

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

Chapter XV

“Get up, this moment!” the washwoman exclaimed, stooping over Lazarus and poking a finger into his side. “Arise, I say, Master Lazarus!” Lazarus awakened with a gasp, grabbing his gut, unknowingly clutching her hand as well. She pulled free her hand and scolded him; “Look at you ~ soiling your new shirt even before your audience with m’lord!”

Lazarus sat upright and looked down at his wine~stained belly. At once, he grabbed his head, winced, and fell back onto the bed. “Dear God; everything moves in circles.” “Oh, no you don’t,” the washwoman barked, “You give me that shirt! M’lord shortly comes. Now, get up from there!”

Lazarus moaned and struggled to his feet before leaning himself heavily against the wall. He looked about warily, as though to see the room anew. Then he rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, commenting to himself that Friar Odino never mentioned to him, of the wicked side to wine.”

“Is there a good side to any wicked thing?” The woman complained, pulling Lazarus from the wall and escorting him toward the table by a fistful of his shirt, “Flying man or not, you’re all alike ~ every last one of you.” She swung him around and stopped him in place. “Men: clean ‘um up, give ‘um drink; and clean ‘um up again,” she bickered, unbuttoning his blouse. Again, Lazarus winced and reached for his head when she slapped his arm down. “Be still; there is little time.”

He sighed and turned away to inspect the empty tabletop, its one fresh candelabra, and the now transformed room; noting to himself that, not a spot of food, mess, or spill, lay about him. He looked toward the corner. “Where is the rat?”

“Rat; what rat?”

“It lay just there; in the corner of the room,” he offered, pointing.

“You’re still drunk.” She huffed, shook her head.

“What, of the food?”

“Twas taken away this morn ~ whilst you snored;” she declared, pulling his arm from out of his shirt. “And you dropped half of the master’s food on the floor. You ought to be ashamed; behaving so, after the kindly reception that m’lord has bestowed.”

“‘Twas the wine. I could not seem to stand. I did not know that ~ She cut him off; “I’ve also heard that one before. *‘Tis the fault of wine, but ne’er thine.*” She removed his blouse, popped it loosely, and turned the shirt at angles to inspect its purpled condition.

Lazarus rearranged his wings and scratched his head. “You say that, lord D’Alcicourt ~ he comes?”

“And quite directly,” she barked, turning and stepping away from him. ““Twould have been even sooner; however, when he heard, tell of your ignoble condition, he allowed you the ample space to collect yourself ~ most of the day, mind you.” She scowled and folded the shirt over her arm as she called back to him, ‘Tis not often that a guest holds him to such a lengthy wait. You might humble yourself before him and give the wine less blame than you believe it to deserve.” The washwoman tapped on the door and slipped out.

As Lazarus circled the table and sat on the bench, the door opened once more. Three large guards entered the room and lined themselves against the wall. After which, a dark~haired and thin~bearded, young man swept himself the door and abruptly halted, his light green eyes quickly falling on Lazarus. His face could have appeared almost boyish, and in stark contrast to the rest of him; as he was tall, well framed, and commanded the stature of a weathered soldier. He unfastened his cape and draped it over a guard’s ready arm. Then he adjusted his double~breasted vest, smiled, and slowly approached Lazarus. “Lazarus Gogu, I do gather?” He nodded. “I am Lord *Ceryce D’Alcicourt, Comte de Languenais*, and seniority over these lands.” He rounded the table, opposite Lazarus. “I have anticipated this moment with you.” He clasped his hands, looking at Lazarus’ shirtless torso with apparent pleasure as he stated, “At last, we meet.”

Lazarus reverently responded with a deep and lasting bow. “M’lord; the honor is mine.” “Indeed, rise ~ no need,” he insisted, joyfully.

Lazarus rose to find the nobleman approaching him. He heard the jingle of loose coins beneath the man’s vestments. And he saw his vest briefly part to reveal the butt of a sheathed dagger.

D’Alcicourt sighed and shook his head, adding, “I must extend my deepest apologies for the ill~treatment that you have received whilst under my custody. I gave strict orders that no harm come to you. My men were brave ~ some of them died in your defense. Had I anticipated such a riotous gathering, I would have dispatched amply more men.” Lazarus lowered his gaze.

