

Penance by Firelight

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A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

What is the Dark Ages?

What, indeed?

It's a time period — we all know that — but it's not precisely the period of time in which the games are set.

It's a mindset. Sort of like the World of Darkness, but not quite. It's not so much a dark, gritty, urban place where no one believes in magic or creativity and vicious monsters influence everything secretly. It's a horrifying place where the common man knows with utter certainty that he's born into sin, can expect nothing but toil his entire life, and might, if he's not found wanting, meet his reward thereafter. It's a world where unspeakable things do indeed stalk the night, but they don't have to be as careful, because what's the aforementioned common man going to do — pray at them? It's a world where the nobility is chosen by God Himself — and disagreeing with that choice, even privately, might damn one's soul for all time. It's a world where the Inquisition, operating under special sanction by the Pope himself, might arrive to save you from the demons — or burn you as one of them.

It's a world where people believe in magic, and it terrifies them. It's a world where the word "soul" means something, because losing that soul is the worst possible outcome that anyone can conceive.

Is it a dark and frightening world? Absolutely.

Are there monsters here? To be sure.

Are there stories to be told? Hell, yes.

The format for this book — pilgrims regaling each other with stories — is inspired by Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But rather than using their stories to lash out or poke fun at each other, the pilgrims herein use them to exorcise their own demons, to teach lessons, and to find out if their view of the world is anything close to correct. Questioning things openly can be seen as heresy. Doing so in a story is simply allegory.

Whether you use the stories you tell with this setting as civil disobedience, self-discovery or simply entertainment is not for us to decide. All we can do is present the Dark Medieval world in all of its tarnished glory, and extend you an invitation to join us and tell your stories.

So, enter the Dark Medieval world. Much needs to be done. The War of Princes thunders between the undead lords of the night. The werewolves war on each other for land and power, and lash out at the Leeches who dare venture too close to their ancestral homes. The wizards hunger for knowledge and power, while the Church tries — ostensibly — to save the souls of the mortals caught in the middle.

It's an exciting time. Can you afford to miss it?

— Matthew McFarland, Dark Ages Developer



The Pilgrims

“So hadde I spoken with hem everichon
That I was of hir felaweshipe anon,
And made forward erly for to ryse
To take our wey, ther as I yow devyse.”
— Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

Many roads lead to Compostela, and each year many pilgrims travel it. Some travel alone, braving thieves and whatever else might wait in the night to keep their solitude and reflect on their sins. Some travel in groups from a small village, bands of friends or relations making the trip together, reinforcing their faith with the solidarity of companionship. And some pilgrims simply meet on the road and travel together out of fear, out of comfort, or out of simple boredom.

In the Year of Our Lord 1230, in the first part of the month of April, on the Silver Road to Compostela that winds through Portugal and is commonly traveled by pilgrims from the south of Iberia and other, more distant lands, such a fellowship came together. Why the seven of



them chose to travel in that year, only God Himself knows, but surely God had His reasons.

The seven were a varied lot. One was a Dominican friar, a man not yet old but whose calling and harsh work granted him the appearance of an older man. Thin and long of limb and feature, his cowl concealed a shock of stark white hair. He was called Giordano Nicola d'Azenta, although the others merely called him "brother" or "friar."

Another was a man called Alejandro, and he never said what land he hailed from, although other suspected him to be Aragonese. His girth and clothes showed him to be prosperous, and his graying hair and manner of speech marked him as a man to heed, should he choose to speak. He rarely did, however, and when he spoke, his voice conveyed sadness and resignation.

Two Englishmen made the journey, though they confessed they had only just met on the ship from that isle. One was a soldier called John of Bellingham, a man of a mere one-and-twenty years who had been to the Holy Land as a Crusader. His sword and armor betrayed that, although he came from nobility, his family was not rich. But he wore his accoutrements with pride, tarnished though they were, and sat on his lean horse with the bearing of a true knight. When he rode, however, one could see him wince with pain — a wound in his right side had sent him home from the Crusade.

The second traveler from Britain was also a noble, but one of much more prosperous fortunes. He was called Richard of Southampton Glen, and he traveled with two strong and loyal wolfhounds who followed ever at his heels. He was easily the most confident of the men on the pilgrimage, and he watched the others as though looking for their

true reasons for making this journey, though he did not state his own.

But not all of the pilgrims were lettered men or lords. A cordwainer — hands roughened and fingers nicked by years of his work — rode with them. His leather hood and fine clothing attested to the quality of his work, but his voice was coarse and brusque. His name was Aldous, and he made a great show of purchasing wine when the pilgrims stopped at an inn on the road.

A student joined the pilgrims late in the journey, but he was not the last. He was called Vidal, and he studied at the recently founded university at Salamanca, but hailed originally from Catalonia. He was so thin, the cordwainer asserted, that a harsh breeze might send him sprawling, and his student's robes had been stitched together by a hand unsuited for such work. He had a fair complexion, but a haunted look wore at him and he looked over his shoulder often.

The very last to join the pilgrimage did so when the pilgrims were but two days from their destination. He was the least remarkable of the group. He did not dress in finery, but neither were his traveling clothes torn or much soiled. He carried no food with him, and ate when the others offered, but never seemed hungry. He wore no cross or crucifix, and when the others prayed at night, he went off alone to say his Aves alone. His name was Christof, and he watched the others carefully and listened to their conversations, rarely saying a word.

This was the assemblage: seven men, their mounts and the two wolfhounds. The pilgrims made their way through the paths and over the earth and stones toward the shrine of Saint James, and on that pilgrimage they spoke but little together. Lord Richard and Sir John would talk frequently, but they spoke in the strange tongue of their homeland and none of the others understood. Alejandro and Vidal conversed occasionally in Latin, but if any of the others comprehended their dialogues, he did not endeavor to join them. The seven pilgrims were glad for each other's company but did not take pleasure in it, did not share their reasons for the pilgrimage or much of themselves, until the night before they were to reach their destination.

The fire blazed high that night, for the air was cold and a strange tension rode the breeze. The men huddled around the fire, ate what food they had or could find, and drank wine that Aldous provided. Vidal looked over his shoulder, then looked around at his fellows and spoke in French, asking if the others understood. Each of them nodded, some a bit more slowly than others, but it seemed as though they had found a common tongue.

"Well, then," Vidal continued, "I have a story I should like to tell. I warn you that it is not a tale for all audiences, and not one I would tell by light of day, and yet I feel it must be heard. It is a true story, you see, and one that happened to a friend of mine — a fellow student at Salamanca. Doubtless each of you has heard stories of demons and other creatures from friends or doting parents, and perhaps you believed them in your youth. I am a student, and I have read of such oddities as to make those stories seem base and bland, and yet something in those tales stirs us still. Am I wrong?"

Not a head shook. The other men listened, and each of them understood.

"Good. Then let me tell you a story."





The Prodigal Son

My friend — let us call him Priam — was well into his winter's studies when a letter came from home. I am shamed to say it was a few days before he bothered to open it, since he fancied he already knew the contents: earnest advice on cultivating virtue, coupled with the refusal to send even a modest sum for book-copying and other expenses. But when at last he did take a moment from his labors to read it, it brought him far graver news. The hand was that of Ponç, his father's steward, and it said that his father was gravely ill, not expected to last through to spring. "If you would have the Don's blessing, then come," was the closing.

And so he obediently set out for his father's house in Barcelona, swaddling himself against the cold in a borrowed cloak. The journey took several weeks, walking all the way but for two occasions when he convinced a fellow traveler to let him sit in the back of a wagon (nobleman's pride, I tell you, is no match for a raw left foot), and he feared his father might well be dead by the time he got there. When he finally arrived, Ponç greeted him with a face more than grim enough to suggest the worst, but he led Priam up to the bedchamber straightaway, and there lay the Don, frail and racked with coughing, yet alive still.

"How fares my sire?" Priam asked the old man, who struggled to sit up in bed, clutching at the front of Priam's robe the way a drowning man clutches at a bit of passing flotsam.

"I fear myself lost already, son, the soul to be followed all too soon by the body —"

"This is nonsense," interrupted the parish priest, who sat nearby. "He has been confessing himself

faithfully for days, and I keep telling him that only grace will meet him at suffering's end, but he doesn't listen to me anymore."


"I know what is to meet me," the Don insisted. "Your brother informs me, Priam. He comes and sits astride me like a tempter demon, and whispers to me of what awaits. He bends so close that I can feel his breath on my neck. He parts the veil of the tomb for me. I'm more than half dead already. Why does it please God to let me linger if the end is the same, regardless?"

"He has bad dreams," said the steward. "He wakes up screaming in the dead of night, and I rush in to find out what the matter is, but I've never seen anything with him, man or ghost."

"You must not succumb to the sin of despair," Priam warned his father gently, "whether it is the devil or, more likely, your aged mind that tries to deceive you. Your eldest son is long since in Heaven. He would never torment you with such falsehoods. And your next eldest survived the battle for M...rida, and must be on his way here, or preparing to come at the very least."

"Ponç knows nothing. He will not stay and watch." The Don glared at the steward. "You are my loyal son. You will do this for your father, a dying man. You will tell me if this is dotage or not."

Now Priam had indeed had a brother named Arnal, his senior by nearly a decade. This unfortunate child had spent most of his invalid's existence confined upstairs, often with a brazier ablaze even in the spring. He



.. had been watched over variously by Pong, who'd been a page at the time, or the nurse when she wasn't running after the other boys, or even the cook's wife when no one else was handy. At 15 his constitution had finally given out. Priam remembered Arnal's burial far better than he remembered Arnal himself.

Priam found the idea of playing nurse to the Don, the Goliath of his boyhood, disturbing, but he could not refuse such a small final kindness, and so that evening he found himself lighting a candle to keep watch by his father's bedside. He lulled the Don to sleep with a song murmured to the accompaniment of a lute, then sat for hours, wishing for enough light to read.

At length he noticed a change in the old man's breathing, a slight quickening of pace followed by low noises in the throat, like words seeking to form. There, he's dreaming, Priam thought to himself, and rose to see. As he stepped closer to the bed, however, it seemed to retreat from him. The pool of moonlight from the hole in the window-shutters above guttered and died, and everything became swathed in darkness. With a hiss the candle behind him went out.

He lurched forward to catch hold of the bed-frame and find his bearings. Instead he tripped over the chest at the foot of the bed, scraping his shin, and tumbled to the cold stone floor. It was pitch black now, and it seemed to him that the air was growing damper, thicker, chillier. He called his father and thought he heard a muffled cry in return, but could not tell whence it had come.

He put out his hands: they touched something that was not bed nor sheet nor chest nor father, but something taut and slick like snakeskin. Then the air in his mouth grew still thicker, filling up his nose and throat until they were packed solid. He could

not even gasp. His chest boiled, froze and nearly burst with the need to draw breath, and his head hummed. Whatever it was that choked him, he could neither cough it up nor force it out with his hands. Soon enough it conquered him, and he fell to the ground senseless.

He awoke in the graying dawn to find himself still on the bedchamber floor. His father lay in bed as before, although he looked more withered than ever, his skin as transparent as oiled vellum. The Don turned his head in his sleep, and Priam saw spatters of blood upon the pillow, yet he could not find the wound that had made them.

Nor was that the chief shock to greet him upon awakening. He went downstairs and sent for Ponç, only to learn that the man had never come to bed, and the pages didn't know where he was. They searched the house and then started looking outside, but the courtyard was deserted and Ponç's horse was stabled.

"Whatever's roasting for dinner smells good," one of the pages remarked.

"But today's a fast," said another. "We're not supposed to be having meat."

"The cook's forgot himself," grumbled Priam. "You find your master, and I'll go have a word with the kitchen folk."

The kitchen, however, had no folk in it, except for Ponç, who had been neatly shaved, basted, stuffed with onions and

skewered on a spit over the great hearth in the middle of the room. Priam found the cook and his family huddled in the wine cellar; even on pain of dismissal, not one of them would say why they were there or what they had seen.

Priam gathered the rest of his father's men and servants together. "A cunning devil moves among us," he told them. "I want one of you to fetch the priest back again for an exorcism, and another to go to the Count's men and beg their assistance in my father's name. Until they return, we have only ourselves to rely upon, so be vigilant."

But as the day wore on, the two messengers never came back. After the Nones bell, Priam sent out another pair after the first.

All that day and far into the night he again stood watch at his father's bedside, sword in hand instead of a lute. True, he had little idea what to do with it. He was the third son — or the second for all practical purposes — and had set his heart on academia from earliest childhood. But his brother Guillelm had just helped drive the Moors south from L...on, advancing the very borders of Christendom. Priam could not fail to protect his own father in his own bedchamber.

As the moon reached its summit, the old man once again stirred, but this time, instead of simply grumbling, he got up and began putting on his tunic and his shoes.

"Sire, what is it?" Priam whispered at him, and then repeated it more loudly because his father did not seem to hear. But the Don simply kept on with dressing himself. When he had finished, he went down from his chambers, passing wordlessly by his two men-at-arms whom Priam had set on guard outside the door.

"Is this the devilry?" one of the guards asked Priam.

"All I know is that he won't answer me," he said.

"Should we not stop him?"

"He is still the Don, and goes where he likes, but follow us, just in case."

The Don hobbled out into the courtyard with Priam at his elbow, making for the cistern at the other end. There he rested his hands upon it and bowed his head, seeming to gaze down into its depths. Priam did likewise, but he saw nothing besides their two silhouettes in the moonlight, reflecting from the water below.

"Is it water for drinking that you want, father? for washing? Let the pages fetch it. I don't wish to be disrespectful, but you must answer me and say whether you are your own master. For if you don't, then I can only assume the worst, and I swear I'll knock you down rather than let you run about with a devil in you."

"The devil needn't so much as touch him," came a voice at Priam's ear. No one else had appeared in the reflection. Priam whirled with a startled cry and saw a slender youth standing there, decked in a courtier's velvet robe with his hair in perfect ringlets. His face had a pearl's white luster and his eyes shone like glass. It was as if God had decided to fashion a new kind of humanity out of completely different material — except that Priam knew this could be no faithful creature of God's.

"Better hold that steady, if you truly mean to use it," the devil went on, glancing at the sword. "Or perhaps you'd rather call for the men."

Priam looked then and saw that he, the Don and the devil were ringed by a high curtain of what might have been fog, except that it was coal black and roiled constantly. It must be that same unnatural darkness that had engulfed him on the previous night, only now it was holding back his father's men, trapping them where they could be of no use. In desperation he shouted anyway, but there was no answer.

"Now, what's all this insolent talk of knocking our father down?" the devil inquired, sitting on the cistern's rim.

"Our father!" blurted Priam. The Don said nothing.

"Shh! I believe he's still asleep, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. But of

course you don't know me. You were so young and saw so very little of me."

