

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

Chapter 14

Like a flaming flotilla, the company of torches drifted over rolling black hills, Lazarus at its core and struggling beneath the gravity of constricting chains. Ascending to the crest of the ridge, Lazarus halted. He threw back his ears, his wide pupils collapsing to mere pinholes.

Before him, the land dipped, spreading unobstructed, to present a large castle atop the crest of the next plateau. A mingling of torch flames churned before its well-fortified gates. The crowd sprawled, even to circle the castle ramparts and, perhaps several hundred yards deep, the nearer edge of the congregation thinned, scattering between several rows of rude thatch-roofed houses. A soldier's hand spurred Lazarus forward, down the shallow hill.

“Close ranks! Ready weapons! Hold positions!” the escort’s chief commander bellowed. Soldiers cast torches aside and scrambled around Lazarus, the loose formation packing into a rigid square. Shields raised toward the edge, encasing the cube, as pikes protruded, leveling conspicuously on the crowd. “No harm comes to it! If rank is broken; strike to kill!”

As one, the outwardly daunting block of defense shifted forward.

The throng roared as relentlessly as a storm, yet as the party neared, the thunder dissipated to leave but crickets songs and crackling torches to dominate the still night air. At length, in that dead calm, an ocean of torches divided, as perhaps did the Dead Sea, rippling apart to illuminate a well-defined path straight to the castle gate. Perhaps Lazarus drowned in hundreds of wide-eyed stares and he dropped his gaze and moved up the new-made aisle, heavy irons clinking to his every step whilst a wedge of ready crossbowmen paved way for the block’s procession.

The crowd mumbled, noises climbing from persons behind them. Onlookers threw insults. Then a rock soared overhead to strike Lazarus on his crown. He crumbled to the ground, dazed, blood trailing down the length of his neck. A crossbowman dropped the

stone-thrower with a bolt and the young peasant collapsed. The act spurred roaring protest. Hastily, two soldiers lifted Lazarus. He staggered forward between them, his head reeling. The commander bellowed warnings to all but the yowling mass only drowned his voice. Instantly, the path to the castle collapsed, swallowed up by angry fists waving torches.

Gathering Lazarus certainly to be the king of demons and prince of evil, the masses converged on him. Perhaps the women recounted their many earthly pains; they spat at him. Bolts flew. Perhaps the men recalled their many hard roads; they lunged for him. Swords hacked. And beneath a sea of shifting feet, excited children foraged for stones. Pikes plunged in the bloodletting.

Lord D'Alcicourt's men beat back the devil-thirsty masses. Even as men, women, and children fell wounded or worse, more poured forth. Furthermore, within the formation, soldier turned against soldier ~ the block crumbled and the crowd swallowed them whole. Angry arms snatched Lazarus and lifted him on high, passing him 'round beneath curses and screams. He was a chain-wrapped mummy, adrift on raging waves of raised limbs. Random cries coalesced into a rhythmic roar that echoed across the land, "*Brûlez le Diable! Brûlez le Diable!*" Lazarus thrashed about, hissing and kicking, engrossed in the whole of his ever-mounting pains. "Burn the Devil!" the masses screamed.

Instantly, an echoing battle horn stilled the rage and all eyes spun toward the castle. Atop its rampart walls, archers raced into position, their shafts directed into the crowd. The castle gates flew wide and a column of armored horsemen thundered out, swords and shields gleaming in the sea of torches. The crowd exploded as rats fleeing daylight. They dropped Lazarus. He rolled into unconsciousness. In the spreading bedlam, dead and wounded dotted the grounds. D'Alcicourt's Court Guard encircled Lazarus and spun outward, flanking, with shields up. Two knights dismounted and hoisted Lazarus over a steed, belly down. As one, and as quickly as they charged out, the armored company roared back through the ramparts, the castle gates crashing closed behind them.

And once inside the castle walls, they slid the unconscious Eljo off his horse and into a deep courtyard pit. Against its far wall, there stood a single plate-iron door, which opened underground, beneath the castle. On either side of the door, there sat two shackled prisoners who stole nervous glimpses of their latest guest. Both were unkempt, with scruffy beards, however, one commanded a considerably larger presence, having blonde hair, broad back and blue eyes. He was even larger than Lazarus and conceivably a giant beside his smaller prison mate.

With most of the night since passed into early morning, Lazarus came too, stirred by an ongoing conversation between the two prisoners. He lay still and listened while the larger man scoffed, his deep voice tainted by a foreign accent. “If it is your Satan, then why does it allow itself to be bound and thrown into this pit? Answer me that!”

The smaller replied, “Well, maybe ‘tis not Satan, yet certainly a demon. Even now, it only pretends capture. It shall break loose from those irons and kill us all!”

“‘Tis neither your Satan, nor a demon. ‘Tis a Night Alf, I told ya ~ bares every mark o’ one. And it can not free itself ~ not in those irons.”