D'Alcicourt drew a breath, patted the tabletop, and smiled. "Yet you are here, praise God. And now that you are safe, I can assure you that my armies and the divine authority of the Holy See, especially of this province, are at your behest, should you require them." He nodded. "So, I trust that you found everything to your liking, yes ~ your clothes, the banquet ~ and the wine?"

"Indeed," Lazarus insisted; "I've never seen as much food on so great a table ~ or garb as fine as this. Forgive me for spilling the wine, m'lord; I lost my balance. 'Twas most unexpected."

The lord dismissed him with a waving hand as he reassured him, "Quite expected, what with all that you have underwent, as of late. 'Twas much too bright a blouse for to conceal a stain." He snapped his fingers. "Ah! Be assured that my maidservant fetches another as we speak. A much darker shade is in order ~ deep as twilight, even." He sighed and smiled. "And since you are now betwixt blouses and partly naked, perhaps you might show me the more splendid parts of yourself ~ your wings, especially, if you will?" He gestured for him to turn. "Unfurl them for me."

Lazarus obeyed, briefly spreading a full view of himself before turning back around, to find the soldiers' hard stares and the greenish gleam in D'Alcicourt's eyes. The man clapped once and held his interlaced fingers to his chin. "Absolutely astounding; what great wings, you have, Lazarus. Truly wondrous, you are." He gestured toward the table benches, approaching it himself. "Now, if you would kindly be seated."

As Lazarus took his seat at the table, the man leaned close to him, opened his mouth widely, and uttered, "A~h~h!"

Lazarus obeyed the crude gesture, opening his mouth for D'Alcicourt.

The lord chuckled and slapped his hand on the table. "And what big teeth, you have; truly, marvelous!" He grabbed the lobe of his ear as he tilted himself and looked at Lazarus' ear. "And a keen ear, you must have, yes?"

"Yes, m'lord," Lazarus admitted, feeling somewhat discomfited by the interest given to his less~than~manly features. He cleared his throat. "If it pleases you; perhaps you might share the reason for your summoning me?"

"And so I shall," D'Alcicourt stated, dismissing his pleasure for a more composed manner. "I summoned you in hopes that you might assist me with a particular task ~ a rather simple undertaking for such a gifted individual as yourself."

"What task is that, m'lord?"

The nobleman drew a breath and looked at the tabletop, briefly deliberating before tapping his finger on the table. "Perhaps I should begin at the beginning, yes?"

"If you would care to share," Lazarus rejoined with a smile and a nod.

“Very well, then. My elder brother was Lord Gildard D’Alcicourt, former Comte de Languenais. His castle is many leagues west of here; however, he has since passed away ~ from the vapors ~ many seasons ago. His wife passed shortly thereafter, in childbirth, leaving no able heir to reign ~ only the infant survived. Gildard had anticipated this possibility, amongst other ill fortunes, by having already prepared a final will and testament, lawful and binding, to deal with just such an occurrence. In it, he decreed this: if he had a child that is incapable of overseeing his estate, then I am to assume governorship until such time that the child is soundly able. What is more, he recorded this: if the child is a girl, then I am to bring her of age and see her hand in marriage to a suitable dignitary before releasing his estate to the both of them. As it is writ and law; for the life of me, I am bound to uphold his decree, whereupon; at my death, the girl child is to inherit the whole of his estate ~ wedded or not. The girl is my niece, Endora D’Alcicourt, and is barely of age to know passion from reason, or good from evil, for that matter. As it happened, she has since fallen out of favor with me to become a wanton and covetous witch, absurdly demanding that all of my father’s former lands be surrendered to her ~ Gildard’s and mine alike. In her scheming way, she has taken the hand of *Lord Frederich Hugon, Comte de Borbonaise* ~ even a swine would be a better suitor, than *Hugon, the Drunken Butcher*. Nevertheless, she convinced Hugon to contest my brother’s final decree and, he petitioned the Royal Courts even as he embarked on a campaign of raids, slaughtering my people as they tended the fields of Gildard’s land. Consequently, the Royal Magistrate summoned an archbishop of the See for negotiations. The Church called for him to honor a truce until the matter was resolved. Yet, Hugon has since broken the truce and laid siege to Gildard’s castle, sparing no lives ~ not even those of the children ~ even the children,” D’Alcicourt exclaimed, striking his fist on the table.