"Demon," Priam answered with all the defiance he could muster, "perhaps you can prey on the dying with these lies, but you won't convince me that you are Arnal." In truth, both the face and voice were growing more familiar by the moment, but a devil might take on any form to deceive the unwary.

"I don't require you to be convinced," the devil replied dryly, "only attentive. It will make the whole thing doubly pleasurable; though I admit I'd prefer Guillelm had gotten here first, since as the eldest living son he rightfully deserves the honor far more than you. Now come —" And with that, a tendril of shadow stretched up from the base of the cistern, and took on shape and mass until it was like an enormous writhing snake. Then it struck at Priam, circling his neck and pulling him into the arms of the fiend, who laughed, showing teeth as long and sharp as those of a hunting hound. A moment later those teeth tore into Priam's neck, and the devil was swallowing his blood in great gulps.

What to say? Such a thing should rightly throw one into a terror beyond imagining, and indeed it did. But it is also, as we know, the devil's peculiar power to make evil seem good and cause men to desire their own ruination. So it was that this creature in brother's shape succeeded in moving poor Priam to a strange concupiscence — stronger and darker than the lust for women — a mad desire to be bled to the dregs, which ruled him completely even as his better faculties saw and



feared the danger of death. He and the devil clung to each other a little while in this vile pleasure, and then the devil dropped him to the ground, where he lay half-fainting.

The devil's cheeks had grown rosy. Now he turned to the Don, who had neither moved nor spoken all this time, and murmured, "Awake."

Such an expression came over the old man's face then that one could well pray one's whole life long to be released from the memory of it.

"Come and sit by me," the devil said.

"Sire, no," Priam protested, but his voice was no match for the fiend's. The Don trembled and his mouth worked as though he meant to refuse, but after a moment he did as he was bid, heaving himself up onto the cistern's rim. Clearly some terrible power was on him, forcing him to obey.

"Now swing your legs around so they dangle down inside, and don't move again until I command it." When this was carried out, the devil regarded the Don with an air of supreme satisfaction.

"Yes, you know what I'll have you do next. You may speak now, if you wish, so that Priam may reap his father's parting wisdom. But no, my brother is busy saying his Aves — what's that?"

"P-please..." the Don stammered.

"Please, what? Spare you the torments of hereafter?" When the Don nodded, the devil said most gleefully, "Ah. You see, Priam, how even a great knight quails at the thought of his soul's just reward. Now, Ponç was willing to grovel just to save his worthless hide, but he was a pig and met a pig's end. Did you ever suspect, father, the numerous little amusements he had of me when I was in his care, or were you too preoccupied with your healthy heirs to worry? Ah, now you can shed a tear for your Arnal. Well, I suppose Arnal could choose to pity you in return. Die you must and shall, but I could protect you from the worst of the punishments by making you my vassal. Can you see yourself a bondman of Hell?"

"No, father," Priam croaked as he tried in vain to get up. "All men die. Not all die well!" But to his horror, his father nodded once, twice.

"Then abjure God and forswear the mercy of Christ and all His saints."

"I abjure Him," the Don whispered. "I forswear them."

"Take off your medal of the Virgin and spit upon it."

The Don hesitated then, but after a moment he obeyed even in this.

"Good. Now put your hands between mine and swear fealty to me for all eternity."

The Don placed his thin, shaking hands inside those of the fiend. "To you, my son, I swear fealty, and I pray your protection in return."

The devil leaned over and placed a solemn kiss upon his forehead. Then in one swift motion, he stood up, lifting the Don by his folded hands and dropping him down into the water. There was a deep echoing splash and one pealing scream after another.

"That was even more satisfying than I had imagined," the devil remarked as he leaped nimbly down from the cistern's edge to land beside Priam. Priam could smell his own blood on the devil's breath.

"Shall we speak of our bargains now, little brother?" the fiend grinned. "Nothing he could have offered me would have stayed my revenge, and Guillelm owes me one birthright, plus interest, but your only crime was a small boy's thoughtlessness. Let me dispose of my inheritance as I will. Return to your studies, if you can still afford them, or go vagabond for all I care. Only leave me in peace, and I will do the same for you. But if you try to interfere...."

With that he bit down upon his own finger, drawing a thick bead of dark blood, and swabbed it across Priam's forehead.

"Then I'll know, and you will suffer even more than the Don did. You saw yourself how I commanded his body, but rest assured, that oath to Hell was freely taken. It took but a few scant weeks to bring him to such despair. How long do you imagine you could last?"



"That can't be your ending," blurted the cordwainer after Vidal had fallen silent.

"But it is."

"But... surely your friend was not so craven as to obey this demon."

Vidal gazed off across the horizon. "Well," he said, "he's still alive. That's all I know."

The sad-eyed man, Alejandro, spoke quietly from behind his cup. "And the fate of the other brother — Guillelm?"

"I have no idea."

"Does your friend not fear for his soul?" This time it was the Dominican who inquired, leaning close to the fire, his voice intent.

"I imagine he'd be foolish not to."

"Well, clearly the parish priest was a fool. But perhaps if your friend went to the bishop, he could find some true help." The brother laid a hand on Vidal's shoulder. The student barely noticed.

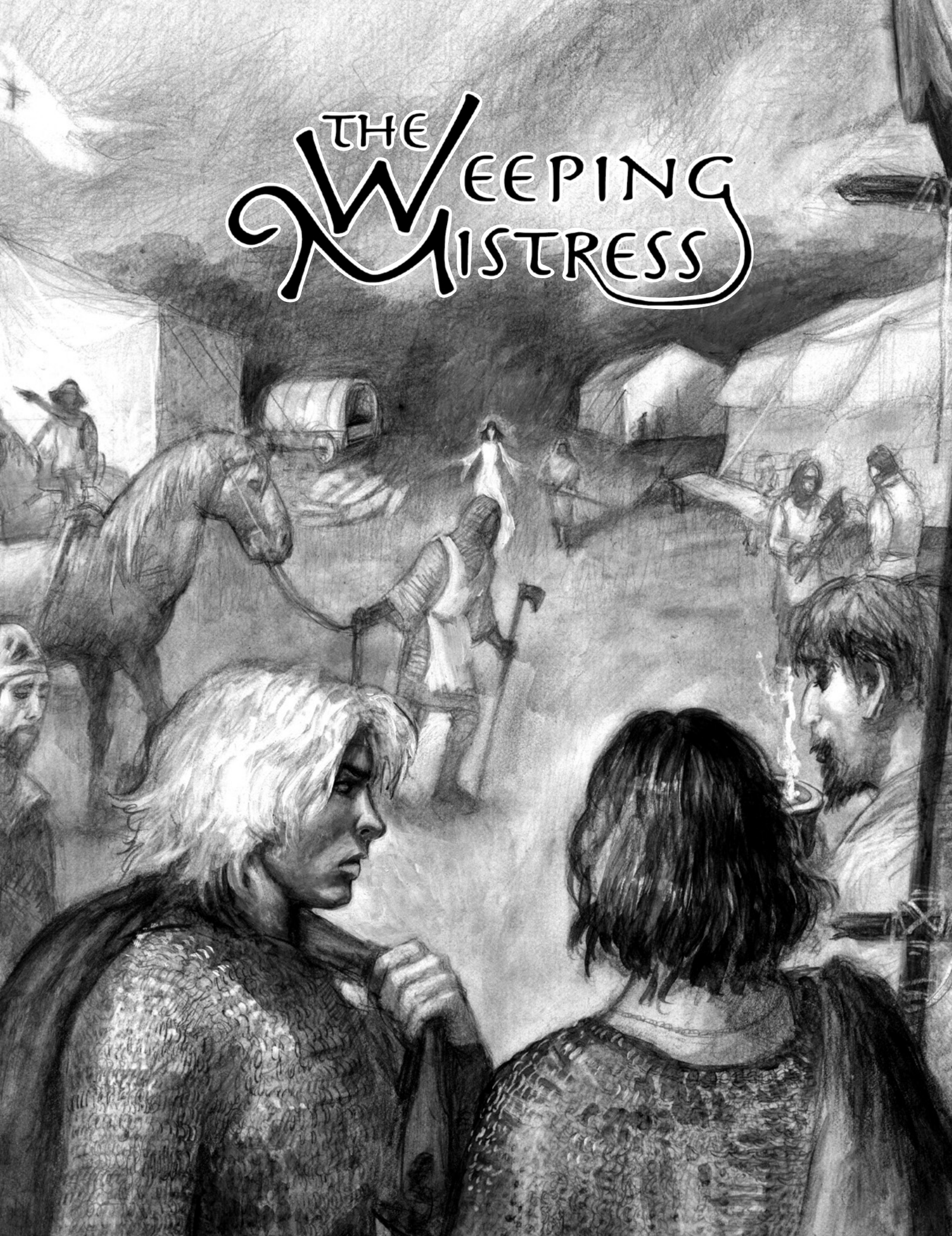
"Yes, perhaps. Or perhaps not."

The pilgrims were silent for a long moment. Then the cordwainer voiced his thoughts, "Anyway, it makes a terrible story to tell on a pilgrimage!" He punctuated this with a snort and reached for his wineskin.

Vidal turned and gave him the barest hint of a smile.

"You're right," he said quietly. "It does, doesn't it?"

THE WEEPING MISTRESS



John of Bellingham shifted uneasily, and unbuckled his sword from his belt. He spoke then, in halting French. "Vidal, I am willing to believe your story, and I have one to tell you as well, if you gentlemen will indulge me?"

The others nodded assent, some with interest, others concern. None spoke, but Alejandro threw a log on the fire, acknowledging that the stories would continue.

"My story," continued John, "is true, and like yours, Vidal, concerns a close friend. However, I was there to see parts of it, while I was away at the Crusade — before I sustained my injury, obviously. My French is not as good as yours, so if any of my tale is unclear, please be so good as to correct me."

Dust and dirt coated every surface in the camp — makeshift tables, tent sides, even horses. The constant through-traffic of knights on their way to the Crusades had packed the soil hard, and the whole north side of camp stank of sewage. Smoke hung in the air along with the faint smell of charred meat, and tired men yelled orders with hoarse throats. We were still distant from the front lines, but the air felt heavy with tension and foreboding. Our commander told us to bed down in the open; only the wounded sent back from battle and the highest officers got tents.

A handful of us had only just been knighted a few months earlier, and the camp was nothing like what we'd expected. Our teachers' lessons drove the concepts of honor and chivalry into our heads — they didn't talk about the filth and fear of war. My comrades and I were

determined to press on, however, after a few nights' rest. We'd been on the road for some time already.

That night, a childhood friend of mine whom I'll call Geoffrey had trouble sleeping and decided to take a walk around the camp. The camp was dark but for the light of our fires; smoke and clouds blotted out most of the moonlight and familiar stars. Geoffrey felt uneasy about the coming battle and decided to stop by the tents that housed the wounded soldiers. He thought he might find one or two of them awake, and that talking to them might allay his fears a little. After all, they knew what awaited us. They had first-hand knowledge of this war we were to fight for God.

He found one soldier lying awake, not much older than us. He brought the knight some water and sat down to talk with him. It frightened Geoffrey a little — the sheets were none too clean, and there were uneven brown spots soaked into them. He always was a little weak of stomach; I used to tease him about it when we were lads.

Geoffrey sat lightly on the edge of the dingy mat, trying not to disturb Robert's injuries. Robert's hair was a sweat-matted blond, his eyes an icy blue. A tattered and grimy blue silk scarf had been wrapped around his left wrist. The two knights talked a little of England; it turned out that they were from neighboring towns, and Robert wanted to know how things were going back home. They chatted about small details for an hour or two: harvests, crops, births and illnesses, and it seemed to ease the man's pain a little. Finally Geoffrey asked the questions that had been on his mind all along

— what had happened to the knight? What horrible injury had he suffered that he had been forced to forsake the battlefield? When would he be allowed to go back and continue the fight for God?

A few minutes of silence hung between them before Robert answered my friend. He simply pulled the sheet back and showed Geoffrey what had happened to him. His leg had been amputated at the knee, and the cloths that bound the wound seeped dark blood. Scars marred the skin of his hands and arms where he held the sheet.

When he saw the shocked look on Geoffrey's face, he spoke. His words came in a monotone, slowly at first, then faster and faster until they poured from his mouth,

and the other knights around him woke up one by one. He recounted long months of starvation and deprivation. He told of the screams of the wounded and the shrieks of torture victims behind enemy lines. He said that he kept himself awake at night as long as possible, because the ghosts of the fallen haunted his every dream — dead Crusaders tortured and slain all in the name of God; their loved ones who died without their husbands, brothers and sons to protect them; and even enemy soldiers, women and children from the villages the knights had sacked. All of them haunted him; all of them came in the night to demand his soul.

The attendants asked Geoffrey to leave then. He only felt more confused than when he'd



started his walk, so he continued onward, trying to find some quiet and peaceful place where he could think. The clouds had cleared a little and a full moon illuminated the woods outside the camp. He stopped beneath a broad-leafed tree and sat down against the rough trunk with a sigh, sure that now, finally, he would have some peace.

He gazed out into the woods to consider Robert's words. He felt certain that the ranting soldier had been an anomaly; surely those who did God's work profited by it. Perhaps the knight had been impious and suffered for his transgression. That must be it — God would never allow a true believer to come to such harm!

Lost as he was in such comforting thoughts, it took him a moment to realize that the green shape fluttering toward him in the hazy moonlight was a woman. It took him even longer to realize that she was running, looking behind her at intervals as though someone followed her. He didn't stop to wonder why a well-dressed woman ran barefoot through the woods; his training came to the fore, and he stood, his battered old sword freed of its scabbard in an instant, ready to defend her.

She ran up to him, and at first he barely noted the pallor of her skin, the bruised circles under her eyes, her limp brown hair and the ragged condition of her once-lovely dress. "Here, lady, who chases you? Stand behind me! A camp full of Crusaders stands ready to protect you!"

"He'll catch me! I can't stay!" Her hands moved erratically — they flitted from her waist to the front of her dress, picked uselessly at the dead leaves in her hair and pulled at the dark green sash that trailed loose from her dress. "He always said

he'd come back for me. He said he'd take me with him. I thought it was — I never believed him!" She held up her hands with a sob, her palms up for the first time, and he saw the gashes that ran the length of her forearms, the smudges of blood from wounds that had bled dry long ago. As he gaped silently, she fled again, and when he turned to follow, she was gone.

For an hour Geoffrey searched the woods in the direction she'd come from but he could find no sign of a pursuer. Finally he returned to camp and fell into an exhausted slumber. His experiences had tired him to the point where he could sleep easily, if fitfully.

Before long the camp was up and bustling, and I had kicked him out of his bedroll. He told me about his experiences, and then went off to ask around about the woman — at the time he was still convinced that she was in some sort of trouble that he could help with.

