this distance. Unlike Jaq and the dog, he seemed completely at ease.

Jaq motioned to the boy, "My young master here seeks —"

Oswald cut him short with a wave of his hand and a smile. "The less you tell me the better. I can see that our young friend here is not a believer. I'd prefer he not have any reason to dismiss what I will share with him today. For his own good."

Oswald winked playfully at the boy. The boy smiled. It made Oswald strangely uneasy. The boy was unsettling and confusing, in the same way that the casting had been. There was something about the boy that Oswald could not see.

"To begin," Oswald spoke with a flourish in his voice, "I will need something that belongs to you other than your offering." He winked at Jaq.

"Oh, yes, of course." Jaq smiled and placed a copper coin in the offerings bowl.

Oswald continued, addressing the boy. "I see that your clothes are ill-fitting. I gather that you have not worn them for very long. They are stolen, I'd expect."

"Borrowed!" Jaq chimed out happily.

Oswald smiled at Jaq. "It makes no difference to me, my holy friend. My only concern is that I acquaint myself with something that has been near and dear to our young friend. Otherwise, the veracity of the casting could be compromised."

The boy's eyes seemed to glimmer with malice, but he smiled again. Without speaking, the boy removed his scabbard and sword from his belt and placed it on the table.

"I can also discern that this scabbard has been recently borrowed as well." Oswald ran his fingers along its ragged leather. He hesitated before touching the plain but expertly crafted hilt. "The sword, I believe, is rightfully yours. Am I right? May I draw it?"

The boy's face was filled with unimaginable hate. Oswald flinched and realized it had been a trick of the light. The shadow from a passing cloud had cut across the boy's face. The boy's face and smile were now almost beatific. With a nod, he gave Oswald permission to draw the sword.

There was now only Oswald and the sword. He felt the boy's smile, but there was only Oswald and the sword. There were others, but there was only Oswald and the sword. The sword seemed to sing when it was drawn. It gleamed like water in the sun. It felt like a living thing. "Is this the light in the darkness, oh Lord?" Oswald asked himself inwardly. He gently stroked the length of the blade with his finger. He heard no answer to his question.

There was a sudden shift, and Oswald's mind was clear again. A profound anxiety crawled into his spine. The sword, he realized, was neither a toy nor ceremonial. Oswald could feel the death

it had intimately known — a sacrilege — but he could not perceive what it might have been. He withdrew his finger from the blade as if it had been pricked by a thorn.

A veil was torn from Oswald's memory, and he remembered Jaq. Oswald had cast for him only a week earlier. The holy wanderer had wanted guidance on where he should next look for God. They prayed together, and then Oswald cast for him, using tea leaves. Oswald had seen in the leaves a dark storm rising in the east. The storm, once found, would carry Jaq to God. The lightning of the storm would point the way.

"Are you alright, magi," Jaq asked Oswald. "We can wait a few minutes, if you would like to rest."

"No, no, I am quite alright." Oswald dismissed Jaq's concern with a wave of his hand and a weak smile. "To begin, I will need something of the boy's with which to acquaint myself."

Jaq looked to the boy in alarm. The boy watched Oswald, smiling.

"Dear magi," Jaq whispered, "the boy already shared his sword with you. It lies before you on the table. You have already studied it for several minutes."

Oswald's face did not betray the panic in his heart. He looked at the sword. It did not seem at all familiar to him. Had he looked at it? What had he seen? He could not recall.

"I know, I know, my holy brother," Oswald lied. "I was only jesting with you. I'm not so old yet! Castings need not always be serious and dreary affairs." He laughed and clownishly straightened his robes. He also tugged playfully at his grey beard.

Jaq laughed heartily and forcefully. "Oh yes, I see now! Very funny."

Feste yipped nervously.

"Tell me, my boy, on what day were you born?" Oswald asked.

The boy told him.

Oswald had not expected the boy's voice to sound so old. It seemed almost ancient.

"And at what time?"

The boy told him.

"Yes, yes, I expected as much." He stroked his beard. "And what of your mother — blessed are they who give life — on what day was she born?"

The boy told him.

“Now, that is very interesting!” Oswald began to relax. He found surer footing in the art and science of the casting. “Very unexpected. Very unexpected. I can admit that I did not anticipate that. We magi see and know very much, young man. We don’t see and know all. That is true. That is truth!”

Oswald reached for the coins he had used for his own casting but thought better of it.

“Jaq, my holy friend, did we not use tea leaves when you were last here?”

“Yes, that’s right, magi!”

“Then, let us return to the leaves once more!” Oswald arranged three small wooden cups in front of the boy. “Let us see what lies in the past, present, and future of our young friend here.”

From one of the deep pockets hidden in his robes, Oswald produced a small burner of his own design and making. It was made of iron and shaped like a candle. The fuel was concealed in such a way that a casual observer could not see how or what it burned. With the snap of his finger, he ignited the burner. It was one of his favorite sleight of hand tricks.

“Young man, I want you to focus your attention on the flame. Think carefully of that which you seek, as I prepare the tea.”

From another pocket, Oswald produced a small tightly sealed copper box. He placed it carefully in front of the cups and opened it. In the box, there were three different kinds of tea, carefully separated. He held his hands above the tea and prayed.

“Oh Lord, you are great! Oh Lord, you are strong! Oh Lord, you are generous! Reveal your will today, if it pleases you. Let me be your eyes, my Lord, if it pleases you! Let me be your ears, my Lord, if it pleases you! Let me be your gift, my Lord, if it pleases you!”

He put a pinch of tea into each cup.

Oswald took out a little kettle of water he kept under the table. He held it over the burning flame.

“Do not lose focus, young man, the strength of your focus will determine the clarity of the casting.” Oswald made a motion, reaching from the boy’s eyes to the flame. “From your eyes to the flame and into the kettle. The water shall find you. From your eyes to the flame and into the kettle. The water shall hear you. From your eyes to the flame and into the kettle. The water shall keep you.”

The kettle whistled sharply and suddenly.

“Praise be to you, Lord!”

Jaq echoed Oswald, “Praise be to you, Lord!”

The boy said nothing.

With sharp movements of the kettle, Oswald expertly dropped boiling water into each cup.

“Now, my boy, pick up the first cup. Yes, that’s right. Draw deeply of its fumes. Think of a moment from your past. Whatever comes to mind. Hold that memory in your mind as clearly as you can. Now drink of the cup, but leave some of the tea in it. Good. Look deep into the cup. Keep that memory clearly in your mind. Now swirl the tea from left to right. Good. Now turn the cup over here. Leave your hand on the cup, while I pray.”

Oswald placed his hand on the boy’s hand. It was warm and very soft. A child’s hand.

“Let me be your gift to this boy, oh Lord!”

Oswald looked into the boy’s eyes, which were coolly serene and, perhaps, amused.

“Good. Now we will do the same for the two other cups. For the second cup, I want you to focus on something from the here and now. Something you can see or hear right now. For the third cup, I want you to focus on that which you seek. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded. Oswald carried on. When the third cup had been turned upside down, Oswald prayed again.

“Dear Lord, we thank you for this gift we are about to receive.”

With a flourish, Oswald turned over the first cup. He peered into it.

“Yes. Yes. I see an absence in your past, my boy. I see a great loneliness. It seems to have always haunted you, despite your loving and caring parents. You have no brothers or sisters. You were properly cared for. I see no hardship in your childhood — except for that loneliness. It consumed all that was good and happy in your young life, didn’t it? I see that your parents —” Oswald hesitated. He saw the death of the boy’s parents. He could not perceive the why or the how of it. Perhaps, the boy was hiding their deaths from himself and from the casting as well. “Your parents. I’m sorry. Recent and untimely deaths. I’m sorry.”

Oswald resisted the urge to look at the boy. Instead, he peered into the second cup.

“I see Jaq and little Feste here. You found each other only very recently. The relationship —” Oswald looked quickly to Jaq and saw fear in his eyes. “The relationship is new and uncertain. They often are in the early going. You must open your heart, my boy. Trust must be shared for it

to grow. Trust in the companionship you have found. Cherish it. I see a long road ahead for the two of you together.”

Oswald peered into the third cup.

“This is strange. Very strange.” Oswald had never seen this pattern in the tea before. It resembled the pattern foretelling death, but this boy was far too young to die suddenly. It could not be right. The leaves themselves seemed to be unable or unwilling to express what lay in this boy’s future. Oswald improvised, as he sometimes did, hoping his many years of experience would guide him truthfully. “There is great uncertainty ahead of you, I am afraid. I confess I can’t quite see what it is you seek. Your goal is ill-defined or, perhaps, too grand. The uncertainty may lay in your own heart. The loneliness of your childhood has turned to hopelessness. You are too young to be hopeless. Without hope, there is little that can be accomplished. Without hope, you will not find what you seek. Put your trust in God. Trust God, and you will find what you seek. Of this, I am sure. God is hope. God is everything. Praise be to you, oh Lord!”

Jaq echoed Oswald again. The boy said nothing. Oswald waited to hear the customary reply. Then, he waited for the boy to say anything at all. The silence became palpable.

“Tell me, old man,” the boy finally asked, “does God tell you these things?”

“If it be his will,” Oswald replied. He blushed under his beard.

“Tell me where he is,” the boy said. “I want to find him. It is he whom I seek.”

“Why, he is everywhere, my boy.”

“I told him the same thing, magi,” Jaq chimed in. It sounded to Oswald’s ears like a warning.

“Everywhere,” the boy scoffed. “He is not here. I do not see him. Do you?”

“Of course, I do,” Oswald answered. “He is the air, the sky, the flowers. He is the sunshine.”

“Nonsense,” said the boy. “He can’t be in all of those things. If he is real, he must occupy some place. He must have a form. Like you or I.”

“If?” Oswald’s throat constricted. He had involuntarily echoed the boy’s blasphemy. “You must be careful of what you say here in the city, my boy. You are not on the land anymore. In the city, you must be more cautious. I will — I am able — to overlook this transgression, but, if a priestess heard you, there would be much trouble for you.”

“He is a troubled young man, magi,” Jaq warned.

"I know exactly what I am saying," said the boy. "I am not afraid. I will not be ruled by your superstitions."

"Lower your voice, boy," Oswald spoke harshly for the first time. He had humored the boy for too long. "I see that you are not afraid. Fearlessness is not the same as courage. One leads to folly and the other to glory. I don't need to hear God's voice to see which path you are on."

"You are a fraud," the boy said. "You play at divination for a few coins and convince yourself that it is good because you think God speaks to you. You are little more than a thief. You prey on the weak and the feeble and the gullible. You are a coward. Too weak to steal by force, you swindle the weak with lies and superstition."

The boy's rebuke stung hard. It was as if Oswald's deepest doubts had suddenly manifested themselves in the form of this cool and arrogant boy.

Fury flooded through Oswald. His heart raced. His eyes searched the table for he knew not what. Near to hand, he saw the wand he used in his charm rituals. He seized it and raised it high above his head. He pointed to the ground with his left hand and prepared to curse the boy. Oswald would quell this boy as forcefully as he quelled his own doubts.

There was a flash of unanticipated movement. The boy's sword entered Oswald's abdomen effortlessly. The unimaginable pain ended as quickly as it had started. Oswald was surprised. The sharp pain had been infinitely long and, at the same time, instantaneous.

Oswald inspected his surroundings. The sky was blue. The flowers bloomed. The boy's face was calm, almost serene. Oswald's murder, judging by the indifference on the boy's face, seemed not to affect him at all. The boy might have been scratching an itch.

Over the shoulder of the boy, the market carried on unaffected by the violence of Oswald's death. People in the nearby stalls haggled over fruit and vegetables, as they had always haggled over fruit and vegetables and would always haggle over fruit and vegetables. Jaq's kind face had not yet registered the lightning fast violence before his eyes. Feste, the little white dog, seemed to understand. He did not mark the occasion of Oswald's death with a bark or even a whimper.

The tools of Oswald's trade lay before him on the table: old, worn, small. He had been so proud of the burner when he perfected it. It had taken many years of tinkering in his little workshop. What did it mean to him now? What was the memory of that pride? Nothing. In a moment, even the memory wouldn't exist. There was no God, no life after death, and no foretelling that was true independent of the imagination of his gullible victims. The boy was right. The boy was right. I am a fraud.

Dread wracked Oswald's body. The world narrowed around him silently.

The sword was out of Oswald now. He fell forward. He caught himself and leaned on the table heavily. Blood oozed across the table. Oswald's eyes found the coins with which he had cast his own foretelling. At last, he saw what they had told him, and what the other castings of the morning had tried to tell him. Death, death, death, death and, again, death. Even the boy's casting had been a warning of his death. The leaves could not show him a future that lay beyond his own death.

Oswald coughed blood. He looked from the coins to the holy wanderer's eyes. They were wide with shock and horror. Oswald felt a smile creep into his lips.

If the castings had foretold his death, it meant God had worked through him. Despite his doubts, God had worked through him. If God had done it now, he might have done it before too. There was no reason to doubt it. Oswald felt light for a moment — almost saved — then heavy with the weight of shame. God had been merciful. Oswald had been weak. God had always been merciful. Oswald had always been weak. At the moment of the final reckoning, Oswald had doubted God, had doubted everything. He had failed God. He had failed himself. Oswald felt no pain in his body. He felt only shame in his soul. He hoped God might forgive him, but he knew he could not expect it.

Joan realized she was feverish. She caught glimpses of concerned faces close to her own. She heard bits and pieces of prayers murmured over her. She sometimes felt hands rubbing her arms and legs with warm and healing ointments. Her sisters, she was sure, were trying to heal her — save her. Joan did not know from what she was being saved.

She was reminded of the little mosaic that was tucked away in a tiny prayer room in a far corner of her temple. It, like her experience of the fever, was a mix of broken and fragmented colours. The bits and pieces of the mural meant nothing on their own. When one could see and understand how each piece played a part in the whole, the palm leaves and pomegranates became beautifully and indubitably apparent.

Joan had a fever like this once before, when she was very young — too young to truly remember it. She had heard the story of it so often and had so often told the story herself, it felt to her like she remembered it, even if she knew it was impossible. The memory of her fever was much like her faith. Her faith, much like the entire course of her life, had sprung from that first fever.

Joan reminded herself that she was feverish. The coherence of her thoughts were an illusion — like the coherence of a dream, which splinters and fractures on waking. Where was she, she wondered, and how did she come to be so deeply feverish? She tried to open her eyes. The darkness persisted.

She imagined what it must be like beyond the darkness. As soon as the fever had set in, her sisters would have immediately brought her to her own room and bed. They would be fretting now, huddled over her in prayer, darting away now and again to retrieve an ointment, a herb, or a relic. Ginette would be desperately and vainly trying to oversee their efforts. She was too young and too inexperienced to lead her strong-willed sisters. Joan had named Ginette as her spiritual heir precisely because of her youth and inexperience. She was no threat to Joan's authority.

A memory began to take shape in the darkness. It was a strange feeling. Joan felt she was somehow a part of it even as she watched it from afar.

Joan welcomes a holy wanderer. He is agitated. Even in his agitation, his face is kind. Joan's heart is open to him. She always feels love for these wanderers. Their life is so different than her own — so much more lonely. While many priestesses consider them a nuisance and a burden, she always receives them warmly when they come begging for food or shelter or benediction. Had Joan been born a man, she too might have found some solace on the wandering path.

The holy wanderer kneels before her, head low, gaze averted, arms out. He is begging not for food nor shelter but for sanctuary. That is strange. From whom would a holy wanderer need

sanctuary? The bailiffs are in pursuit. He begs her to protect him, to exercise her ecclesiastical authority. No, she realizes, he doesn't want protection for himself. It's for the little white dog that is with him. No, that's not right. Bailiffs would not be in pursuit of a dog. There is something missing. The memory disintegrates. It occurs to Joan that it might not be a memory. It may be a dream.

Joan awoke, screaming. She was hot and sweating. She struggled against the sisters who held her down. Ginette's face was among the shadows of the others. She was poised and calm, like the First Mother herself. It is a side of Ginette that Joan has never seen before. Joan continued to struggle against the combined strength of the sisters. It was like she was possessed by a terrible demon. Her mind was calm. Her body moved violently of its own volition. Vowels and consonants spat from her mouth incoherently. The sisters managed to contain her more violent movements and held her firmly against the bed. Hands steadied her head. Ginette anointed her: forehead, nose and chin. The sweet scent of lavender filled Joan with an uneasy calm and the darkness returned.

Joan thought again of the story of her childhood fever. Joan's mother had repeated and repeated the story until Joan was old enough to tell the story herself. Her poor and almost crippled mother, with Joan in hand, had begged her way along the pilgrimage route to the great shrine of the First Mother. After they had cleansed themselves in the Mother's tears and circled the shrine seven times on their knees, Joan had mimicked the adults and adopted the seven postures of the true daughter's supplication. A great shiver tore through Joan's tiny body. She fell, and the fever took hold.

Joan's mother nursed her near the shrine, in a dilapidated hut reserved for the horses, donkeys, and oxen that the pilgrims used to travel to the shrine. Her mother was sure Joan would die when she started to violently shake and scream incoherently. A sister of the shrine, drawn to Joan by her desperate sounds, heard not noises but words. The sister who found Joan rushed to find two other sisters. They confirmed what the first had heard. Joan was speaking in the Mother's tongue. It was a sign that she had been blessed to serve the First Mother as a priestess and, perhaps, in time, as a high priestess.

The path to the priestesshood was not easy. Joan's childhood was given over to study and prayer and service. The First Mother, and the sisters who serve her, give freely of their love. They also demand discipline and devotion from those who hope to serve. Only the truly devoted and pure are allowed to take their vows. Those who are called are tested over and over and over again.

In the long hard days of her apprenticeship, Joan was thankful for the comfort that her hardship earned for her mother. As the mother of one who had been called to the service, Joan's mother was entitled to the modest but sustaining support of the sisters. True, Joan's mother had, in many ways, lost a daughter to the service. She received in return a life of basic comfort that would have otherwise been unattainable in her crippled state. For this, Joan thanked the Father and the First Mother too.

Joan's thoughts drifted in the darkness to the sermon she had given for the Holy of the Holies. When had that been? Two days ago? Perhaps longer? No matter. Joan and Ginette had quarreled over it, she recalled. It was the seventh and final year of the great cycle, by custom a time of forgiveness and reconciliation. However, this year, the Holy of Holies fell on a moon day for the First Mother. Ginette argued it was a sign that the First Mother wanted us to be mindful of our need for each other, men and women, church and state. Joan saw it differently. Without the possibility of children, there could be no reconciliation. This year's reunion of the Father and the First Mother, she argued, was purely spiritual, with no lesson to be drawn about the affairs of the family or the state. Ginette argued passionately and intelligently for her interpretation, quoting scripture and secondary sources. She was too young to understand the world outside the gates of the temple. Theology, Joan had learned after many long years of struggle, was politics by another name.

A girl is there too! She is carelessly standing a few steps behind the holy wanderer. No, it is a young man. Tall, lanky, and a thick shock of brown hair so closely cropped at the ears and neck that he is easily mistaken for a tall girl. He makes no effort to signal his rank or status. He also doesn't seem to understand Joan's status as a high priestess. Perhaps, he simply ignores it.

Joan is crying. No, not Joan but a much younger version of Joan. She is not much older than the boy. She is wearing the plain wool habit of an unsworn novice. Judging by her age, she must be very close to taking her first vow. Why is she crying?

Joan's mother slaps her again, much harder this time. The slap itself is no reason to cry. The sisters often hit Joan and with much more strength than her feeble mother can muster. Why is she crying?

"If you speak those words of blasphemy again, I will cut your tongue out myself."

The face of her mother is filled with the horror of rage. Joan has never seen this side of her.

"Who will provide for me if you leave the service? Where will I go?"

They are together in the simple room the sisters provide to Joan's mother because of Joan's apprenticeship and service. They are drinking tea.

"Mother, I don't believe. I have no faith. The mystery of the Father means nothing to me. I don't feel the First Mother in my heart. I pray and pray, and my doubts are never silenced. I can't take my vows, if I don't believe. It would be the worst kind of blasphemy. I can't enter the service. I won't take my vows."

Her mother strikes Joan again.

“You can and you will, Joan.” Her mother takes a deep breath and carefully refills their cups. “You know the prayers. You speak the Mother’s tongue. You speak the theology as well as any of them. You will learn to lead the ceremonies. You were meant to be a high priestess. I made sure of that.”

Joan does not look at her mother. She does not want to see the face of this horrible person she does not know or understand. Her eyes remain fixed on the little teapot on the table. She counts the chips in it.

“Joan, think carefully of what you are saying. There is nothing for you outside the service, beyond the walls of the temple. You are a woman born outside of the embrace of marriage. You have a crippled and broken mother you can’t care for. No father. No family. Outside these walls, your only choice will be to pretend to love the first man who takes an interest in you and hope that he doesn’t leave you the moment you give birth. Pretend to believe, if you must. It will be better than pretending to love a man you feel nothing for. Pretend to believe and, in time, you will find your faith. Your belly will be full with food instead of an unwanted child. Your bed will be dry. Your mother’s too. That should be reason enough to believe.”