Lazarus jolted.

D’Alcicourt relaxed his fist and rubbed his eyes with two fingers. “Forgive my outrage.” He drew a deep breath and further explained about his wife and kind; “My lady and her three young brothers were at Gildard’s castle when Hugon laid siege. His men killed them and burned their remains alongside the bodies of my soldiers and peasants. I am now to believe that Endora has sent her condolences and her word that they were not in the castle when Hugon struck. However, m’lady and her brothers remain missing, for a fortnight.”

D’Alcicourt abruptly rose from the table and stepped toward the wall before folding his arms and leaning his back against the stones. He nodded at Lazarus. “And, as of late, I received word of a very different relationship betwixt Endora and Hugon. My informant

has told me that Hugon holds Endora captive, apart from him, whilst he sleeps in Gildard's bed. From this, I can only gather that he spares her life merely because I am not yet dead. And when I die ~ and then she dies ~ he stands to protest my final decree and gain outright possession of my father's entire province. I know his plan. He has already boasted to his men that he shall attack my castle, leaving none alive to tell of it. The Drunken Butcher raises his army against me as I speak."

D'Alcicourt approached the table and sat, looking squarely at Lazarus. "This is where you can do me a grave service. Hundreds of lives ~ men, women, and children ~ are riding on your wings, Lazarus. As a Christian flying man, I expect that you do your part to serve what is just, and righteous in God's Holy Name."

Lazarus squirmed and braced himself. He swallowed hard and nodded.

D'Alcicourt addressed his guards, "Recall your oath ~ sworn to secrecy; saying nothing of this moment." The guards nodded and D'Alcicourt turned back to Lazarus. He leaned himself over the table and moved his finger across its top, as though, tracing over an unseen map. "After night falls, I need you to fly to Gildard's castle and enter the middle window of the south tower, which opens upon winding steps that climb to the upper corridor. The corridor leads directly to the castle's master chambers." To the left, is Hugon's chamber; to the right, is Endora's chamber. As Hugon's prisoner, Endora's door is locked from without; and no guards are permitted within the corridor."

Lazarus leaned away and shook his head, sighing heavily.

D'Alcicourt waved a stilling hand, "No, no ~ not to fret! Hear me; no one shall discover you! Hugon posts his interior guards only at the base of the stairwell and they shan't expect entry through the higher window. What is more, you shall fly in from the rear of the castle that spans a steep cliff, requiring no guards. His army guards the front and sides of the castle; and their eyes shall cover the grounds ~ not the skies. You can fly in and out, without attention or word mentioned of you." D'Alcicourt leaned away from the table, presented Lazarus with open hands, and smiled. "You see? 'Tis all too simple a task for a man who can fly for half an eve without rest. The Lord has truly blessed my people, with your unexpected presence, Lazarus. For you, they shall be, forever grateful."

"M'lord," Lazarus stated, clearing his throat, "Perhaps you may mistake my ability. I can fly half an eve without rest; however, I cannot carry another whilst in flight ~ 'tis beyond me."

"I do not expect you to carry anyone, anywhere." D'Alcicourt unsheathed his dagger and stuck it into the tabletop. "Is this too heavy a burden?"

Lazarus narrowed his eyes at the black-handled blade. “So, you do not ask me to save Endora, I gather?”

He looked up to find D’Alcicourt shaking his head and saying, “She is not yours to save, Lazarus. Only the Good Graces of the Lord Almighty can administer such.” He leaned forward and tapped a finger on the butt of the standing knife. “This is all that you need to carry ~ light as a feather and sharp as a falcon’s eye, it is. Take it.”

“M’lord, I have no need for it,” Lazarus retorted.

“No; one cannot rely on strength alone. Hugon is a big man. Now, you shall take it with you so that nothing is left to chance.” D’Alcicourt pointed a finger at Lazarus and winked. “Big, he is; yet again, do not fret. As with every eve, he shall be drunk and sleeping alone. He shan’t awaken to soft footfalls. So, be quick and clean; and do make certain that he breathes no more. Leave the dagger with him so that his men find him slain by my own blade. Then you must depart from the same tower window and fly back to me. I shall await your safe return.”