Lazarus rolled over, peeled open his eyes and, with a bit of effort, seated himself upright. He shook the blood~matted hair out of his face to expose a nasty gash high above his left eyebrow. “Dear God,” he groaned.

The smaller prisoner stammered, struggling against his irons. “You see! There it goes! The Devil!” He pleaded to guards who paced the grounds near the topmost edge of the pit. “Lift us out! It awakens!”

“Silence!” a soldier barked reply. He looked at Lazarus and raised his gaze to the star~filled sky, then turned away in leisure departure.

“Aye,” the large prisoner spat, complaining to the smaller one, “Hush it! Your screams are fittin’ for a wee flower.” The smaller man narrowed his eyes at him, huffed, and thrust his back into the wall, sitting rigid yet, with drooped arms atop raised knees ~ perhaps in effort to reclaim his dignity through such a defiant yet careless appearance. He glared at Lazarus from afar.

At length, he leaned forward and hissed at Lazarus, “I am not the one you seek, devil. I am a Christian.” He pointed to the large man; “He is the one you want ~ a North Man ~ a pagan.”

Lazarus defended himself; “I am not a devil.”

“Can ya not hear?” the North Man snarled at the Christian man. “He is not a devil. I told ya what he was.”

“My name is Lazarus Gogu.” Lazarus inspected his chains.

“Gogu, perhaps.” The North Man leaned back and smirked. “Yet, Gogu the Night Alf, ya still are.”

The Christian questioned him, “Then, if you are not a devil, why do you look like a devil?”

“Twas the way I was born. I am a man ~ only different.”

“A man?” The North Man chuckled and turned to the Christian. “The Night Alf calls

himself a man. What think ya ~ man or no?" He laughed.

Lazarus asked the North Man, "What is a Night Alf?"

"You!" He snapped reply. "And if ya come near me, I shall be breakin' your neck."

Lazarus raised his brow and turned to the other. The Christian spoke; "He is a North man. His people believe that Night Alfs are creatures that claim the forests at nightfall." "Then he is not a Christian?" Lazarus asked.

The North Man laughed. "Our Alf wants to know if I am a Christian." He shook his head in apparent disgust.

Lazarus questioned him. "You do not believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins?"

Jolting forward, chains popping tight, the North Man sat glaring at Lazarus. "No!" He spit on the pit floor. "And ne'er shall I swallow such lies!"

"Be careful that you do not earn a rightful place in Hell," the Christian warned him.

The North Man cut an eye at him, curled his lip, and eased back against the wall. "At my death, my place shall be at Odin's table ~ with food, drink, song, and virgins in the *Halls of Valhalla*. And ya can keep your foolish tales for scarin' little children into grown cowards."

"You believe only myths," the Christian replied, "I told you many times already. There is no Odin or *vall~hallow~halls*. Look around you ~ no one speaks of these lies, save you. How can you believe ~"

The North Man leaned over, grabbed the Christian by the back of the hair and jerked his head close. He growled in his face, "Mind your tongue! In the land of my father and brother, I have seen many of your kind slain for sayin' less. I may be but one amongst ya Christians, yet, in my lands, ya would stand as only one amongst my people. Mark this truth ~ all would know ya as 'Odin's blasphemer' and would take ya down fer less."

Lazarus asked them, "Why are the two of you in this pit?"

The North Man turned loose his mate and he leaned back. "We are in here, my good Alf, because my friend here killed a man and stole his steed."

"I only defended myself," the Christian snapped, pressing down the back of his hair. "He drew on me first."

"And had ya not been stealin' his horse, he would not had drawn on ya. Then ya led the soldiers right to where I was sleepin'. Ya bleedin' fool! I said I was tired of walkin' ~ I did not tell ya to go steal a steed!"

"No, no, no," the Christian blurted, "They were going to let you go. You are not here on my account. I told them that I did not know you!" He jabbed an accusing finger at the

North Man. “You put yourself in here. You admitted to knowing me ~ and then speaking that foolishness about Odin, you bound by the truth, and the like. ‘Tis that foolish faith of yours that condemned you ~ not me!”

“So be it,” the North Man replied, slinging his chains in protest. “And by my faith I shall die proud at the hand of my enemies. And on the morrow, when we are hanged, the Valkyrie shall take my soul and leave ya to rot.”

The Christian rebuked him, “When we hang, you shall burn in hell for your false faith.”

“Hanged?” Lazarus asked, raising eyebrows.

“We are to be hanged on the morrow ~ for our crimes,” the Christian confessed.

“For your crimes!” The North Man snapped. “Only, I made the mistake of travelin’ ‘longside a murderin’ thievin’ lyin’ snake as yourself! And for keepin’ my faith before my enemies! Only that!”

“Yet, I am here to see Lord D’Alcicourt,” Lazarus insisted. “I am not here to be hanged.”