Geoffrey spent the entire day talking to people: cooks, squires, nearby farmers, other knights — anyone who'd stop to listen. Some thought he was mad and those of high enough rank or station were happy to tell him that to his face. A few people took him almost seriously. One of those was the wounded knight he'd spoken to during the night, Robert, who seemed much more lucid in the full light of day.

"You say she had a birthmark on the left side of her chin, yes?" Robert scratched his blond hair with one scarred hand. "And her dress was dark green? Are you sure? It was nighttime, after all."

"The moon was full," Geoffrey answered, curbing his impatience. "I'm certain."

"She sounds like Corinne of Lisbon. Couldn't be, of course." Robert laughed a little uneasily. "You see, she's dead. Has been for almost a year now. She took her own life."

A cloud passed over the sun; Geoffrey crossed himself and shivered. "Why? What on earth could drive someone to destroy her chance at entering Heaven?"

Robert shrugged. "I've heard stories. She was the mistress of a Crusader. He died overseas — horribly, some say, tortured and killed by the infidels." He shuddered and made a superstitious gesture of warding that suited a peasant better than a noble. "When her lover died, she carried on most inappropriately. She paid no attention to propriety; she wept and called

his name in public and even in the presence of his family. She kept saying that he'd promised to come back for her." Robert shook his head sadly. "It was all very upsetting to his wife and children, you understand."

Geoffrey nodded. "That's what the woman last night said — that he'd said he'd come back for her."

"Well, two different stories float about as to how things went from there. The prevailing story has it that she killed herself in a fit of selfish grief. The Church refused to allow her to be buried on consecrated ground, of course, which might explain things if that's truly her ghost you encountered. I've heard tell that those denied proper Christian burial sometimes linger." Robert leaned back on his makeshift sickbed and



squashed a spider with a look of quiet concentration on his face, grinding it into the wall.

"Of course. That would make sense. I have heard such stories as well, but hoped never to meet such a restless soul." Geoffrey nodded again. "What was the other story?"

"Some of Corinne's servants whispered that the Crusader did return for her." Robert waited a moment before he continued, relishing the stunned look on Geoffrey's face. "They said his ghost haunted her for days and drove her to her death. Supposedly they heard him swear that only he would have her, and that she'd join him one way or another."

"What happened after that?" Geoffrey felt the air around him grow cold and he shivered.

Robert shrugged. "She died." He looked away for a moment. "She really shouldn't have carried on like that, you know. The priests said that she probably called up the ghost herself with her unseemly grief. Maybe that was her ghost you saw, still fleeing her beloved Crusader. Maybe you had a flight of fancy. Either way, there's a cure for what ails you — stop taking walks alone at night!" He gave Geoffrey a sickly grin.

Geoffrey didn't listen, of course. I told him to give up on his foolish fancies. I told him no good could come of chasing after ghosts. As usual, he refused to heed my words.

That night he went back to the same place and searched among the trees by moonlight. He called Corinne's name and entreated her to come forward. He promised her all sorts of

protection and aid, even pledged to have her exhumed and buried on holy ground if she'd just allow him to help her.

The moonlight shone cold through the branches that night; leaves stirred in a breeze that grew more frigid by the hour. Untoward sounds came to Geoffrey's ears — first small stirrings in the leaves, like rats or mice, except that they fell silent whenever he looked for their source. Then branches snapped and cracked behind him, but when he whirled about he saw nothing. Shadows stirred at the corners of his vision. The faint sound of raucous laughter reached him on the breeze, and he tried to follow it but to no avail. He found nothing.

Geoffrey turned with a sigh of defeat at the first pale rays of sunrise to return to camp. He stopped dead in his tracks — there in a clearing he saw a man. The stranger wore armor so battered and abused as to be almost useless and carried no sword. A shaft of moonlight illuminated the right half of his face, revealing a scar that slid from eye to chin, a proud nose, a cruel twist of lips. Then he lifted his head with a jerk, and the faint light fell full across his face.

On the other side of that proud nose decay held full sway. The empty eye socket dripped with brackish fluid and buzzed with flies. The cheek had been laid open, flesh torn and ragged, tongue half-visible through gaps broken in rotted teeth. Something had torn the left ear entirely away, and blood clotted in the gangrenous hole that remained.

The Crusader grinned. That grinding movement of ligaments, flesh and bone was the last thing

Geoffrey saw before he found himself back at the camp, gibbering and babbling while I tried to calm him.

The next day must have been hellish for Geoffrey. He saw the Crusader whenever no one else was looking. The Crusader seemed to follow him, appearing for a moment here or there to leer at him mockingly. Once Geoffrey felt a puff of fetid breath against his cheek and heard a whisper in his ear, "You remind me of myself just a handful of years ago, so young and innocent, so trusting. Give up. Go home. There's no place for you here." Geoffrey didn't even turn around — he just ran.

Voices blasphemed God in Geoffrey's ears and laughed when he tried to shut them out with his fingers. The Crusader told him in excruciating detail about the tortures the infidels reserved for good Christians, about the shapes of their blades and the fires in their eyes. Geoffrey became convinced that the Crusader only told him these things in order to persuade him to stop trying to help Corinne. He stopped eating; he spent all night each night trying to find her. He wandered endlessly through the woods and called her name.

I did my best to camouflage his activities — we'd been friends for years, after all, and I felt I owed him. We were mostly on our own for those few days, so it wasn't overly difficult. I debated with myself as to whether I should talk to our commander. Clearly Geoffrey wasn't behaving rationally. I wondered in my spare hours if he'd been cursed, possessed or bewitched by fairies.

Finally Geoffrey found the Crusader's mistress again. Her green dress looked the same but for

a new rip in the fabric across one knee. Leaves tangled in the brown strands of her hair; her eyes stared wide and wild. The moon was no longer quite as full, but in its light Geoffrey saw the faint outline of trees behind Corinne's eyes. He begged her to help him. He told her he could find a priest to set the Crusader to rest. He swore before God and the cross that he would see to it she stayed safe.

He never expected her to refuse! She begged him not to harm her lover, said she was glad she'd killed herself, glad she was with him. Life had been unbearable without him, she declared. Just because he frightened her sometimes didn't mean he deserved to be destroyed! Then a queer look came into her eyes and Geoffrey felt cold again.

"Why don't you join me?" she asked, her voice soft and soothing.

"What?" His thoughts moved slowly; he wondered what good he, a flesh-and-blood being, would be to her out in the woods.

"My lover wants you to desert your comrades. He hopes to drive you into doubting your God, into leaving. I can see that he is succeeding in your eyes. You doubt whether anything is worth the misery that awaits you on the battlefield." Corinne smiled with thin lips, a strange expression on that pale hollow face. "You could join me instead."

"How?" He felt something moving ponderously in the back of his thoughts. He looked down and found that he'd drawn his knife; it gleamed dully in the moonlight. He stared at it without comprehension.



“Use your knife. I’ll wait for you here.” She held out her arms to him.

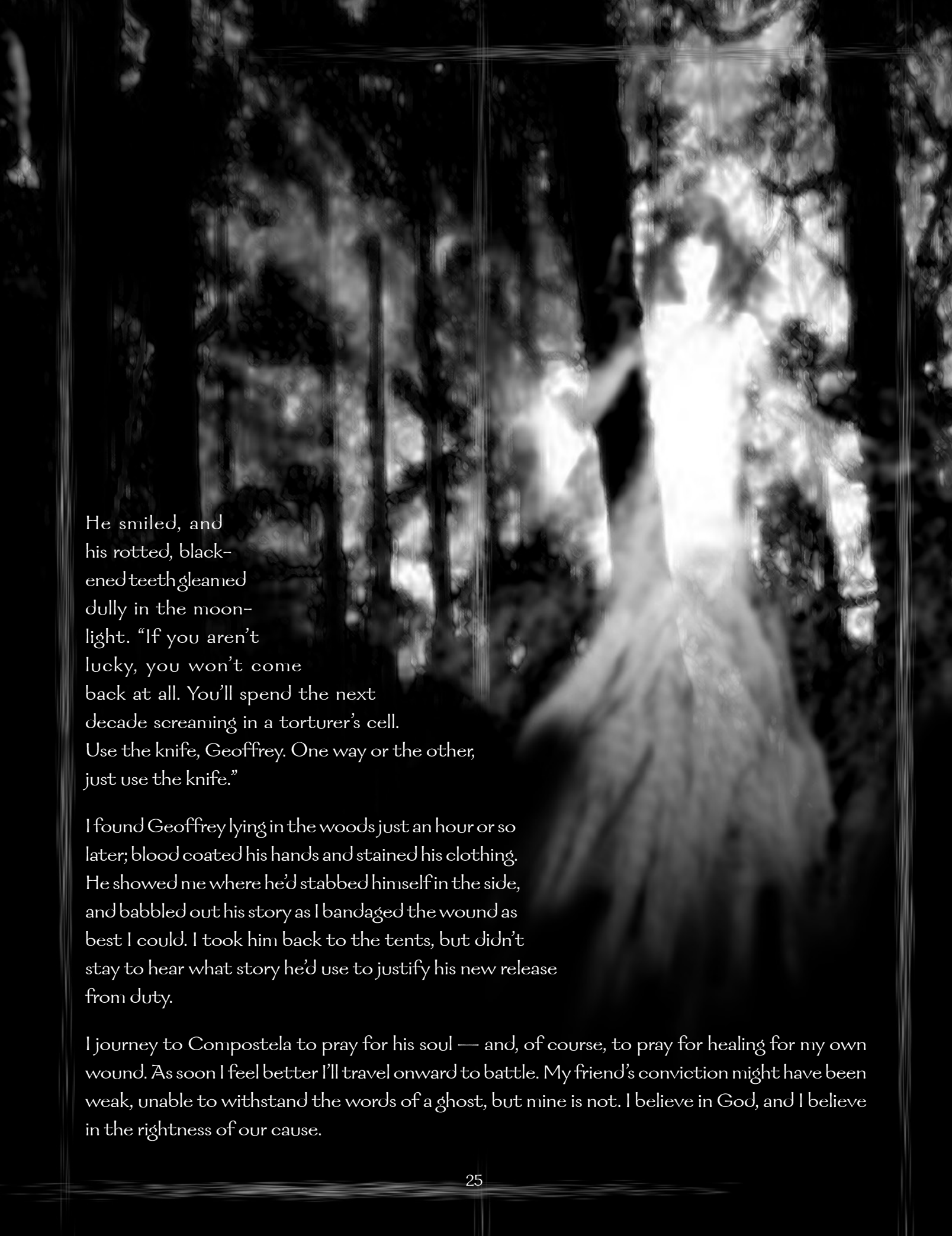
Geoffrey stared again at the wounds on Corinne’s arms, watched a drop of translucent red blood fall slowly through the air and spatter soundlessly on a dried and decaying leaf. The familiar crackles and whispers of the forest around him sounded dull and distant. Raucous laughter off to his left broke the pattern of his thoughts and startled him into looking up.

The Crusader smiled, a sight that froze Geoffrey’s gut. “Don’t listen to her, boy. You don’t have to die to be free of the blood and pain. Just leave this place.”

Geoffrey felt despair weaken his knees, and he sat hard on the ground. “I can’t. I’d never be able

to go home again. I’d bring shame upon my family.” An image swam to the forefront of his mind: the injured knight, his leg sawed off at the knee. Robert’s tirade echoed through Geoffrey’s thoughts — only this time in the Crusader’s voice — and he squeezed his eyes shut.

The Crusader laughed again. “Consider your options, Geoffrey. You could plunge that knife into your heart and languish forever in the arms of my lovely mistress here — or at least until she finds a new lad to lead to his death. You could plunge that knife somewhere else instead, just to wound yourself. You can come up with a story, I’m sure, that will convince your comrades you were injured in service to God. Or you could go back, be a good knight, take orders, and watch them cut off your leg at the knee, if you’re lucky.”



He smiled, and his rotted, blackened teeth gleamed dully in the moonlight. “If you aren’t lucky, you won’t come back at all. You’ll spend the next decade screaming in a torturer’s cell. Use the knife, Geoffrey. One way or the other, just use the knife.”

I found Geoffrey lying in the woods just an hour or so later; blood coated his hands and stained his clothing. He showed me where he’d stabbed himself in the side, and babbled out his story as I bandaged the wound as best I could. I took him back to the tents, but didn’t stay to hear what story he’d use to justify his new release from duty.

I journey to Compostela to pray for his soul — and, of course, to pray for healing for my own wound. As soon I feel better I’ll travel onward to battle. My friend’s conviction might have been weak, unable to withstand the words of a ghost, but mine is not. I believe in God, and I believe in the rightness of our cause.

“Well,” said Aldous, “that’s a little better, at least. Your friend acted in a most cowardly fashion, but at least you recognize God’s mercy and come to pray for it. But still! For a Crusader to act in such a fashion, how shameful —”

“Quite,” murmured John, staring into his drink as though about to cry.

Brother Giordano stood then and stretched his back. “Goodness,” he said, “if we keep on like this, we shall all be despairing by morning. I have a tale to tell as well, and this one does not end in tragedy for anyone. Listen to me, if you will, and I will tell you a story of God’s mercy and His strength, and it will rekindle your faith, I think.”

Alejandro smiled his sad smile. Aldous nodded vigorously and refilled his cup. Vidal leaned closer. The friar sat down again and removed a rosary from his robes, twisting the beads while he spoke.

“Ready, then? Christof? Christof, are you listening?” The other man had been silent through the first two stories, and did not speak now, but only nodded. “Good, then.”



^{the}
Plessed
Pilgrims

England, I am told, is possibly the wettest country God ever saw fit to set upon the world. Not only is it surrounded by water to begin with, it enjoys considerable rain in all seasons, snow in the winter and copious fog. It is also blessed — and I do say this in all seriousness — with numerous wells whose healing waters are known even here. It was to such a well, and the holy shrine to Our Lady that stood by it, that the actors in this drama took pilgrimage.

Pilgrims, you say? Yes, they were. A good party of them, in truth, men and women suffering ailments of the body and the spirit, seeking healing for all: a leper, a man whose breath was weak, another man who suffered constantly from his gouty foot, a prosperous merchant and his sickly daughter, and two servants of God, a brother and a sister of a mendicant order. The sister — whom we shall call Sister Vittoria — was frail in body and of fragile health. As my friend had it, she had been struck down by a withering curse, spat upon her by an angry, jealous witch. Though she was a woman in the prime of her youth, she had become as shriveled as the most aged crone, her bones brittle, her hands twisted, her eyes failing her. The brother accompanied her as she sought to break the curse with the grace of Our Lady, to protect and assist her in all things.

They joined the party of pilgrims in the great city of London. Fortunately, Sister Vittoria spoke enough English to make herself understood to their patronus, and to their fellow travelers. They were, one and all, a woeful

lot, much worn down with the weight of their sufferings and their grief, weakened with sickness and wearied by the lack of compassion shown them. Sister Vittoria's gentleness and good humor in the face of adversity commended her, as did her brother's devotion to her well-being, and soon they were well-acquainted with all but a few of the pilgrims. The merchant and his daughter held themselves apart from the rest of the group as it trekked steadily toward the Shrine of Our Lady in the early autumn rain.