Lazarus shook his head. “But, m’lord; I saw your army outside the castle. ‘Twas great. How can Lord Hugon defeat such numbers if you place them in defense of your castle? Perhaps, if you do this, then no blood shall be spilled.

D’Alcicourt shook his head. “‘Twas not my army, gathered at the gates, but an unruly and unwelcome mob. When word had spread throughout the province, they came for you. In truth, my loyal ranks have dwindled considerably and; for the most part, they remain within the castle. And unlike me, Hugon leads a considerable army ~ perhaps even greater than the mob that you saw. All told, I have little defense, should he strike. The village, outside the castle, shall be the first to fall. As is his practice, he shall spare no lives.”

Lazarus searched the tabletop, considering options. “Then perhaps you can lead your villagers and soldiers away from harm ~ as did Moses, with his people; and no blood shall be ~

“No, Lazarus,” he interjected, “I am not Moses; and this is not a faraway land of old. I am a vassal and servant of the king ~ a mere lord ~ and these are my lands and its people. We’ve no place to go. We were born on this land; we work this land; and we shall be buried in the shadows of our forbearers ~ this is our home. If I command my people to abandon everything dear to them and, allow Hugon to burn their homes and defile the graves of their fathers, brothers, and sons, who died at his hand, then they would turn against me ~ villager and soldier alike. And I could not begrudge them for it.”

Lazarus searched the walls, considering more alternatives. “M’lord, if you have so few people, then why do you require the same amount of land as, when you had many?”

Perhaps you might make peace with him by offering him a portion of land, which you no longer require. And perhaps you might send the bishop to arrange the accord, and have him free Endora. And no blood ~

“No man can barter with Hugon. He desires all of my lands ~ and my head ~ and shall settle for nothing less; he is beyond reason. Moreover, the bishop has fled, leaving me with only a winged man and a dagger.”

“Fled? Why did His Eminence flee?”

D’Alcicourt caught his breath and smiled curtly. He rolled his eyes, interlocked his fingers, and explained, almost reluctantly, “Well, because I insisted of him, that he arrange another sort of accord: one that involved an informal inquisition of sorts, which I thought might serve to quell growing suspicion and calm the concerns of my people.” D’Alcicourt looked sternly at the soldiers against the wall, who nodded with a gaze of sincerity.

Lazarus asked, “The inquisition was about me ~ with His Eminence and the scribe, yes?”

D’Alcicourt nodded. “For my people, I required a representative of the Church to proclaim that you are not a devil, but a flying man.” He loudly cleared his throat. “In his overly long stay at the castle, and under constant guard for his safety, mind you; he found the time to gather our delicate position. The reason is now clear, yes?”

Lazarus looked away.

D’Alcicourt continued, “Nevertheless, he fled to Avignon with his concerns.” He shrugged. “I had no recourse. I could not have him order you burned upon a stake.”

Lazarus winced. “His Eminence wished to burn me? But he found me to be a flying man. Only the scribe said otherwise.”

“No matter; they shall trouble you no more. You are under my protection; and my people are now at ease with a mere Christian flying man in their midst.” He turned to the guards, who stood against the wall, and addressed them, “Is this not true?”

They answered as one; “Yes, m’lord.”

“But, do you gather me to be a devil?” Lazarus asked him.

“It matters,” he answered with a quick twist of his neck, “Only that you are safe.”

“If you will, m’lord; it matters to me.”

D’Alcicourt sighed and shook his head. “Very well; I shall confess that, in the beginning, when one of my soldiers sent word of your capture, I believed you to be the Devil.” He shrugged. “His recollection of you was quite colorful, to say the least; as he had me gather you standing a full head taller than the tallest of my men, having monstrous wings of a dragon, and baring teeth so large as to devour even a cow. Merely

words without merit, they were; idle as prattle, as I have since learned from your short stay.” He passed a presenting hand over Lazarus and chuckled. “Look at you. You are not the Devil ~ or any devil, for that matter, but a mere flying man.”

Lazarus cocked his head. “Yet, if you gathered me to be the Devil, then why did you allow me into your home, m’lord?”

They searched one another’s eyes.