“No, Alf. Ya shan’t hang. Fret not.” The North Man assured him with only sarcasm after stealing a glimpse of the sky. “The morn is soon upon us. Come first light, there shan’t be anything left of ya to hang.” He bellowed a haughty laugh. Lazarus looked up to discover wispy thin clouds outlined with a faint red glow.

“Silence, pagan!” A soldier yelled down. Lazarus fumbled within his chains, trying to free himself.

“You upset him. What did you mean by that,” the Christian asked.

Still chuckling, the North Man replied, “I shall make a wager with ya, my friend.” He shifted closer to the Christian and whispered, “I wager the word of my people ‘gainst the word of yours ~ your faith ‘gainst mine. What say you?”

“You can not wager faith.”

“Oh, but I can. If I can prove to ya that my people are right, shall ya renounce your faith and join us at Odin’s table?”

“You do not value your soul, speaking blasphemies on the hour of your death.”

“I do not make the wager to endanger my soul, but to save yours.”

“What wager is this?”

“By the word of my people ~ by the truth of Odin and Loki, I swear to ya that this is a Night Alf and not one of your demons.” He nodded at Lazarus.

“I am ~ not ~ a Night ~ Alf,” Lazarus huffed, still struggling against his binds.

Yet, the North Man continued, “Soon, he shall go the way of all Night Alfs. Ya see; they can not be above ground in daylight, lest they burn up when the sun strikes them. And when ya see him burn up, shall ya swear allegiance to the faith of my people and to Odin?”

The Christian looked at him incredulously, brow crumpled. “You have lost your

balances.” He glanced at Lazarus and scratched his beard. “You are serious?” “He’ll burn up as sure as we shall be hanged,” The North Man smirked. “Have we the wager or neigh?”

The smaller chuckled. “No, no, no ~ here is the wager. Instead, I shall save your soul. If he burns up in the sun, like you claim, I shall give my soul to your Odin ~ which shall never happen.” He laughed and poked a finger at his large friend. “And if he does not, I want you to embrace the Lord Christ as your savior and renounce your Odin god and the faith of your people. And when we die, in heaven, you shall thank me forever.”

The North man drew his face tight before bursting with laughter. “‘Tis the spirit!” He patted his comrade on the shoulder. “A wager it is then! Done!”

“Done,” the Christian sneered. “And I shall hold you to it.” The two of them leaned against the wall and looked on as Lazarus worked frantically to free his arms. The Eljo rose to his feet, sliding up the wall. He turned and advised the Christian, “You must not wager your soul over myself.” Glancing to the sky, he turned back to his chains.

The Christian eased to his feet. “‘Tis only a wager if one can loose. Defending the Lord Almighty, I can not loose. And since I save another soul from the likes of you, God wins this one.” The Christian smirked.

“No more trickery, my good Alf.” The North Man mocked Lazarus and winked. “Come the sun, he is Odin’s. And ya shall be but ash and dust.”

The clatter of armor rose to a roar as soldiers encircled the pit ridge; their crossbows cocked and ready.

“All Down!” A soldier yelled. “Down, now!” Lazarus and the Christian leaped onto the pit floor. The North Man scowled, pressing his back tight to the wall. The soldier bellowed, “All prisoners secure!”

Clang! Creak! The iron pit door swung wide to spill forth a stream of armed guards. Most of them pressed the Christian and pagan prisoners against the wall while others swarmed Lazarus.

“On your feet! Move it!” They ushered Lazarus quickly through the iron door. He stumbled through a whirlwind of armor and swords and down an underground passage lined with torches, pikemen, and archers. The pit door slammed behind him and a voice echoed up the corridor; “Pit door secure!” The guards swept Lazarus through a subterranean maze of twists and turns.

One of his escorts cried out, “Halt!” The soldiers spun him toward a door and tightened a grip on his chains. “Step inside.” Lazarus complied. The door clicked behind him and echoes of mumbles and shifting metal faded with departing soldiers.

The air hung thick and perhaps crypt~like. He scanned the dim rectangular room. A long rough~hewn table centered the floor, running lengthwise, and two equally long benches lined its sides. As well, two candles burned in dishes at opposite ends of the table, the nearer wax pillar sporting a tall flame that cast a dancing circle of light about its base. The further candle cast no light, however a faint red glow bled from its wick. And below the swirling smoke spiral, on the floor and wedged in the far corner, a crude straw mattress sprawled. In the opposite corner, he caught a fleeting glimpse of what appeared to be a flat rat, lying alone and mostly decayed. Lazarus slid down the wall, raking his chains against stones. He collapsed on the mattress, surrendering the details of his current confines to the boundless realm of dreams.