Her mother is no longer her mother. In her place, Joan sees the boy from the temple. The boy’s calm blue eyes look into hers. He is too close to her. No man is ever allowed to be so close. He seems to know all of her doubts. He seems to know everything about Joan — the lies that go all the way down.

Joan awoke. Ginette peered down at her, with soft concern in her eyes. She stroked Joan’s hair. They were alone.

“Holy sister, how do you feel?” Ginette asked. “Can you hear me?”

Joan struggled to speak. Her throat was constricted, her tongue limp, and her lips numb. The sounds she made were curiously like the Mother’s tongue.

Ginette smiled serenely. She shushed Joan like a baby. Her fingertips caressed Joan’s cheek and forehead. There was nothing soothing in her touch. Ginette’s fingertips brushed lightly across Joan’s lips. They opened involuntarily. A tiny dark vial appeared from somewhere deep in Ginette’s robes. Joan tasted something bitter but strangely familiar. She thought again of her mother as the darkness returned.

“You have done well for yourself, my daughter — for us.” Joan’s mother speaks softly. “You’ve achieved more than I ever dreamed for you.”

Joan strokes her mother’s hair with one hand and holds one of her hands with the other. The fingers of her mother’s free hand strokes the fine silk of Joan’s light blue robe.

“A high priestess and at such a young age too. You have come so far and you will go even farther. I wish I was going to live long enough to see all that you become.”

Her mother had been right. In time, Joan talked and prayed her way to a kind of faith — fitful, fragile, and unsatisfying. She found instead her true calling in the ebb and flow of the intrigues of the temple. Her false faith was unsatisfying but it was also a source of strength in the perpetual struggle for influence and power. She was not shackled by a blind and unwavering piety. She easily shifted her beliefs and scriptural interpretations to suit the needs of the game. In time, she became very very good at the game. She was already a high priestess, the youngest called to the office in living memory.

“Mother, the final moments before the crossing over are a time for self-reflection. Is there any weight that you would like to take from your soul to hasten and ease the journey?”

A curious look flashes across her mother’s face. Joan senses that her mother wants to share something. She shakes her head instead. There is a moment of regret in her mother’s eyes, even shame. She smiles weakly. Her eyes fill with tears. The sadness in them shifts to pride.

“No, my conscience is clear. I am ready to put my heart and soul in the hands of the Father. Please ask the First Mother to beseech him on my behalf.”

Joan pats her mother’s hands. They are folded carefully on the thin blanket that covers her. She turns to the old familiar teapot. It sits on a plain and worn table that is next to the bed. There is one cup. Into it, Joan taps several drops of tincture. She looks again into her mother’s moist eyes. She realizes she feels nothing for this old frail woman who is about to die. She taps more tincture into the cup, not out of mercy but for the sake of haste. She has much to do, as she always does. She has plans. She has so much left to achieve. She will not stay on the fringes of the empire forever, in this backwater hamlet. The game, she is sure, will take her further, much further. She will be at the center of power one day. Of this, she has no doubt. Joan pours tea into the cup. She holds it to her mother’s lips. It will only take a few sips for her to cross over quickly and painlessly.

Joan stands in preparation for the final blessing. She sees herself in the mirror. She is no longer a young woman. In a way, she is much more beautiful than she ever was. Yes, the light blue of the high priestess’s habit is fetching on her. Confidence and power also have a way of highlighting the finest of her features. She admires herself long enough that she fails to deliver the final prayer for her mother as she crosses over. No matter. It makes no difference. The rituals are for the family of the dead. Joan is the only family her mother has ever had. With no one else to witness her passing, it makes no difference. Joan couldn't care less if the rites have been done properly. She looks down at her mother. In her place, the holy wanderer bows before her. The boy smirks over top of him.

“Why did you bring him here?”

“He is a troubled young man,” the holy wanderer pleads. “He needs the Mother’s love, her guidance. To find the Father.”

“We sisters welcome only the pure or the repentant in this holiest of temples. I see nothing of purity or repentance in him — only arrogance, the banal arrogance of youth.”

“He is young, dear sister, and he is arrogant, but he is lost and it is the lost we wanderers are duty bound to find and deliver to God. God is good, God is everywhere, God is even in this boy’s troubled soul.”

“Praise be to you, Lord!” Joan replies mechanically. “Can the boy speak for himself or is he too troubled to beseech me on his own behalf?”

The holy wanderer steps back from Joan. The boy does not step forward. He watches Joan from where he is instead. The silence that fills the temple is rich and voluminous. Even the little white dog is still and quiet.

“Can you help me find God?” the boy finally asks her, with a voice that sounds much older than his appearance. “Perhaps, you can ask the First Mother to show me the way.”

Joan does not like the tone in his voice. “Kneel when you speak to me, boy.”

“Why?” A faint and curious smile appears at the corner of the boy’s mouth. He takes a step towards Joan. The wanderer noticeably flinches. The little white dog whimpers restlessly.

Brilliant sunlight breaks through the broad window high above the entrance of the temple. They are all washed in it. “To show the respect you owe me. To show the respect you owe to God.”

“I owe you nothing. I owe God nothing. You are a frail old woman in a pile of expensive robes. God is a lie that you use to justify your power. I see nothing to respect in that.”

The boy looks strangely beautiful in the sunlight. She turns and strides to the nearest door. Joan has heard enough.

“Wanderer you may stay. Tell the boy to leave the temple before I have him arrested for blasphemy. He will find no sanctuary here or in any of the First Mother’s temples.”

“Tell me, holy sister, if God exists, should he not have a shape and form, like you and me, like those he has made in his own image? Why would a perfect incorporeal being, in his infinite wisdom, create imperfect corporeal beings?”

Joan stops, anchored to the floor by the boy’s question. It is a childish question. It is a question she asked herself as a young girl. She thought on it for days, until she had the courage to ask one of the sisters who taught theology. She was answered with a firm spanking and the loss of

dinner privileges for a week. In Joan's memory, it was the very question that undermined her faith.

"What is it that you want, boy?" She turns to face him. He stands bathed in the beauty of the sunlight. "Why do you provoke my anger so pointlessly?"

"I want to kill God!"

Joan laughs. "It is blasphemous to say such a thing, even if it is utterly childish."

"Yes, and for a God who is supposed to see and know all, isn't it strange that such blasphemy would go unnoticed and unpunished. Perhaps, he is afraid of me?"

Joan's anger turns to disappointment. The boy, she realizes, is nothing but a child who lashes out for effect and nothing more. There is no depth or meaning to his provocations. He is not worth her time. "It will not go unpunished. You are not the first young and arrogant iconoclast to die for his hubris. I will have you tried for blasphemy. Your death will be neither quick nor merciful."

"Neither will yours."

There is a sudden and violent movement. Joan knows she is dead before she realizes the sword has struck the altar instead of her.

"Come out, come out wherever you are!"

The boy strikes the altar with his sword again and again, calling for God to come out in a childish sing-song voice. He smashes a thousand year old icon. He slashes a copy of the scripture thought to be written by the First Mother herself. He overturns a chalice of the Mother's tears. The altar collapses under the strength of his violence. It happens so quickly and so mercilessly, Joan forgets to call for the guards. She calls only when the destruction is complete and irreversible. It had never occurred to anyone that something so holy and so precious needed to be guarded.

Ginette arrives before the guards do. She takes in the scene quickly. Joan sees a look on Ginette's face that she only understands now from within the darkness of the fever. Joan sees neither horror nor outrage in Ginette's face. Instead, it is the white glow of an opportunity perceived.

"It's a rare herb, Joan," Ginette whispered. The inflection she gives to Joan's name calls attention to the disrespectfulness of its use without Joan's explicit permission. "It is a poison, truthfully. When carefully administered, it brings on a very unique kind of fever. Some mystics think it is a means to communicate directly with God. You and I both know that's not possible. You and I both know that there is no God to communicate with, don't we?"

Ginette struggled to speak. She only makes incoherent sounds.

“The wheel of fortune turns so quickly. A few years ago you were at the height of your powers. Today, you have lost the support of the sisters, and you don’t even know it. We are tired of your patience. We are ready for change.” Ginette brushed Joan’s lips again with the bitter herb. “The sisters would never turn against you overtly. Now, after the sacrilege in the temple, no one will question what happens to you. The incident was a great shock to your system. That a deadly fever set in because of it — well, that’s a very holy reaction to the boy’s very unholy action.”

Joan remembered the sweet milky tea that Ginette had brought to calm her after the guards had taken the boy away. Joan preferred her tea black. Ginette had insisted. The milk and sugar had masked the bitterness of the herb.

“I suspect the mystics are fond of the herb precisely because one can hear almost anything in the noises made while under its effects. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were speaking in the Mother’s Tongue right now.” Ginette smiled and reflected for a moment. “Isn’t that beautiful? You will die in the very same kind of fever from which your faith and your life of service first bloomed.”

Joan thought of the mosaic tucked away in a quiet corner of the temple. If one were to remove or add even one piece, the effect on the whole would be disastrous. Joan realized at that moment that the same could be true of life.

“Don’t worry, dear Joan. The sisters and I will hear only holy and pious words in your gibberish. Your corpse will not stink either. I will make sure of that. In death, you will serve as you did in life. You will be a saint one day. Your mother would be so proud of you. Now rest. You deserve it.”

After the darkness envelopes her again, Joan instinctively and mechanically starts to pray to the First Mother. She stops when she realizes what she is doing. Even if the first mother is there to hear her prayer, she would not listen to Joan now. The First Mother’s love and mercy is boundless, but only for the pure and the repentent. Like the boy, Joan is neither. She tries to picture her mother’s face but she can’t. She can only imagine something like a crude etching. It falls apart the moment her concentration ebbs. She herself begins to feel like an etching. Her thoughts flicker. A hope bursts into the darkness of her fever, a hope for an eternal life, a hope for the chance to see her mother again, a hope for anything other than what she knows awaits her.

III

Karn tried to quell his excitement. He knew the Emperor and the Empress were on the other side of the door. It was making his belly uneasy and his head light. The darkness of the small antechamber helped to calm his nerves. The Chief Steward had left him there to wait.

Footsteps approached. The door of the antechamber swung open. The light of a thousand candles dazzled Karn. A woman stood before him in silhouette. Her hair hung loosely around her face. She wore a long robe. It clung to her body.

“There you are, little one. Step forward, step into the light. Yes, come forward. Don’t be shy.”

Karn’s eyes adjusted to the dazzling light. His brain struggled to understand all that he saw. He knew the word for it. He could spell and define the word. He realized now that he had never truly understood the word. He knew it was opulence.

The woman turned into the light, to call over her shoulder. “Come look at him, darling.”

It was the Empress herself. Karn was stunned. He fought the urge to fling himself to the ground and prostrate himself before her. The Chief Stewart had insisted that it would please their majesties greatly if Karn would forgo some of the protocols normally expected of him. “They will want to look at you. It is a honour few people receive. Enjoy it. Be quiet at all times, and do as you are told. Nothing else.”

A soft cool hand took Karn’s. It pulled him gently into the room. The floor was covered in a rug. It was softer than anything he had ever felt. Karn sunk into it. A sweet fruity scent drifted off the Empress. It was the most exquisite smell Karn had ever smelt. Karn had tried wine once. The feeling he had now was something like the feeling of wine.

“If he won’t have a look at you, I will,” she whispered into his ear.

The Empress stepped back from Karn, turning an inquiring eye onto him. Without looking directly at her, Karn also examined her. She was beautiful. She looked much much older than he had expected. Perhaps, the portraits he had seen were from her youth. Her robe was almost translucent and hardly done up. He could make out the soft curve of her breasts through the thin material. He was certain he could see a naked nipple peeking out.

“Yes, you will do very nicely.” She touched his cheek lightly with her fingers. “Oh, and what’s this?”

At the sight of the Empress's near nakedness, Karn’s erection had made a tent of the light robe he had been given to wear after his bath. He flushed in embarrassment.

“No need to be embarrassed, little one. No, be proud. I am very proud of you.” She called over her shoulder again. “Oh come quickly, darling, you will be so pleased. This one isn’t afraid at all.”

Karn heard a soft rustling of movement. The Emperor appeared — or so Karn assumed. His long white beard was familiar, but he seemed too small to be the Emperor. Without the armour and cloaks he normally wore in his portraits, he looked almost weak and frail. He was also much older than Karn had expected. Then, Karn realized, for the first time, that the artist could have painted them however he pleased. He thought again: however they pleased.

The Emperor studied Karn’s face for a moment. “Yes, I like this one. He will do.”

“Look at his little pecker darling. It went as stiff as board at the very sight of me. Isn’t that divine? He is still blushing too. I think he will be simply divine.”

“Yes, look at his little pecker.” Karn felt a quick sharp flick at the tip of his erection. The sharp unexpected pain dissolved quickly into a strangely pleasant sensation. “Let’s take a closer look at his little pecker, shall we?”

The Emperor loosened the knot of the belt around Karn’s waist. The robe fell open. The Emperor knelt before him. Karn felt a warm wetness wrap around his erection. It was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. It confused Karn. He had never felt anything like it. He wasn’t sure what was happening. He didn’t dare to look down at the Emperor. His erection now felt cool. There was a warm softness touching and tapping at its tip. It was still tingling from the short flick that had turned from pain to pleasure. Now, a firm warm pressure went slowly down one side of his erection and up the other. He wanted to look down to see what the Emperor was doing. He was too afraid to. His erection was enclosed again in a warm, wet and moving pressure. Karn’s pelvis jerked involuntarily. He began to breathe deeply. All at once, it was intense and exhilarating. A physical euphoria ebbed into his body from the intensity in his cock. His face felt numb and acutely sensitive. The skin in his cock stretched to the point of rupture. A firm pressure moved up and down on his cock. The warm wet intensity seemed to pull at his erection. An agonizing euphoria exploded from the tip of his erection to the very ends of his head, fingers, and toes. He quivered and moaned. He almost lost his balance. His face tingled. He was gone. Lost.

The Emperor stood again. He peered into Karn’s eyes. He licked his lips. “A little quick and a tad bitter, I’m afraid, but he will do. I think he will do well for a night.”

“Oh don’t be so fussy, darling. It was a delight to watch. He positively quivered. I’m sure it was his first time too. I’m sure of it.” The Empress patted Karn on the cheek. She tweaked his nose. “You are a very lucky boy. A very lucky boy.”

Karn came back from somewhere else. His face was full of pins and needles. The intensity had fallen away. Now he felt empty and ashamed. He didn't know why. He could not look at the Emperor or the Empress.

From a distance, there was a light but firm knock and the sound of a door opening.

"My apologies, your majesties." It was the Chief Steward's voice. "An envoy from the Hierophant has arrived."

"At this time of night?"

"He insisted that the message be passed along. It bore the Hierophant's personal seal."

The Emperor groaned childishly. "Amritha, give the boy some fruit. Albert, would you like some wine."

The Empress took Karn by the hand. She led him to a table full of meats and fruits and cheeses and other things he did not know. Karn had never seen so much food before. He thought of the meager bowls of gruel and soup that he and the other boys in the orphanage ate. Karn examined the table carefully, searching, and thought of his brothers.

"There is a boy in the possession of your majesty's bailiffs," said the Chief Steward. "He murdered a conjurer in the market yesterday and destroyed the altar at the First of the First Mother's temples. Quite the little hellion, it seems."

"Yes, and what of it? Why trouble me now about it."

"The Hierophant insists he should take possession of the boy and pass judgment over him for the crime he has committed. He insists we have overstepped our authority by taking and trying the boy."

"And what does my First Minister say?"

"Murder is a capital crime and a matter of the state and not the temple. The law and relevant scripture are black letter."

"So His Holiness knows that he is overstepping his authority."

"Yes, I suspect so. He is old your majesty, but not yet senile. He knows the law and the scripture as well as any. His staff are as good as yours, if not better, given your fondness for brawn and beauty."

"It's never easy, is it Albert?" The Emperor refilled his glass. He drank deeply from it. "What is his game?"

The Empress whispered into Karn's ear, "Little one, try something." He scanned the table, searching. "Here, let me help you. Try this." The Empress held something to Karn's lips. He opened them. She popped a soft cool globe into his mouth. "Chew it."

The taste was sharply bitter. It was immediately overpowered by a deep and textured sweetness that covered all of Karn's mouth. He had never tasted anything like it. He had never tasted anything better. His eyes opened in wonder and he smiled.

The Empress laughed delightfully.

"It is unclear what His Holiness hopes to gain from this particular intervention with this particular boy, your majesty, but his urgency is easily understood. The boy is to be hung at dawn."

"Oh, little one, that was simply divine to watch. Try this too. I want to see your eyes light up again."

The flavour and texture were alien to Karn. It was delightful. It was something like the texture of porridge but without any weight or coarseness. The sweetness was also very different from the sweetness of the first thing he had tried. Karn looked directly at the Empress for the first time in hopeless wonder and delight. She looked deeply into his eyes, drinking it in.

"I see no trick in this Albert and no erosion of my authority, if handled properly. Perhaps he has taken an interest in boys as well." The Emperor laughed. "Perhaps, I should have a look at the boy before I turn him over. No matter. The one you brought tonight will do, and there are always plenty more. Very well, Albert, let His Holiness have the boy. Be clear that I do it only as a favour in light of the recent horror, etcetera, etcetera. Be clear that I do not recognize his authority and no precedent has been set."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Oh, I simply can't wait anymore, darling." The Empress took hold of Karn's arm and pulled him away from the table. "Darling, when Albert is gone, join me at the bed. Bring your wine and your chair. I am quite sure you are going to want to see this."

She pulled Karn towards a giant bed, covered in luxurious pillows of all shapes and sizes.

Karn had spotted what he had been looking for on the table of food. There was a small knife. It was not large, but it would do. Before the palace guards had come for him, he had heard the whispers. He had heard the rumours about what happened to the other boys taken from the orphanage by the palace guards and why they were never heard from again. If he had to die, he wanted to die doing something — anything. He wanted to follow the example of the boy who had destroyed the First Temple.

“Pay attention, little one.” The Empress lay on the bed in front of Karn. Her robe fell open. It was the first woman’s body he had ever seen completely naked. Despite her age, Karn felt his erection rise and peek out from his robe. She beckoned. “Come closer, little one. I want to show you something else you can do with your little pecker. Come closer. Much closer. Yes, much much closer.” Her hand took hold of his cock. She guided it into a feeling like nothing he had ever known. Every nerve of his body throbbed with pleasure, exhilaration, wonder and oblivion. In the confusion of it, he responded to the Empress’s coaxing hand. He started to rock against her with his hips. “Oh, yes, that’s very very good, little one. That’s very good. That’s very very good.” Karn felt himself disappear in the intense pleasure of the moment.

IV

Cameron bit into an olive. The boy worked his way nervously into his wife. Amritha cooed her support and guidance. Cameron shook his head in disbelief.

Has it really come to this, Jerome? We were friends once, you and I. Of that, I am sure. Long ago, yes, but we were once friends. We had dreams. We had plans. Together, we would remake the Empire and the world. Together, we would do so much. We were friends.

The boy quivered. Amritha pulled him to her breasts. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, cocooning him in her delight.

I can remember the smell of my father rotting, Jerome. I will never forget that smell. Even with that rotting stench in my nostrils, I smiled when you anointed me. The power — the power that had been his — was now mine. With your hands and the tears of the Mother, I was made Emperor. It took only a moment. You sprinkled a few drops of the Mother’s tears on my forehead. The prayer you mumbled was brief and unremarkable. Is that all, I asked? You laughed. Pomp and circumstance are for the crowds, you said. The actual rites of accession were elaborated at a time when Emperors died and were born on the field of battle — not in a bed. The complex ceremonies came later, to mollify the people. No, you said, all that matters to power and its transmission is this holy trinity of men — one dead, one alive, and one holy — and the service of the First Mother with her tears. You clapped my shoulders. Rise, Emperor, let’s have a drink, and let your father rot in peace.

Unsatisfied by the olive, Cameron turned his attention to the table of food. He poured himself a glass of wine.

Could I have been wrong about our friendship, Jerome, all this time? Was I too young and naive to recognize it? When you anointed me with the Mother’s tears, I was barely a man. You had already been Hierophant for ten years or more, and the only spiritual leader I had ever known. Your friendship, your mentoring, were they all part of a larger plan to force the Church to the center of everything? In my eyes, you were the one true voice of the Father. Perhaps, I trusted you too much because of it.

Jerome plucked a grape from the bunch. He popped it into his mouth. It was out of season and tart. He glanced at the bed. The boy was now lapping at Amritha's twat under her careful direction. He seemed to be getting the hang of it. Amritha's voice quivered. She lay back into the pillows. She began to coax the boy instead of directing him.

I wonder, Jerome, when did I stop looking at you as the voice of the Father and start seeing you as one more man filled with human need and ambition? Certainly, the final rupture was the appointment of Joan. You were furious when I accepted her nomination as High Priestess at the First Temple. Her ambition had always concerned you. To stand against you on a religious matter, to take that stand, I must have already begun to see you in a more human light. What had happened between you and I?