Sister Vittoria was not without curiosity — one could say it was the worst of her faults — but she was also possessed of great compassion, and felt a strong sympathy for the ailing young woman. The girl, whom we shall name Berengaria, never appeared unmuffled, as though she were constantly chilled. She was pale and listless, as though the life had all but abandoned her, and she had the look of a well-rounded girl who had lost all her flesh far too quickly. Her sunken, reddened eyes and trembling mouth bespoke someone not only ill, but in the grip of some deep sorrow.

Her father was greatly protective of her, and stiffly objected to anyone becoming too familiar with her, even fellow pilgrims. This did not deter the sister and the brother, who offered the ailing girl what kindness they could, so that her father's heart softened. It was to them that he told her story:

A year before, Berengaria had been a young woman of high spirits, possessed of all the

beauty and fire of her late mother, the indulgence of her father and the love of the man to whom she was betrothed. Her wedding was on the horizon, but it was not to be — her intended was killed accidentally during a disagreement that turned into a full-fledged brawl, barely a month before they were to be made man and wife. The girl had been broken-hearted, first raving with grief and fury, and then settling into a quieter, deeper pining. She grew sickly and pale, and by the time she began losing flesh and complaining of nightmares, her father knew she suffered from more than simple grief.

In truth, the brother and sister knew it as well. They had come to suspect, being the only ones allowed much time in her company, that her ailment was not merely physical. Her malaise was too deep to be wholly natural, not for a girl of such robust strength as her father described. Sister Vittoria cajoled the girl's father into permitting her to attend the girl privily, to grant her the comfort of another woman to turn to, and to add her prayers to his own, and he gratefully accepted. That night, the sister told her brother what he least wished to hear:

"She is marked. She dreams of her beloved coming to her, to consummate a marriage that never was. She is not only being prayed for — she is being preyed upon."

Her brother bowed his head in acknowledgment of her wisdom, and because it pained him greatly to see an innocent so troubled. Together, they knelt in prayer, begging the

grace of God and Christ and Our Lady to be laid over the ailing girl and her beleaguered father as the strongest of shields. They pled for healing, not only for her, but for all the unfortunates with whom they traveled. And it did seem as though their prayers had seen some answer. Pain and woe faded from among their companions, and even the sad and weary Berengaria roused from her lethargy to look upon the world with renewed life and vigor. The last stage of their journey, despite the heavy autumn rains, was undertaken with lighter feet, greater cheer, stronger hearts. Still, the brother and sister did not relax their vigilance, for now they were warned and sensed that danger was not far from their charges.

"It must come for her tonight, brother," the sister said softly, watching as the girl napped quietly in a tavern's warm chimney nook while the rest of the party partook of their midday meal. "Tomorrow we will be within the holy precincts of Walsingham and no unclean thing will be able to reach her. I do not think this... beast... followed her halfway across England to lose her now."

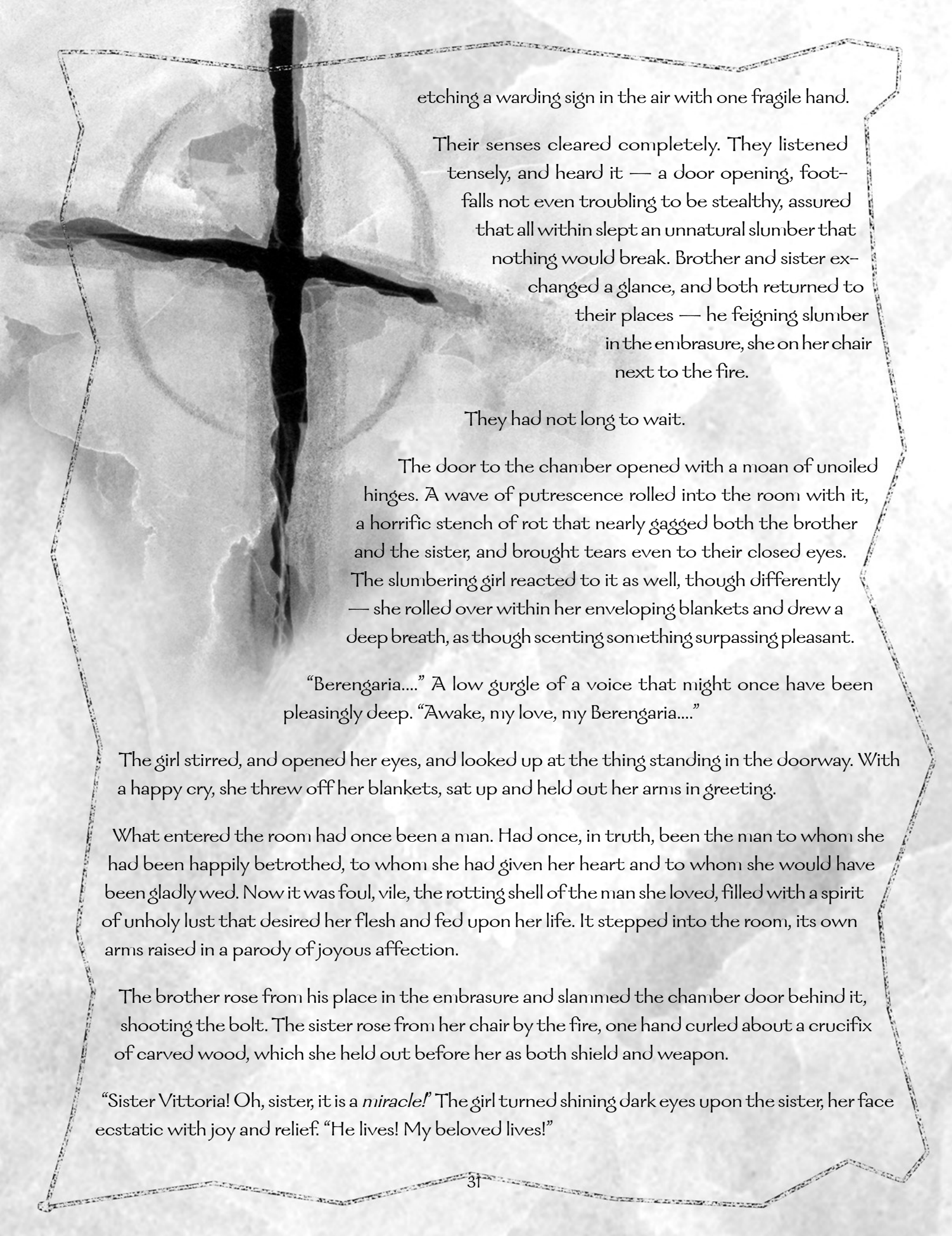
The brother could do nothing but agree, for he saw that she was correct, and it would be a lie to say that he knew no fear of the night that was coming. The girl was weakened by the assaults upon her, his sister was frail in her illness, and he knew himself to be no saint of old, to dispel evil with a word and a gesture. A battle was in the air, and he was in no way certain that they could win it.

Their party halted that night at a Benedictine pilgrim's hostel, much like the one we passed the day before Christof joined our company, where they received a generous welcome and were well-fed and housed. The sister and the girl were, at their request, accorded a small private room in which to take their rest; the others in the party laid their pallets in the common room, and all settled in for the evening. Before midnight, the brother crept from his place and down the hall to the room in which his sister waited, sharply awake, and took his place, hidden in the embrasure next to the chamber door, to wait with her.

A soft rain began, quiet thunder rumbling down the hills and through the valleys, never growing loud enough to wake the girl, who slept the sleep of the dead. The sister kept her place, sitting awake in a chair next to the fire, keeping it low but fed. Her brother kept his as well, sometimes sitting, others rising and stretching, in an effort to keep himself awake. The sound of the rain striking the hostel's roof, trickling over the slats in the shutters, was sweet and strangely lulling. The warmth of the fire and its flickering light wrapped themselves about him like the softest of blankets, the most welcome of beds....

"Brother — wake! Do you not feel it?" The sister crossed the room in a stride, her frail, fine-boned hand gripping his shoulder tightly enough to wake him from the doze into which he had fallen. When she said the words, he did feel it — the lure of sleep, the sweet seduction of rest, as rich and heavy as the fragrance of summer flowers, too sickly insistent to be wholly natural. Aware of it, he could shake it away, and he saw his sister doing the same,





etching a warding sign in the air with one fragile hand.

Their senses cleared completely. They listened tensely, and heard it — a door opening, foot-falls not even troubling to be stealthy, assured that all within slept an unnatural slumber that nothing would break. Brother and sister exchanged a glance, and both returned to their places — he feigning slumber in the embrasure, she on her chair next to the fire.

They had not long to wait.

The door to the chamber opened with a moan of unoiled hinges. A wave of putrescence rolled into the room with it, a horrific stench of rot that nearly gagged both the brother and the sister, and brought tears even to their closed eyes. The slumbering girl reacted to it as well, though differently — she rolled over within her enveloping blankets and drew a deep breath, as though scenting something surpassing pleasant.

“Berengaria....” A low gurgle of a voice that might once have been pleasingly deep. “Awake, my love, my Berengaria....”

The girl stirred, and opened her eyes, and looked up at the thing standing in the doorway. With a happy cry, she threw off her blankets, sat up and held out her arms in greeting.

What entered the room had once been a man. Had once, in truth, been the man to whom she had been happily betrothed, to whom she had given her heart and to whom she would have been gladly wed. Now it was foul, vile, the rotting shell of the man she loved, filled with a spirit of unholy lust that desired her flesh and fed upon her life. It stepped into the room, its own arms raised in a parody of joyous affection.

The brother rose from his place in the embrasure and slammed the chamber door behind it, shooting the bolt. The sister rose from her chair by the fire, one hand curled about a crucifix of carved wood, which she held out before her as both shield and weapon.

“Sister Vittoria! Oh, sister, it is a *miracle!*” The girl turned shining dark eyes upon the sister, her face ecstatic with joy and relief. “He lives! My beloved lives!”

It must have been the face that the demon showed her, what her heart most earnestly desired to see, the miracle that would reunite her with the man she had lost. She did not perceive what the brother and sister saw — the rot of the flesh, the shreds of clothing and skin nearly indistinguishable from one another, the muscle and sinew barely clinging to bone, the cavernous ruin of face, the sunken eyes glowing a deep and unholy crimson within their sockets. An expression that was half-sneer, half-snarl twisted what remained of the lips.

“Sweet child, this is no miracle,” Sister Vittoria said gently. “This is the foulest of defilement, the twisting of love into pain.” Her face hardened, and for an instant the years seemed to fall away from her as her anger gave her new strength. “In the name of God, I command you *Do* show yourself!”

The thing laughed, a hideous wet rattling. “You command? Your God has no power over me — my love called me here of her own will, and it is only her word that I must obey.” It turned to the girl, still rapturously glamour-struck, unable to see the truth through it stood before her. “Come to me, my love. Come with me and it shall be as it should have been....” The creature turned a malicious leer at the sister. “We shall be man and wife in the eyes of

God, and perhaps even this good sister shall bless our union. Come.”

“Berengaria, no! Hear me!” Sister Vittoria cried. “This is not your beloved, not the man you wished to marry. The flesh is his, but the spirit has long fled to the arms of God — and it is the flesh that has done you the harm you suffer from, and the foul thing within it has taken joy from it! Take my hand, child! See the truth with your own eyes!”

Sister Vittoria offered her hand to the girl, the hand that did not hold her crucifix extended toward the demon-ridden corpse of Berengaria’s betrothed. The girl rose to her knees, clutching a blanket to her chest, either from modesty or to ward away the cold that suddenly permeated the room as the demon’s deep-throated growl of rage shook the walls.

“Do not listen to her, Berengaria! *Come to me!*”

Berengaria lunged for the sister’s outstretched hand and clutched it in sudden fear. Her eyes widened with horror as the illusions were stripped from her, and she buried her face in Sister Vittoria’s robe, sobbing.

The demon rounded on them, snarling. Sister Vittoria extended her arm, her hand trembling

with the strain, and began to speak the Word. "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust.'"

The demon recoiled with a hiss, and the brother took his chance to come to his sister's side, wrapping his hand about hers on the crucifix, adding his strength and voice to hers. "Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge."

"*Be silent!*" the demon shrieked. Fury, hatred and rage warred on the distorted remains of the human face. Its eyes blazed like coals fanned

back to life. "*Berengaria! Come to me NOW, you stupid whore!*"

"Berengaria," the sister's weary voice was the sweetest music after the acid of the demon, and she gently squeezed the girl's shoulder as she continued to weep, disconsolate and horror-struck. "Rise, child. Stand and add your voice to ours. You must do this now, or forever be this creature's prey."

The girl raised her tear-streaked face from the sister's skirts. She stole a single, frightened glance at the creature snarling out its wrath and frustration less than the length of the room away. Then she rose on weak, trembling legs, and





wrapped her hand around Sister Vittoria's, even as the sister lent an arm to support her. And together, the three spoke the words:


"His truth shall be your shield and arm guard. You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste by noonday."

The demon frothed and howled. It lunged at them, to rend them all with foul, rot-clotted teeth and broken claws, but it could not reach them. It was held back from them by far more than the length of Sister Vittoria's arm, by the fierce love they could all feel rolling over them and through them, wrapping about them like divine wings.

"Because you have made the Lord, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your habitation, no evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot."

"Bitch! Traitor!"

"I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him My salvation." A fierce, clear light filled the room, coming from nowhere and everywhere,



driving the demon cringing back against the far wall and making even the brother and the girl close their eyes against its brilliance. Only Sister Vittoria could look into it, her eyes reflecting its terrible beauty.

“This girl, Berengaria, has rejected you, demon.” When she spoke, her voice was the very thunder. “And I say to you now, in the name of God, in the name of the Son, in the name of Our Lady, that you shall go from this place and trouble her no more!”

It howled, and the sound held more forlorn anguish than the brother had ever thought possible for the voice of a demon. It sprang away from the wall, and crashed through the shuttered window, fleeing into the darkness from which it had come. Slowly, the fierce, beautiful light faded, leaving only a shaken, weeping girl, a weary sister and her exhausted brother, to survey the wreckage — and to deal with the questions as the rest of the hostel’s

residents came to investigate the crash that had woken them all.

What happened next, you ask? Well, the party continued on its way to the Shrine of Our Lady, and the next day there were more blessings, consecrations and sincere rededications to the faith than even that holy place had seen in quite some time. The girl, Berengaria, after being blessed, and prayed over, and given a new baptism in the waters of the holy well, recovered from her illness and regained much of her former fire. It is my understanding that she has taken holy orders, choosing to live as a bride of Christ than any mortal man, and pursuing good works and aid to the sick and despairing.