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Yet, for what seemed a passing moment, his dreams fled and the door flung wide ~ and so did his eyes. He rolled quickly and sat himself erect, squinting at a flood of bright light which poured through the doorway. Two servants entered with seven~tiered candelabras and positioned them atop the table. As they departed with spent candles, a column of soldiers filed inside to line the length of the far wall. Several well~dressed men entered, followed by a rather large and delicate middle~aged balding bishop, adorned in full attire. He exchanged glances with Lazarus, his shifty eyes perhaps attesting to an air of wariness, or even reluctance. Behind him, guards shut the door, taking their posts to secure it.

The scribe stopped before the table and stared at Lazarus before turning to the bishop.

“Tis truly a devil. Look at it ~ the teeth ~ the ears ~ and with wings of a bat.”

“I am not a devil,” Lazarus countered.

The bishop corrected the scribe. “Do not accuse him without good reason ~ he has done us no harm. We shall find out soon enough.”

The scribe huffed and seated himself at the table with an inkwell, quill, and a roll of parchment. Lazarus rose to his feet. Uneasy guards gripped weapons as Lazarus stepped against the wall. The scribe unrolled the paper, pulled the quill from the well, slung it and positioned it over the paper. He cut a sharp eye at Lazarus and drew a deep breath.

“Do you have a name?” The scribe asked him.

“Lazarus. Lazarus Gogu.” The quill scribbled.

“What you now confess, Lazarus Gogu, shall be recorded as truth. Do you now swear to

confess only the truth before God and His Holiness.”

“I speak the truth.”

“Very well, then. Whom do you serve; which lord and king?”

He answered the scribe; “I serve my Lord God and King.” Doubting eyes darted about.

“Perhaps I might ask differently,” the scribe stated, “To whom do you pledge your allegiance ~ to which nobility and country?”

“I am a man of God. I pledge my allegiance to Him, His Holiness, and the Church.”

The bishop smiled and stepped forward, “Good. And do you believe in one Almighty God, who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?”

“I do.”

The scribe stopped writing and looked up, raising an eyebrow. “So you consider yourself a man ~ and of God?”

“I do.”

“Men do not have wings,” he replied, his tone laced with sarcasm. “Nevertheless, tell me, can you actually fly?”

“Yes.”

The scribe questioned him again whilst writing, “And how far can you fly at once?” Lazarus answered. “Half an eve, before I must rest.” Yet, the quill froze and the scribe leaned back with doubting eyes and pursed lips. Several wide-eyed guards mumbled.

“Silence, all.” The bishop corrected them. He turned to Lazarus. “Lazarus, do you believe in Christ born of the Virgin, suffered, risen, and who ascended to heaven?”

“I do.”

“Good.” The priest paced the floor, nodding. “This is good.”

The scribe inquired; “Tell me about your parents. Who are they and where are they now?”

Lazarus fidgeted, casting an uneasy eye at the bishop.

The bishop spun to the scribe, waving a beckoning hand. “Let us not linger on and on; ask another question of more importance.”

“Very well.” The scribe rolled his eyes and followed with the next question; “Have you ever killed or been in battle?”

“No.”

He dipped his quill, shook it, and studied Lazarus. “Never killed? Yet you have teeth as a dog. Tell me, do you eat meat?”

“I have. What I mean ~”

The scribe interrupted him. “You say that you have never killed?” He grilled Lazarus, pretending a concoction of apprehension and confusion. “However, to eat meat, one

must kill for it, yes?” And in subtle accusation, he pointed his quill at the Eljo. “Could it be that you now lie before this council?”

“Hear, hear.” The bishop waved a delicate hand and checked the scribe, “No need for confusion. Let him speak.”

Lazarus confessed. “I killed some wild animals, yet, God’s commandments do not apply to animals! I was only hungry and I had no bread!”

The scribe raised an eyebrow. “No ~ bread?”

“None. I found no grains in the forest. I can not make bread without grains.”

“So then you like to eat bread?” The scribe scribbled.

“No, I do not like bread.”

The scribe stopped and sighed. “Then why in blazes were you looking to make bread when you do not like bread?”

The bishop cleared his throat and stepped forward with fingers clasped below a large belly. “Do you believe bread and wine, in the mass performed by Christian priests, to be changed, by divine virtue, into the body and blood of Christ?”

“I do.”

“Excellent reply.” The slyly~grinning bishop rubbed his hands together and turned to the scribe, who sat motionless. “You recorded his answer, yes?”

The scribe replied, “Yet, if it pleases you, I would like to ask him ~”

“It would not please me,” the bishop leaned heavily on the table and scolded him, “Now record his answer.” He snapped his fingers and pointed to the parchment.

“As you wish.” The scribe sulked, yet dipped his quill and obeyed. The bishop turned back to Lazarus with a pleased face.

The scribe stuttered, outwardly anxious, as he asked the next question. “And, how many more are there like your ~ kind ~ uhm, *flying* men?”

“Oh, yes,” the pleasant bishop interjected, “There must certainly be more flying men. How many more and where might they now be?” He pursed his lips in eager anticipation.