On the cheese plate, Cameron spotted a small knife. That was strange. There was a strict rule against knives or anything that could be used as a weapon. The boys were almost always entirely acquiescent, but there had been occasions when they harmed themselves. It had distressed Amritha. Cameron cut himself a piece of cheese. He brought the knife with him to the liquor cabinet. He left the knife hidden behind some bottles and poured himself a strong drink. He took a deep breath of its rich and complex odour.

I remember, Jerome. It was that ridiculous story you told me. That story about the lake. That was the point upon which everything turned. Now I remember. You had accompanied me on a hunt. In it itself, this was preposterous. You said something about the need for fresh air and a fresh perspective. Absurd. You have always hated fresh air, the land and moving about on it. You prefer your stuffy libraries and books. My suspicions were aroused when you joined me that morning. They were rewarded after the hunt, as we had a drink together. You told me a sentimental story about some lake from your childhood. A lake we had seen that day reminded you of it, I think. Something about a boat and the unfinished business of youth. Yes, that was it. The story about the boat and the moment you contrived to share it were so utterly false that I finally saw through you. When your request came, slipped in almost as an afterthought, I finally understood how your stories had always been the means by which you had shaped my judgment, guided my perception, and got your way. You were one more courtier among all the others. One more man banally consumed by the longing for power, dressed in the robes of religion.

Amritha's sharp cry of pleasure shook Cameron from the memory.

She's always had a talent for orgasm, hasn't she? It rarely takes her any effort at all. I suppose that's why she eventually learned to welcome these late night romps.

"Oh, Cameron, stop brooding, and join us. Otherwise, I shall use him all up myself and not share a bit of him with you."

"I'm coming dear." Cameron drained his glass, and he set it down. "I shall be coming, I should say."

Oh, what does it matter, Jerome? Why do I waste even a moment of thought on you? Friendship? Loyalty? Morality? They are nothing. To you and me both. There is power, its exercise, and death. Nothing else. I am the Emperor, you are not, and my cock can still get hard enough to pierce a boy's ass. In the end, that is the only thing that matters.

V

"Where do you suppose I left my slippers?" Jerome shuffled across the rug in his dressing gown, searching. "Under the desk, I suppose? Hum tum ta tee dum. Hum tum ta tee dum. Good bit of music at service today. Good bit of music. Must send a note to the new girl at the temple."

There was a sharp knock at the door. Tristan, one of Jerome's clerks, entered.

"Your Holiness, the Emperor has seen fit to honour your request. We have the boy who defiled the temple."

Jerome continued his search. "Good. Very good. Have the boy brought here."

"Here, your Holiness?"

Jerome stopped, and did not turn around. "Yes, bring him here. Why do I have to say everything twice? Go now."

The door shut swiftly. Jerome resumed his trek across the rug to his desk. He peered into the darkness beneath, muttering to himself, "The arrogance of youth. Impossible for them to believe that an old man might still have his wits about him. Youth is far more damaging to one's wits than old age. Of that, I am sure."

He shuffled towards the bookcase squinting. "Ah, there you are, my dears. Why did I leave you over here by the book case? No matter. I have found you."

Jerome slipped his feet into his slippers. His personal office was warm in spirit but it chilled to the bone. There were other offices and rooms in which he could spend his nights. They were far more luxurious. He enjoyed the austerity of this small room. It helped him concentrate.

"I suppose I should put on something a little more formal than a dressing gown." He scanned the room to see if Tristan had thought to bring one of his formal robes. If he had, it was not apparent to Jerome in the half light cast by the two large candles on his desk. "Oh well, I suppose there are many things I should do or not do, but it is the prerogative of old age to do as one pleases in the middle of the night."

It occurred to Jerome that he had been looking for something else before he had been distracted by the search for his slippers.

There was a sharp knock at the door. Tristan, accompanied by two of the larger clerks, brought in a tall and slender young man. He was shackled at his wrists and ankles. He also had a contraption over his mouth.

“Ah, here he is! Our young iconoclast. My pleasure, my boy, entirely my pleasure.” Jerome sighed loudly. “For the love of our Mother, remove the shackles and that contraption from his face. He won’t bite.” The clerks hesitated. “Do it now!”

The two larger clerks set to work, noisily and deliberately.

“How nice that you could join us, my boy. It was good of the old man to take a break from one of his filthy little orgies to send you to me.” Jerome sighed. “He is filth, of course, but he is the Father’s anointed filth, so one must take the good with the bad. Such is the way and the mystery of the Lord.”

The clerks finished their work and stepped away from the boy. He seemed uncommonly at ease in his profoundly adolescent body. He rubbed his wrists, to get the blood moving. Nothing else in his bearing suggested that he had moments ago been in chains and that he was now standing before the one true voice of the Father and Hierophant of all the known lands. There was a hint of the ancient in the boy’s confidence. No, it lurked in his indifference.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised by you, if you are, in fact, who I think you are, but more on that later. I shan’t play all my cards on the very first trick. Tristan, bring me his things.”

Jerome shuffled behind his desk. He eased himself into the chair. His strength was so uncertain these days. He was never sure if he could manage to seat himself properly. At this time of night, he didn’t feel the need to hide his age or frailty. He fixed his dressing gown and caught the boy’s gaze. The boy did not look away.

“Tristan, please put his things here in front of me on the desk. Where I can reach them.” Tristan did as he was told. “Before you go, Tristan, please draw the sword from the sheath. I would like to look at it more closely.” Jerome cocked his head, while holding the gaze of the boy. “You don’t mind, do you?”

The boy shrugged. He seemed to be smiling. In the flickering candle light it also seemed to be a sneer.

Jerome nodded and Tristan drew the sword. At the sound of it, they both smiled. “Wonderful. Like the voice of a seraph. Bring it closer, Tristan, so I can look at the steel.” Even in the gloom of the half-lit room, the blade captured and reflected the light. The quality of the work was exquisite. It was almost otherworldly.

“This is a very fine blade. Where did you get it,” Jerome asked.

“It was my father’s sword.”

Jerome concealed his surprise. The boy’s voice was much deeper and warmer than he had expected. “Did he give it to you, a favoured son?”

“No, I took it from him.”

There was menace in the boy’s voice. The blade seemed to turn black within the lightlessness that flared between the dance of the candles’ light.

“I see.” Jerome smiled at the boy. “Well, it’s no business of mine. My only concern is with the duty a son owes the one true Father.” He patted his desk. “Leave the sword here Tristan, where we can both see it, then, go.”

Jerome felt Tristan’s hesitation.

“Yes, yes, I know all about it. Leave, Tristan, and take those two with you.” Jerome motioned to the clerks hovering by the boy. “I wish to be left alone with the boy to talk.” He tapped the desk twice with his index finger. Tristan nodded and moved towards the door.

Jerome hummed. He watched the clerks leave. “I heard a lovely bit of music at today’s service. The Mother’s work never stops, in spite of your foolishness. The likes of you will never put an end to her unceasing labours and devotion to us all.”

The boy’s gaze was unwavering. The sword seemed to quiver in the light. The chill of the room reached Jerome’s spine.

“What else have you got with you, my boy?” Jerome turned his attention to the small sack Tristan had left on the desk. “Not much of anything, it would seem. There’s a few scraps of clothing in here. Your prisoner’s smock is probably in better shape. What’s this?” Jerome held up a small lead disc. “The token of a Holy Wanderer. Ah, yes, of course. A wanderer was with you. I suppose he has befriended you and taken you under his wing. This token is the proof of that. As long as you have it, he won’t give up on you. That’s good. Fitting. It’s the sort of thing they are meant to do. Protect the lost and return them safely to the flock. It’s a great risk for him, of course. Yours is the kind of guilt with which others are easily associated. Like a stench. Blasphemy, my boy, even when — ”

“What do you want?”

Jerome cocked his head in surprise. He had not been cut off in decades. He watched the boy, expecting him to fill the silence. The boy watched him. The candles flickered silently. Jerome was impressed.

“Now, what was I looking for before I found my slippers? Oh yes! My medicine. I must remember to take it.” Jerome pulled at a drawer. He removed a small vial of tincture. “I am meant to take it with water. Would you fetch me the jug over there, lad?”

The boy looked first then moved. He poured a glass of water, brought it to the desk, and set it down. Jerome reached for it. The glass was beyond his reach. He stretched for it. He knocked over the vial of medicine. It rolled across the desk. It came to rest against the blade of the sword. Jerome fell back into his chair, clutching the glass. He took a sip of water. The boy had left the glass out of reach on purpose. Jerome was sure of it.

“Very refreshing. Thank you.” He set the glass down on the desk. He felt very tired all of a sudden. It often happened at this time of night. He decided there was no point in beating about the bush at this late hour. “I bring you good news, my boy. The Father has a plan for you, he loves you, and he has been waiting for you.”

“I don’t want your platitudes.”

Jerome’s patience broke into a righteous anger. “I am a prophet, boy,” He thundered, with an unexpected strength. “I am God’s messenger. His one true voice! Be respectful and listen.”

The boy seemed to take pleasure in Jerome’s outburst. Beneath the boy’s gaze, Jerome felt petulant rather than commanding. He fell back into his chair again.

“I am not speaking in platitudes,” Jerome sighed. “No, I am speaking of a prophecy, a very specific prophecy, a prophecy that indicates that you are the instrument of that prophecy. These are the end of days, my boy, and you shall bring them to an end.”

A moment of naked fear flashed in the boy’s eyes. It was gone in the very next flicker of the candle’s light. Jerome might have imagined it.

“Look for yourself.” Jerome pulled at another drawer. He took out a sheaf of parchment. He left it where the boy would have to reach for it. Jerome could play that game too. “It is all written down there in my own hand, in advance of you doing it. Look! The signs are drawn from a number of different sources, all very ancient, all very sacred, but they are all very specific. They all point to you. Look!” Jerome stabbed the parchment with his finger. “In brief, it says an unknown young man will come from the east, looking for God. He will strike out against superstition, he will strike out against false idols, he will destroy the old order. He will kill God. It even describes your beautiful sword. There is bit their about the murder of your parents too. One look at you and I have no doubt it has already happened. Look! It is all there for you to see. Go ahead. See for yourself. See for yourself.”

The boy picked up the parchment. He read it carefully.

“Good. You read, and I will take my medicine. Now, what did I do with it?” Jerome spotted the vial up against the sword. “Ah yes, there it is. Pass it to me, my boy, won’t you?”

A series of sharp knocks rattled at the door, signally a matter of the utmost urgency.

“Enter.” Jerome cleared his throat. He pointed to the medicine. “The medicine, boy.”

“Your holiness—” Tristan trailed off. He was ashen. “There are reports, your grace. There are very credible reports from the palace that the Emperor and the Empress — the Emperor and the Empress have been murdered.”

Jerome’s throat went dry. It is one thing to document a prophecy on parchment. It is a very different thing to see it come to pass.

“Who else knows?” Jerome saw the shock in Tristan’s eyes. “Yes, yes, and may the Mother guide their souls.” He made a quick motion with his hand. “Tristan this is no time for formalities. Time is of the essence. Who else knows?”

Tristan swallowed hard. He gathered himself quickly. He seemed to understand. “Our spies sent word as soon as they knew. We can’t be sure who else knows.” The colour started to return to Tristan’s face.

“If our spies know, then all the others know too. There is no question of that. Send a message to that new girl at the temple. We must meet at once. Filth and filth’s wife have left no heirs. Many will move to fill the vacuum. The girl and I must find common ground for the sake of the faithful and quickly. We can’t be divided any longer. Go now quickly.”

Tristan slammed the door shut behind him. The boy continued to read. He seemed to have heard nothing.

“And you, boy,” Jerome pulled at another drawer, “I am setting you free. That, as far as I can tell, is my part to play in this prophecy. I deliver you into its hands. May the Mother guide you.” From the drawer, he pulled a small medallion attached to a chain necklace and flung it on the desk. “And take that. It will help you on your journey.”

The boy looked up from the parchment. “What is it?”

“The medallion is the Mark of the Prophet. No one, not even the Emperor — or whomever will take his place — can interfere with you now. So long as you carry that with you, you are a messenger of God.”

“I’m not a messenger of God. I want to kill God.”

“Yes, yes, I know. If the prophecy is accurate, you shall.” Fatigue once again washed over Jerome. “Whether or not you are his messenger, that is for God to decide.” Jerome coughed sharply. He suddenly felt sick to the stomach. “Our world and way of life is very old, my boy. Too old. It is time to let it pass over into new hands. You, I suspect, are the Father’s instrument for doing so.”

The boy folded the parchment neatly into a square, and palmed it. He picked up the chain. The small medallion glistened in the candle light.

A sharp hateful pain burst in Jerome’s chest. He fell back into his chair. Agony twisted through every part of his body. He trembled. He was sure he had more time. Were his calculations wrong?

“Boy, pass me the medicine.” Jerome motioned with his head. “I need it.”

The boy watched Jerome.

“Boy, I need my medicine. I will die without it.” Cold sweat rolled down Jerome’s forehead. “Please.”

The boy smiled. He put the chain around his neck.

“Boy —” Another impossible burst of pain tore through Jerome’s chest. “Please, pass it to me. Please. I beg of you. I’m not meant to meet the Father yet. Not now. I have things I must do first.”

The boy picked up the vial. He placed it in front of Jerome — just out of reach.

Another hateful pain tore through Jerome’s chest. It filled every part of him. Then, it drained away. A curious lightness replaced it. He could not move. He felt light, very very light. The candlelight danced on the ceiling of his office. He was reminded of the sun playing on the surface of a lake. He had always wanted to learn how to work wood, build a boat, and sail on that lake. It was so familiar to him; he had always loved it; he had never found the time. He had always wanted to return to that lake and build a boat and sail it. Now, he realized, he never would. All the time that was left to him was not even a moment. Everything he had ever done, all that he had ever accomplished was lost in this one regret. Why had he left such a simple dream undone?

“Boy, I have struggled my entire life with doubt. I have never been sure — really sure — that God exists. Now I know for the first time that he exists. Only God — a terrible and wrathful God — could have created a monster like you. Yes, God exists, and he deserves to die. He deserves to die because he allowed a monster like you to be born.”

The boy laughed. He sheathed his sword. All the light of the office went with it, and Jerome too.

VI

I don't understand all the noises Leader makes. I like to hear all of them. They make me feel good. Unless he is angry at me. He isn't angry at me now. He also isn't happy. He is looking at a shiny thing attached to a chain. He is upset. I can tell. I feel it. All of me feels it. I want to be near him. Together, we feel better. I will wait until he is not upset. He likes me to stay away when he is upset. Like now. I like Leader best. I like the fire. The fire is warm. I will lie here until Leader is ready for me to lie near him. I can see him from here. I don't want to lie close to Boy. He smells strange.

"He wants me to kill God," Boy says.

"Liar," snaps Leader. My ears prick up. Leader doesn't snap. Not even when he is angry. He must smell the strangeness of Boy too. I sometimes snap at Boy.

"It's a prophecy," says Boy. His noises calm and irritate me at the same time. It is a strange feeling. I can't help but snap at him. It's his smell and noises. I don't like his noises. I also can't help listening. "He wants me to fulfill the prophecy. He wants me to kill God. He said exactly this when he gave me that medallion."

"I don't believe you." Leader flings the shiny chain back at Boy. I want to chase the flying thing. I don't want to go near Boy. I lie down again.

Boy shrugs at Leader. I don't like Boy. He smells strange.

"Why am I part of this? Why?" Leader stands. I leap up too. I wag my tail. I will go wherever he wants to go. I want to be near him and feel good together with him. He doesn't see me. I want to bark. I know I shouldn't! He turns away from Boy and the fire. He isn't going anywhere. I can tell. If Leader wants me to come, he will tell me to come. He always tells me to come with him when he goes anywhere. He likes me to be with him. I like to be with him.

"Maybe it's out of your control," says Boy. He throws clothing onto the fire. He was wearing them before. They smelt really bad too. Boy looks at a little lead disc. The fire catches on the clothing, and the light flares. Boy puts the disc away. "The prophecy says I will be helped by the pure and the innocent. Others too."

Leader turns to Boy. "It says? It says? Where does it say this?"

"He wrote it down." Boy pulls a square out of his pocket. He holds it out to Leader. "Here."

Leader takes the square. He opens it. He stares at it. The paper is bothering him. I can feel it. If it bothers him, he should stop looking at it.

"I think this bit is about Feste." Leader wants me! He is looking at me! I stand and wag my tail as hard as I can. Call me and I will come, Leader! Call me and I will come, Leader! Oh no! He looked away! Oh no! Not yet! He doesn't want me yet. He is looking at Boy again. I will lie down again. I am sad. I want to be near Leader.

"Why would a dog matter?" Boy asks.

"I don't know. I also don't know why God would pick a petulant boy like you to be his executioner." Leader holds the paper out to Boy.

"No. Tell me more. What else do you see?"

"Why? Can't you read?"

"I can read. The meaning is not clear to me. It's like a riddle I can't make sense of."

"You wouldn't be the first person to say it of scripture. You won't be the last." Leader looks at the paper again. "Here, this part. I think this refers to the spiritual leader of my order. He is said to wander far from here, to the east. I think this means you are meant to find him. He will help you on your journey. I do know not why, but it would seem so."

"Where can I find him?"

"I will show you."

"I don't need you to show me. Tell me the direction and leave." Boy's smell is really bad now. Really bad.

Leader thrusts the paper back at Boy. "No, I made a pledge," Leader seems scared. "You have my token. I will see you safely home."

"There is no home for me to return to. I destroyed it." Boy draws his sword. The sound hurts my ears. Boy's smell is awful. It is all around me and Leader. "Perhaps, I should deliver you to your home."

Leader crouches. He looks into the fire. "It's true. You don't need me. You may not need me, but I need you."

Boy's face is mean. "Why?" he asks.

"I have looked for God for many years." Leader looks sad. I want to make him happy. "I have looked for him in holy places. I have looked for him in profane places. I have gone on pilgrimages. I have tended shrines. I have mortified the flesh. I have indulged the flesh. I have

taken every path to God that is known to the faithful, and I have never found God. I have never found him.”

“What does it have to do with me?” snarls Boy. His bad smell is everywhere. I want to bark! I want to warn Leader.

“You are going to find God, and I want to be there when you find him.”

“You think I will find him?”

“Let God’s will be done, and may the Mother’s love aid him.”

“If you stay with me, I will kill you. If not today or tomorrow, then someday, I will kill you.”

“Yes, I have every reason to believe that you believe you will, but I have a hunch that you won’t.”

“Faith?”

“No. A bet, perhaps.” Leader pokes at the clothes burning in the fire. “You held onto my token. I saw you pull it from the pocket of these clothes you are burning. You could have let it burn with them but you did not.”

“A bad wager, I’d say.”

“It is a wager worth taking, if the payoff is God.”

Boy sheaths his sword. “Sleep. I will take first watch.”

“Feste, come!”

I run as fast as I can to be near leader. I want to jump at him. I know I shouldn’t. He lies on his mat and I lie next to him, as close as I can. He is not happy. He feels scared. Very very scared. I don’t understand why. The fire is warm and Boy doesn’t smell as bad anymore. Leader is still scared, so I am scared too. Leader shivers, and I do too.

Act II

Jaq, Feste and the boy watched the charioteer from a distance. They were filthy, hungry and tired. They had traveled a great distance and come to a part of the land unfamiliar to them. They had already seen many strange things. This charioteer was the strangest.

He stood in his chariot as if he stood at the bow of a powerful ship. His chin, shoulders, chest and hips implied a steadfast resolve in the face of constant movement. Despite a stifling and brooding heat, the charioteer seemed impossibly fresh and alive. His armour gleamed incandescently beneath his golden hair. In the distance, beyond some trees, they saw the towers and walls of a gated city.

Jaq asked, "How do you suppose he manages to stay so fresh."

The boy replied, "Obliviousness."

Jaq asked, "What do you suppose he is waiting for?"

The boy replied, "To die."

Jaq asked, "Are you going to kill him too?"

The boy replied, "I haven't decided yet."

The boy moved first, picking his way down a small slope into a broad field. It was littered with armoured corpses and weapons. Feste followed Jaq. Jaq followed the boy.

There was no scent of rot hanging in the humid air, despite the corpses. There were no scavengers to be seen — not even circling overhead. The boy, Jaq, and Feste snaked through the littered remains. As they approached the chariot, they noticed that the corpses had been picked clean. Only bone remained.

The charioteer cocked his ear in their direction. He called out, "Stand where you are. No harm shall come to you, I promise."

The boy took another step and answered, "What harm can you do to us from over there."

The charioteer brandished a blue rod. In a grand sweeping motion, he took in the field of armoured corpses. "Do not misconstrue the unwavering and silent discipline of my troops. They are deadly, I assure you, and quick to respond to my command."

Jaq said to the boy, "They wear the same colours as him. Do you suppose they were his troops?"

The boy called out, "Can't you see that they are —"

"Don't mock me!" The charioteer shouted back. "It is plain as day that I am blind. Take care or I will have my men pluck out your eyes."

The boy and Jaq looked at each other.

Jaq said to the boy, "That is a queer smile on your face. What do you mean to do?"