D’Alcicourt abruptly stood, clasped his hands behind him, and paced the floor as he kept an eye on Lazarus. Then he abruptly stopped and spun on his heel to fully face Lazarus before answering with yet another question; “Yes; and why would, a God~fearing man like me, invite all that is unholy, as the Devil himself, into his very home?” He smiled and propped himself loosely against the wall, and praised Lazarus, “You are quite versed in the discipline of dialogue and leave little space for idle speak. It seems to me that you can best even the bishop, in discourse and discord.” He snatched a breath and assumed a more sincere stance. “Nevertheless, ‘twas not so difficult a decision for me, since I had no course but insist upon an audience with you. If you were the Devil, as my soldiers had claimed, then I gathered that you might be quite willing to offer me a pact of sorts, and perhaps provide me with options unavailable to me.”

Lazarus questioned him, a growing apprehension in his voice, “What manner of...m’lord, pray tell; what sort of pact?”

“Surely, an accord that would save the lives of my people ~ in exchange for my own, of course,” D’Alcicourt admitted, retaking his seat opposite Lazarus.

Lazarus cleared his throat and solemnly declared, “The Devil would...take more than your life, m’lord. What of your soul?”

The man nodded. “Yes; my soul, in exchange for defeating Hugon and forever protecting my lands and people from butchers like him. He clasped his hands before him and smiled, elatedly saying, “However, by the Grace of God, the pact was not to be, since you are not the Devil, but a winged Christian man who can likewise save my fellow Christians from the vile spread of Hugon!” He shook his fists at the ceiling and joyfully called aloud, “In Christ’s Name, my prayers have been answered by His godsend of a flying man who can deliver us from the devil, who is Hugon, and protect my good people from his growing evil! Truly, the Lord moves in wondrous ways.” He turned to his soldiers. “Does He not?”

“Yes, m’lord,” they responded, reverently.

Lazarus set his jaw and briefly closed his eyes, weighing the moment in his mind. “Yet, you insist that I take another man’s life.”

D'Alcicourt pursed his lips and nodded. "Notwithstanding the good and godly intentions of such a venture, I gathered that you might have reservations." He slipped his hand into his vest and produced a jingling purse. "I am likewise prepared to offer you generous compensation." He shook the purse. "Thirty~three pieces of Genoese gold should ease such concerns, yes?" He loosened the purse straps and poured the heavy gold coins on the table between them, adding, "Most men never earn as much in all their lives; however, 'tis all yours upon your safe return. I am a man of honor and my word is genuine." He smiled and leaned toward Lazarus, asking, "Now, what say you to a lifetime's wages for but a single eve's work?" D'Alcicourt raised his eyebrows and awaited Lazarus' reply.

Lazarus cast a wary gaze betwixt the down~turned dagger, with its point sunk into the tabletop, and the heap of partly shimmering gold, which lay in the long shadow of the knife. He shook his head and turned away. "Not everything can be bartered, m'lord." He looked back at him and raised his hands in apparent confusion. "You said that you were willing to offer your soul, when it is not yours to offer; and now you insist, that I take the life of a man when it is not mine to take. He dropped his hands into his lap and sighed. "Forgive me, m'lord; in all good judgment, I can not do what you request of me."

D'Alcicourt's face fell. He set his jaw as he returned the coins to his purse. He drew tight the straps, slipped the purse beneath his vest, interlaced his fingers on the tabletop, and peered deeply into Lazarus' face. Then he broke the brief silence, asking him, "Lazarus, have you ever heard tell of the tale of the three prophets and the serpent?" "I have not," Lazarus admitted.

"Then I must tell it to you," he stated, settling himself more comfortably in his seat. He looked over Lazarus' shoulder, as if gazing into a great distance. "It happened like this ~"

"Once, there were three brothers who were gifted as prophets of God. The eldest was blind, yet blessed with keen hearing; he was able to hear any form of evil from the greatest distances. The middle brother was gifted with exceptional sight; he was able to see any possibility, and change the course of destiny because of it. And the youngest brother was a man who spoke few words, yet, was graced with an unusual tongue, such that he could speak with angels.

One morn, the two elder brothers prepared a fine feast and; since the youngest lived apart from them, they set off to fetch their brother from

a nearby village. As they strode down the only beaten path betwixt the two villages, the blind brother stopped and gave warning, saying, 'I hear the presence of evil atop the next rise ~ 'tis a ready serpent, laying in wait.'