“I do not know. I am alone.”

“There’s only one of you?”

“I have seen no another.”

“I see.” The priest frowned, caressing his largest chin while casting his disappointment to the floor.

From the parchment, the scribe read another question aloud, “Do you know how to use a

blade, a bow, or a weapon of any kind?”

“I once made a knife from bone ~ for cutting skins and meat,” Lazarus offered.

The bishop approached Lazarus and searched his eyes. He spotted Lazarus’ prayer cross and pushed aside the overhanging chain links for its better inspection. “Where did you get this?” He leaned closer in continued examination, breathing heavily to himself as self-absorbed fat men often do.

“Twas a gift from my ~ from a friar ~ his prayer cross.”

The obese priest rolled it in his pale and dainty sausage fingers, examining its worn corners. “Yes. Only a friar could wear down a prayer cross like so. I believe you, Lazarus.” The bishop cast him a subtle wink and turned to the guards, “I have seen enough. Remove them.”

The scribe stood quickly and jabbed his quill in the inkwell. “Perhaps we ought not act in haste. How can you be certain that he did not steal it from a prisoner whilst in the pit?”

“Oh, I am quite certain that he did not,” the bishop replied. He tugged on the layers of chains that strapped the necklace tightly against Lazarus’ chest. “For the cross to lie beneath these chains, it could only mean that he was wearing it even before he was bound. Devil’s never carry crosses.” The priest then addressed the entire room whilst pointing to Lazarus. “’Tis is no Devil spawn; ‘tis is a flying man; ‘tis a Christian flying man ~ and his name is Lazarus. And as bishop of this province, I shall retain authority in this matter and shall hear no reference made of him to the contrary.”

Rounding the table, the scribe whispered to the bishop, “A word with you, if I may?” He nodded to a far empty corner of the room. Lazarus perked his ears as, in seemed privacy, the scribe hissed his concerns to the bishop. “Any devil would know how to answer any of these questions. And it looks like nothing made by the Grace or in the Light of God. Perhaps it might be wise to consider leaving those ~ “

The priest cut him short. “Perhaps you might be wise to consider this: If you upset this delicate moment, Lord D’Alcicourt shall have you wearing those irons.” He spun and barked at the soldiers. “Did you not hear me? Remove those filthy irons at once!”

Three guards leaped forth and undressed Lazarus.

The scribe huffed, gathering his belongings when Lazarus addressed him; “I am a flying man.”

The scribe froze and darted his eyes to the bishop to find glaring eyes staring back at him. He shifted his attention back to Lazarus, threw on a rigid smile and replied. “Yes,

you are ~ that.” He stole a glimpse at the now pleased priest before forcing his way out of the room with his rolled parchment and inkwell.

Lazarus bowed slightly to the priest. “I am in your debt. Thank you.”

“Yes, you are. And perhaps we might discuss that little matter later, in the privacy of my quarters,” he quipped in a whisper, whilst stroking Lazarus’ arm. “His grin became a hard brow and a high chin. “However, you are not yet free. Lord D’Alcicourt shall see you shortly.” The bishop spun about and addressed the soldiers. “We are finished here.” The room cleared, the door shut, and Lazarus sat on a bench. Thoroughly filthy, his hair matted with blood, he nursed cuts and bruises beneath a pair of brilliant burning candelabras.

Considerable time elapsed before the door reopened to introduce a middle-aged maid and her three younger maidservants. The obese woman stood nearly as tall as Lazarus did, and her considerable size could perhaps almost dismiss entirely the modest presence of the maidens that filed in behind her. She carried a large overstuffed tray beneath her bosom, the platter filled with soaps, ointments, and various hygiene miscellany. She stopped and inspected Lazarus, who sat on a bench and at the far end of the table. Lazarus arose and bowed.

“So, you are the distinguished flyin’ man?” she asked. “Lazarus, is it?”

“I am Lazarus Gogu,” he offered.

“I have seen more healthy rats ~ you are foul,” she huffed before strolling to end of the table. “And I can smell ya from here.” Whilst unloading the contents of the tray, she discovered that the maidservants had not moved, yet, stood staring across the room at him. One of them gripped a pail of steaming water, another hugged a bundle of folded cloths, and the last held fresh clothes and boots.

“Well, get over here,” she scolded them, “Master Lazarus shan’t bite. He is a Christian.” They sprung forward, placing their contents on the table whilst eyeing him. He smiled, nodded, and they returned smiles.

She returned to the table and busied herself mixing ointments. “Master Lazarus, m’Lord meant you no harm and is furious about your mistreatment. He has since arrested many. I can assure you that we villagers played no part in it. Those who gathered at the gates came from other parts of the province ~ they grow bold since they know that m’lord’s army is too small to enforce rule over his lands.”

“Yet, Lord D’Alcicourt still wishes to speak with me, yes?” Lazarus asked.