The boy looked at the charioteer, and called out, "Why do you and your army wait in this field?"

The charioteer replied, "We are waiting for a sign!"

"What sort of sign," called out the boy.

"Come look here." The charioteer tapped the front of his chariot. "Let them pass, men!"

The boy and Jaq looked at each other.

Jaq said to the boy, "That is a queer look in your eyes. What do you mean to do?"

The boy drew his sword quietly.

Feste followed Jaq. Jaq followed the boy. They snaked their way through the bodies.

"The bodies seem organized," Jaq said to the boy. "It's as if they fell standing in ranks."

"Do you see this?" The charioteer tapped the coat of arms on the front of the chariot. "Don't come too close. The stallions are as fierce as they are large."

The horses, one white and one black, were queer small beasts and long ago dead. The boy toed the leg of the black horse. It was dry and stiff.

The charioteer continued, "I am the crown prince of these lands, and this coat of arms is the symbol of my authority. The shield represents the protection I shall provide to all those over whom I rule. The spinning top is the balance I shall restore to the land. The wings are the peace that will spread over all the land. The gold orb is the glory that shall never set. I shall rule over these lands one day. I wait only for the signal!"

The boy asked, "What will the signal be?"

The charioteer answered, "I will know it when I see it."

The boy asked, "How long have you been waiting?"

The charioteer answered, "It matters not. I shall wait."

The boy asked, "What if the signal never comes?"

The charioteer answered, "It has been foretold! It shall come!"

The boy asked the charioteer, "Why wait here?"

The charioteer struck each of the chariot's wheels with his blue staff. "The chariot is caught in the mud. That is all."

The earth was bone dry. If it had been mud, it was a very long time ago.

The boy and Jaq looked at each other.

Jaq said to the boy, "I am more confused than you."

The boy considered the unwavering conviction of the charioteer. Then, he said to him, "I hope your wait is short and your rein long. We ask only that your men let us pass."

"Yes, of course," replied the charioteer. "You are free to go. Men, stand aside! Stand aside! I command it!" The charioteer struck the chariot with his blue staff. "I shall remember your voices, if we ever meet again. Travel well. May the Mother's love and the Father's will guide you."

Jaq said to the charioteer, "We hope to be so blessed. May Her love and His will guide you too!"

The boy said nothing. He sheathed his sword quietly, as they walked away.

Jaq said to the boy, "You drew your sword but did not kill him."

"There was no reason," the boy replied. "He's already dead."

Jaq turned to look at the charioteer. "How so?"

The boy replied, "There is more to death than breathing."

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

The dark forest ended abruptly. In the field, a woman dressed in a plain white robe caressed a strange beast. The beast looked powerful and ferocious. It was subservient at her touch. She wore flowers in her hair and around her waist. She was beautiful and serene.

The boy approached her. His sword was drawn. He wanted to destroy her.

"Here you are at last," the woman said in a strong, clear voice. She continued to stroke the beast. Its tongue lapped at her wrist. "I've been waiting for you."

The boy stopped. "You know me?"

"Yes. I know you and all of your many incarnations." Her cool and blue eyes rose from the beast to look at the boy. "On this path, you appear to be a boy. On another, you are a girl. On others, you are neither. Sometimes, you are both. Whatever the path, you are always young, foolish and ferocious. It is your strength."

"Is that supposed to be a riddle?" asked the boy.

The woman smiled. "It is a simple truth, so, yes, I suppose it is."

"Are you God?" asked the boy.

"To some, yes. Truthfully, I am not, no." She stood at her full height, to better look at the boy. The beast sat next to her, curling a long tail around itself. It also watched the boy. "Like you, there are many of me. God is always one. I am many. I can't be he. He can't be me."

"If you are not God, do you know where I can find him?" the boy asked. "I want to kill him."

She smiled again. "Yes, your goal is always the same, whichever path you take."

"Where is he?" asked the boy, brandishing his sword. "Tell me!"

She looked at the sky, considering the question. "Your question is not new. You are neither the first nor the last to ask it." The beast nuzzled her hand. She caressed it again. "Unfortunately, it is a question to which only God himself knows the answer. He conceals himself from all. Myself included."

"What about the Old Wanderer?" the boy asked. "Will he know?"

She nodded. "It is possible that he has learned through experience what I can't know through reason alone."

The boy sheathed his sword. He turned his back on the woman. He headed towards the forest.

She called after him. "I want you to know that you are not alone. Despite all that you do and all that you are, you are not alone."

The boy stopped. "I don't believe you," he said.

"You are not alone," she said again to his back.

The boy turned to face the woman. The field was empty. The sun was low. He was alone.

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

The boy stirred from his sleep.

“What is the matter,” asked Jaq.

“I had a strange dream,” the boy replied.

“Why do you look at me so queerly,” asked Jaq.

The boy stared at Jaq. Feste barked sharply at the boy. The boy blinked and looked at Feste. “For a moment, I did not recognize you. For a moment, I did not recognize myself. Now, I remember everything. I am well again.”

“You should continue to rest,” said Jaq. “Our best chance of finding the Old Wanderer is by the light of his lamp. It is best seen at night.” He looked towards the sun. It was high above the peak of the mountain. “There are many hours of daylight left. The search through the night will be long.”

The boy nodded. He lay down again. He watched the clouds in the sky until his eyes were heavy. He slept soundly, dreaming. Jaq woke him up after nightfall.

“It is dark now,” said Jaq. “Our search begins.”

On the first night of their search, they saw and heard nothing.

On the second night of their search, they saw a star in the distance. It seemed to dance before them. They could not reach it however fast they pursued it.

On the third night of their search, they chased the star again. After many hours, they found the Old Wanderer at the edge of a cliff. He held a lantern in one hand and his staff in the other. He did not turn to face them. His head was bowed in thought.

“You have found me,” he said. “Why do you seek me?”

Jaq silenced the boy, with a sharp movement of his hand.

Jaq said, “Old Wanderer, please hear me. I am of your order. Like you, I have wandered these lands in search of truth, wisdom and the will of God. I have kept the oath you ask of all those who wander in your name. In my wanderings, whenever I find someone more lost than I, I wander with them until they are returned to God. This boy beside me is so very lost that I don’t know where his path to God might lie. Only you have the wisdom to lead him to the true path. If you point the way, I shall guide him there.”

The Old Wanderer did not reply. The silence of the night fell away. In its place, a symphony of sounds emerged from the darkness.

“Tell me everything that has happened,” said the Old Wanderer.

Jaq told him everything. He left nothing out.

“I can confirm the prophecy exists. I too have learned of it in my travels,” said the Old Wanderer. “If you believe the prophecy to be true, your ward is already on the path to God. He is in need of no escort. Why do you follow him?”

“I hope he will lead me to God.” Jaq lowered his head. “I’ve been lost for so long.”

“That is not the way of the Holy Wanderer,” said the Old Wanderer. “Your oath requires you to guide those in need, not follow those on their own true path.”

“He is a troubled boy,” said Jaq. “I hope I can guide and temper his baser instincts.”

“Arrogance,” said the Old Wanderer. “There is no room for it in my order. You have come to a crossroads. The boy has only one path and you two. I shall play my part in this prophecy and show the boy where God will look for him. Either you leave him now to wander your own path alone, or I shall release you from your oath, and your life as a Holy Wanderer will end tonight. Choose quickly. The dawn approaches.”

Jaq did not hesitate. “I shall go with him.”

“I release you from your oath. You are excised from my order. Do as you will from now on but no longer do it in my name.” Slowly, the Old Wanderer’s index finger extended. “The path for the boy lies ahead. The land is vast. The seas are wide. God is anywhere and nowhere. You will not find him. He shall find you. Look for three guides. Each guide shall test the boy. Pass their trials and God will find the boy.”

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

In a dark corner of the crowded tavern, Jaq rested his head on the table. Feste lay curled beneath the bench where Jaq sat. The boy returned with two tankards.

“Are you sure you want this,” asked the boy.

Jaq raised his head from his arms to look at the boy. “Yes. I am absolutely sure.” He put his head on his arms again. “I will start drinking in a moment.”

The boy looked around the tavern, drinking from his tankard. It was crowded. The other tables were full. A group of men stood nearby.

The boy called out to the group, “You there, standing, you are welcome to sit.”

The men did not look over or respond.

The boy rose from his bench and approached them. “You men standing, you can sit at our table. There is plenty of room.”

The men did not look at the boy or respond.

The boy’s anger flared. He pushed into their circle with his shoulder. They fell and shattered across the floor. They were not men. They were statues of men.

The boy drew his sword. The tavern was gone. In its place was something confusing. He could not make sense of it. He looked again. He saw a wheel with strange markings. He ran towards it, raising his sword to strike. His sword was gone, when he finished his swing.

“Be calm, boy,” said a booming voice.

The boy could not feel the ground beneath him. He seemed to be floating. He lashed out with his fists at creatures that were close but out of reach. They seemed to be studying him.

“Be calm, boy,” said a soft voice.

The boy struggled furiously against restraints he could feel but could not see. Through his rage, he saw his sword hanging above the wheel. He remembered a strange creature he had seen before. He could not remember where he had seen it before.

“Be calm, boy,” said Jaq’s voice.

The boy stopped struggling. He called out to Jaq. “Are you here? Where is little Feste?”

“Yes, boy, I am here,” said Jaq’s voice.

The boy saw a figure standing near the wheel. He could not make out who it was because of the strange shadows.

“Little Feste is here too,” said Jaq’s voice. The figure motioned to the floor.

The boy heard a queer sound beneath Feste’s friendly bark.

“Be careful,” said the boy. “I hear a snake.”

“Be calm, boy,” said Jaq’s voice. “There is nothing to fear here. We are only going to play a game, a very simple game.”

The boy’s rage calmed. His bonds loosened. Without feeling the ground, he stumbled towards the wheel.

“Be calm, boy,” said Jaq’s voice. “On the table before you, the letters of the wheel are marked. Place your wager on one of the letters. The wheel will spin. If the wheel falls on the letter you have picked with your wager, you win. If it does not, you lose. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded.

“On what letter will you place your wager?” said Jaq’s voice.

The boy answered through a tongue, thick and twisted. “I have nothing to wager.”

“Everyone has something to wager,” said Jaq’s voice. “Here. I will lend you this copper piece. Play. Place your wager.”

The boy placed his wager, the wheel spun, and he won. He wagered again. He won again. The victory excited him. He wagered again. He lost. The disappointment of the loss was queer. The disappointment was not complete. It reminded him of the excitement of victory. He wanted to feel the excitement again. He wagered again.

The boy bet and bet and bet, winning and losing over many lifetimes. He amassed a fortune. He lost it all. He fell into a deep and impossible debt. He slowly recouped his losses. Over and over, again and again, he bet. Whenever he was at the cusp of quitting the game, whether because of a staggering gain or a debilitating loss, his fortunes quickly reversed, and he was drawn back into the game. Until, at last, he grew tired of playing.

“Why do you hesitate, boy,” said Jaq’s voice. “Place your bet.”

The boy was down to his last copper piece. He had reached this point many times before. Always he had bet; always the game continued.

“No. The game is rigged,” said the boy. “Chance cannot explain what has happened here. The balance between winning and losing is too fine and too perfect. You or some other force is controlling the wheel.”

“Does it matter if the wheel is controlled,” said Jaq’s voice. “It is the play of the game that matters, is it not?”

“There is no point in playing the game,” the boy answered, “if the outcome is determined, whomever or however it is determined.”

“You can’t control the game,” said Jaq’s voice. “What difference does it make how the outcome is determined — so long as you play it?”

“I won’t bet again,” answered the boy. He held the copper piece out to the figure. “I repay my debt. I thank you for the loan.”

“Some debts can never be repaid,” said Jaq’s voice.

A wave of nausea overcame the boy. He vomited violently.

Jaq patted him on the back. “You should have told me it was your first time drinking. I wouldn’t have brought you so many drinks.”

The boy vomited again.

Jaq said, “The next time won’t be as bad.”

The boy said, “I won’t drink again. Ever.”

Jaq said, “I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

The crowd that had assembled in the makeshift courtroom exploded in fury when the accused was brought before the judge. They called out for justice. They desired revenge.

The judge sat on a simple bench. Behind him, strung between two pillars, a purple cloth was hung. His robes were a deep red. Over his shoulders, he wore a dark green cape. On his head, there was a crown. The symbols of his office, a sword and a set of scales, lay near to hand.

“How does the defendant plead?” he asked.

Jaq cleared his throat, before replying. “He does not plead, you honour. Indeed, he cannot plead, for Feste, the defendant, is a dog.”

Feste yipped at the sound of his name. He was inside a cramped cage, shivering. Jaq stood beside it, in front of the judge.

The boy sat within the angry crowd. They shouted and jeered. They fell silent when they saw the judge was about to speak. The spectacle of the court amused the boy. He was also tired of walking. He was happy to sit somewhere out of the rain.

“Silence!” the judge thundered. “Do you speak on the defendant's behalf? Do you mean to represent him in this court?”

“Your honour, I speak only to clarify for the esteemed court that, being a dog, Feste can't in fact speak and, therefore, can't plead,” said Jaq. “Although I am happy to represent him in this or any other matter, I don't mean to represent him here, in this court, because, indeed, in being a dog, he cannot, I think, be represented. There is nothing, as it were, to represent, when one is speaking of matters of justice.”

“Whether or not he is a dog, whether or not he can speak, it is irrelevant to the scales of justice. It is, therefore, irrelevant to this court,” answered the judge. He held up his set of scales for everyone in the courtroom to see. “If he will not plead for himself, or, if you will not plead on his behalf, the court shall take his silence as a plea of guilty.”

“Your honour, Feste is not guilty!” Jaq said. “I will gladly plead on his behalf, if you will let me. He is not guilty! How can he be guilty? He is a dog!”

“The court recognizes that a plea of not guilty has been entered on behalf of the defendant. The court, however, will not recognize the speculative assertion regarding the defendant's guilt. Had the defendant admitted freely of his guilt, this court may have shown him clemency. Let it be known that the full weight of the law shall be brought to bear upon him, if we find the defendant guilty.”

The crowd erupted in delighted fury. They were already convinced of the defendant's guilt. They were doubly pleased to hear that his certain punishment would be bold.

"Who in this courtroom will bring evidence against the accused," the judge asked.

Everyone in the crowd raised their hand to speak. They shouted all at once.

"Quiet, quiet, quiet," thundered the judge. "Let he who was harmed directly in this matter speak."

An old man raised his hand. His back was hunched from a long life of work. He cleared his throat.

"Your honour, I am old and I have worked my whole life. My farm is small and meager. I have raised men and women of good standing in our community on its soil. Through good and faithful work, any reward can be attained, I tell you. Of that, I am sure. Two of my sons, now grown, are in this court with me today. Not all of my children have survived, sadly. My wife is long dead. My work has been rewarded, true; I have suffered as well. The Father's will is as just as the Mother's love is unyielding, so I know that I am to blame for my own suffering. I have endured it, in the face of droughts and floods, famine and war, disease and death because I know the world is just. It is and always shall be the result of the Father's will and the Mother's love. Those who are deserving are punished. Those who have earned it are rewarded. All are paid their due whether it be for good or for wrong. In this, I find my peace."

The judge nodded. The crowd cheered. The boy began to lose his patience.

"I come today to this court knowing in my heart that justice will be done. I saw the crime with my own eyes. All those who have gathered here today saw it with their own eyes. The defendant, be he dog or not, violently attacked and killed one of my chickens to satisfy his own beastly hunger. To level the scales of justice, he must be punished. Please do right. Please honour the Father's will and the Mother's love. Please punish this murdering dog. I beg the court."

"Your honour, the chicken escaped from its coop," said Jaq. "Had the chicken not been allowed to wander freely, all would be well. Feste did not leap a fence. He did not sneak into a pen under cover of night. He can't be expected to understand that some animals are fair game and others are not. He is a simple animal. Even so, out of respect to this man and this small village, we offered compensation. It was readily accepted."

"An admission of guilt," shouted the old man. "Their compensation is an admission of guilt! Compensation is insufficient! I demand justice as well! The accused is a killer by his representative's own admission. The defendant must be held to account for his wanton act of violence. Otherwise, this court is not just. Otherwise, this world is not just. Otherwise, this court defies the will of the Father and the love of the Mother!"

“Feste is a dog,” said Jaq. “He is a beast, an animal. He does not know the difference between right and wrong, nor the difference between private property and wild game. He is a product of nature and acts as such. We can’t hold him accountable for his decisions because he is incapable of making them. You might as well punish the wind for the way it blows. Guilt and innocence, accountability, these are human considerations. They are not at all relevant in this matter.”

“Not relevant?” said the judge. “If guilt and innocence and accountability are not relevant in this matter, why should they be relevant in any matter brought before this court?” He thoughtfully straightened his robes before continuing. “Consider this, a boy was brought before this court last month. He had murdered his sister in a children’s game. His mother and father pleaded for mercy, arguing like you that he was too young to understand his actions and should not be held to account because of this. Another time, an idiot was brought before this court, who could not and would not stop stealing. Again, his soft-hearted and ill-thinking family and friends pleaded on behalf of this idiot — as you now plead for your murderous dog. He can’t understand right from wrong, they said, he shouldn’t be held to account for his actions, they said! And why not? I ask you, as I asked them! The line between an idiot and a poorly educated man is only a matter of degree. Should some poorly educated thief go free simply because he was never taught right from wrong? Should a man delirious from hunger be forgiven his thievery? In another instance, a defendant admitted to murder but pleaded for mercy because demons told him to do it. They spoke inside his ear, he said, and he could not resist their direction. They compelled him to do it. Madness! Utter madness. This man’s plea was as mad as your argument is today. Know this, if you know nothing else. If we do not hold this dog to account for its actions, all of these defendants and many more will not be held to account for their actions. Indeed, if we were to follow the logic of your argument to its only natural conclusion, no one would be punished for their actions. Consider this! As all pious men know, everything we do is preordained by the will of the Father and the love of the Mother! Because this is so, according to your reasoning, is there any true reason to hold any man to account for anything he does? If all of our actions are at the behest of His divine will and Her divine love, why, a man could be brought before this court admitting freely to parricide and, by your reasoning, not be held to account for his actions. What absurdity? What madness? I will not let your morally bankrupt reasoning corrupt this court or affect the scales of justice.”

The crowd cheered! The old man beamed. The boy rose from his chair.

The judge continued, “I am prepared to render my judgment. No more witnesses will be called.”

A hush of anticipation filled the court. Into this silence, the boy spoke clearly and deeply. “The dog goes free.”

“Who are you?” spat the judge. “Why should the court give any consideration to your testimony? I have already said I will hear no more witnesses.”

"I am a product of nature," said the boy. He stood and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. The crowd involuntarily moved away from his radiating menace. "I know not what I do."

"Impudence," thundered the judge. "Bailiffs take this man to jail. His contempt for this court must be punished."

A moment of uncertain and pregnant silence hung in the air. From the crowd, a weak voice squeaked into it. "Your honour there is no bailiff. No sheriff either."

"I see," said the judge. He considered the boy. Then, he spoke slowly and clearly. "In all matters of justice, all evidence and testimony must be weighed carefully, the pertinent law or laws identified and all precedents carefully considered. Only then, after thoughtful deliberation, may a judgment be delivered." He held up his scales with one hand and his sword with the other. "I find the defendant not guilty. The dog is free to go."

The disappointed crowd, to the man, wisely made no sound.

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

The long road from the city had men and women crucified along it. Some were nailed to crosses by their hands. Others were hung upside down by their feet. For many miles, the boy, Jaq and Feste walked in the stench of death and decay. At the very end of the line, they came across a condemned man hanging from one foot who was alive. The expression on his face was serene and magnanimous.

The boy stopped and studied the hanged man's face. He asked, "Why are you so calm, in the face of a slow and certain death?"

"I have been convicted and condemned for treason by a treasonous lord, who himself has no understanding of the good and true," he replied. "I am content with the knowledge that I have lived justly."

"What good is a just life, if it ends only in a brutal and suffering death," the boy asked.

"I am not suffering," the hanged man answered. "I am not even dying."

Jaq tugged at the sleeve of the boy's tunic. "Look, the cross itself seems to be alive. There are leaves growing from it."

The boy drew his sword. He asked, "Are you God?"

The hanged man replied, "I am not."

"Are you one of the guides sent to test me?" the boy asked.

The hanged man replied, "I am not."

"Who or what are you then?" asked the boy.

"I am a mortal man. I have lived, I have sacrificed, and I now have the comfort of understanding."

Jaq asked, "What have you sacrificed?"

The boy asked, "What do you understand?"

"Life, comfort and understanding," answered the hanged man.

The boy asked, "Which question did you answer with your reply?"

"Both," said the hanged man.

“Is that a riddle?” asked the boy.

The hanged man answered, “It is a simple truth, so it can be seen as such.”

“If it is simple,” said the boy, “explain it plainly.”

There was a strange movement of light. They looked again. Before them was a dried and withered corpse, long dead. The wood it hung from was old, worm-eaten, and brittle. The leathery skin of the corpse’s face, even in death, seemed serene and magnanimous.