Sister Vittoria? Unfortunately, the Shrine of Our Lady did not hold the cure that she sought — but, as far as I know, she still seeks it, and brings help to others wherever she goes.

Five of Brother Giordano's audience sat rapt at his tale, and when he finished, they nodded to each other in satisfaction, their spirits lightened a bit despite the grim happenings in the story. Only Christof did not look moved, and in fact yawned loudly.

"Keeping you awake, are we, Christof?" the cordwainer growled at him. Christof simply shook his head and reached for his cup of wine. "What of the rest of you? Ready to sleep, or shall I tell you my tale?"

"Not a tale of licentiousness and bawd, I hope," answered the Dominican, but he smiled as he said it, pleased that his tale had been so well-received.

"Not at all," replied Aldous, "and not as pious in tone as yours, brother. But I am a craftsman and it is my lot to think in terms of the practical. I had thought that this story would never be told, since it isn't fit for most company. But since the stories we've heard so far have shown us demons that drink blood, ghosts of the departed and even lovers come back from the grave, my story might actually seem tame." He gulped the rest of his wine and gathered his cloak under him for a cushion. "But I rather doubt it."

"Let's hear it, then," prompted Vidal. Aldous grunted, and began.

the Good Deed



I heard the tale I will tell you now from a man who came to me seeking my skills. He claims that the events I will relate to you actually happened to him, but I will not blame you if you do not believe him — or me — for the story, both the whole and the pieces, is as fantastic as it is horrible.

This man — I do not remember his name, for it was many years ago and I saw him only the once — was young when the story took place, and full of that peculiar mix of blithe spirit and arrogance that is the usual mindset of youth. He was late coming home on that fateful day for whatever reason; perhaps an afternoon snooze put him behind in his work, or perhaps he spent too long cozening a kiss from a pretty young lass. The reason matters not, as he had traveled late on many occasions before under many pretexts, brushing aside the fears of his mother and his departed grandmother. Both esteemed matrons warned of dangerous beasts which stalked the night, and bemoaned the losses suffered by the line through the years as, now and again, a promising and much-loved child disappeared between sundown and sunrise, never to be seen again. I see you nodding, now — yes, you know how these stories go. Nothing good will come of a man who does not listen to his mother.

This night, the wooded road he traveled was quiet, eerily so. No birds twittered in their nests, no animals rustled through the low branches as they foraged. Strange, unpleasant smells drifted across his path in clouds, as though someone had kicked through a patch of particularly rank fungus, or scared some musky creature nigh unto death. A fog began to settle

along the forest floor, reaching tendrils out into the road to muffle his footsteps and gobble up the cheerful whistling he affected to buoy his courage.

It was as the man passed a small clearing that the forest awoke — though, if the things that he told me are true, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the forest slid from uneasy dream straight into nightmare. Something blacker than shadow uncurled in the space beneath the trees. As the man stood, transfixed by fear or mayhap stunned by disbelief, the woods around him erupted in a din of baying and snarling such that he feared the Wild Hunt was upon him, or that the doors of Hell had opened and the hounds who eternally harry and rend sinners were at his heels. There was no time to turn around, had he even dared. For less than an instant after he felt hot breath on the back of his neck and noted the curious lack of a brimstone scent which he would have guessed the hounds of Hell to carry about them, then something great and shaggy slammed into him, knocking him prone in the road. There, face down in the dirt, he tensed for the killing blow. It did not come.

When his vision cleared, he chanced a look up. The howling beasts around him were not hounds, or even wild wolves, but instead a horrifying combination of wolf and man. By this I mean, as best I can understand from the man's understandably muddled account, that they walked upright on their hind legs like a man, yet had the fur, teeth and claws of a wolf. Such a thing may sound conical here in the warmth and firelight, but I can assure you that the man felt only terror in their presence. They stood



near twice as tall any man he had ever seen, and fast, and strong — not simply animals trained to dance about in ridiculous costumes in grotesque imitation of man, but monsters who pulled themselves free of the earth the better to rend and kill.

The man put his face back down on the road. It was the only way he could clear his mind enough to think. The simple sight of the wolfmen — werewolves, he now remembered from his grandmother's tales — filled his belly with such panic that all thought was beyond him. Sounds of battle filled the air: Maddened howling, fleshy thuds and wet ripping noises, the tortured creaking of trees bent beyond their limits, and other sounds that he could not identify and his mind shied away from considering too deeply. He

would be dead, he reasoned, if he had been their prey. Still, it would not be wise to get to his feet and run — they might kill him by sheer instinct, like a careless peasant child pulled down by a lord's hunting dogs. And so slowly, never lifting his eyes to see, he inched his way across the road and into a ditch at its side, where he slid beneath the rotting leaves and began, for what was quite possibly the first time, to pray in earnest.

The battle of monsters raged on around him, for how long he did not know. But miraculously, the fray passed him over, and he came to his senses some time later whole and unhurt. He lay still for a long while after regaining his senses, listening intently, dreading with every breath the feeling of daggerlike claws piercing his unprotected

back. The forest was uneasily quiet again, but he could expect that after the battle it had just witnessed. Enough of his youthful bravery had seeped back into his bones that he would be damned if some squirrel or other small creature gathered its courage to stand up and squeak before he did. So he took a deep breath and opened his eyes. All was still. He crawled out of his moldy hiding place to survey the battlefield.

The moon had risen while he hid, and now cast its gentle glow over the horrifying scene before him. Trees, some with a century's growth he guessed, were uprooted or split asunder where the fighting took place. Sprays of gore and gobbets of flesh decorated those trees still standing. The ground was slick and red, as though a fountain of blood had been uncapped in the clearing and left to play, dappling every surface with its crimson splashes. And then he saw the bodies.

The body nearest him was that of a young man, roughly his own age, his face staring sightlessly toward the sky while the lower half of his body was pressed prone to the ground. Startled, the traveler crouched down and slipped quietly across the road to the youth's side, thinking that he must also have been caught on the road but was less fortunate in hiding. It was quickly obvious that the youth was well past any help, his body broken beyond any hope of healing. It was also apparent, after brief consideration, that this was no fellow traveler. The dead man wore little clothing, and the remains of what he did wear were crude and barbaric. He wore ornaments that were similarly savage, strange tokens of feather and bone with unfamiliar symbols scratched into them. And although he seemed young, his skin bore countless scars, evidence of battles past with far better outcomes.



Not far from the dead youth's feet was, strangely enough, the body of a wolf. It was also unmoving, its entrails dragged from the body to trail out into the woods. It had been a massive beast when alive, with a great ruff of gray fur and teeth the width of a man's little finger. As he stared at it, a thought struck him so suddenly that he nearly staggered and fell onto the blood-soaked ground: here was the half that was wolf, and there was the half that was man. The monster had been literally ripped apart, and the part that was man was still whole and discrete — or at least mostly whole. The beast, the feral wolf, had been inhabiting him, possessing him, driving him to act the part of the ferocious monster that had terrorized the area for years. Perhaps, had his wounds not been so grievous, the boy would have survived. Perhaps one of the afflicted yet lived, the traveler thought, and he could save not just a life but an immortal soul in thanks to God for his own miraculous survival. Our traveler gently closed the youth's eyes, and then stood for a better, braver look around.

The next body he found was also young, a girl probably not past her 15th year. He wept, then, for her face was beautiful still, but the white hollow of her throat and the rest of her... he left his coat there to cover her. The sudden flare of his resolve to find a living man left him that much more horrified to find a dead woman, and he was for a time unmanned. He did not find her wolf near her when he recovered his wits, and this gave him some hope that the misbegotten creature had survived the battle and escaped, pelting away into the woods. If the wolf could survive the dissection of the monster, then so too could the man. He dried his eyes and continued his search for survivors.

As he hunted through the night for the living and the dead, he became aware again of sounds. An owl called; its mate answered from afar. Insects began to hum and creak in the trees and under the leaves again. Underlying it all was a soft, steady whisper. The man described it to me as something like a weaver's shuttle passing quietly through the warp, or the barest breath of wind through a grove of aspen trees. The strange sound gave him pause as he tried and failed to place it, but no threat seemed forthcoming. He pushed his fear back down and continued his search.

He found the body of another man then, its face and head crushed beyond recognition. He found the body of a wolf with this man's body, a wolf with surprisingly silvery fur that put him in mind of a unicorn. One look at the beast's jaws and the dark blood that matted its chest was enough to remind him, however, that this was no benign creature of myth but rather the bestial half of a monster.

A cloud drifted in front of the moon. He cast about for a time in near complete darkness, still looking for an elusive survivor, a rescue that could sanctify this otherwise horrific experience. As he began to despair of finding anyone else, he stumbled over something behind the uprooted bolus of a tree. It was not a human body, he realized as he knelt down and felt coarse fur with his hands. As he patted around, searching in the dimness, he realized with a panicked start that this was neither the body of a wolf — here, under the fur, was the upright torso of a man. It was a werewolf, an intact monster that lay before him. He shrank back against the damp earth, mind racing and

breath ragged. He wished to flee, but his limbs would not act in concert. So he sat, his back to a tangled wall of mud and roots with the monster by his side, straining to hear the rattling of its breath or the thunderous beating of its mighty heart. The unearthly sound continued, and all else was still.

The bright face of the moon drifted free of the cloudbank, and our traveler and would-be rescuer could see once more. He briefly wished the moon to be covered again; even in death the wolfman inspired awe and fear in equal measure. If this were not the tale of a young man, the story would likely end here. An older, wiser man would have seized the opportunity to flee. The curiosity of youth made him stay in the clearing, entranced by the same creature that inspired such terror. He studied the

monster carefully, noting how like its clawed hands were to a man's, rather than paws; the odd arrangement of its hind legs that allowed its mannish walk. It wore a scabbard, he noted, for a blade not in its hand, and he marveled that a monster could make such a thing. He was bending over the creature's chest to examine a silver talisman at its throat when he realized a terrifying thing — the whispering sound that had nagged at his mind was coming from the body of the wolfman.

As the traveler had lingered to study the monster's teeth and claws like some sort of infernal Master of the Hunt, the grievous wounds that the werewolf had suffered were slowing sealing up, flesh and bone knitting inexorably together. The man pulled himself up on his shaking feet, but he did not run. He watched, transfixed, as



the exposed white of the monster's bones was traced over in blood, then as muscle crawled in from the edges of its wounds. Still he did not run. He watched as skin stretched itself over raw flesh, joining in a jagged patchwork of scars. Still he did not run, but now it was too late. Nostrils flared as the beast took in a great, shuddering breath. The young man turned at last to run, but at his first movement the monster's eyes flew open — huge yellow slanted eyes, burning with hatred. With one swift leap the beast was on him, and the world went black.

When he awoke in the clearing, it was at least a day later. He had been badly mauled, rent by both tooth and claw. Only God can ever know what thoughts haunt the mind of such a monster, what spurred it to attack him and, even more mysteriously, to leave him still living in the clearing. But he is certain in his own mind, he told me, that it was the little kindnesses he committed that night during his search for survivors that saved his own life. The coat that he had so gently placed over the body of the young girl had been returned to him, covering his own ravaged body from the elements, soaked now with both his blood and hers. He imagines that, as he fell limply to the ground at the monster's feet, the great beast looked around the clearing at the terrible aftermath of the battle. Upon seeing the stranger's coat on the girl's body, he hopes, the half of the creature that was man was overwhelmed with remorse. Fighting off its bestial possession for a time, it returned the gesture and the coat. By some miracle, the man survived.

Even after the supposed kindness of monsters, the man was near death when some travelers happened upon him, but with some food, water and care he survived the trip on mule-back to his home. The other bodies were gone when he regained consciousness, and a rain had washed away much of the blood. His rescuers assumed he had been set on by a wild animal and dismissed his tale of werewolves, but his mother believed him. She nursed him back to health with remarkably few admonishments, simply glad that he had survived.

Now you may dismiss this tale, and I would not much blame you if you do. I would scarcely believe it myself, except that I have seen the face of that man as he told me what I have related to you. The eyes, he said, those fierce yellow eyes, are burned into his memory. He sees them every time he closes his eyes to sleep, and he sees them on the silvery face of the moon. They are the tormented eyes of a man imprisoned in the shell of a monster, so infused with bestial instinct and evil that it kills without thought and can only regret after the deed is done. He is a haunted man, knowing this, and perhaps a hunted man if the wolfman that has tasted his blood should ever repudiate the good deed.

If you take nothing else from this story, please take this caution: should you ever have the misfortune to encounter a werewolf, never believe that it is dead until you see the wolf leave the man. While the beast still possesses him, the monster cannot be killed. By the grace of God, may none of you ever have need of what I have told you.

“Indeed,” said Richard, his voice cracking from his long silence, “I hope that we never do.” Aldous nodded bullishly and gestured to the forest around them as though hoping to underscore the dangers they posed.

“And what of you, Lord Richard?” asked John. “You mentioned to me a few days ago that you had a special reason for this pilgrimage, one concerning a child. Do you have a story to keep our fire warm?”

“If stories could fuel fire, then men would have no need of wood,” answered Richard. “But I do have a tale, though I hesitate to relate it.” He stared into the fire as though arguing with himself. Brother Giordano fed the fire, and then spoke to the brooding Englishmen quietly.

“We have no need of your story, if it pains you to tell it. There is enough wood here,” the friar added with a kind smile.

Richard looked up at his fellow travelers, determination set on his face. “No, I will tell you,” he said. “For one thing, I feel I owe you a story, since you’ve been good enough to share yours with me. And besides, given the ones that have preceded it, I see no need to feel shame in its telling.” He removed his outer tunic. The night’s chill seemed to have abated somewhat, and the fire leapt merrily.

The CURSE of the GOLDEN BROOCH



I must admit that I would hesitate to believe a word you have spoken if it were not for the tale I am about to tell. Yet, I have seen with my own eyes the touch of the Fair Folk, and I can therefore accept the dangerous possibilities of which you speak. But the hour grows late. I shall continue with my story, and you shall judge it yourselves.

My ancestral home is a small manor called Southampton Glen, nestled in the forest down the Northampton Road. The manor is set in a great clearing, and our lands extend out to the road itself upon which we do the trading that is our lifeblood. I might attempt to describe our lands further, but I have not the eloquence to do them justice. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to see for yourself if you are ever so fortunate as to visit.

At the time my tale begins, I was a young man newly grown, returned from my first campaign and proud nearly to bursting of my achievements. My father had invited our allies to our table, for food, song and celebration, and we joined together to rejoice in our successes. I tell you this so that you may understand my tale to be true inasmuch as I saw it with my own eyes.

One of our allies had brought his daughter and her maidservants. The daughter Anne had the appearance of a courtly lady — no, an angel. None of the men could keep their eyes from her, be they married or no. She had skin like new milk, hair of spun gold and eyes that brimmed with intelligence and merriment. We competed desperately for her attentions, and happy were the men who had her hand for a dance that night.