“Indeed. Now, if you would kindly step down to this end.”

“And he knows where I am?” Lazarus questioned, rounding the table.

“He does. ‘Tis for your protection, that you are confined, Master Lazarus. He insists you be treated as his distinguished guest.” She grabbed his arm and moved him directly behind her. “Stand here.” She pulled the soap pail from the table and plopped it at his feet.”

“May I speak with him, now?”

She looked him over and chuckled. “You are filthy ~ and certainly in no condition to seek an audience with m’lord. You must risk a bath. Now, let us get on with it. Come out of those skins.” The woman turned back to the tray as the maids encircled him, stepping lightly as angels. Each pulled a soapy cloth from the pail and wrung it.

Lazarus’ eyes flew wide. He stepped away from them. “Disrobe? This moment?”

“You do wish to see m’lord, yes?” she asked him over her shoulder.

“Yes, yet, I would rather ~”

“Oh, shush it. I raised five sons and told ‘em, every one: ‘You have got nothin’ I have not since seen.’ Now undress yourself so that I can clean you up for m’lord. I have my orders ~ either you take off those filthy skins or I am to do it for you.” She resealed the open ointment flasks and returned them to the tray. “He expects you to be scrubbed down. And you have no need for those skins since m’lord has provided fresh clothes and boots. You shall look ~”

Behind her, a maidservant gasped. Another snorted a giggle and the woman scolded them. “I shall have no such behavior!” She reeled ‘round to them in continuing lecture, “As long as ~”

Yet, she spotted Lazarus, standing thoroughly embarrassed.

“Oh, my!” she choked, hand on cheek, as all eyes fell hypnotized by Lazarus’ exceptional features.

Quickly, she cleared her throat and barked at her maidens, “Well? Get on with it!” They snapped forward and slapped soapy cloths on him, scrubbing him down. The woman washed his hair, after which, she fetched a tin of the ointment mixture and swiped a rag over the cut on his forehead. She nursed it. And as the maids washed, she likewise tended to the smaller cuts on his head.

“That shall do it.” She placed the salve to the table and turned back with a clean washcloth. “The deeper cut shall leave a scar, yet, You shall live.”

The woman held his head back and washed his neck. “You certainly do not need a shave, Master Lazarus. Have you never grown hair but on your head?”

“No.”

“And do all flying men have ears and teeth as long as yours?”

“I do not know. I have not seen another ~ Ow!” Lazarus tensed.

“Oh, be still; I am not hurtin’ you.”

“‘Tis them,” he admitted, grumbling upward at the ceiling.

She looked down at the tops of three heads, perhaps gathered in mischief. “Lilita! Are you girls not finished?”

All three leaped to their feet, sporting grins. “Oh, yes, mum.”

“Then move the pail and scrub his backside.” The woman released his head and washed his shoulders. “Raise your arms. And if you would kindly spread those wings, Master Lazarus, then we can clean inside them as well.” He complied; they gasped; yet, the bathing continued.

At length, the woman dried and powdered him. She held up a white frilled shirt, its back sliced down the middle. “I allowed space for your wings, however, puttin’ it on might be a bit of a task.” Yet, it slipped over his wings, rolling perfectly into place. “Wonderful. I thought it might be a bit small. I used the size of my eldest son for to fit you. He was a big man as well.” She fastened the front.

“This is his shirt?” Lazarus asked.

“Oh, no.” She chuckled. “He never wore clothes as fine as these.” She straightened his collar. “Yet, he is dead now.”

“What happened to him?”

She pursed her lips. “He was slain by that monster, Lord Hugon ~ the Devil himself.” She took a pair of black pants from one of the maidens and gave them to him. “His army raided the village fields, killin’ my husband, my five sons, and my two daughters. They fought bravely ~ yet, we are no match for Hugon’s army.”

“Why did he kill them?”

“Cause he is a monster. Yet, enough of that ~ done is done as is gone.” She gave him a pair of black boots. “Now, put these on.” She turned to the table and she and her maid-servants collected their belongings.

Her back to Lazarus, she spoke, “Well, we bathed you with soap and water, washed the blood from you, and put ointments on you. ‘Tis all we can do.”

Refilling the tray, she instructed one of the maidens, “And fetch those skins.”

“Yes, mum.”

She drew a fat woman’s breath and called to him. “No, Master Lazarus, you are not a flyin’ man.”

“But I am.” Lazarus insisted.

She turned and explored his eyes. Then she threw her hands on her hips and smiled in admiration. “No. Now you are as fittin’ as a flyin’ prince. And m’lord ought be quite

taken with ya, as I am.” Lazarus bowed and smiled.

“Well, girls, let us gather everything. Ours is done.” The woman carried her tray to the door and tapped.

Lazarus called after her; “I am in your debt. Thank you.”