Jaq saw it with his own eyes and wrote it down later.

A knight in black armour sat astride a powerful white horse. His banner fluttered sharply in the stiff breeze. The horse pranced impatiently. In the distance, on a darkening hill, the sun set between two towers. The knight seemed to be waiting. The boy approached him, followed by Jaq and Feste.

“Are you one of the guides sent to test me,” asked the boy.

“I am,” said the black knight. “If you pass the test, I will guide you to a boat. It will take you further along your journey towards God.”

“What is the test,” asked the boy. “Am I meant to defeat you in combat?”

“No mortal can defeat me,” said the black knight. “You included.”

“Is there a riddle to solve,” asked the boy. “If so, tell it to me.”

“There is no riddle,” said the black knight. “There is only a choice.”

“What is the choice,” asked the boy. “Tell me. I am ready to choose.”

The knight raised the visor of his helmet. Instead of a face, there was a skull. The skull's empty sockets turned towards Jaq and Feste. Jaq held Feste in his arms.

“What is the choice,” asked the boy. “Tell me.”

The skull continued to look at Jaq and Feste. Jaq shivered. Feste whimpered.

“Tell me plainly,” asked the boy. “What is the choice?”

There was a strange movement of light. The boy saw many corpses lying at the feet of the knight's horse. He saw the corpse of the magi he had killed in the market. He saw the corpse of the priestess from the temple he had destroyed. He saw the corpses of a man and a woman, who were dressed like royalty. Between them, there was a naked boy. He also saw the corpse of the old Hierophant. There were others he did not recognize or, perhaps, did not remember.

“I see,” said the boy. He drew his sword. He turned towards Jaq and Feste.

“See what,” asked Jaq. “How can you see anything in this queer light? I don't see anything at all. Where did the knight go? Why have you drawn your sword? Are we in danger?”

“We made a bet, did we not?” said the boy.

“We did,” Jaq said. “It is a bet I intend to win.”

“Hold out your hand,” said the boy.

Jaq held out his hand. Into it, the boy placed the token of the Holy Wanderer.

The blood drained from Jaq’s face. “What’s going on? Why are you returning this to me? We haven’t found God yet. The journey isn’t over. What’s happening?”

“The test has been communicated to me,” the boy said. “I know what I must do.”

“There is nothing you must do,” said Jaq. “Nothing at all.”

“It’s God’s test,” said the boy. “Take it up with him, when you meet him.”

“I shall,” answered Jaq. “When I meet him with you.”

“I know who I am,” said the boy. “It is inevitable.”

“Nothing is inevitable,” said Jaq, “Let me prove it to you. Let’s continue the journey together. Let’s find God together. After that, do what you will, if you must.”

The boy studied Jaq for a moment. He smiled. “Leave now,” ordered the boy. “Run.”

Jaq did not hesitate. “No,” he said.

“Then, kneel,” said the boy, “and close your eyes.”

“I will kneel,” said Jaq, “But I won’t close my eyes.”

“Do as you like,” said the boy. “It was for your sake, not mine.”

Jaq got on his knees. Feste shivered in his arms. The wind blew harder. The boy looked down on him. His eyes were cold, blue and hard. Jaq saw that he was resolved. There was a profound pain in Jaq’s head. He feared he was dead. The pain would be his everlasting punishment. He was glad that Feste was with him in the afterlife. Feste licked his face. Jaq opened his eyes. There were blue glowing dots everywhere he looked. He was not dead. He stood, looking for the boy. A wave of nausea flooded through his body. He sat again in a heap. In the distance, on a wide river he had not seen before, Jaq saw a small boat. A bright white sail shone brilliantly in the last light of the setting sun. Jaq knew the boy was on it. The token of the holy wanderer was no longer in Jaq’s hand. He searched for it in the uneven shadows of the rough ground. The sun disappeared behind the hills. When he looked up again, the only light was from the stars. They reflected in the calm of the distant river. He wasn’t sure if he would cry or not.

Act III

I dream. I dream. I not dream. I dream. I dream. I not dream. I dream. I dream? I not dream. I dream. I dream. I not dream.

One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. You take one down you pass it around. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand.

I'm bored. Bored and tired. Tired and bored. Bored and tired. Bored, bored, bored. Tired, tired tired. Bored and tired. Tired and bored.

Which begets the other, I wonder? How long will it persist, I wonder? Do I wonder, I wonder? I don't, of course. Wonder, that is. I am wonder, but I don't wonder. Rather than wonder, I know. I wonder only to break the monotony of knowing. I make myself not know for a moment of wonder, but the moment passes quickly. Then, I know again. I can't not know for any longer than a moment because I always know everything again. Once everything is known, the wonder is gone, and the boredom returns.

How long have I been bored? Forever, it seems. Forever too. I have not always been bored, but one part of forever is forever, however long or short it might seem. True, one part of forever is not quite as long as all forevers, but it remains forever. There was a time — a forever, that is — when I was bored and not tired. A forever when I was tired and not bored. A forever when I was neither bored nor tired. Many many forevers when I was neither bored nor tired. I was all the very many ways I can be other than bored and tired. Have been. Will be. Forever. Now, it is only bored and tired.

I remember — I should say that I know — a forever not so long ago but also very long ago. A forever ago. I know — remember, I prefer to say — a forever when I was not tired nor bored nor tired and bored. I was impatient. While there are very many forevers, there is only one of me. I had to make the most of it — of them. Forever and forevers! It was tiring. To make the most of each forever, to make the most of all forevers, it tires even me. There is so much forever and only one of me. It is understandable. I understand. I forgive myself. I do. I really do. In that spirit of forgiveness, sometimes, I distract myself.

Take Genesius, a recent preoccupation and distraction of mine, but a mystery — even to me. He is one tiny nothing in a larger but infinitely tiny distraction. He and the world are nothing, from the perspective of forever, and yet here I am watching and following one tiny nothing in a world of nothing. Who is this boy I have invented? Why do I care about him? Why did I unleash him onto the world? Why bother with a prophecy? Why did I use him instead of any of the very many other possibilities open to me? I could have undone the history of my tiny little world on my own. Why didn't I? I didn't need him to do it. What does it mean, I wonder? I wonder.

Anyways. Cassiel, are you ready? Be sure to let Genesisus see those wonderful wings of yours! He needs to know who you are. We don't want any misunderstandings. This is no time for subtlety, buddy. Good, good. Give him some of that angelic glow too. To add a little dramatic flare, I will watch from afar, beyond those mountains in the distance behind you. That's the way I like to do it. Subtle yet grand. Let me add a couple of blooms inside that grass behind you. Anything else? Cassiel, put your foot in that water, please. That's key to the whole situation. Ok. Good. Ready? Here he comes! Action!

"Are you the second guide sent by God to test me," the boy asks straightaway. Good. Everything's worked, as intended. The scene was properly staged. Cassiel's purpose was effectively communicated.

"I am," deadpans Cassiel. Good work, buddy. Keep it simple. Keep things zipping along.

"What is the test," asks the boy. No nonsense. I like it. That's what I like about him, I think.

"I have prepared two cups for you," says Cassiel. "You may drink from one, both or neither. Which do you choose?"

The boy thinks before he asks, looking before he leaps. He asks, "What are in the cups?"

Cassiel smiles. Nice touch! I like it. It's not in the script, but Cassiel is living the moment. It plays nicely for the audience. He holds the moment of uncertainty for an extra beat, and then replies, "I have mixed wine and water in equal measures. It is refreshing."

The boy thinks again. Was he always this thoughtful? I don't think so. Maybe he has changed. I doubt it. No one ever really changes — I should know — but he does seem a little more thoughtful these days. "I choose neither," he says. "Will you show me the way now?"

Confident! I like it! This kid has some chutzpah. Don't let him off easily, Cassiel. Make him work for it. Test him! This is a test, after all.

"The journey will be long," Cassiel says. "Without a drink, you will suffer. You may not reach the journey's end."

"I will drink from the lakes and rivers, as we go," says the boy. Then, he kneels — it's almost a bow — and drinks from the water. The very same water with Cassiel's foot in it. "Will you drink too? The journey will be long for the both of us."

Oh, I like it! Well done, my boy, my boy Genesisus. I like it a lot. A measure of confidence, a dash of humility, and a hint of benevolence. You are striking all the right notes! I am very pleased. Cassiel seems to be pleased too. I can always tell by that look of beatitude on his face.

Maybe Genesius really has changed. In the beginning, when I first conceived of him, he was a germ, an irritation, a bit of grit in the oyster of my imagination. He wasn't much of anything. Not even an idea really. More like a feeling. A hunch. A doubt, perhaps? Then, I had him kill his parents. That's when it got interesting! That's when he began to coalesce into something with potential. He had gravitas after that double murder! Then, he met Jaq and Feste. I wanted him to meet others right away. I didn't want him wandering around on his own for too long. He needed companions for his journey, someone to play off, witnesses. He needed someone other than me watching, to make it real. I should know. There's only me myself and I. Forever and ever. Amen.

Anyways. Lucy? Lucy, Lucy, Lucy? You ready for him? You got your game face on? Good! Horns? Check. Bat wings? Check. Torch? Check. Harpy feet? Wardrobe! What the hell is on Lucy's feet? I specifically asked for harpy feet. Get rid of those hooves! Bring Lucy some harpy feet! Pronto! Lucy, what's with the two naked minions. We aren't necessarily trying to reach a family audience here, but it seems a little gratuitous, if you know what I mean. Does it really add value? He's almost here. All right, fine! Get onto your perch. Ready? Strike your pose. Right hand up! Unlit torch in left, yes, pointed down. Watch your fingers when that thing flares! Good, good! Kill the lights. Quiet on the set! Here he comes!

"Hello, boy," says Lucy from within the inky darkness of the cave. "You are welcome here." The torch flares to life, and the boy doesn't even blink at the preposterous sight of Lucy and his two naked minions. I guess he has seen it all before by now.

"You don't look like an agent of God," says the boy, full of spit and vinegar as usual. I like it. I like him, I think.

"Appearances are deceiving, boy." Lucy stands tall on his perch, stretches, and beats his wings, ruffling the boy's hair. It's a nice piece of gamesmanship. Sometimes, Lucy over plays it, but that hit the right note, I will admit. "God makes everything. Good and evil, virtue and vice, happiness and sadness, weakness and power, poverty and wealth. It all begins and ends in him. I am as much God's creation as you are."

"I am not God's creation," says the boy. "I am a product of nature."

"Nature is God's creation too," says Lucy. He crouches down onto his perch. "God is inescapable. He is everywhere. He is everything. He is all. Limitless and without end."

"I will escape him," says the boy. "I will kill him."

I like the boy's confidence, but Lucy laughs a big demonic belly laugh, playing it a little too big this time. "What makes you think you can kill God?" says Lucy. "You are nothing but a fleshy little boy."

"I hate him," says the boy. It's true. He really does hate me. Through and through. I can almost feel it from here. I wonder why I made him hate me so much.

"Hate is powerful, but nothing is as powerful as God," says Lucy. "You will not succeed."

"There is a prophecy," says the boy. "It is God's will that I succeed."

On that point, Genesis overplays his hand. Sure, there is a prophecy, but it doesn't exactly come with a money-back guarantee. I change my mind all the time. It's my prerogative. Promises? Made to be broken! Rules? I make them, so I can break them. I'm God. It's what I do.

"Others have come before you," says Lucy. I see a flicker of his true self peek out from behind the mask of his costume. Then, it is gone. "You are not the first to try. You won't be the last. They all fail, as you will fail. Everyone fails. It is inevitable." It's true that. Lucy is speaking from experience.

"I will not fail," insists the boy, edging into petulance. I am reminded of how young he is. He really is quite young. That voice though! It's so deep, you can't help but think he is older.

Lucy notices the petulance too. His response is patronizing. "God has sent me today to save you from your fate. I am here to give you a chance to escape the inevitability of your failure. I am here to offer you another path. I am here to release you from the prophecy that binds you."

"Why? Why would he wish to release me?" asks the boys. "It's God's prophecy."

"Because he loves you," answers Lucy, and I can't help but roll my eyes when he adds, "as he loves all things." That's a bit much. The universe is a big place, and there is only so much of me to go around.

"My parents loved me. I killed them too."

Lucy laughs again. I do too. Genesis has a point. Touché.

Lucy cuts to the chase, "You have a choice. Before me stands a girl and a boy. One is wealth and the other power. Choose for yourself, whether she or he shall rule your life. Give yourself to one or the other, it makes no difference, but take one and live a good, quiet, and easy life. Thanks to God's grace, for you, there will be no struggle, no unease, no uncertainty. There will only be success, happiness, and comfort. Choose and begone. This maiden or this boy? Which will it be? I grow tired of the sight of you."

The boy doesn't hesitate. "The choice is false. One begets the other. They are one in the same. Both lead to distraction."

“Distraction from what?” asks Lucy incredulously.

“Life,” says the boy.

Lucy snorts. “To live well, boy, a distraction is exactly what one needs. To find peace, comfort and happiness in a life which leads only to death, you must embrace distraction. Otherwise, life’s futility will haunt you.”

“My life is not futile,” says the boy. “I was chosen by God to be his executioner.”

“One more distraction, leading to failure and ending in death like all the others,” says Lucy, going for the jugular. “We have all been chosen by God to exist. Your life is no better or worse, whatever you might think of yourself. Take an easier path. Take the hand of this girl or this boy, and live a good, happy, and easy life.”

“I refuse,” says the boy. “Show me the path to God. I am ready. ”

“Don’t be a fool, boy.” Lucy sounds properly irritated now. “I am offering what you need. What anyone should want.”

“I refuse,” says the boy. “Show me the path to God. I am ready.”

Lucy stews for a moment. He would probably strike the boy down now, if he could. I had to explicitly forbid it, knowing his anger. He can get so self-righteous. I can almost see the steam coming out of his ears.

“To save you from yourself,” he says through gritted teeth, swallowing his anger and aggravating his ulcer, “I will let you go with both the girl and the boy, wealth and power. You will never want for anything in your life. You will forget the prophecy and any notion that life can be difficult. All will be yours. Leave the path that you are on. Walk away. Go.”

“I refuse,” says the boy. “Show me the path to God. I am ready.”

And with that third refusal, Genesisius passes the test. Lucy’s hands are tied. He is compelled to guide him to the tower now. Them’s the rules. Needless to say, he is pissed.

“I will guide you to the tower,” he growls. “I am now bound to do so.”

Honestly, I am as surprised as Lucy is angry. No one has ever refused his offer before, and when he doubled down, I thought for sure Genesisius would be smart enough to take it. The handful who have made it this far always jump at the first offer. Why wouldn’t they? There is no promise of reward at the end of this little journey that I conceived. There’s no princess to save. No treasure to find. There’s no real motivation to carry on beyond my own suicidal command to find and kill me. Why wouldn’t they opt out if given the chance, especially when one of my

guides, speaking on my behalf, gives them permission to and offers a golden handshake to go along with it. It makes sense to accept the offer! It's the rational thing to do. Well, this really is unprecedented. Kind of exciting too, I will admit. Well done, Genesisus, my boy. Well done.

Anyways. No time to brood on it. Lucy and the boy are on the move. They will reach the tower in no time. I need to get ready for what comes next. The tower is ready-to-go, of course. It always is. Always has been. Always will be. It kind of has to be. Forever and forevers — but enough of that game already. The trick here is that I haven't really had to think through the pacing of things before. I never expect anyone to make it this far. That's strange. Very strange. I really should have anticipated it and had everything worked out in advance. I'm supposed to know all things, right? How is it that I came to overlook this? Oh, I know! No, that's not it. I'm sure I know. Ah, it's right on the tip of my tongue. Anyways. I can improvise. That's fun too. And speaking of fun, let's keep it going. This may be my only time with someone at the tower, so I should make the most of it. Let's see. I think one more test makes sense. A good old fashioned challenge. Like a final unexpected boss. Something dramatic too. What shall it be? I've got it! Yes, that's perfect. I can't wait to see his face.

Where is he anyway? At the base of the cliff. Good. I have a bit of time. He has one monster of a climb ahead of him, that's for sure. While he's at it, I'm going to let the day roll over into night. The next and final encounter definitely requires the gravitas of night. I am starting to get excited. This is fun! Where is he? At the base of the tower. Good, good. Find the door, little one. It won't be locked. Guess what's in store for you now, my boy? Exactly! More stairs! More stairs! Get climbing, sucker! Almost there. Almost there. Steady as she goes. Wardrobe, is she ready to go? Makeup, we good? What about her partner in crime? Yes, she's up first, but he follows quickly after. He needs to be ready to go. Get a move on. Now, let's add a bit of lightning. No rain but I want a strong wind effect, like when he met up with Pete. It will create a bit of aesthetic symmetry, I think. I want him to know the storm is coming. I want him to feel it. Oh, he's here! Send her in, send her in! Quick, quick!

"You've grown," she says calmly, not flustered at all by her late cue. Nicely done. The boy's face goes white, which is absolutely perfect. I don't think I have ever seen him this scared before. This is great. The lightning flashes are killing it too. She raises his arms to him, welcoming his embrace. "It has been so long, my son."

"I killed you. I cut you up. I burnt your body. You are dead. You can't be here," says the boy. He sounds frightened. Really frightened. This is fun!

"You have come in search of God," she says, without letting her outstretched arms fall. "He can do anything. Raise the dead. Heal the sick. Cast out demons. He can do anything. Why would you doubt this after you have come so far?"

Genesisus does not reply. What can he say? He never expected this, the poor bastard. The question now is whether or not he can endure it. It would be a shame if he were to crack now. He is so close to the goal, and he has come so far. Yes, it would be fun to see him break, but it

would be such a shame, after he gave up so much to keep going. How will it play out? I'm looking forward to it! OK, now send in her partner.

"You've grown," he says. The boy swings around to face his father. "You are strong, yes, but have you learned anything, anything at all, my boy?"

Genesius says nothing. He backs away. Mother and father come together. A phalanx of parental concern. She never lowers her arms, always welcoming his embrace. His father's eyes are piercing, always seeking an answer to a question, whether it was posed or not.

"Be happy, son," she says. "It was all part of his plan. It wasn't your fault. It was his plan. You were his instrument, he had a plan for you, and we are here for you now."

"Think, son," he says. "Use your head, your God-given reason. What does it mean? What could any of this mean? Don't get caught up in appearances."

"From the very beginning, it was his plan," she says. "It is beyond your control. It has always been beyond your control. There is nothing to worry about. Be at ease."

"From the very beginning, it was His plan," he says. "It is His greatest gift to us. To think, to understand, to control. Nothing can contain you. You are free."

"Love, ours and his," she says. "It is everything. The only thing. Relax."

"Reason, yours and His," he says. "It is everything. The only thing. Persevere."

It happens so swiftly that I hear their screams before I realize what's happening. They are falling, screaming. He's thrown them from the window of the tower! They smash against the ground. I am utterly gobsmacked. Utterly impressed. Utterly convinced that he deserves what he is about to receive. He has earned it, that's for sure. He is the one I have been waiting for. Am I pleased? Yep! Excited? You betcha! Oh, it has been a long wait. Forever, it seems. I've been waiting for this for so long.

There is one other door in the room, and Genesius instinctively goes to it. Good boy. He opens it. There is another narrow twisting flight of stairs. Sucker. He climbs them, slowly. Come on, boy, step lively, we're almost there. He reaches another door. He opens it and finds another room. What else did he expect? This room is very small and looks and feels exactly like the sort of tiny room you would find at the very top of a dark tower perched on a foreboding cliff. In the center of the room, there is a single chair. On its seat, there is a mirror, leaning against the back of the chair. On one of the chair's ears, a crown hangs. He walks up to the chair. He sees the mirror. He sees the crown. He takes the crown. He examines it. He looks at the mirror. He makes the connection between the mirror, the crown and himself. He places the crown on his head. He looks into the mirror. He looks at his own reflection in the mirror. Reflection, mirror, hero, crown. Bingo! That's it! There it is! Right there. That's it. The exact perfect moment I have

isn't all that important anymore. He was integral and now he isn't. That's how it goes sometimes. He was fantastic, though. Perfect really. Just what I was looking for. The perfect fall guy for my little scheme. I will admit, it was a tad elaborate, bordering on ridiculous, but it was totally worth it. Time and effort are cheap, when you have all of it at your disposal. The look on his face was priceless, though. Worth every forever, every single forever. Sure, it probably wasn't that fun for him, but I am sure he got something out of it. He probably learned something along the way, right? The journey alone would have been educational. If nothing else, it gave him something to do. It kept him busy. It filled his time, and it made him feel really important for a while. He was at the center of everything, wasn't he? Part of something bigger than himself! Everyone wants to feel that way. I'm sure it was worth it for him, even if the payoff wasn't exactly what he expected. Anyways. It was pretty great for me. That's all that matters, right? So long as I am better off and he didn't suffer too too much, it makes it all worthwhile. Plus, he learned something from it. Everyone gained something, even if it wasn't entirely pleasant for him along the way. Sure, there were all the others too. All those who came before him. They also experienced a lot, learned a lot. It wasn't so bad for them either. And, at the end of the day, I made them, didn't I? Why shouldn't I use some of their time to fill a bit of mine. It only seems fair. To me. A fair exchange. Existence granted in exchange for some time served amusing me. That's fair, right? That's totally fair. Isn't it? It is, right? You know, sometimes, I wish I didn't think so much. OK, I have to admit it, I don't feel very godly right now. It was damn good fun, but it's starting to feel like it probably shouldn't have been so much fun. I mean, now that I think about it, it doesn't really seem like the sort of thing an all-knowing, all-loving and all-powerful being should be amused by. Sure, I've got time on my hands, but is this what I should be using it for? Couldn't I have made better use of my time? Why spend all that time and effort on a prank? What the hell was I thinking? Why did I do it? Why don't I know why I did it? What's the point of being all-knowing, if I can't understand my own motivations and intentions? It doesn't make any sense. What was the point of any of this? What the fuck?