I daresay that most of us fell asleep that night with her name on our lips, dreaming of the hope of winning her hand, but Anne had already laid eyes on her beloved that very night, and her heart was given to him without pomp or precedent. Theirs was a sudden love, and both knew their destiny the moment their eyes first met and hands touched. In the dead of night, they stole to the forest for a few solitary hours and returned, exhausted and content, in the wee hours of the morning.

Anne and her father were persuaded to stay on for a fortnight. Her lover swore to ask for her hand before they parted company, but her father spent his days in seclusion with the lords, discussing plans for forthcoming campaigns, and he had no opportunity to ask his question. Still, they met in the forest every night, and dark circles grew under the lover's eyes, though Anne remained as beautiful as ever despite her fatigue, and no one ever suspected their moonlit meetings.

One night, the night of the full moon as I recall, they walked for hours, planning their nuptials and rejoicing in their future together. The young man was driven by love and excitement and set a speedy pace, much too taxing for his beloved. She quickly tired and begged him to rest, to slow down and allow her a moment to rest her aching feet. Her lover gallantly swept her into his arms and carried her to a pile of soft leaves and moss by the side of the path. As he set her gently down, she cried as if stung and clenched her hand. The young man drew his knife and rummaged amongst the leaves, ready to slay whatever creature dared to assail his beloved Anne.

He found no creature at all, but a brooch, hidden under the moss, that pricked her when she set her white hand upon it. This he set aside while he soothed and tended the injured finger, and she laughed at him for the exaggerated care he paid to such a trifling thing. Finally, he offered her the brooch, as prisoner and prize, to do with as she pleased. The brooch! When they finally chanced to look upon it, what a wondrous sight they saw — bright gold inlaid with jewels in such colors that they must have come from far-off lands. It was a magnificent thing, and Anne and her lover were in quick agreement that it should be saved for their wedding day, for only such a marvelous adornment could do justice to her beauty.

Finally, the lords came out of their council room, and the young man asked his question and was

accepted. All the company cheered for the newly betrothed couple, and the wine flowed in an endless succession of toasts to their happiness. The young man was nearly transported with joy, and his friends all congratulated him on his luck and chided him for stealing such a treasure from beneath their faces. He was all happiness and smiles, until he saw how it was with his beloved Anne. She was smiling but oh, so pale and her skin stretched over her bones in a manner that alarmed him immensely. He immediately spirited her outside where they could speak privately and questioned her. Was she well? Had she eaten? Could she be with child so soon? What troubled her and set such a shadow upon her perfect face? Anne laughed away his concerns, kissed him and claimed fatigue. But her hand passed over her breast as she spoke and a shadow darkened her dancing eyes, and the young man was frightened.



Anne and her retinue left the next morning. If she looked a little tired that day, she blamed it on the impending separation from her betrothed and begged to return within a month's time for the final wedding preparations. The request was readily accepted.

If you have felt a love such as theirs, you might understand how the month passed in a flash but seemed to last an eternity to the young man. He spent his days in training and in council with his father and his nights dreaming about his Anne and the moment when he would see her again. When the appointed day came, he could scarce contain his excitement and kept his eyes on the road more often than on his work. When he saw the company in the distance, Anne leading on her gentle palfrey, he nearly shouted with joy and ran to meet them on the road.

What a sight greeted him! His betrothed looked upon him with love in her eyes, but the changes in her face and appearance were too blatant to be ignored. She was clearly ill, with a skittish air like an untamed colt. Her hand clenched and unclenched upon a velvet pouch tied to her belt and, as much as he tried, he could not pry it from her. He spoke at some length with her maidservants, but they were as puzzled as he as to the possible cause of such an unusual malady. Anne herself would not admit that she was ill and would merely change the subject when anyone tried to discuss her condition. Left with no other choice, the young man stole into her room late at night to discover the contents of this mysterious pouch that presented the only

clue to her malady. No sooner had his hands closed over the familiar shape of the golden brooch did Anne rise from her bed like a spectre in white, shrieking in pain and anger, demanding that he unhand the treasure and return it to its rightful owner.

He shrank before her fierce attack, and pain swelled in his eyes and heart as he left her bed-chamber empty-handed. Within the chamber, he could hear his beloved murmuring over her prize, and fury overtook him that she would be wrested from him in such a horrible manner. He strode from the manor with renewed purpose. He would track this accursed brooch to its point of conception and pry the means of its destruction from the lips of the thing that spawned it. With his naked sword in hand, he stalked into the forest, bellowing challenge to the enemy that was certainly within, determined against all reason to find the path where Anne first discovered the brooch.

Perhaps he was deluded in his belief that he could find one pile of leaves in the midst of a great and impenetrable forest. Perhaps he did not know his forest as well as he had boasted, but I think not. It seems to me that some capricious hand bent the once-familiar paths into new shapes, for the young man passed the same tree, the same bramble-bush time and again. It was as if he was doomed to forever search for the needle in the haystack while some unknown source befuddled his wits.

Finally, his gait grew unsteady with exhaustion, and his sword fell unheeded into the dirt. The

young man staggered into a grassy clearing but a few steps from the path and collapsed. No sooner had his face touched the cool grass than hands lifted him roughly up and an eldritch light shone in his eyes. He immediately became aware of a great host surrounding him in the clearing, of such wondrous and terrible countenance as to only be the Fair Folk.

Before him, he spied the little brown men, faeries of the hearth and home — the goat-legged satyrs, who deported themselves with such laughing wantonness that, to his shame, he felt for a moment the desire to join them in their cavorting — the red-capped warriors with hunger and mania in their eyes. These he saw and more, wonders too amazing and numerous to relate, and his head reeled with fear and desire. They laughed at him, seeing this writ upon his face, and the young man thought of his beloved and prayed to God for protection, for he had no iron or salt upon his person, and the church bells would not ring until morning.

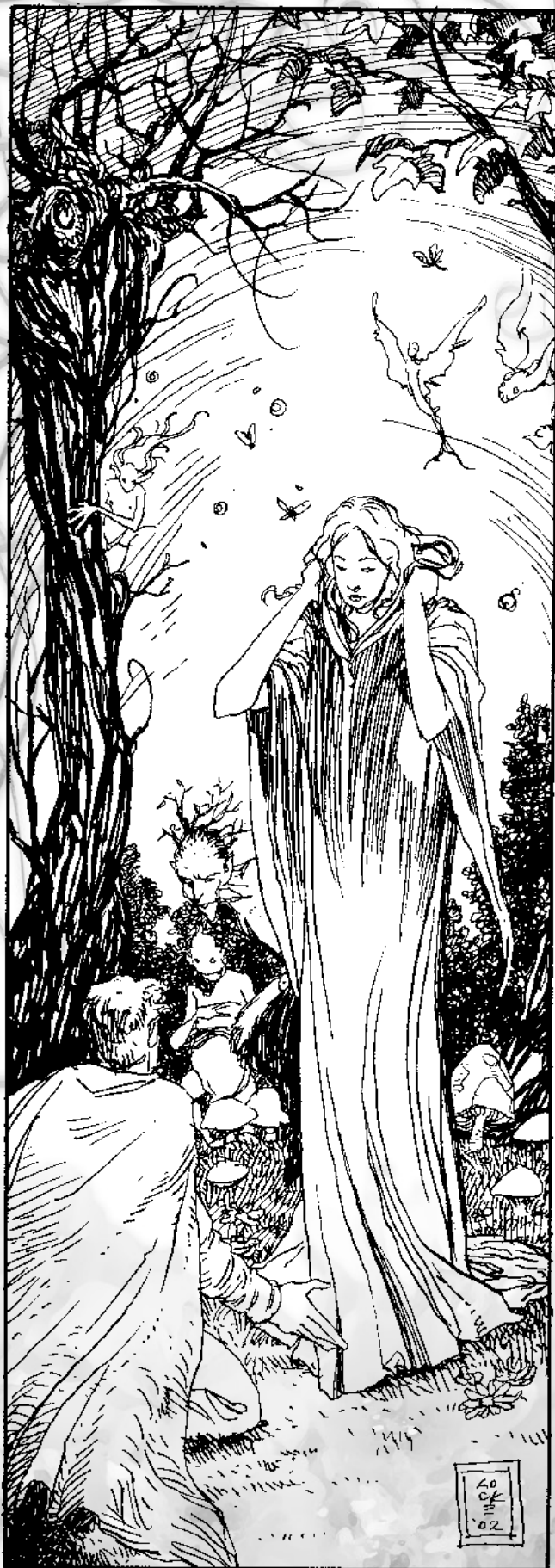
They brought him to stand before their leader, who sat cloaked and hooded on a dais cunningly wrought of wood and leaves. He was secure in his mission, and he stood proudly with head held high, ready for whatever doom this lord of theirs would impose upon him. But when the hood was thrown back, it was a maiden's face that he beheld, and such was the unnatural and terrible beauty of her appearance that the young man fell to his knees before her, worshipped her, and wept.

To his shame, he would have forsaken all for this faerie queen if she had allowed it. He would

have broken the oaths of love he had made to Anne. But the queen would not accept him. The rejection burned at his heart, and he at once proposed a thousand quests to prove himself, each more unlikely than the last. But still, she refused him, and the gathered faeries found much mirth in his failure. Finally, in desperation, he promised to bring her the golden brooch, for he had nothing left to give.

At this, the queen started and looked upon him with sudden kindness. She bid her ladies-in-waiting bring cushions for him to sit upon, and bade him in a voice like a mountain stream to tell her more about this magnificent brooch. Eagerly, the young man described her the shape and making of it and its hold over his betrothed. The queen was much intrigued and asked him to bring the bauble to her. Perhaps, she suggested, her magics might be able to break the dreadful spell so that he and his lady might be properly united.

Then, the young man realized what he had offered. He knew not how to pry the brooch from his lady without doing harm to her, and cried in desperation that he could not; he would not do such a thing. At this, the queen rose in a terrible and thunderous fury, and the laughter of the assembly fell silent before her wrath. Before his eyes, she grew to the heights of the tallest tree in the forest, demanding that he bring the brooch with or without the lady who currently possessed it. She demanded that he bring her the brooch before the coming dawn, or she would lay a curse upon the man and his line. He cowered and shrank away from her and had to be removed from her presence,



for he found that his legs trembled so to make walking impossible.

Faerie hands put him upon the path and brought his sword up from the dirt. They spun him around and around until the stars wheeled above his head. When his vision cleared, they were gone. But he knew he must make haste, and he wondered not at this remarkable feat, but instead marked the place of their gathering and rushed back to his home to gather Anne and see what the fae queen could do for her.

At home, the entire household was deep in slumber, and the maidservants did not awaken when he stole into Anne's bedchamber. She whimpered as he wrapped her in his cloak and carried her from the chamber, but did not fight him so long as his hands did not stray too near the brooch clutched in her desperate fingers. She was so light in his arms that he feared she would waste completely away, and panic gave wings to his feet. He reached the clearing moments before the sun broke the horizon.

The queen awaited them there, and she immediately saw the young woman's affliction. She ordered the young man to leave his lady in her care, and, though he somehow knew that she coveted the brooch and cared not for Anne's safety, he had no other choice. Anne must be tended to or die, wasting away from the dreadful curse of the golden brooch. With heavy heart, the young man set her in the grass, kissed her brow, and turned to leave. No sooner had he attained the path when he turned back. In his weariness and sorrow, he had forgotten to ask how he could find them again to claim

his beloved once the evil spell was broken. But the clearing was empty and his beloved lost to him with no means to recover her.

His father's men found him the next day, lying unconscious in an overgrown clearing, and quick they marked the look of the fae-struck in his eyes. They heard with dismay the fate of Anne and soothed his sorrows as best they could, though they could do nothing to soothe the pain of her loss. From that day forward, the young man moved as if in the midst of a nightmare, refusing both food and sleep. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months, but Anne did not return. Try as he might, he could not find the faerie queen or her retinue, though he was certain that they watched him and laughed as he searched the forest for them night after night.

He could do nothing but wait. He waited while the leaves fell, but Anne did not come. He waited while snow covered the trees, but Anne did not come. Finally, one morning after the snow thawed, he awoke to find her sleeping on his doorstep, a newborn babe cradled in her arms. She was restored to health and vitality, and the golden brooch was gone. He awoke her with a cry of joy, and their reunion was one of such happiness that a poet might fill all the parchment in the world but never approach what they felt. She had, after all, been gone for almost a year.

He resolved to marry her immediately, before she could disappear once again, and Anne laughed at his foolish words and resolved not to stray too far. He questioned her then and there, standing on his doorstep, but she could



not give any account of her whereabouts, the faerie queen or the golden brooch. In fact, she would not believe that she had been gone so long, were it not for the child in her arms. She could not give account of the babe, only to say that she was its mother and to offer it to him in the hopes that he would love it and claim it as his heir.

He took the child with mingled pride and fear, for it may indeed have been his own. There was a hint of resemblance in the gray eyes and the slope of the child's nose. But, to his eyes, there was a fae glint in the very same eyes and the whisper of leaves in the babe's innocent cooing, and he could not put out of his mind the allure of the Fair Folk. But he spoke not of his worries, and claimed the child because his beloved wished it and married her soon after.

Their marriage was a happy one, and they had many children, but their firstborn was an odd, solitary lad with the bad habit of stealing off

into the woods rather than doing his chores. He was utterly untameable, but Anne always had a soft spot for him, and the boy would listen to her if to no one else. But he spoke seldom and had few friends, preferring the solitude of the forest to noisy games of catch-me-if-you-can with the village boys. Of late, Anne and her husband had noticed that he was increasingly distracted and his forays into the woods more and more frequent, but thought nothing of it until he disappeared a month ago. He has not been seen since.

Anne is inconsolable. She has taken to wandering the woods at night calling for her child, as her lover did for her so many years ago. She begged me to make this pilgrimage and pray for his safe return. I could not deny her, though I know he is lost to us forever. The boy is the queen's man now, and I am ashamed to admit that I envy him for that, for I cannot forget the terrible beauty of her face.

The others sat stunned, but Richard seemed not to notice his revelation. He sat, quietly, a tear running down his cheek. One of his hounds stood up and licked his face lovingly, and he patted the animal's head in thanks.

"So you —," Aldous began, but the friar shushed him.

"A story is a story," said Richard, "and cannot feed a fire or quiet grief. And yet we tell them."

"Yes," said Vidal. "And men have for centuries. But if yours is true — if all of ours are — then it makes me wonder..."

"Stop wondering." The voice was unfamiliar, for Alejandro had spoken but little during the pilgrimage. His French was perfect, however, and the others turned to him in surprise. "If you begin wondering, Vidal, you might never stop, and you may lose what is right in front of you." He stood and turned, looking out onto the road. "I have a story, too. I hadn't planned to tell it — in truth, I was afraid, for this story happened to me. But since Richard has chosen to share a story from life, it seems the least I can do. I would ask, however, that you gird yourselves, for there are elements of this story that may offend your Christian hearts."