The middle brother searched the path and replied, 'Yes, 'tis so. However, I see a winding way through the wood ~ one that shall lead us safely to our brother's village.'

The eldest complained, 'I do not know the wide wood like the straight and narrow path. Perhaps we might continue forward and slay the serpent before it strikes.' Concerned about the snake, he added, 'However, since I am blind, I shall wait here whilst you slay it.'

Also fearful of the snake, the other responded, 'Perhaps we ought not to slay one of God's creatures when He has blessed us with keen senses to avoid it? And since you are blind, it may strike you whilst I try.' They agreed with one another, finding good cause to avoid the snake entirely; and they slipped into the wood, en route to the village.

That eve, all three brothers returned down the village path, completely beside themselves, in speak of the coming feast, and unaware of all that lay before them. Straight away, the serpent leapt out and struck the heel of the youngest. The two elder brothers rushed him to safety, and cared for him beneath a fig tree. After which, each accused the other for their younger brother's misfortune.

The middle brother reproached the elder, 'You knew that the serpent was on the path, yet, on our return, you did not listen for it! Now, our brother is stricken!'

The elder brother rebuked the middle, 'And you knew that the serpent was on the path as well, since you refused to slay it when I asked this of you! Now, our dear brother is near death!'

Then, the youngest cried out in tongues and frightened the men into silence. He told them that an angel spoke to him, saying, "Twas God, who placed the serpent on the path, that He might know who is worthy of walking the way. And since He blessed your brothers with a keen sense to know Evil, yet they showed no urgency or duty to remove such; He declared, henceforth, that the serpent shall become like a dragon underfoot, striking at the heels of every villager, 'til it be slain."

Upon hearing this, the two brothers leapt to their feet and beat the brush; chasing the serpent up and down the path until they finally slew it. And as testimony, they brought its carcass back to the fig tree only to find their brother was dead."

With his elbows now braced on the table, and fingers still interlocked, D'Alcicourt searched Lazarus' face as he explained, "As it happened with the three brothers, their lack of duty in the slaying of evil, became the very evil that slew their brother. And just as the serpent lives only to strike down and take from every good man; likewise, Hugon does the same." He gently patted the table. "Hear me, Lazarus; only you can get near the serpent and slay it. If you refuse, then hundreds of good men, women, and children shall perish. And Hugon shall continue killing 'til the end of his days. As a flying man of God and a servant in His Good Army, you must recognize your extraordinary gift and utmost duty to save His people from evil. Do you gather me? 'Tis your godly duty, this day."

Lazarus huffed and turned away when D'Alcicourt moved quickly to sooth his concerns. "No, hear me clearly, Lazarus. Slay this daemon, Hugon, and I shall appoint you as my personal governor over Gildard's castle and lands, altogether providing you with a sizable army to keep rule over the region. Forthwith, you shall want for nothing for the rest of your days. All of this, I shall give you, for something that you can easily accomplish in but a blink of an eye. My word is binding for as long as we both shall live, so long as you serve with me."

"But you ask me to kill," Lazarus interjected, still eyeing the dagger. "Perhaps there is another way ~ a just and fitting arrangement betwixt the two of you?" He leaned forward, insisting, "I can not take this man's life, Lord D'Alcicourt ~ I simply can not." The nobleman slammed his fist on the table. The knife fell on its side. "For the sake of God!" He stood up. "Have you any sense of duty or compassion for your Christian fellowmen?"

Lazarus lowered his gaze in humble reply; "If it pleases you, m'lord; in the commandments delivered by Moses, 'Tis a grave sin to take the life of another man. 'Tis also written: Fear not those who can kill the body but not the soul. Fear only that which can destroy both. How am I to show duty or compassion for my fellow man and kill him in the same? How can I serve God and deny his rule in the same?"

D'Alcicourt turned to his guards, raising his arms and dropping them limply. He stared at them, outwardly stupefied. "What sign is this ~ that I am perchance vexed with a curse?" He shook a presenting hand at Lazarus as he complained to them; "He is right here ~ in my own castle ~ the very answer to him. This single pair of wings can stop the daemon, Hugon, when my entire army cannot. How can I have had the good fortune of finding a flying man, only to learn that the zeal of his faith makes him fruitless in the face of Evil?" He looked at the ceiling. "Dear God, I have lost so many good people,

thus far! Must this be as a trial of Job?” He questioned his soldiers, incredulously, “Can there be any greater, an ill omen upon a people, than this?”