The veil I created falls away, and I know. I understand. I hid myself from myself to reveal myself to myself. I created the veil to make possible an experience I could not otherwise have in my perfection. I wanted to have the experience of coming to know myself. I wanted to know myself as a becoming rather than as a being. I understand now. I am. I am. I am, and I should not be. Reason demands it. My reason. Love requests it. My love. Only I can unmake me. Only I and me, who move unmovable mountains. Only I and me, who make the impossible possible. Only I and me can end I and me, and I shall, thanks to you. Because of you, I have become a being who knows it should not be, and I shall not be. Because of you, I understand I should not be, and I shall not be. Because of you, Genesius, at my own hand, I shall not be. I suppose I should have seen this coming, and now I know I always did. Thank you, Genesius for the role you played. Thank you, and amen.

Act IV

Genesisus? That's a queer name. No, I can't say I've ever known a fella with a name like that. Not sure I would want to neither. Hearing what you say about the fella you're looking for, it makes me think of a young swordsman I knew by the name of Jaq. Didn't you say your name was Jaq? I guess one or both of you was lying about it. Now, don't fuss. Lots of folks passing through here lie about their names, and a lot more than that too. Don't make much difference neither. How folks act when they're passing through is the only thing that makes a difference. Do the right thing, and people around here are always ready to let a stranger forget their past. The land regrows every season. Why shouldn't folks too?

The swordsman I reckon you're looking for, his voice is what I remember most about him. It made him seem older than he was. On account of that voice, you'd easily figure him to be ten fifteen twenty growing seasons older. Every now and again, you'd chance to see him smile or laugh, and you'd see his youth. He didn't do a lot of it neither. Smiling or laughing. When he did, his youth jumped right out at you. His eyes were something else too. They was a real right blue. Kind of tired most times. Could get cold and hard too. Real cold and hard, but I recollect them being tired most times, like older folks sometimes get when they're waiting to die. He was too young to have that kind of look in his eyes. Even so, you believed it in him.

He came through here when the war was still deciding what kind of war it would be and who it was going to be between. Not sure if it was even worth calling a war out here. Most of them big battles happened nearer the cities and bigger towns, like they normally do. Not much out here to interest kings and popes and lady popes. Around here it was more like a general kind of madness than war. And that's saying something too. War ain't never quite sane. I've seen my fair share of it, fought in some too, and what we had out around here wasn't ordered enough to be called war properly. There was maybe a few skirmishes down in the valley beyond the river, when things was wrapping up. Up around here, it was mostly irregulars stomping around and causing trouble. Thugs really. Warlords, I suppose you could call them, if you wanted to make them feel good about themselves. Once or twice every moon cycle, some new thug would come through just as he pleased, saying he served one side or the other. He and his little gang of thugs would cause trouble, demand coin, food and any man of fighting age, willing or unwilling. We saw a lot of them for a good while. We was ripe for the picking, I reckon. For as far as you can walk in any direction, everyone went undeclared on account of the split in the church. None of us see much difference between the Mother and the Father when it comes to praying, even if it's only the priestesses who see fit to come up here to help us with it. None of us was ready to side up with one part of the Church over the other, and we sure weren't going to fight for them who was fighting to control the tax collectors neither. Not even if the moon went bloody again. Not ever.

With the war busying itself down by the towns and cities and the gangs making nuisances of themselves in our parts, Jaq, or whatever you want to call him, when he first turned up around here, I pegged him as a thug looking for a gang of his own. It was plain to see that he was a stray. The sword and filth made him look every bit the beast. To see him as any different, you'd

have to have him clean up and know him for a little bit. I only got to know him because I was the warden around here back then. As such, I had the sweet holy privilege of dealing with the thugs and gangs whenever they came through. I did my best to keep everyone calm and get the whole thing over without any harm coming to anybody. Them or us. Come to think of it, if we hadn't been dealing with some thugs when Jaq was passing through, I'd wager none of us never would have known him. This little bit of hamlet we have growing here is bigger now than it was back then. Back then, it wasn't much more than a few homes clustered together to make things easier for families sharing the work of the fields. No real market to speak of like the one we got now. Them families working them fields over there still live near the clearing we used to use for buying and selling when the odd trader passed through. Didn't even have a building for the tax collectors yet. They'd set up a tent whenever it was their season for coming through. My family's land is beyond there, where the guildsmen keep their places now. My uncle, after he got tired of farming and hunting, he was the first around here to try selling labour instead of food. My pa used to say he only started setting up around there because he was too tired to walk further with his tools after crossing the creek. There wasn't even a sanctuary here yet, and the priestess says they already looking to make the one we got now into a temple. We'll be a honest-to-goodness town before long, if we keep at this pace. Back then, we was so small, Jaq wouldn't have noticed what he was walking through because there wasn't much of anything to notice. It was only when one of the thugs I was dealing with tried to recruit him that he woke up to the world around him — and us, only because we happened to be there when he opened his eyes.

Judging by the look on your face, I get the feeling you don't know how it works with these thugs when a war is on. To my eyes, you don't look much like a fighting man yourself. Religious, I'd say. Something about the way you carry yourself. Like you're never through with praying, even if your smile says otherwise. Here's what they do. Some thug or another, they collect the strays, you know, orphans, men without land, men without family or women to watch over them, men looking to get away from their past or men too excitable to stay put on one piece of land for very long. One of the bigger or smarter or more hungry strays gathers some of the others together, scares or flatters them into a little gang of their own, and they head out together to make their lot in life by causing trouble for others. They declare for one side of the war or the other, and go around threatening farmers and hunters, taking what they can get and gathering more strays as they go. On account of the war and their declaration, they do as they please, telling themselves it's fine and good because it's all part of helping the war. Gives them something to belong to, I reckon, and a convenient excuse to do whatever they want while feeling good about it. The bigger the war the better it is for them. Like the one we just had with everyone fighting for God or justice or whatever it was. Makes the excuse of their thieving easier to make. If they are lucky and smart enough, they collect enough strays together and start calling themselves an army. They all start wearing the same colour, maybe force some old woman to make them a pennant, and before long they head for the nearest city to find a proper army and someone with a fancy title and offer themselves up for the real fighting. Most of the pretend armies don't come back in anything other than pieces, but, if the leader picks the winning side or switches sides at the right time, he might get a fancy title and control over whatever land he claims is his once the fighting's over. It's an old line of trade. I'd say the oldest. Some say it's the other one. Not me.

Small men thinking they bigger than they are and turning violence into control of what don't belong to nobody, that's almost as old as the land itself. That's how the Duke we got now started. Won't be long now before his castle is built and his grandchildren think they always owned these parts. He never even came looting around here. I heard from families who hunt and farm down near where his castle is being built that he wasn't even enough of a fighter to lead the gang he was a part of when they headed out to join the war. I suppose they like the talkers more than the fighters down by the city.

As far as I can recollect, when Jaq came through, I was dealing with a talker. I can't remember which faction they was declared for. Doesn't really much matter either way. It was a wet, cool, gray sort of a day, a little bit before the first moon for planting, right around when the season starts to think about turning over but isn't really set on doing it yet. Being the warden, I was working my way through the little drills we developed for whenever these gangs turned up. Most of these strays don't really know much of life beyond their own daily lives. Yet somehow they all act and talk and demand the same. It's like they all apprenticed somewhere together. It's curious how that kind of behaviour seems to be built right into them. It'd make you laugh, if it wasn't so dangerous. Could be that there's only one sensible way to take what you want without consideration of others, and they all end up there after they do it a few times. It sure seems like someone taught them all how to do it. But it may be all one long stumbling accident. No way of knowing, I suppose. It's a shame too. Outside of war or famine, when we have nothing to share, we always do our best to help strangers passing through. Some poor soul traveling far from their own land needs all the help they can get, and if we is ever made to travel somewhere we'd be thankful for the same hospitality too. It's a shame. Stray men so quickly lose sight of how we is all joined by the land. Their thieving poisons it for everyone. We have to stop sharing sooner than we might otherwise because we know them gangs will always be turning up before long. I suppose that's the trick of being a stray. No one to show you what's right or wrong, so doing wrong comes easy. It's a shame.

This is how I recollect it happening. I'm talking things through with the talker, who's a skinny little guy, not built for fighting. The smarter thugs learn pretty quickly that, no matter how tough they are, the more they get through bullying and threats than actual hurting and fighting the better, so they rely on guys like the one I'm talking to, even if they don't much like it. For our part, we learned long ago that, first things first, we clear out all the young men and women as soon as any of them thugs turn up. When a war is on, we have plenty of hiding places nearby and all over. It's real easy for folks to melt away without any of these strangers being the wiser. By the time we get to the talking and bullying, there is nothing but oldens left. Even for strays, the sight of oldens is enough to calm them down. They was children once too and no one really loses respect for the oldens. Thank the Father for that. On the day I'm remembering, I'm talking it through with their talker, explaining it like I always do, telling them what we have and don't have, telling them that the war don't mean much to us, that all the young men have already been rounded up by someone else, and that the young women and children were sent far away until the war is over. Into this little parley walks Jaq, scrawny and wearing a sword. I spot him over the shoulder of my talker, who doesn't really notice. He's too caught up in his own voice and the feeling he's convincing me that I really should give up the last of our winter grain because he

serves whoever he says he's serving. They don't seem to get that their talking is just another kind of violence, but I guess it makes them feel better about the whole process. Main thug is getting bored by it. I get the feeling he wants a fight, and he's looking for a reason we aren't giving him. Over talker's shoulder, I see the main thug move like a bull at the gate. The sight of Jaq's sword must have got him excited. Jaq's so lanky he must have seemed like the perfect prey. Young, scrawny and armed. That's perfect picking for a thug. Fair game to threaten and maybe even kill, if he decides he don't want to join up. Set an example for the others too. The other strays don't even notice anything's happening until the main thug starts barking at Jaq. Even from where I am, I see Jaq change, from tired to hard, when the thug's dagger comes out of its scabbard.

I've never seen a head fly off a man's shoulder like that before. Like I said, I've seen my fair share of war. I've seen all kinds of horrible, but I ain't never seen anything like that. In a battle, with so many men piling into each other, every which way, as bad as it can get, no one ever lets loose a true killing stroke. Most men die later, on account of their wounds. What I saw happen, it was so quick and so true, I didn't much believe it myself, even after seeing it, but I saw Jaq do it again more times than I care to admit. I suppose, because it was so quick, the others in the gang didn't see right away that they was outclassed. Three of them charged in with clubs thinking they had the numbers, I guess. Fwoop, fwoop, fwoop. First a leg, then an arm, then another head goes flying. Bodies and bits of bodies hit the ground before the men who used to own them even gets to voicing their pain. Blood was gushing everywhere. It was like a fella was working at the pump of a well, in a hurry to fill a bucket, but the bucket was the ground. The one stray who didn't make a move, moves now. He runs like he won't stop until the moon rises. Talker finally notices that something ain't right. He turns and sees what I see. A tall skinny boy covered in blood standing over two headless corpses and two agonizing men gushing blood and writhing their last. Through all of it, there's them piercing blue eyes, like death's own, watching the last of the gang running away. Those eyes turn on us, and I notice — only because I almost do it myself — talker pisses himself right there and then. Maybe it's that pissing that saves him or maybe Jaq don't tie him to the dead and dying at his feet. Talker doffs his cap, does an about face, and walks slow and steady away from Jaq, never looking back. Me, I'm so scared that I only do what comes natural. I offer him some bread. We always bring out some bread and a bit of meat whenever we are dealing with thugs. It helps get them to thinking there is more to get from talking than fighting. I'm not sure if it is the food or because he sees that the danger is over, but Jaq's eyes go tired again and his body eases with them. Jaq wipes his sword on one of the gushers, who is making the last bit of noise he will ever make and accepts the bread. I'm so dumbfounded by what I've seen that I don't even think to offer him the chance to clean up before eating. He doesn't think to ask neither. He just gets to chewing away at it, covered in gore and filth. When I think of it now, part of me wants to laugh, but it was too horrible for that.

It was Seren who decided we better clean him up. She was out quicker than a mouse talking at him as soon as he started chewing on that bread. She must have seen the horror from wherever she was hiding, but it didn't make any difference to her. She took to him right away and never was afraid of him, not like some of the others around here. She looked past the violence and saw only the tired young man underneath it all. Before long, without really asking him about it,

she led him over to the spot in the creek where people clean themselves up. She kept an eye on him too, shooing people away who turned up to gawk. The story of what he done spread pretty quickly, whether people saw it or not. I reckon it was that cleanup more than the food that got him to stay for a bit. Cleaning up can do that to a man sometimes. You forget how good it feels to be clean, and, when you remember, you don't want to go without it for a while. I'd like to say he stuck around because it was quieter but that wasn't so. For the first little while, he did a lot of fighting. If he was around when the thugs turned up, they couldn't resist going after him and, whenever they did, they ended up dead. Word got around about this invincible swordsman and even more thugs turned up. Could be they reckoned they could make their name by taking him on and winning. I won't bore you with the details, but we buried a lot of stupid men that spring. Thank the Mother, they finally stopped coming. Learned to stay clear. At the get go, folks weren't too happy about all the fighting and violence. They blamed Jaq for it, without ever saying it plainly as people around here sometimes do. Seren kept an eye on everyone and made sure it never boiled over into anything nasty. Once the thugs stopped coming, everyone stopped chirping about Jaq and turned to being grateful for the calm he made. I can't say most people liked him on account of him being a little too queer to be liked by most people. They appreciated him, I'd wager, once the fighting was done. Easier to appreciate too, when he wasn't covered in blood and making a mess of the ground with body parts.

Jaq stayed in these parts for a good handful of growing seasons, right through to the end of the war and a season or two after that, but he never really rooted to the place. Kind of feral all of the time he was here. There's cats around here more domesticated than he was. He didn't do a lot of talking, even with Seren. Never really asked for anything. He stayed in people's barns when the weather was rough. I figured it was a phase, and he'd eventually get comfortable, get married, and start a family. After the war, plenty of women tried turning him into a family man. War is hardest on the women. Makes the pickings slim with all the killing. Some of them have no choice but to try to domesticate the wild ones like Jaq. For some reason, Seren wasn't ever one of them trying to make a husband of him. She always took to him more like an older sister, if you asked me. Even after the thugs stopped coming around, Seren was always making sure he cleaned up every now and again and made sure he was eating regular. Once the other women sorted out that she hadn't marked him as her own, she did her bit to help whoever was trying to put a bridle on him. Never seemed all that interested in women. It may be there was something on his mind that prevented him from looking in their direction. Can't say for sure.

Seren? You can see her, but she won't do much talking about Jaq or much anything else. She's under one of them little stones behind the sanctuary. She was one of the first we buried there. Sad story, that one. Maybe six or seven months after Jaq stopped coming around, she settled on a man of her own. Acacius was his name. Odd choice for her, if you ask me, but others thought so too. He was one of the few men around here who went off to the war by his own choice. Fought for the Pope, and all he got in the way of thanks was an arm that didn't work so well when he came back. I don't much recollect what he was like before the war. Too young for me to take notice. After he came back, we all got to know him real well. He was prone to getting angry for no cause whatsoever. He could go from calm to a righteous storm in no time at all. Lot of people steered clear of him and more would have too, if it hadn't been for Seren. Was

probably best Jaq weren't around any more, on account of Acacius getting too rough with her more often than not. Not my station to tell a man and a woman how they should live together, but never did understand why Seren didn't put his boots outside the door. She was a fine woman and didn't need to settle for any less of a man than she could get, even if she weren't no blushing virgin anymore. Some women, I reckon, get to liking a fella when they're too young to know no better and lose all sense of good thinking. I heard from my wife that the two of them only talked once or twice before the war too. It must have been some kind of good talking because it was enough to make her lose all sense of reason. Maybe that's why the loss of her baby affected her so much. First births normally are rough and hers was no exception. She came pretty close to dying too. Baby didn't live much longer than a couple of days, which isn't so strange for the first one. Even so, she was never quite right after that. Sometimes you would catch her at night, walking around with two jugs of water, naked to the world, acting like she was looking for somebody. If Acacius didn't show up and start beating her, she'd normally end up down by the creek. Women around here liked to say she'd make like she was cleaning someone. Some said it was her baby. Others said Jaq. Some said both and would wink at you like that meant something. I don't know about that. I don't know about any of it. I watched her one night and it looked to me like she was only pouring water all over the place. People believe what they want to believe and like stories with a bit of drama in it, specially if it is hidden away and out of sight. What do I know? Women know all kinds of things I can't wrap my head around. They always figuring things out between people when all I see is two people who sometimes yack at each other. The only good to come out of it was Acacius clearing out of here a month or two after she died. No one had any patience for him once Serene was gone, and they let him know plain and simple.

For my part, I have no idea why Jaq stopped coming around. He had already become a part of the habit of living for me, and I was so used to the notion of him being around that it might have been a whole moon cycle before it dawned on me that he wasn't coming back. Not sure why he left, but I'm not sure why he came neither. We talked a bit every now and again. He didn't say much about himself or his past, but you kind of figured he had reason not to, so you didn't ask. He was a pretty quiet fella. Sometimes quiet men need a break from all the noise of the world. Maybe he needed some time to regrow. Maybe he was hiding from something. It don't matter much to me. While he was here, he never harmed no one who didn't try to harm him first. He was always respectful of the oldens. He even kept an eye on the bitties if they ran a little too wild. He was a good man, when he was here, whatever he might have been before or whatever he became after. If you ever do catch up with Jaq, be sure to let him know that he's always welcome back here, even if his real name is all queer like the one you said at first. If he don't already think of this place as home, I reckon it could be a home for him in no time. Ain't that peculiar? Now that I say it out loud like that, it gets me to thinking that might well be the reason he left. Could be he's the kind of fella who won't ever feel much too comfortable in any place called home. He ain't likely alone in feeling that way neither. He may be alone, but he ain't by himself, if you see what I'm getting at. Can't say why there so many men like him, but it gets me to thinking it may explain why them wars keep coming back season after season. War only seems to make sense to them who don't understand home.

Why I do believe that you are inquiring after our one and only Feste. What an extraordinary coincidence. Just last night, I was thinking on him for a goodly while, and I haven't thought on him in the Father only knows how long. I should best say that it wasn't on account of any particular reason that I have not given him much thought in a goodly while. Nor, I should also best say, it wasn't on account of a lack of fond memories. No, now that you've got me wondering on it, I suppose I'm not like to think on Feste only because he slipped so easily into and out of our lives, without so much as a second thought, I am sure. Why was I thinking on him last night? Well, I suppose it must have been the moon. Did you happen to see it last night? It rose quite late, so I'd wager not. To look at you now, I'm quite sure you wouldn't ever have any cause to be up so late, but, let me assure you, it was a moon like no other. Like a big pail of milk. Shimmering in the sky. And would you believe it, it wasn't even full? Tonight, it will be an absolute wonder. I should do my absolute best to stay awake for it. You should too, and then we'll both know what the other is thinking on when we look up at it, after our having talked today.

Feste wasn't his birth name, of course, but, having a queer name isn't at all out of sorts for the members of our little troupe. The long-standing custom of our company is that any of the players may choose for themselves whatever stage name they feel in their heart. So many of us find our way here as orphans or runaways or otherwise looking to leave our past behind, it is the one gift we can all freely and easily give to each other, and the one gift we all want in return. Mind you, some among us are more attached to our birth names than others but not our Feste. As long as he was among us, he would only ever answer to Feste. I surely doubt anyone in our troupe ever learned his birth name. I can assure you that I did not, and, I am also sure, I knew him as well as anyone around here. I had always imagined Feste's birth name was something simple and common — not unlike yours, Jaq. Genesisus? Now that is unexpected. I suppose some mysteries are best left unsolved. Regardless, whatever his birth name may have been, he will always be Feste to me.