"All the better, then, for you to tell it, Alejandro," said the friar. "Let us hear your tale."

With a callused hand, Alejandro smoothed down his moustache and stroked his chin. The motion was slow and thoughtful, as though he could detect every gray hair among its sable-toned fellows. He closed his eyes and gave a long, deep sigh. When the aging aristocrat looked up once more, a faint smile played across his features.

"Very well, then. It begins simply enough. I was on the road before I met all of you, and I met another traveler, a dark man who sat down with me as I made a cooking fire." Alejandro paused to sip at his wine. "I do not know, even now, why I told him the things I did, but I do know that I must share this tale with all of you tonight, if only to hear myself say it and to remind myself that it was real."



The
Road
of
Doubt

Yamex

It began at my camp, three days past. My horse's ankle seemed a bit inflamed, so I had walked that day to let him recuperate. It had been a few nights since I shared a fire with anyone, and my road had seemed quite lonely at that point. When he approached and asked if he could offer some bread and cheese for a sip of my wine and a chance to warm himself, I welcomed the company. What happened from there was inexplicable, but I will try to do it justice....

"My name is Tomas," the hooded man asserted in response to my introduction, extending a strong and long-fingered hand in greeting. When I accepted it, I felt a chill pass across the base of my neck, as though a whisper of breath rustled the hairs there. The stranger drew back his hood, revealing a youthful face and eyes that reflected something unfathomable. Disturbed, I nevertheless did my best to retain my composure and passed a cup of wine to the newcomer.

"You are named for the Doubting One," I asserted, "him who questioned the veracity of the Risen Christ. Is that why you have undertaken this journey, friend? To quell your doubts?"

Tomas smirked and looked off into the thick shadows beyond the firelight for a few moments, savoring the scent of the rich wine he had been offered. With a slow and meticulous motion, the young pilgrim sampled the spirit, leaving my question hanging in the chill air.

At last, Tomas lowered the cup, stared into my eyes and offered his reply: "I silenced my doubts long ago."

I took the statement for what it was worth,

pausing long enough to finish off my own cup of wine before asking, "What puts your feet upon the road to Compostela, then, Tomas? What is it you seek?"

Tomas kept his gaze fixed upon my eyes as he spoke, "Let us say that we have crossed paths tonight but are upon very different roads, Alejandro. I am a pilgrim, yes, but whither I go, I will find no saint's bones awaiting me, and neither any priests offering indulgences nor gathering throngs looking for answers to questions they do not yet understand enough to properly ask. No, my road goes not to such places and is all too clear to me now. But where does your road take you, good sir? I see that you have doubts of your own, for they are mirrored in your stare. What is it you think you will find in Compostela?"

My blood ran cold with the blasphemies he hinted at in his words, and I trust that I paled much as some of you here before me do now. I wanted to answer "faith" or "serenity", but I knew the answer was "nothing." I would go before St. James' remains to ask why Rosa had been taken and why Paolo and I could not be reconciled and would hear no voice from beyond telling me that my beloved wife was making a house for me in Paradise or that my eldest son would give up his violent ways and return to make our family as whole as it might now be. I undertook this pilgrimage only as another means to while away the days, and I expected nothing more of it than a long journey and a lonely road back to my estate and my empty bed. Finally, I replied to Tomas' question with a mute and disappointed shaking of my head.

"It is as I thought," Tomas said, brushing back his long black hair with his hand. "You do not know why you are here tonight, sharing your fire with me and planning to continue on in the morning to a place that offers you no comfort or hope. You are adrift in a sea of questions to which nothing in your experience provides answers. I know the place you are in, friend, for I once dwelt there as well."

I smiled bitterly, for despite my fear at his terrible words, Tomas' assumptions had angered me, and I retorted, "You seem a bit young yet, good man, to truly know those things that pain me."

"You are not my elder by as many years as you may think, Alejandro," Tomas answered me, "and the divine plan you quest for in vain upon this trek encompasses more and stranger things than ordinary men might dare imagine. I have come here tonight because your doubt hangs heavy upon your soul, and I can hear the scales upon your eyes groaning with the weight of it. You are almost ready to lose something terrible, something that has fettered you all your life."

"Doubt?" I asked sardonically.

"Not at all. Doubt is the first step upon the path. What you are ready to relinquish," Tomas steepled his fingers and his demeanor suddenly turned deadly serious, "is certainty. The happiness you once knew was a kind of certainty, was it not? When it was taken from you, you were thrown into chaos but quickly fell into a new kind of *certainty*. You have come to see the world as a merciless enemy whom you cannot placate. You hold others away from yourself, because you are afraid to

feel more pain. Your fear grows out of a belief that you lack the power to alter the course of your own life anymore. If not you, my friend, then who?"

I knew that I should have been disturbed, even offended, by this man's familiarity and the blasphemy that he seemingly skirted in his discourse, but I could only croak out a single word: "God."

Tomas laughed aloud and clapped his hands, "You know how to spout your rhetoric like a good little frightened lamb, I see! Rest easy, Alejandro, there are no mitred heads about to stare disapprovingly at you. I myself am a Christian, my friend," he chuckled, "and yet I cannot countenance the idea that the Creator shaped us as motes of dust to be carried wherever the wind takes us. There are greater designs still in store for God's best handiwork. Do you know in what way your happiness and your sorrow are similar?"

"No," I muttered, unsure of why the anger I should have felt was replaced by curiosity.

"They have nothing to do with your choices, Alejandro," Tomas replied. "They are products of an environment that acts upon you and to which you respond. Now, in the depths of your doubt, you stand on the cusp of making not a choice, but the choice. You are prepared to make the first true decision of your life."

I looked into my erstwhile companion's unnerving eyes and my words escaped as a whisper. "My wife is dead, and my son will not speak to me anymore. I am so terribly alone, and my life is a prison that

has no shackles to hold me nor a gate to bar me from leaving. It needs none, for it is everywhere I turn. I can find no sanctuary from my misery. Cheerful company is no balm to me, and prayer tastes bitter upon my tongue. What could you possibly be offering that will set me free?"

In answer, Tomas rose from his seat and spoke to me, "I have nothing to give you, Alejandro, and, in truth, you need nothing from me. You have come to question everything you believe in and, soon enough, you will learn that there are no answers to those quandaries that might be offered to mortal ears. If you are strong, and I think you are, you will discover that the only way to acquire the knowledge you crave is to ask a new set of questions."

"What do you mean?" I stammered, as Tomas crouched in front of me, interposing his own body between the fire and myself.

"Let me show you," he said, pivoting to scoop a handful of flame from the crackling fire. It flickered with an unearthly bluish light, and I fell back, away from my guest, as Tomas sculpted the unburning flame into a ball of light that hovered inches above his palm. Paying no heed to my doubtlessly trembling form, Tomas extended his arm and the ghost-light drifted lazily away, toward the tree line. Without glancing back, Tomas set out in the direction the light had gone. "Are you coming?"

I clutched desperately at the cross dangling around my neck and at the sword belted at my hip, and hissed, "You are a demon, come to spirit me away to Hell. You will find that I do not go easily." In a panic, I uttered St. James'



words from rote, *"Submit yourself, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."*

Tomas laughed once more and turned only slightly, "Judge not, lest ye be judged yourself. And if I were a devil, come to infect you with evil and saturate your mind with heresies, would I have much to offer, Alejandro, that you yourself have not already pondered in the dark hours you lay awake, shivering in your bed and wondering at the injustice of it all? You have not been in possession of your soul since fate took your happiness from you, my friend. I am offering you a chance to take it back. But I make this offer only once. Do you accept and follow me into perils unknown, or do you return to your wine and pretend on the morrow that this was a drunken hallucination?"


Putting his hood up once more, Tomas strode into the darkness without awaiting a reply. I took a few deep breaths as the cowed figure began to fade into the velvety blackness and thought with dread on whatever nightmare roads lurked out there, winding like serpents at that necromancer's command to swallow up the virtuous. And then, almost unbidden, my legs started to carry me into those shadows. I lived in damnation. What more was there to lose? But I see that such talk troubles some of you, as it would have myself mere days ago, so I will return to the facts of the tale.

I walked with cautious steps, afraid to entangle my foot in a root or break an ankle upon a loose stone. I peered into the night, hoping to make out some trace of my mysterious visitor among the faint glimpses of starlit woods. Once or

twice, I thought I caught sight of that terrible witch-fire, but I continued on for what must have been an hour or more without finding Tomas. At last, I realized that I was lost. I could feel the stickiness of blood upon my cheek from where a branch had snapped back into my face. My knees ached, for the terrain had been rugged and uneven. I reached for my kerchief, only to discover that it had apparently fallen somewhere back there, in those impenetrable pools of black that gathered anywhere the stars did not shine. Strangely, and I do not make any claim to bravery, I did not panic nor worry at my state. Instead, I resolved to forge onward and find a way back to camp. As I turned, Tomas' light flared, and I stood face-to-face with the wizard once more.

"I am glad to see you here," Tomas said, before turning to push aside a thick tangle of branches. As I came up behind him to follow, the sorcerer gestured for silence and stillness. He pointed with a long index finger toward movement in the distance and whispered, "Behold."

I leaned forward to gaze upon whatever spectacle Tomas had brought me here to see. I scanned the clearing beyond and quickly caught sight of a great form hunched in the mouth of a cave. Its eyes shone like two sunlit rubies and it stared down at a kneeling man, stripped to the waist, with a wild mane of hair and a savagely notched axe at his side. My breath caught in my throat and I stifled a scream of terror as the beast in the cave lurched out to stand before the man. Scales without number, shining like black pearls, armored its hide, and a great crest of horns sprouted from its wedge-shaped



head. It spoke in a language that I did not understand but with a voice that shook the ground and the soul, and the man at its feet hoisted high a severed human head in tribute. Without warning, Tomas' hand was on my shoulder.

"Come, let's away."

We walked only a few minutes before Tomas pointed out a gap in the trees beyond which, chanting could be heard. As we approached the sound, I stopped Tomas and turned him about. As loudly as I dared, I asked, "Why did you show me that?"

The magus thought on the question for a few moments, mulling over an answer that would suffice. After a time, he replied, "Fear is the second step. Only a man who does not love life can be truly unafraid. That spectacle frightened you? Good. Any sane man would say the same. Now, however, I know that you are not truly lost and will be open to the splendors of what comes after."

At that, Tomas returned his attention to the clearing and bade me do the same. We closed the last few paces and sat upon the split halves of an ancient tree rent long ago by lightning or some other calamity. I watched in si-

lence as 10 figures — three men and seven women — naked as newborns, danced around a bonfire upon a sandy shore. They moved with wild abandon and their voices were raised in a chorus of ecstasy and praise. As they whirled in their ritual, I could make out glimpses of their features by the warm orange light. Even the eldest among them possessed a vigor and vitality that most youths would envy. It was some time before I realized that I had been looking upon their naked bodies unashamed, so beautiful was their nocturnal rite. As the reality of the situation dawned upon me, I averted my gaze.

“What troubles you?” Tomas asked, though it was obvious from his tone that he knew the answer.

“What they do is sacrilegious and undignified. It is an affront to the Lord and unfitting for a man of faith to witness,” I stated with certainty in my tone.

“It is well for you, then, Alejandro,” Tomas retorted, “that you are not a man of faith. You are a man of desperation who clings to stories in a book, stories no more real to you than myth. And who, precisely, are you to state what is and is not abhorrent before God’s eyes?” I began to reply, but Tomas continued, “Watch closely, Alejandro, and you may see that God’s standards are not those that arrogant men have seen fit to attribute to Him to justify their own fear and prejudice.”

Overwhelmed by the logic of the argument in light of what I had already seen and heard this night, and shameful at my presumption and delusions of righteousness, I decided to hazard another glance. A silvery glow gathered beneath the waves, as though the moon was shining up



from the depths. The tide washed back against itself and split like a corridor into the heart of the sea, as the light grew closer to the surface. Wreathed in celestial illumination, a tall, regal woman emerged, her footfalls leaving no tracks upon the sand as she walked to where the dance continued. I blinked away the stinging of tears, so profound was her beauty. As she tipped her head back and began to sing, I knew what it was to hear the voices of the seraphim.

"No more," I hissed to Tomas, hiding my face from the magnificence of the sight. "My heart cannot endure it."

"Why?" Tomas pressed, drawing close.

"Because —," I hesitated for a single breath, "because I now cannot deny that there is still goodness in the world, and the revelation stings more bitterly than any blow I have ever suffered and tears at my spirit more deeply than any terror I have ever felt."

"You are alive, Alejandro," Tomas said, taking me by the shoulders, "and the revelations of your life should burn you and blind you, and move you also to such joy and fulfillment as you never dreamed before that very moment. Life does not ask for your leave when your eyes are opened, my friend. It simply shows you what is there, that you might piece together the truth of it on your own. That is the third step. Come, I have one last sight to show you."

We walked together once more through the dense canopy of trees, only stopping when the sky turned ruddy, as though from dawn's first light. Despite hours of wandering, however, I knew that it could not yet be dawn. With

trepidation, I forged ahead on Tomas' heels.

"This is my final destination, Alejandro," Tomas said as we reached a steep drop at the edge of the tree cover. Over a score of people — men and women of all ages and with skin that ranged from the pale tones of Britons and Teutons to the dusky hues of my native Castile and the northernmost reaches of Araby — were engaged in discourse, and a strange glow suffused the meadow. Nearly all were garbed in flowing robes, and no few of them carried staves or other talismans of power. At but a glance, I knew that I looked upon a gathering of wizards. At the center was a man, speaking with eloquence in archaic Latin. He talked of troubling times, of a gathering storm, but that is all I heard before Tomas turned to me.

"You may join me if you wish, friend. You have earned it."

I shook my head, smiling, earnestly for the first time in I knew not how long, "I cannot. I must not. Not yet," Tomas looked puzzled and opened his mouth to speak, but I did not pause long enough to allow him a word. "I owe that much to Compostela and to Saint James. I have my doubts, true enough, but they are mine and I must understand them ere I begin to believe in anything again. Do not think I will be so quick to change my tune just because you have shown me miracles here tonight. Miracles are found also at the end of the Silver Road. I must see for myself if one is waiting there for me."

"Fair enough, my friend. You shall find your camp but ten paces behind you" Tomas conceded, taking my hand. "And if you find no miracle at the end of your road, Alejandro?"

"Then perhaps, I shall come this way again, to see if a hooded stranger with whom I might barter a bit of food and drink for some company waits by a fire at a cross-roads," Alejandro said, meeting the eyes of each of his companions in turn. Seeing the incredulous looks that some wore, he added, "Perhaps it is not entirely as I have said, for my skills as a storyteller are not so strong as they might be, but you have heard the essential truth of my experiences but three days ago. And, should I not find what I seek at the end of this road, I believe I may yet return this way to discover if another destiny, another life, waits upon the Silver Road, beckoning me to cast the scales from my eyes." With that, Alejandro sat back upon his haunches and fell silent again.