“No, you are not, Master Lazarus. Two seasons have passed since I was last a mother to my boys. And only a widowed mother can appreciate moments as these.” She smiled weakly and peered at the floor, perhaps stealing a glimpse of seasons passed. Yet, the door opened and a guard allowed them passage. “Farewell, Master Lazarus,” she called back, as her three burdened maidservants trailed behind her.

“Yes, mum,” Lazarus replied, still smiling, waving his hand like a little boy, even as the door clicked closed.

At length, Lazarus circled the table, head down and hands clasped behind him, pacing in a likeness of a pondering winged nobleman. Then and again, he cast a wary gaze over the walls, twitching his ears, perhaps in some subconscious effort to ascertain that telltale sound of the introduction of hell ~ sometimes marked by what might seem a humming of many locusts.

In his very brief stay, he quickly grew to dislike walls, instead longing for the alternate safety of open space ~ of eternal skies. And, although under protection as the lord’s distinguished guest, Lazarus remained prisoner to an even higher ruler. He lost himself in the candlelight ~ in deep reflection ~ fully aware that he could not risk leaving the room, since, by now, daylight reigned over the earth ~ the scorching sun serving as his master gatekeeper.

However, in the interim, safe from heaven’s infernal chariot, more immediate concerns gnarled his gut. Foremost, how would he explain to Lord D’Alcicourt, or any God-fearing Christian, for that matter, that he was wholly a being created for the night, yet retain his image as a Christian, created in the Light of God? As well, he could only pray that, whatever task Lord D’Alcicourt might have in store for him, it was not a sinful act and did not mandate the light of day. If so simple as that, then, once completed, he could again be on his way to Cancello for to fetch Friar Salvitino and fulfill his promise.

However, the pangs of hunger cried out from a hollow stomach that lay long empty as a gutted tomb. He turned to the door, searching the air with his nose. Faint at first, the smell intensified such to confirm the aroma of roast pork. Voices echoed through the exterior corridor. The door swung open.

In filed a row of servants, each burdened with a steaming dish. Lazarus backed against the wall as they converged on the table, filling its surface with silver dishes in a banquet fit for a king. Roast pork and peppered peacock, fillets of fish, tender veal and broiled beef, and baked chicken and venison steaks competed for space on the crowded surface. Boiled eggs and block cheese decorated dishes. Fruits filled trays beside bowls brimming with nuts. A pitcher of wine stood swollen. Altogether, the table transformed into a sprawling collage and culinary masterpiece.

Individually, the servants bowed and smiled at Lazarus before leaving the room. Lastly, a thin elderly servant arranged a single place setting. He lifted a goblet and filled it with wine.

“There is going to be a feast?” Lazarus asked.

“Indeed; yours, Master Lazarus. Do you require anything more?” Quite jovial, he seemed. He passed a presenting hand over the entire table. “Does all appear to your liking?”

“Oh, no.” Lazarus shook his head, crumpled his brow, and scanned the feast, thoroughly overwhelmed by its extravagance. “‘Tis too much. I shall die. Must I to eat all of it?”

“Indeed not,” the servant chuckled, “Eat only what you wish, Master Lazarus. If it pleases you, your place awaits.” He gestured to the plate and goblet, seemingly drowned by surrounding dishes.

Lazarus approached his appointed place, complaining, “Yet, so much. There is plenty for many. Perhaps you might have others eat as well, lest it spoil.”

“Oh, it shan’t spoil, Master Lazarus.” The servant grinned. He looked over the table.

“We shall all feast on the morrow, on account of you. M’lord is in good spirits and celebrates. And when you have taken your fill, the remainder of it has been promised to all the castle servants.”

“What does he celebrate?”

“He celebrates you, Master Lazarus.”

“Me? Why?”

“Well, I am not permitted to discuss such matters even if I might presume his reasons for it. Master Lazarus, do you require anything more?”

“I ~ no. Thank you, sir.” he murmured. The smiling servant dismissed himself, leaving Lazarus to pray over his plate.

And in a moment, after kissing his prayer cross, Lazarus swarmed the table, filling his plate with portions of every meat dish. He savored each serving ~ never, in all his life at

the abbey, did he imagine himself partaking of a banquet so fine. As he dined, his thoughts were elsewhere, dwelling upon his catacomb days as a boy ~ of the many times that his father stood guard at the door whilst he ate bowls of crusty bread that accompanied what little scraps of meat or cheese that he could slip from the refectory kitchen ~ of the many scriptorium books that he read in secrecy, them describing kings, lords, castles, and fanciful feasts ~ of stealing out of bed and slipping into the wine cellar to catch a sneaky fat friar in the best of spirits. For Lazarus, all of it seemed as happenings of only evenings before. And in an outwardly bittersweet sense, to him, he felt as if Odino's jovial spirit lingered all about him.