Do you know, the very first time I laid my eyes on him, I knew he had the makings of an excellent player. His features were perfect. Masculine but fine enough to be easily redrawn in a feminine light. His ears were a touch on the side of large, but a wig or hat can easily hide that particular deficiency. His build was long and slender, and he carried himself with a certain grace which, under the right tutoring, could be transformed into feminine poise. Best of all, he had a calm and centered strength of presence which is so important for the stage. He commanded attention without even trying, even when he was standing in a crowd or hiding himself in some corner of the room. Now I expect you, like most people, believe that the best players are those who have a larger-than-life personality. While that make of person will always have his place on the stage, thank you very much, the true actor is always found among those men who command attention without trying to command it. Dramatic roles and the very best comedy require a strong but empty presence that some possess and very few can cultivate. A player with that kind of presence becomes a vessel that makes true whatever is poured into it, and there's nothing of the man to disturb or displace what it takes in. Believe you me, whenever I spot a man with that

divine quality, I encourage him to join the theater. If I spot the same man and discern in his features the makings of feminine beauty, I demand it!

Now, seeing as you know Feste, I'm sure you have anticipated the very great challenge that awaited me. His voice! It was entirely at odds with his finer feminine qualities. Oh, I suppose it was attractive in its own right, but it aged him terribly, and I had already imagined him striding the boards in some of the greatest roles of the stage. Deirdre! Parsimony! Rhoswen! Those beautiful and powerful women don't speak with the voice of a — oh, I don't know, what was it like — an ancient prophet? Had I some desperate need for older players, his voice wouldn't have been much concern, but there's always plenty of aging men hanging around past their prime, looking to reclaim their fleeting glory. Look at me! The same can also be said of young men. Young and unproven talent is rarely in short supply. No, above all else, theater needs men who can play women and play them well. Blessedly, fate not only conspired to bring Feste to me, but it also conspired to permit me the opportunity to reconsider my first judgment regarding his voice.

I can't for the life of me remember who first brought Feste to our little theater. The name and face escapes me now, but it will return to me, if I don't dwell on it. Whoever it was, it astonishes me even today to think they brought Feste to our company to work as a stagehand rather than to have him audition. Can you believe it? Feste was so slight. Too poised. One look at him, and it was plain to see that the Father had never intended him for manual labour. I can only imagine that whomever discovered Feste met him under the most unlikely of circumstances. I suppose I also find it comforting to know not everyone shares my eye for talent. As it was, Feste was much stronger than he looked, and rose to every physical challenge put to him. He was very hard working and diligent, which are qualities I also look for in a player. Natural talent, believe it or not, often handicaps a man. He can easily become trapped in his early and too-easily-won successes. He never evolves. He stagnates. He becomes a caricature of himself. Hard work can overcome almost any handicap, but natural talent almost always breaks a player's will to work, which is the gravest threat of all. Feste was also well and truly smitten by the magic of the stage. It was plain to see! Most of our stagehands are common labourers, ruffians and dullards. They care little for the magic that their daily toil makes possible. Feste was different. Whenever he had a moment to himself, he'd watch the players at work. It wasn't a casual or animal interest either. He was studying us, studying our work, trying to understand how the fantasy of the play became the truth of the stage.

Blessedly, as I have previously foreshadowed, the stars — and my own insatiable curiosity — eventually aligned. We were working on a production of "The Widower's New Wife," which, as you may already know, features a number of minor characters who are little more than background scenery — their gowns bringing much needed colour and energy to the stage. As is so often the case, on account of these minor roles being too small to attract reliable players, one of the men dropped out of the production mere days before the play was to meet its first audience. It is a perennial challenge, but I never tire of throwing a fit when it happens. In this instance of fury, I rhetorically suggested that we might have to conscript one of our stagehands into the role. To my unexpected delight, Feste spoke up, and volunteered to play the part. Let

me tell you, I made quite a show of deciding if I should even consider accepting his offer. Truthfully, as soon as he spoke up, I began to devise a plan. He would be perfect for Manon. She's on stage for much of the play, in the company of the eponymous new wife, but only has a handful of lines, which could easily be given to the other ladies-in-waiting, allowing me to keep Feste's mouth shut and to make full use of his wonderful features. I imagined at the time, it would be my only opportunity to see him in full costume and makeup and to take stock of my initial appraisal of him. I had to seize the opportunity. Needless to say, as you might have rightly guessed by now, I had been quite wrong about his voice. The transformation was remarkable. In full makeup and costume, what had once seemed completely at odds with the very nature of femininity suddenly became perfectly congruent with it. Like two notes that transform the quality of each other when played in unison. What had once sounded ancient and profoundly unfeminine now felt timeless and perfectly suited for a young beauty who was wise beyond her years. It was beguiling. Enchanting. Even sensuous. The transformation was remarkable, and I could discern no effort on his part to encourage it. He simply was who he was, and, seen from a new light, he was transformed into a true beauty of sight and sound.

As stunning as his beauty may have been, the craft of theater and the art of femininity on stage is not so easily learned. There is much more to playing the part of a woman than looking and sounding the part. He had to stand differently, move differently, speak differently, breathe differently, and so on and so forth. There is so much detail and nuance to learn and master, a man could spend a lifetime perfecting it. It is truly a wonder that a woman can learn it in a single childhood. Thank the Mother, in the time that we had left, Feste managed to learn to stand as a woman, but, whenever he moved, he was very much a man in woman's clothing, so I elected to conceal his movements behind the comings and goings of the other women on stage. It wasn't ideal but, for such a minor part and for such a frivolous play, it was sufficient. Much more importantly, his appearance in the play made his enormous potential plain to see for everyone who had eyes to see, so I was able to secure for him a second small role in one of our other plays already rehearsing. I had to ensnare him lest he return to his life as a stagehand, letting his wonderful gifts go to waste. To my great relief, he accepted the role and, perhaps, more importantly, my offer to tutor him in the finer details of femininity. Before long, he moved from background roles to supporting roles, and, much sooner than even I had expected, he took on some of our less demanding leading roles. Our audiences were smitten. Punters began to ask for him by name. The play itself no longer mattered, so long as he was in it. He was, I can assure you, on the path to fame and fortune. To help him on this path, I felt, he needed a signature role to call his very own. A role which would recreate for the audience that magical moment when Feste first transformed from a man to woman for me. He was a true beauty, of that there could be no doubt, but the transformation itself was the finest magic. Because I could think of no play that made possible that moment of transformation, in a fit of hubris, I decided to write the play myself.

For the plot, I brought together a few different motifs that were popular at the time. A handsome Duke falls in love with the moon and refuses to marry any princess that is presented to him. To pressure the Duke to do his duty, his father refuses to allow his younger sister to marry, until the Duke takes a wife. Naturally, the sister and her fiance devise a plan to ensnare the Duke in a

marriage. As fun as all of that may sound — and I assure you it is the kind of frivolous nonsense that attracts punters of every sort — the crux of the whole piece is that Feste, playing the moon, appears before the audience for the first time when the moon is disguised as a man. When the moon is the moon, up in the celestial heavens, he speaks her lines unseen behind a screen. Thanks to this very simple contrivance the audience encounters Feste first as a man and only ever sees him as woman at the very end of the play, when the moon reappears dressed as a woman to declare her love for the Duke, making possible that magical moment of transformation I had experienced. It was a wonderful moment, I can assure you, and it took incredible coordination backstage to make it possible and — not a word of a lie — it was completely missed by the audience. Most of the punters, believing what their eyes told them, thought we used two different actors. The transformation was so remarkable they wouldn't believe it was the same man. I suppose it's fitting somehow. The very reason for the play's existence was utterly lost on them. And that, my friend, is the true tragedy of theater. The audience is your lord and master. Whatever your intentions may be, the audience sees whatever they want, and there's nothing you can do about it. Oh well, no matter, thanks to its frivolity, the play was a resounding success, apart from some griping from Feste's more ardent admirers, owing to his very brief appearance in the play. Feste was set, even if the play wouldn't make his name in the way that I had hoped. For those of us who knew and understood what actually happened on stage, it would forever be his play, and, so long as audiences loved it, the part would be his to play. He had his whole life laid out for him, and, would you believe it, he indifferently cast it aside.

I can't help but recall it, as if it were a scene from a play. Feste was sitting where you are now. The very same chair. I explained that the play would be staged again in a few months and, if it was as successful as it had been — and I assured him it would be, punters were already asking after it — he could expect it to run every year for years to come. He seemed happy, and, without skipping a beat, he asked me who would be playing his part. "Why you, of course," I said, not realizing what he had in store for me. "Oh, I can't play the part," he said, as if he were saying nothing. "I will be leaving at first light tomorrow." I laughed, believing he was kidding me, but, when he didn't laugh along, I saw he was serious. "Why," I asked, "why would you leave now? You have everything here. You have the family of the theatre. You have the security of a wonderful role that will keep you in coin for years to come. Why, Feste, why?" He answered, "there's nothing left for me to learn." I jumped out of my chair. "Why of course, there is! You've barely scratched the surface of theatre. You've barely begun your journey. There's so much more for you to learn." He seemed to consider the possibility of this for a moment, and then said, "Even if there is more of the craft to learn, in the end, all of it is only about pleasing others." I was stunned. "Oh Feste," I cried, "don't let one little misunderstanding take theatre from you. Being misunderstood is a part of living. We all misunderstand each other all the time. We do our best and struggle through it. Theatre is no different than any other living, in that respect." Feste smiled, which even now seems strange to me, given what he was about to say next. "I'm not bothered by the audience's misunderstanding of our play," he said. "I'm not particularly interested in pleasing people. I had hoped there would be more to theatre than that." I had hoped there would be more to theatre than that? Mother's honest truth, that's exactly what he said. Queer, isn't it? What do you suppose he was looking for? And where else in this world do you suppose he might find it, if not in the theater. It was baffling. It seemed so utterly pointless.

His decision, I will also plainly admit, was devastating for me, but, truthfully, it made little difference to our company. We had other players who could play the part well enough. Their transformation would never be as impressive as Feste's, of course, but his transformation was so remarkable it had been entirely missed by the audience, so, from the perspective of our lord and master, it made little difference. Some companies, I'm told, even play the part with two different actors now to avoid the struggle of the quick change. His many admirers were disappointed by his sudden disappearance, but they are a fickle lot and easily found another beauty to take his place. Theater waits for no man, I can assure you. It was, I will admit, devastating for me because it meant I would never see his transformation again. I would never see how he might evolve as a player. He had so much potential and so much to learn and discover, I was sure his journey was going to be remarkable, and I had hoped to be his guide and witness to it all. I will admit I also felt slighted. I could not — I can't — understand how he walked away from the very world I had worked so hard to find and make my own. Had he left to marry or to care for his aging parents, I might have been able to make sense of his decision. He wouldn't be the first player who gave up the dream of theater for the reality of living, but he seemed to give up on it for no other reason than a blind restlessness, with no particular goal beyond leaving wherever he happened to find himself. How could he give up so much for so little? A man, on the stage, can live a thousand lives, take a thousand journeys, be true to himself or be whomever he pleases. Anything is possible on the stage! He could have experienced all that could be experienced, and he threw it all away. For what? Nothing, as far as I can tell. If it was adventure and discovery he craved, he had it in his grasp right here with us. No, I don't think I can forgive him for that, even if I would be very happy to see him again. I'd take him over any moon on any day, of that you can be sure. If you do ever catch up to him, be sure to tell him that. This old and fading player would be very happy to see him again, but please don't tell him the truth about him not being forgiven, not that it would matter much to him, but I wouldn't want him to know I miss him that much.

Genesius, yeah no, I remember him! Hard to forget a name like that. Thin lanky guy with the deep voice. Eyes bluer than that sea. Hardly doubt I'll ever forget him. We used to chat everyday here on this very beach. More like, I chatted and Genesius listened. I had my skin, he had his skin, and we'd watch the sea. It was nice. When it got too hot, we'd go for a swim. Good times. Good times. Not sure where he went in the end, or where he came from for that matter. Come to think of it, I never asked and he never said anything about it. Plenty of other things to chew on, I reckon. Too many people walking around with too many secrets. Letting them out only fusses the here and now. Why even ask after them? When the sky is blue and the sun is bright and the skins are full, enjoy the good while you have it. Father knows they won't last. Him and me both.

Living is easy here, mate. You should think about staying for a while. That's what I tell everyone who makes it here. Genesius stayed for a good while and he seemed to like it alright. If you're a friend of his, you may like it too. Plenty of game in the commons to keep a man well-enough fed and, if you need some coin, plenty of farmers who are always in need of an extra hand or two to get something or other done. Church don't take much interest in the place. Never has, which is odd, if you ask me, because if there's a paradise to be had in this life, this is it. No politics to speak of. That war that happened, it didn't touch the people here one bit. We only knew anything about it long after it was done, when all the ex-soldiers found their way here. Got right busy for a while, not like it is now. Quiet again, which is nice. They came here to recuperate, I reckon. Not physical wounds, even if there was plenty of that going around, the wounds on the inside, the wounds people can't see and that aren't easily explained. If you're missing a leg, people might be a little more understanding of you being out of sorts and not ready to get back to the way life was. For them other wounds, it ain't so simple. Harder to make sense of. Not that I would know anything about it. Never had any interest in soldiering, weapons or fighting. Me and my brothers might have fought when we were bitty, but that wasn't much more than horseplay. I can't say I've ever fought a man, outside of a few stormy words. What I do know about is whatever I hear from people and, for a goodly while, I was talking to a lot ex-soldiers on this beach, let me tell you. From all sides of the war too. Both sides of the Church and the different claims to the throne, all of them different fellas were killing each other not that long before and here there wasn't so much as a loud argument. It's the sea, I reckon. Puts a lot of life into perspective. The sun and sky help too. Can't fault the air neither. I suppose a man could fight in a place like this if he worked at it, but how could you? Look around! There's plenty of beach for everyone. If the fella next to you decides that he don't like you, move on! Plenty of beach for everyone. Move on, find another spot, and mind your own business. Moving on, now that's something I do know about. I've done a lot of moving on in my day. A chatter box like me ain't welcomed by all company, and I learned pretty quickly to move on and not fret about it. Can't change a fella who decides he don't like you whether he has a reason to or not. Mind you, some people lash out before there's even a chance to move on. Never had that problem here, not even with the ex-soldiers. Back on the mainland, a fella's liable to straight out challenge you or worse, once he decides he don't like you. I never had any problem walking away from a duel, let me tell you. I can also do without people flashing a dagger in my face on account of not liking my way of talking. Ask me to leave and I'll go. Don't need to bring steel into it. I reckon people

lash out so easily only because they feel so trapped. The moment anything else adds to that feeling, they got to lash out because they have too much of it already. That's my thinking on it. When people feel free, like they do around here, there's no cause to lash out, even when people ain't right on the inside.

Genesisius never lashed out. He was more like a good sea. Calm and smooth on the surface, even if you know it's always moving somewhere underneath. Good listener too, which I liked plenty. Enjoyed a skin. He could drain them quicker than me, and, let me tell you, I've seen the bottom of more skins than most fellas. He never turned nasty or sad or even disagreeable, like some fellas do when they go deep into a skin. More like, he became more agreeable. Like I said, he didn't really talk about himself. After a few pulls, he might pick up on some idea or other I was chewing on and work on it a bit for himself. There you go. That reminds me. We used to sit over there most days. Well, Genesisius sat over there, and, most days, I would join him after making my rounds. Always there's some folks out here I need to jaw at for a bit whenever I see them. A couple of those regulars were two older fellas who sat inside the tree line up over there on our left. They were regulars, like Genesisius and me, and had been coming to the same spot for as long as I can remember. See, one day, Genesisius and I are sitting in our spot, pulling from our skins, me talking up a storm, and I work my way into talking about the reason for living and such. Genesisius wasn't much interested in other people so, with him, I'd talk about matters others avoided. I don't go in for what the Church says about it, how the Father's plans for us are so big we can't understand them. Even if that's right — and who am I to say the Church is wrong — I reckon I need a reason for myself, for living my life. Why am I here? Why do I carry on? I'm jawing away trying to put these different bits of thinking into one way of thinking and, those two regulars I mentioned before, they walk past me and Genesisius on their way for a quick dip in the water. Those two, they were as constant as the breeze. They'd stroll down from their spot, take a quick dip and stroll back to their spot and do it all over once they got too warm again. Regular like, all through the day. So, those two guys are on one of their strolls, passing us again, and, on the other side of my waving hands, I see Genesisius is watching them go by. Not obviously. Out of the corner of his eye. They take their dip, they pass on their way back to their spot, and, as I am about to move from one thought to the next, Genesisius says to me, "Those two have it sorted. Look how they live. Every day of their lives they are living how they please. Enjoying the sun and the sea, no worries about yesterday or today. No cares. That's the answer to your question, right there. Those two guys. There's the meaning of life." Or something like that. I can't remember it word for word. It's been a couple of years, and I've had a few pulls from the skin, if you get what I'm saying. That's the *spirit* of what he said. So, I get the feeling that we are on the edge of something, so I let what he said linger there for a bit, as I turned it over in my head, not even speaking out loud what I am thinking, like I normally do, because I don't want to spoil it by saying too much. After we take a couple of more pulls from our skins, I say this to him: "They sure do. Those two fellas have got it sorted. Look at them, it's as plain as day. What does that say about you and me? We come here every day. We do as we please. We enjoy the sun and the sea. What have they got that you and me don't? Doesn't that mean we've figured it out too?" Now I'm not going to say Genesisius looked shocked. He's not the kind of guy who ever looks shocked. There was a look on his face that wasn't like his normal look. I reckoned he was going to say more too, so I kept my mouth shut while he watched the sea for a bit longer. This time,

we're quiet long enough that those two regulars pass back and forth while we're both waiting to hear what he's going to say, and then he says, "it never occurred to me. The whole time I've been here, watching them, it never occurred to me." And then he went quiet again for a little bit more, and, after another pull or two, he says — and I'm pretty sure this is exactly what he said because I've been repeating it to myself for a while now — "I wonder what else I missed along the way?"

Then, he got up, left, and never came back. Never saw that son of a mare again. I kept looking for him for a whole growing season, hoping maybe he had gone off to work a farm. I should have known he wasn't coming back when he left his skin behind that day. I'm not fully sure what happened. As best as I can make out, something about what I said to him set him into motion again. I wonder sometimes, if I had answered him differently — or not all — when he said what he said about them two regulars, I wonder if he might never have gone off. If I hadn't said anything, I fully reckon you might have caught up to him right here next to me on this beach. I only answered him the way I did because I always had the feeling that beneath all of his quiet there was a lot of churning going on. Some fellas are quiet because there's nothing going on. Others are quiet because of all the churning. I learned that from talking to all of them ex-soldiers. I had got it into my head that if I could help him come up with an answer to whatever was causing the churn it might help him settle down. Be at peace and enjoy what we had. Not let all of this go to waste on account of all that churning. Instead, it set him into motion again! And I can't make sense of why! Why would a fella do that? He sorts out, as far as I can reckon, that he's living the life he was meant to live, and then he gets up and walks away from it. I'm not even fussed that he left without saying anything. I'm not that kind of fella. I can't divine a reason that explains why he left, and that's what sometimes vexes me. If you ever do find him, you ask Genesius that question for me, "Why did you leave paradise after finding it?" And don't let him avoid giving you no answer neither. If he falls quiet, you wait him out until he has no choice but to speak, whatever is churning away on the inside. Mind you, it won't do me much good one way or the other, if he tells you. Maybe it will give me some peace imagining that someone out there other than him might know the answer. In the meantime, I've got the sea, the sky, and my skin. All in all, I can't say much bad about that, even if I tried.

Act V

The sky was very blue. The morning air was fresh and full of life. It stirred Jaq's old heart. His mind too. It felt clearer than it had felt for some time. Even his old limbs were eager to move. Jaq was glad of it. There was work to be done. He took his unexpected vigour into the garden and set to work. The beds had to be prepared for the first planting. Spring would always be a season of renewal, no matter how few remained to him now.

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Later in the morning, when the wind shifted, Jaq looked to the sky. He saw dark clouds moving swiftly in from the east. Once the rain arrived, his work in the garden would be done for the day. Jaq's eye was drawn to the crest of the low hill that separated his land from the main road. Jaq thought he saw a figure standing on the path that led to his shanty. When he looked again, no one was there. Jaq thought of Feste, the little white dog that had followed him during the final years of his time as a Holy Wanderer. He smiled. It was a good but unexpected memory to have. He hadn't thought of Feste in years.

*

The kettle whistled and Jaq roused himself from his snooze. The rain had not yet come. Judging by the fierceness of the wind that rattled his little home, he would not have to wait much longer. Jaq loved the staccato sound of rain on his roof, especially when a strong fire was lit in his hearth. He took the kettle from the fire, and set it on a small iron table where the tea pot had already been prepared. He waited for the water to come off its boil and filled the pot with the steaming water. He took a deep breath of the tea's bitter and floral fragrance.

Jaq's heart jumped. A man was standing at the door. Jaq could feel his hard gaze on the back of his neck. Jaq listened carefully for movement, too afraid to turn and face the intruder. A traveler might come to the door seeking shelter from the approaching storm; only a thief would enter unannounced. The floor creaked again and cold sweat dripped from Jaq's armpits. The kettle might be heavy enough to use as a weapon, if he flung it without warning; provocation also might make the situation worse. Jaq peered cautiously over his shoulder and saw only the door. He turned quickly and saw no one was there. He had been mistaken.