"I should like to meet this man Tomas, I think," murmured Brother Giordano.

"Why?" The voice was blunt and rough, coming as it did from Aldous. "You'd like to tempt God by speaking with a demon?"

"A demon," said the friar, "can assume all manner of shapes, as I think we can all attest. I'm not convinced that everything that resembles a demon actually is a servant of Hell. But in any event, I think it's unlikely that I will ever get the chance."

The group fell silent for a long while. The men were tired from the long day of travel and drained from the stories. John opened his mouth, probably to suggest going to sleep, but Vidal spoke before he could.

"And what of you, Christof?" asked the student. "Have you a story for us?"

"Indeed I have," answered the stranger, the newest of the pilgrims. "I was only waiting to be asked."

"Let's hear it, then," grumbled Aldous, "and go to sleep. As much as I long to see the shrine of Saint James, I confess I'm not looking forward to rising tomorrow morning."

"Don't worry, my good cordwainer," said Christof in fluid, perfect French. "My tale, while also of creatures and powers dark, is not a true story — not of the same kind as yours, anyway. But if it will make you listen more carefully, then I will say that it did happen to a friend of mine. Is that the proper way to begin?"



THE TWO BROTHERS

R/K
2/17

This story concerns two brothers, two men born of the same goodly parents, yet they were as different as virtue and sin. One brother — called James — was fair of skin and light of heart. A smile was never far from his lips and a joke or jest never foreign to his mind. When he grew from child to young man, he spent his days making women laugh — and sometimes cry, though he knew it not.

His brother, though, was dark fellow. His skin was swarthy, nearly so painted as a Moor, and he wore a frown beneath his brow that set any who looked on it in a foul temper. This man was called William, and while his brother chased women and broke their hearts, he sat in silence, staring up at the sky or out over the moors.

While the brothers' parents were not poor, nor were they noble, and they were glad that they had two strong boys to work for them. But neither of the brothers enjoyed to work. James was too busy dallying with the soft young women by the creekside, imploring them to join him in a swim. William could often be found not far away, staring at his brother, not a voice in his head. Their mother despaired, calling one slothful and the other lustful, and their father would take a switch to them both when either failed to work. William would protest that he did work, which was true, and cried out in pain to his father, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

His father said, "Yes, you are, and when one sins, the other sins." James laughed, for he found excitement and pleasure in pain, but William remembered these words. Time went on, and whenever James would run off after women, William would drag him back, sometimes by the scruff of his neck, and make him work. "I'll not be beaten for you again," said William. James only laughed.

When William, the elder by a scant year, reached his 18th summer, he left home to join the service of God. James laughed at him mercilessly, for he considered those who would live chaste in a cloister a pack of fools. William bore his laughter with the same frown on his face, but took his brother aside before he left. "I am no longer your keeper," said William. "When you sin now, you sin alone."

James only laughed and said, "Tell me, brother, does the sight of a monk's bald pate stir your loins the way young Rebecca down the way does mine?"

William left, disgusted, and went to become a monk, and we shall hear more of him anon. But James, thinking now on Rebecca, went to visit her and did not return home until after dark. When he did, his father was waiting with a switch in hand, and James laughed at first, for his father had never managed to discomfort him with his ministrations.

Tonight, however, was to be different.

The switch that James' father had was cut from the rowan tree, and was stronger and harder than any before. The first blow told James that something was wrong — not only was the weapon his father wielded harder, but the blow fell more solidly and split the lad's back. James cried out, but his father did not stop for near an hour.

And then, with James lying in the dirt, bleeding from two-score cuts across his back and legs, his father spat on him and said, "You slothful, lustful boy. Your brother is not here to rein you in and therefore this task falls to me. You will do the work I require of you, and you will not question me or falter in your chores, or I swear by the Son and the Father you will never sleep in my home or eat of my food again. You will honor your father as the Book commands, or you will make your own way." And with that, James' father dropped the bloodied switch upon the ground and stormed back into the house.

James lay there in the dust, sobbing, too hurt in soul and body to move. As the tears subsided and his vision cleared, he saw himself looking at the switch, which was so strong that it had not even bent, despite the force with which he had been struck. He reached out and closed his hand around the switch, and slowly, painfully, pulled himself to his feet.

The switch was stained red with his blood, and still warm from his father's hand. He grasped it with both hands and tried to break it, but the rowan-wood was too

strong. In mad rage, he flung the switch from him into the woods near his home, and turned to face his father's door.

"I choose, then," he said to the night, "to make my own way." And off he walked into the woods.

How long James walked that night, I do not know. The pain in his back subdued all other things, except the pain of his shattered pride. His screams had surely carried to the village, and by noon every man — and, more important, woman — therein would know the indignity he had suffered. Stung by the thought of his consorts laughing at him for being spanked like a brat, he walked on, farther into the wood than ever he'd dared before.

He came at length to a deer path, and followed it, not knowing what else to do. He had no food and nothing but the clothes on his back. He had no friends or family anywhere but in his village — except his brother, cloistered miles away. Finally, exhausted and spent, he lay down by the side of the road to sleep.

When he awoke, the birdsong above him told him that dawn approached. He sat up and stretched, and immediately regretted it as the wounds in his back began oozing again. He stood and looked about, trying to calm the rumble in his belly and wondering how he might eat. From behind him, he heard a whisper.

"Boy," said the voice, and he turned to see

what had spoken.

"I hear you," said James, "but show yourself."

"I cannot," the voice replied. "Look closely at the birch in front of you, and you may see a bit of me."

James did indeed see a white birch in front of him and stared closely at it. In the grain of the bark he saw what resembled great wings, and near that, a strange face.

"Are you a spirit, or a demon, or do I see you at all?" whispered the youth. The voice merely laughed, and when it did, James saw the birch's leaves twist slightly, as though in a breeze.

"You see what I've become," said the spirit, "but I wish you could see me as I was. Wings resplendent, flying over Heaven, earth and sea — oh, to be free once again. But I suppose a man such as yourself knows little of longing for freedom."

James smiled bitterly and turned his back. "Can you see, spirit, my choices? I can return to my father's tender care or starve a free man. But I will not return — my father said I must obey or make my own way, and so I shall."

The spirit in the tree laughed and the leaves rustled gently. "You, sir, are a man after my own tastes. Perhaps, then, we can help each



other. I wish to be free, and you wish to make your way. Well, then, I have a solution — if you are willing to take a risk.”

James turned to face the tree again and nodded.

“Good,” said the spirit. “Take the bark from this tree — all of it. The section of bark where you saw my wings and face must be removed last, mark me. You must burn every last scrap of bark except for those two, which you must boil in water over the fire you built with the rest of the bark. Drink the water down, and freedom awaits us both.”

As the sun rose, James took to stripping the bark from the tree. But the tree stood much taller than he did, and he could not reach high enough to remove most of the bark. The spirit counseled him to fetch an ax and cut the tree down, and so James went off in search of an ax.

Before long, he came to a small house and found a wood ax on a chopping block. He looked about, but saw no one, and so pulled the ax from the block and started back toward the birch tree. As he did, he heard a man’s voice from behind him.

“You there! Put down my ax!” James turned to see a bearded man rushing toward him angrily. James made to drop the ax and run, but then he saw a switch in the man’s hand and saw his father’s anger in the man’s eyes.

James turned the ax-handle toward the

man as if to hand it to him. He smiled, sweetly, and said “I am sorry, sir. I will most assuredly put your ax down.”

The man did not listen, but reached out his hand to take the ax-handle. As he approached, James spun the ax in his hands and buried the blade with a sickening thud in the man’s head. The man fell to his knees, the switch dangling loosely in his fingers. “Is that to your liking?” asked James, wrenching the blade from the man’s head.

James returned to the birch and told the spirit of what had happened. “The worst sin, I think,” said James, panting as he chopped at the tree’s base, “is that I feel no shame or guilt. I felt only vindication, for when that man charged at me, I saw my father.”

“Sin?” replied the spirit, now speaking slightly above a whisper as the bloodied ax worked at its prison. “Any man who would respond with such anger and violence cannot be happy in this world. You delivered him to Paradise; likely he’d thank you if he could.” And James mused on this while he cut, and finally the tree fell.

James dutifully stripped the bark off the tree, and cleared a space to make a fire. He then looked about and realized he had nothing to hold water in, nor any water to boil. The spirit in the tree informed him of a stream a few moments’ walk to the south, and perhaps there would be a pot or kettle nearby that he could borrow.

So James walked off into the wood again, and presently came to the stream that the spirit had mentioned. He saw there a girl of perhaps 14 summers, filling an iron pot. His mind immediately roiled with thoughts of lust, for the girl was very much after his tastes — fair-skinned and dark-haired, shapely of form but probably too young to have been plucked yet. James crept up behind her and said gently, “Do you live nearby?”

She started, and dropped the pot. She turned to face him and fear read in her face. She saw, perhaps, the woodsman’s blood on James’ clothes or the dirt besmirching his face. But she answered, and said “No, sir, I do not. I live quite a distance, but our well is fouled and so I must walk here to get water for my family.” She shifted uncomfortably, and James could see her legs beneath her skirts, wet from kneeling at the stream.

“You must be careful in the wood, dear. You can never tell who you’ll meet.” She nodded and dropped her gaze, and James seized her shoulders and pulled her close to kiss her. But she struggled and pushed against him, and beat against his aching and bloodied back.

James had been with women, as you have heard, but had never once taken a woman by force. Now, however, as her small fists beat at him, he thought of his father and his vow to make his own way. So he forced her down and had his way, and left her bleeding and weeping on the banks as he took water in her own pot back to the birch.



"Am I damned, then?" he asked the birch. "Am I damned for what I've done today, me who has never feared for his soul?"

"Damned?" answered the spirit, its voice stronger now as James' hands, stained with virginal blood, built the fire. "I should think not. God gave Adam dominion over woman, and that is what you have taken, no?" And James shrugged and agreed, and went on with his task.

With the fire built, he set the water to boil and peeled the last scraps of bark from the tree's trunk. The spirit whispered something then, something that sounded to James like an exultation or prayer, but he didn't think too long on it. He mixed the bark into the water, and, having no cup with which to drink, cupped his hand and sipped the odd brew.

At first he felt nothing, only the pain of the hot liquid searing his mouth. But then he felt something change. He felt a tearing, white-hot agony in his back along the wounds his father had inflicted. He felt heat rush to his loins and a wave of lust and wrath sweep over him. He felt all the women he had bedded and all the days he had spent lazing about while his brother worked. And he saw that it was good.

James returned home that night, but not to honor his father and mother, as the Book says. Instead, he returned home to give something back to his father — more than a score of lashes, but James-now-Byleth

did not use a rowan switch. He still had the woodcutter's ax, after all.

When he had returned his father's kindness, he bestowed his own upon his mother. I will not recount here what she must have suffered. I will only say that by the time it was over, she no longer knew even her own name. And James-now-Byleth made his own way out from the house and belched fire into the front door, setting all within ablaze, and he stood under the moon and laughed.

And he felt a lash on his back. The pain of it drove him to his knees, and he looked over his shoulder to see his brother, William, standing there with a switch in his hand. The very same rowan switch that James had thrown into the woods.

William did not speak, but raised the switch and brought it down on his brother's shoulder. James-now-Byleth scurried away like a spider, but William followed, and the younger brother knew that despite the power that now coursed in his body, despite the wicked claws on his fingers and the fire in his gut, the rowan switch, wielded by a man of faith and soaked in James' own blood, could end his life and imprison both him and his benefactor.

William may have known this. Perhaps he had learned enough to know this, perhaps not. Perhaps he acted with God Almighty guiding his hand. But he still did not speak, and still brought the switch — which did




not bend or break, no matter how hard he struck — down on his brother's body.

And James said, weakly, "I have made my own way, brother. I do not need you as my keeper."

William raised the switch and replied, "No, brother. You need me now more than ever." And again he brought the switch down. Over and over, the switch fell, until finally the demon wrenched itself from James' body and took wing, now free from its

prison, but cursing William for destroying its new body.

James' body lay dying, and William, although not fully through his vows, heard his brother's confession. When his family was safely buried, William went in search of Byleth, the obscene wretch that had corrupted his brother's flesh. But he was ever aware that, despite the foulness that James' body became under Byleth's touch, James had made his own way, and the decisions to kill, rape and drink were his.



“So that is my story,” said Christof, “and now perhaps some sleep?” The other pilgrims looked at him, disturbed by his tale but unsure why.

“I have a confession, first,” said the friar, and the others turned to stare at him. “The story I told earlier was my own. I am more than a Dominican friar, I’m afraid. I would not reveal myself now, except that I am sworn to protect pilgrims as I have before.”

“A pity, then,” said Christof as he stood and the wings extended from his back, “that Sister Vittoria is not here to save you. Your faith is weak, Brother Giordano, and I am not pleased that you recognize me.”

“I didn’t, Byleth-called-Christof.” The Red Brother opened his cloak to reveal the crimson tunic of an Inquisitor. “You revealed yourself to me by showing knowledge of imprisoned demons that only a demon or one who hunts them should know.” The other pilgrims stood as well, frightened and awed by the power of the two enemies facing each other across the fire.

"Still," said the demon, "tonight you are alone, and I shall eat well." Wicked, needlelike teeth and a forked tongue protruded from his lips, and black claws grew from his fingers. And yet Sir John stepped next to the friar, baring his sword.

"You'll not find me a coward, demon. Not tonight." The friar smiled at the young man's bravery, but the demon did not bat an eye.

"Nor me," added Vidal. "Not again." He picked up a stout stick from the pile of firewood and held it like a club.

Aldous stood next to the student and drew his own blade. "Be warned, demon," he said. "Just because I am no knight does not make me a weakling."

"Likewise for me." Lord Richard stood with the pilgrims, his eyes flashing and jaw set. His wolfhounds flanked him, growling and snarling at the thing that threatened their master.

Alejandro, characteristically, said nothing, but drew his sword and stared at the demon. He had seen worse, after all.

The demon looked at each of them in turn, as if trying to decide how best to strike. But as the group remained still, as not one man of them flinched, Byleth-called-Christof began to back away.

"Flee this place, demon," said the Dominican. "I may indeed be weak, as is any child of God, but my faith is strong and it can move mountains. Flee now, lest you lost another body."

With an unholy shriek that left the men's blades tarnished and the hounds running for cover, Byleth-called-Christof took to the air. His silhouette disappeared over the trees as the first rays of the morning sun appeared behind the men. Although none of them had slept, each felt as though he was awakening. What waited at the end of the road? A miracle, perhaps, or simply the end of the journey?

None of them spoke as they mounted their horses to complete their pilgrimage. They had each said enough for one night.