Only then did he find the spirit's origin sitting beside his plate as a full goblet of wine. It beckoned him with words familiar but old: 'No longer be drinking water, but a little wine be using, because of thy stomach and of thine often infirmities.' The memory of Odino's hearty laugh echoed in his mind. He took the cup, sipped from it, and smacked his lips. Then a slow grin crept over his face. He turned the goblet up, downed it, and sighed. Then he looked to the ceiling and addressed Odino's spirit; "It tastes better than it smells." He poured himself another cupful and pulled off a peacock leg.

As the private feast continued, Lazarus tapped the pitcher, washing down nearly every mouthful of meat with wine and growing more cheerful by the passing moments. Eventually, he chuckled at nothing and engaged in open dialogue with himself and the food.

Lazarus was drunk.

"I now gather, whilst you were in the cellar, why you laughed so." He chuckled and toasted the ceiling. "To you, Friar Odino, who art in heaven. As it is written: And no one, having drunk old, doth immediately wish new, for he saith, The old is better." He refilled his goblet, lifted the remainder of his peacock leg and tumbled backward, off the bench and onto the floor. The wine splashed over his shirt, soaking it purple and the goblet rolled to the corner of the room. Still holding the large drumstick, he rolled on his side and burst into a fit of laughter.

Lazarus searched the floor for his cup, spotting it in the corner, beside what seemed a flat decayed rat.

"Oh. You do not look so good, my friend. Did Friar Clodius step on you?" He snorted a laugh and propped himself on one arm. "Master Rat, did you know that I am a flying man?" Lazarus cocked his ears lazily, as if expecting reply. "So, you do not speak to

flying men?” Silence passed. “Well, then take a bite of this,” he steadied the drumstick in the rat’s direction, “I must insist that you eat something. You seem a bit ~ thin.” He laughed, babbling nonsense beneath watering eyes.

Half~collecting himself, Lazarus attempted to stand yet, fell again. He slurred, “Well, Master Rat, if you must know, I am a man...fly... I mean~ flying~ I can not *steem* to *sand* up. I said, ‘*man fly*’?” Lazarus guffawed and thrust his drumstick on high. “Yes, Master Rat; I am *Man~Fly*, at your service!”

Moments later, he regained his footing and stumbled back to the table, where he stood propped against it, yet swaying in a drunken stupor. He narrowed his eyes and looked around with an outward expression like someone confused of his whereabouts. His gaze came to rest on the far wall, which, in his thorough intoxication, appeared to heave in and out, as if the stones breathed. He raised his drumstick and bounced it off the wall. “Perhaps you might make this one come alive also?” He stood upright and scolded the wall; “I did not summon you!” Then he fell backward on the floor. He lay still and searched the ceiling with lazy eyes.

Lazarus jolted as a familiar noise intensified ~ a sound like what might resemble an approaching locust swarm. He scrambled beneath the table, eyes glued to the base of the far wall, which stood unchanged even as the noise ceased. He turned to the opposite wall and spotted a pair of naked feet sporting claw~like black toenails.

“Dear God!” he gasped under his breath, shaking with terror.

“Yes, dear flying man,” came a soft voice of many women at once, “I am God.” The feet stepped forward and planted themselves beside the bench, standing close enough that he could lay an outstretched hand on them. “Now, what am I to do with you, Master Lazarus? It seems that you do not know how to remain dead. Is it so difficult a condition to grasp that I, alone, must be the one to teach you?” Lazarus remained silent yet, followed the feet as they strode around the table, occasionally stopping before moving again.

“Your feast is an altar brimming with death. Look at what you did to them ~ headless, legless, gutted and dismembered, burned, boiled, and torn. Can you hear their screams, Master Lazarus?”

Suddenly nauseous, Lazarus clutched his stomach only to discover it repeatedly heaving. “You ate them. Can you hear their pains?” Overcome with splitting cramps, he lay down on his side, cradling a belly that he thought might tear open. Then he heard it: minuscule cries emanating from within his stomach ~ like the blended squeals of many dying mice.

“Do you know why they scream, Master Lazarus?”

Lazarus turned to where the feet last stood yet they were gone. He rolled back to see Lucifael’s face hovering over his, black eyes burning down. He lay petrified.

“Because you refused to eat the bread! Instead, you ate *them!*” she screamed, “You ate their souls, Eljo!” She produced his old skinning knife of sharpened bone and traced the blade delicately across his cheek and lips. “Now, come lay atop this table for me!”

Food scattered and dishes clattered across the flagstones as she cleared the table with broad and deliberate sweeps of her arms ~ the once-elegant and distinguished nobleman’s feast now reduced to nothing more than indistinguishable and disgusting heaps atop a filthy floor.

In a flash, she now stood outside the table, where he last saw her feet. “Come! We shall resurrect them! Get up!”

Yet, Lazarus remained still and trembling, staring at her black-nailed toes.

“Get up, Master Lazarus!”

[End Chapter 14]