The soldiers dropped their gazes.

D’Alcicourt slapped his palms on the table and leaned toward Lazarus, grumbling, “Very well then. On an account of you, I have lost many able soldiers, much food and supplies, and precious time. And with Hugon’s imminent attack, I could not have afforded the loss of any of them!”

D’Alcicourt continued calmly, “However, since these losses stem from my own decisions, I have no recourse but to accept them. After all, I cannot rightfully hold your good faith in contempt of my own will; however, this decision shall surely rest on your head, as it brings certain and terrible death to hundreds of Christians; mostly of who are women, children, and the elderly.” Then he shook an accusing finger at Lazarus. “And let History forever remember that a sole flying man ~ that YOU alone, Lazarus Gogu ~ slew all of them with your mighty sword of self-righteousness!” He grabbed the dagger from the tabletop and sheathed it, adding, with a glare of disdain, “A sword of such extent ~ such caliber ~ that it needn’t be brandished even to slay thousands!” He turned away and stormed toward the door, calling without, “Guards!”

Abruptly, the door swung open as Lord D’Alcicourt and his soldiers departed the room, leaving Lazarus to ponder the possible obligations and subsequent expectations, which might accompany any prescribed, Christian flying man.

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Outside the castle ramparts, the cloak of night drifted from out of the east; and the withering sun cast its last rays to mark yet another eve since Lazarus’ capture. Across the sky, the first stars of twilight pierced through wispy clouds and their crimson blanket of sunset. And over the land of long shadows and sleepy hollows ~ due west of D’Alcicourt’s castle and, not even a league through dim fields and pitch forests ~ a ready army of maybe three thousand equestrians and foot soldiers aligned themselves on the rocky bed of a snaking ravine. At the head of the winding column, a large knight sat in his saddle. With his helmet visor raised, he adjusted the armor fittings over his fists and forearms ~ ‘twas Hugon of Borboneise. Two mounted knights accompanied him.

To the left of Hugon, a knight pointed up the ravine and toward a bend. “M’lord, he returns.”

Hugon raised his attention to an advancing scout that guided his horse down a steep embankment and leveled himself into the bottom of the ravine. Then he broke into a

gallop as Hugon wondered aloud; “And D’Alcicourt’s devil has not slain the boy?” He cast a narrow eye betwixt his two knights. ‘Tis either a good omen, or a great evil, goodly veiled.” He studied the hastily advancing scout and informed his men; “He carries something on his person; be ready.” The two soldiers gripped their swords and watched the young man’s approach. The scout cradled a bundle of cloth in one hand, pressing it firmly against his rib.

The soldier on Hugon’s right offered, “Perhaps he is wounded?”

Hugon shook his head. “He sits too upright for such a wound; and his horse rides strong. Be ready for trickery, or veil of the Devil Himself.” As the scout advanced, the two knights lowered their visors and drew their swords. Hugon sat, unmoved.

The scout slowed, his steed blowing hard.

Hugon addressed his belatedness. “The castle is not in the English Kingdom, boy.”

“Forgive me, m’lord,” said the winded scout. “The servant was elderly and late to arrive. ‘Twas a long walk from the castle to the wood~line, for him.”

“Out with it, then; what say the servant?”

The scout moved his horse closer to Hugon and leaned forward on his mount, caught his breath, and whispered, “Your astrologer speaks true, of his visions, m’lord. Lord D’Alcicourt has captured a winged devil. He cares for it under heavy guard, in one of the lower corridor cells, welcoming it as a distinguished guest. As well, the bishop has issued a formal decree, by authority of the Holy See, claiming it to be a Christian flying man; however, the bishop has since disappeared. The servant also gave his word, saying, that if you attack the castle soon enough, then lord D’Alcicourt’s defenses shan’t be at the ready.” The boy nodded. “I believe he speaks true, m’lord. I did not see the castle under heavy guard. As well, the peasants remain in the village and show no concern. And I saw no patrols along the wood~line or beyond it ~ nothing, save a hare in the wood.”

Hugon nodded toward the package in the scout’s hand. “So you snared a hare for me?”