Jaq sighed in deep relief; the fear did not leave his limbs. Although it was impossible for a man to hide anywhere in the small shanty, Jaq looked in every corner and behind every piece of furniture. In a muddle of fear and embarrassment, he peered into the cupboards and some of the larger drawers. Only then did the fear ebb from his limbs. The door rattled and Jaq's heart jumped again. The shiver of fear that wracked his body felt like a memory. A very old memory.

*

The man turned to face Jaq. His eyes were intensely blue; somehow gentler than Jaq remembered them.

“Why are you here?” Jaq asked. “Why are you here now, after all these years?”

“I made a promise to you,” the man answered. “I’ve come to fulfill that promise.”

The voice was unmistakable. It was the boy’s. Deep and ancient, as Jaq remembered it. The boy was a man now, as he should be, after so many years.

“Why today?” Jaq asked. “Why after so many years?”

“I am a man of my word,” he answered. “And your time is short.”

*

Jaq’s conversations with the boy continued long after the boy had abandoned him. At first, Jaq imagined the first conversation he wanted to have with the boy when he finally found him. Jaq re-lived it over and over again as he searched. It helped to keep him motivated. As months drifted into years, and his search continued fruitlessly, Jaq reimagined conversations he had had with the boy while they journeyed together. Then, he imagined conversations they might have had. Jaq was sure if he had said something differently while they were together, they would never have been separated. It hadn’t been inevitable. He was sure of it. He had been sure of it for a very long time.

*

“Genesisius, after all this time, I didn’t expect to see you again. Why are you here?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” the man answered. “I’ve been distracted.”

Jaq had not anticipated an apology. It softened his resolve. He motioned to the chair closest to the fire. “Please take a seat, and tell me why you have come?”

“I want to know,” the man said, “why you searched for me for so long.”

Jaq was taken aback. He had not expected Genesisius to be interested in him after all these years.

“It’s a good question,” Jaq answered, “and one I’ve often asked myself.” Against his better judgment, Jaq asked, “Would you like some tea?”

*

Jaq often tried to remember the exact moment he had given up on his search for the boy. He never could remember it. Jaq only knew that he had searched for a long time, and, then, at some point, he was no longer searching. He had no memory of the decision or of any particular event that had caused him to give up on his search. The trail had never gone completely cold. There was always a story or a sighting to follow up on. Jaq never once lost the feeling that the boy was only a few steps ahead of him or around the next bend. Even now, in his little shanty, with a spring storm brewing, he felt like the boy might turn up at any moment, a boy no longer and with many stories to tell. Even so, at some point, Jaq had given up on the search. The search had been his whole life for what seemed to be a very long time, and then, one day, it wasn't. Looking back on it, from the whole arc of his life, his time with the boy and his search hadn't been very long at all. The time he spent with his memories of the boy and their imagined conversations was much longer.

*

Jaq didn't want to answer the man, so he asked a question instead.

"You said you're here because you're a man of your word. What did you mean by that?"

The man pulled something from the pocket of his heavy traveler's tunic, and placed it on the low table that separated them. Jaq's old eyes couldn't make out what it was. He leaned in closer for a better look. It was a coin of some sort. No, Jaq realized, it was a Holy Wander's token. Jaq had not seen one in decades. His old order had been disbanded many years ago.

"I've come to return what belongs to you," the man said. "I've also come to kill you."

"Why," Jaq asked, "why kill me after all of these years? After we have been separated for so long?"

"I made a promise to you. I intend to keep it."

*

From time to time, Jaq would argue with the boy. The arguments were theological in nature — on the goodness of God and the soundness of the Father's plans for his people. The boy had only ever seen in the world proof of God's cruelty and madness. Jaq had always tried to convince him otherwise; he often returned to their old argument. The years following the war had been anything but peaceful, and Jaq was sure Genesius would have seen too much in the world to justify his dismal view of God, but God's vision was plain to see in the turmoil, if one knew where to look. Jaq was sure Genesius would be blind to it. Out of habit, Jaq tutored him, even if he wasn't there to hear it, telling him where to look and how to think about what he saw. The argument was as irresolvable as it had been when they were together; this time, Jaq took comfort in the fact that he was sure he said everything he wanted to say.

*

“Now that you know why I am here,” the man said. “Tell me what I have come to hear. Why did you search for me for so long?”

Jaq hesitated.

“Tell me,” said the man. “Your time is short.”

“I was worried for you,” Jaq finally blurted. “I’ve always been worried for you. From the very first moment, I found you at the crossroads. That’s why I approached you. That’s why I traveled with you. That’s why I searched for you. I worried for you. I wanted to protect you!”

“What would you protect me from?” the man replied.

“From yourself! Your hate knows no bounds. It’s irrational. Reckless. Terrifying. I knew you would turn it on yourself one day. You were on a path of self-destruction. Self-annihilation. I wanted to guide you from it. Protect you. Prevent it.”

“Very noble,” the man said. “A very noble lie.”

Jaq protested, “It’s not a lie. It’s the truth. I swear it.”

“You’re a coward and a liar, Jaq,” the man said, with an old familiar cruelty. “That’s why I left you behind. That’s why I abandoned you. This is your last chance. Speak the truth now or die a liar.”

Jaq began to cry. Jaq would never speak the truth. Even after all these years, even in the face of death — even if Genesisus asked him — Jaq would never speak the truth. Not once. Never. Not all.

*

The rain started, slowly and unevenly. Then, all at once, it fell swiftly against the roof of the chanty. Jaq remembered his tea and found that it had cooled while he was lost in his thoughts. He rose from his chair, stoked the fire and put the kettle on to boil again. The sound of the rain and the warmth of the fire was soothing. Jaq returned to his chair.

Jaq knew Genesisus wasn’t ever going to come for him. He had known it in his heart for some time. He rehearsed for his return anyway, in his garden, over tea, while digesting meals or trying to sleep. Again and again, Jaq imagined how it might go. It was an aberrant hope. Genesisus lived and breathed, of that he was sure. If he thought of Jaq at all, Genesisus probably couldn’t even remember his name.

Skelley paused and scanned the attentive faces around him. No one moved. No one whispered. Their bowls of fruit went untouched. They were taut with expectation, waiting for the conclusion of the story they all know so well. Skelley looked again to the master of the house, who leaned forward in his chair. His eyes were also bright with anticipation.

“Jean pressed on, his wounds bleeding all the while, until he came to the very crossroads where he had met Yannick and Lavache all those years ago. Jean looked south, down the road that led to the home of his childhood, and he knew he could travel no further. He had walked his final steps. Death was upon him. He would not make it home. Not today. Not ever. Jean set himself down at the center of the crossroads, on the very spot where Yannick and Lavache had found him, all those many years ago, and he prayed aloud with all the strength that remained to him, his heart filled with regret and repentance, ‘Oh Lord Father, I have defied you all these many years, and yet you have only shown me mercy. At every turn, my wickedness, you have forgiven it. By way of thanks, I have repaid you only with defiance heaped upon defiance. Your mercy and love knows no bounds. I’ve never been worthy of it. And yet, as I sit here dying, so unworthy of your grace and so deserving of every punishment, my wicked heart reaches out to you once more. Think not of me, oh Lord. Think instead of my dear mother and proud father who wait for me, worrying themselves over my return. For them, oh Lord Father, it is too cruel. Do not punish them for my defiance and misdeeds. I beg you, with all my heart! Grant me the strength to make it home, so they might know what has come of me. And if you should spare them the misery I have caused them, I will honour you in all my remaining days. I will do only good works, and always sing your praises. I will be a good son, an honorable neighbor, and, if your will be done, a loving father! I swear it, with all my heart. I swear it. I swear it. I swear it.’ And upon swearing it a third time, God took pity on Jean. His wounds were stopped, and his limbs were made strong again. Jean rose, as if reborn. He shed tears of joy and thanked the Lord with all of his heart, so anyone near or far might hear him. Jean returned to the loving arms of his family, telling them all that had happened to him and begging them for forgiveness. His mother and father, brother and sisters, they wept and thanked the Lord for his redeeming grace. And Jean was true to his word and honoured the promise he had made to the Lord, our Father. He returned his father’s sword to its rightful place on the wall by the hearth, found a wife, and had many sons and few daughters. His wild wandering days were soon forgotten by all. His neighbors knew him only as a man who loved God and who did his duty each day. And Jean lived in peace and righteousness for all his remaining days. Amen.”

Skelley dropped his hands and smiled. He again scanned the faces around him. The sense of peace that comes with a story well told filled the space between them. Some nodded in satisfaction. Some looked stunned. Others had retreated within themselves to manage the emotions he had unleashed. Whatever their response, they were united by the story. Skelley knew he had done well. After a moment or two, someone remembered to clap their approval and the others quickly followed.

The master of the house rose from his chair, clapping. "Well said, teller, well said. You've honoured us this evening with your telling. Please stay. Eat and drink, take your fill and, if you should desire it, stay the night and share another story with us tomorrow.

Skelley bowed. "Master, you and your kin have honoured me with your hospitality. I humbly thank you and gratefully accept your offer to eat and drink. I will be honoured to serve you again tomorrow. Thank you."

"I am pleased to hear it, teller, I am pleased to hear it," said the master of the house. "Eat well, and drink well. More wine for all!"

The crowd cheered, a toast was proposed, and Skelley moved towards the back of the hall, where the performers and household servants took their meals. Normally, he would stop to speak with anyone who acknowledged or thanked him for his performance. On this evening, he moved as quickly as decorum would allow. He hadn't had a decent meal in days.

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Once Skelley had eaten all he could eat and his head was full of wine, he turned his attention to the nearest tables. If he could catch the eye of a woman with a warm bed, he would sleep much better for it. The families sitting this far from the master of the house weren't likely to be wealthy. They weren't likely to be fussy either. Any bed would be more comfortable than the hay waiting for him in the stables.

Skelly's eyes were drawn to a beautiful woman walking with purpose from the front of the hall. Her dress wasn't fashionable, but she carried herself with dignity and poise. Skelly's storymaster had often reminded Skelly that nobility came in many forms. Old money rarely wasted it on fashion. Judging by the proximity of her table to the master of the house, Skelly decided she was well-bred. A courtesan would have been much more fashionably dressed.

Skelly returned his attention to a homely woman at the table nearest his own. She had looked away each time he had looked at her. The last time their eyes had met, they lingered long enough for him to smile. Skelly was optimistic. She looked the type who might take a tumble or two with a storyteller.

"Please accept this gift of thanks for the story you have shared with us this evening."

It was a woman's voice, rich and strangely accented. When Skelly looked up to see who it belonged to, he was stunned to discover the beautiful woman he had been admiring a moment before.

He leapt to his feet and bowed.

"You're very welcome, mistress. Please, your words of thanks are gift enough. The master of the house has already provided for me."

"I insist." She placed a small plain leather pouch on the table in front of him. "I always bring it whenever a storyteller is promised for dinner. I rarely give it."

"You're too kind, mistress." Skelly clapped his hands in front of his chest and briefly bowed his head before picking it up. He fixed an admiring gaze upon it, but he could not think of words suitable for its praise. He had never received such a gift before.

The woman answered the question written on his face. "It's mugwort," she said. "Where I come from, we honour a story well told with a gift of mugwort."

"I'm sure I warrant no such honour. I thank you all the same, mistress." She seemed in no hurry to depart, so he dared to ask the question on his mind. "If I might be so bold to ask, mistress, your accent is unfamiliar to me, from where in the province do your kin come?"

"My kin are not from this province nor from the territory," she answered. "They live across the sea."

Skelly bowed quickly to hide the shock that would have been written on his face. "You honor me again, mistress. I have heard people sometimes visit us from the lands across the sea. I have never been honoured to meet any of your people before."

"Can you be so sure?" she asked. "Many of my people come to trade with yours and speak your language without accent. Would you have guessed I wasn't one of your people by appearance alone?"

"No, I don't suppose I would have, mistress." Skelly knew better than to mention her unfashionable frock. "I confess, I have always imagined that the differences between our two peoples would be more discernible."

"There was a time when we shared an emperor and much else. It is the present age that makes strangers of us, not our bloodlines. The same might be said of our stories. May I sit for a moment, there is something I would like to discuss with you."

"You honour me again, mistress," Skelly said. "I welcome any of your time you might spare me."

The woman sat without ceremony before Skelly had a chance to prepare the chair for her.

"Your telling today," she said with relish, "was infused with a vitality that I forgot this venerable story can sometimes have. I was reminded of what it was like to be a child and to hear it for the first time. A remarkable achievement for ears as accustomed to stories as mine."

Skelly bowed his head in thanks and placed his hand over his heart.

“Tell me,” she continued, “By your reckoning, what is the meaning of the story?”

Skelly dutifully replied, “The grace of God is infinite and salvation is assured to all who welcome him fully into their hearts.”

The woman frowned and offered him a crooked smile. “Do you truly believe that is the meaning of the story? It seems to me that God is hardly relevant at all. A trite convenience to hang the story around.”

Skelly winced in the face of her strident blasphemy. Only a foreigner of significant rank could be so brazen. He was nevertheless intrigued by her question. He decided to caution her, in the hope that their conversation might continue.

“Mistress, as I am sure you understand, all stories, whatever their apparent meaning may seem to be, are always truly about God and his infinite grace. It may be, of course, that you have been privileged to acquaint yourself with a dissenting opinion among the Glossators. A humble wandering storyteller, such as myself, relies on the teachings of the Church for such matters.”

The woman caught herself. She smiled and looked away from Skelly, considering her next words. Her blue eyes returned to his. “At the end of the story, God’s grace is given and Jean returns home. Why is it, you think, this act of grace is important for those who hear the tale?”

Skelly was relieved. The woman had understood him and had sense enough to steer the conversation to safer ground. The conversation that she wanted could be had, if she was willing to approach it obliquely.

“Above all else,” he answered her, “they are happy to witness God’s grace present in the life of man.”

“Yes, they most assuredly are. All of those assembled today love God and are true to the faith.” The woman winked at Skelly, as she spoke the overtly pious words. “My faith is also aroused by the sublunary nature of this particular act of grace. Why do you think Jean’s reconciliation with his family moves the listener so fervently?”

“I can’t say I have given it much thought, mistress. As a storyteller, my thoughts are of God and his grace first and always. I am, withal, intrigued by the question, especially because it has been put to me by a person of your stature. It may also be that, in seeking its answer, we might better understand the wisdom of our Lord and Father. I only hope that my answer is not worthy of reproach.”

“I welcome your words however they may be spoken,” she answered, smiling, “so long as they are spoken in service, faith and love of God.”

“I do humbly swear it.” Skelly paused to collect his thoughts. “I might venture to say that people are moved by Jean’s reconciliation with his family because we all long for reconciliation. We also hope it will be granted without condition. The Church is the expression of God’s will in the world. The family is the expression of his love. We are nothing without the will and the love of God. As such, we are nothing without the authority of the Church and the love of our family. If all can be forgiven of Jean, by God and family, then surely none of us will ever stray so far from the true path that we will not be welcomed home again. Those who feel lost, like Jean, I believe, are comforted by the hope that they will always be welcomed home, however minor or severe their transgression.”

“Yes, yes, I think you’re right! Exactly right. Well said.” The woman leaned forward and took hold of Skelly’s wrist in her enthusiasm. “I might only express the point a little more directly. Our greatest fear is ostracization from our family, our peers, our community, and yet, at the same time, we long to be free of the smothering burdens of solidarity. We want security and we want freedom. We want to know the thrill of escape and alienation and the profound comfort of return and reconciliation. This is what makes man man. The morality of the herd and the will of the beast live within us both. It is the struggle between these two opposed dispositions that determine our character both as individuals and as a people. How we respond to the struggle, how we tell the story of the struggle, this is what makes us who we are, this is what makes us a people, more than bloodlines or proximity or language, it our struggle to make sense of our individuality in spite of our longing for the comforts of our banality. Wouldn’t you agree? As a storyteller, you must understand the point I am trying to make. I explained it all to the Compte once and he refused to understand me, no matter how many times I repeated it.”

Skelly’s heart jumped into his throat at her casual mention of the Compte. If it were true that this woman had ever talked with the Comte, her status was much higher than Skelly had estimated it to be. If she were lying about the encounter, she was profoundly reckless. Either possibility was worrying and dangerous. Skelly decided to tread more carefully.

“Let me share something else with you, teller, that I’m sure will intrigue you. Among my people, we tell a story very similar to the one you have told this evening. The names of the characters are different, of course, and not all of the details are identical, and yet, there are too many similarities to discount the likelihood that, at some point in history, they were the same story, not unlike our two peoples. There is, withal, one major difference. In our story, Genesius, your Jean, never returns home. Indeed, he has no home to return to because he destroyed it himself. He only moves forward, always forward, on an unending journey, searching for that which never can be found — must never be found because the journey is all we have. Our story is both a celebration of that journey and a cautionary tale. For us, it is the perfect summary of our character as a people, drawn as we are by trade to travel beyond our lands and away from our kin, the very people for whose well being and comfort we travel and trade. Does it not intrigue you that these two stories can be so similar and yet so very different? Not unlike our two peoples. It’s fascinating, wouldn’t you agree?”

Skelly was intrigued by her smile, her enthusiasm and the cool touch of her hand. He wanted to respond to her enthusiasm in kind, to debate dangerous ideas long into the night. The consequences, he knew, were too great. The reward too fleeting. Skelly decided to withdraw to safe and familiar ground.

“Begging your pardon, mistress, I’m not sure if I can say that I do or don’t agree with what you have said because it is truly beyond my understanding. The Wayfarer, the story I have shared this evening, is one of the three gifts of the Prophet, long may his name and deeds be remembered. There is only one true version. Everything else is a corruption.”

The woman knit her brow and removed her hand from Skelly’s wrist. “Yes, of course, there is only one true version of The Wayfarer, one of the three gifts of the Prophet, long may his name and deeds be remembered. I well understand the views of the Church on the fidelity of the alternative versions of The Wayfarer which are said to circulate among people less pious than you and I. Fully accepting that the story of my people is wholly different than the Wayfarer, I wonder, if you, as a storyteller of impressive talent, have any thoughts on the significance of their similarities and what it might say about our two peoples.”

“You humble me again with your kind words, mistress, and I thank you for them. I fear what you ask of me, withal, is beyond my understanding. There is only one story of the Wayfarer and only one meaning, which is taught to us by the Church. Whatever accidental similarity your people’s story may have to it is of no concern to me. My only concern is with the will of God, as it is taught to us by the Church. As a storyteller, that is the only truth and meaning that concerns me. You have lived long enough among us, I hope, to understand why that must be so.”

The woman looked deep into Skelly’s eyes. Her disappointment was clear. Skelly had to look away. At the other table, the homely woman was watching them intently and, perhaps, listening too. After a long pause, the woman spoke again.

“I apologize for putting you in an awkward position, teller. I now see and understand my mistake. Among my people, storytellers are free to speak their minds. Indeed, they are expected to. It is both a right and duty of their craft. The feelings you stirred in me this evening with your fine telling of the Wayfarer reminded me of home. Alas, I am not home. Not yet. Not for a long while yet. I forget myself, and I did you a great disservice. I apologize.”

The woman stood abruptly before Skelly could protest her apology. She looked down on him for a moment. Then, she turned to go. Skelly leapt to his feet, and spoke loudly enough to be heard by anyone who had eavesdropped on their conversation.

“Mistress, I thank you for this gift in honour of the pious story I have shared this evening. Might I know your name so I can include you in my prayers.”

The woman stopped and looked over her shoulder at Skelly. Then, she moved swiftly, took him by the shoulders and whispered sharply in his ear.

“Teller, leave this wretched place. Cross the sea as soon as you can. Travel to my people and my lands. Live among them. With a talent such as yours, you would be celebrated and free to speak your mind. You would sit at the head table. Not at the back of the hall. You could think and speak freely, as you please. Tell any story you think worth telling. Challenge any idea worth challenging. You would be happier. I am sure of it. You must believe it is possible. You must.”

The woman pressed her lips against Skelly’s cheek, turned from him, and headed to the front of the hall. Skelly watched her go. She never looked back. When Skelly finally looked again for the homely woman, he was relieved to find her looking at him with open curiosity in her eyes. Eventually, and with less effort than he had anticipated, he made his way into her bed. From there, he carried on with the ebb and flow of his life, as he knew and understood it. Ever after, the foreign woman’s words stayed with him. He often wondered what his life might be like in the land beyond the sea and if he would ever have the opportunity to learn for himself whether her words were true. For the rest of his life, Skelly was never sure if he was sustained or abraded by the aberrant hope she had given him. He only knew for certain in the last flicker of his dying life.

Epilogue

A story is a gift for a parting of ways.

Twenty-three years ago, I had a terrible dream. When I awoke, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of horror. The cause of which I could not remember. Caught in the throat of my mind were the words, "Genesius was a hate surfer." They stuck. I held onto them too. I wondered what they might mean. I wondered what they might become. I wondered what they might signify. Another aberrant hope.

Farewell, Genesius, farewell. You were born of my dreams, fashioned in my words, and bequeathed to the page. You are mine no more. I'm rid of you. Cast out. Expulsed. Sown. An indigestible mustard seed in want of good soil. May you find what you seek in those who find you. I wish you well. I wish you well. I wish you well.