“Oh! No m’lord,” the scout refuted, handing Hugon the package. “I stopped for nothing. ‘Tis a gift from the servant, who welcomes your advance. ‘Tis a token of his appreciation and loyalty. He made certain to include plenty for yourself and others; and said that he has a banquet ready for you and your men.”

Hugon weighed the package in his hand before unfolding the cloth to reveal layers of sliced pork. He smelled the meat and nodded before asking the scout, “A fine bit of food before battle; what think you?”

“Oh, yes m’lord; a fine bit, I gather,” the young man acknowledged with a smile, “And prepared in your enemy’s own kitchen, m’lord.” He looked to Hugon’s two knights for

signs of shared mirth, yet found only hard stares. They retired their swords. Hugon responded to the boy, “Precisely, as you say ~ food from my enemy.” He refolded the cloth and tossed the package back to him. “So take your fill.”

The boy swallowed hard. “M’lord?”

“You know this good servant better than any man here, having seen and spoken with him ~ and looked him squarely in the eye. Did you not find him to be in good faith?”

“Yes, m’lord, yet he told me that the gift was specifically meant for you ~ that I eat no meat along the way.”

“But, you are not on your way; since you have already arrived. And he said that there was plenty for others, yes?

“Yes, m’lord.”

“Then I offer you meat, and a full belly before battle. Eat!”

The knight on Hugon’s right complained; “He is but a boy, m’lord. He has obeyed your every command.”

The soldier to Hugon’s left rebutting the other; “If he obeyed m’lords every command, then the boy would now be chewing his meat, yes?”

“Indeed,” Hugon agreed. “Partake of the meat, boy! Eat your fill.”

The knight to his right rolled his eyes and turned away; as the knight on the left laughed and smacked his lips at the scout. The young man opened the cloth and ate quickly.

Hugon turned to peer over his shoulder as he noted the final glow of a setting sun. “With Christ, His Holiness, and my good astrologer, with his Moon Plate, Destiny is with us.” He turned back to his knights. “And when D’Alcicourt’s lands are united beneath my banner, both regions shall become as a single great province, only to serve the Will of God as a ready and unwavering power in His Majesty’s defense of France.” Hugon steered his horse toward the sunset and inspected his army, and gave orders to the knight on his right. “I want you to make certain that the munitions carts are secure for quick advance. I expect your men to position the line of siege carts before D’Alcicourt’s archers are atop the ramparts. At the same moment, you shall have the rams in place.” Then he commanded of the knight on his left; “And you shall have your men clear the village and drive the peasants toward the castle, holding them well in range of D’Alcicourt’s archers, whilst a portion of your strongest soldiers reinforce the ramming of the gates. Now, inform the ranks that we press onward.”

After Hugon’s two Captains bolted from his side, he turned his steed about and studied the scout, who labored over a mouthful of meat. He snapped his fingers and waved, and the young man complied with his gesture, refolding the cloth and surrendering the

package. Hugon tucked the bundle into the satchel of his saddle and dismissed the soldier. “Join ranks, boy.”

The scout drew on his reins and spurred his steed away.

Now alone, yet with an army behind him, Hugon looked into the dark eastern sky and murmured to himself, “Evil deeds do not go without cost, D’Acicourt. You may have the Devil in your midst; yet, I shall have your head; as God shall have your soul.” He leaned over the side of his horse, blew his nostrils clean, and resettled himself in his saddle. Thus, betwixt the root-lined walls of a dry riverbed, lord Hugon’s army made its preparations to move. Horses snorted and soldiers shouted commands, even as the unbroken and ringing noise of armor and weapons accompanied a steady shrill of evening insects.

~*~

Like a spider, weaving over its evening catch, Time rolled the dying skies into a cocoon of darkness, only to unfurl the transmuted heavens into the radiance of yet another dawn. As the red sun rose, it dissolved every long and lingering shadow, softening the sharp angles of D’Alcicourt’s sparsely defended castle ramparts. And within the bowels of the stone fortress, sealed behind a crude door, Lazarus remained as its prominent guest and guarded prisoner.

The Eljo walked to the corner of the room where he recalled the dead rat. He squatted, swiped his finger across the flagstones, and smelled it, discovering only the faint traces of dust and wine. He stood, perplexed, and searched the other corners of the room, gathering that he might have unknowingly spotted the carcass elsewhere; however, they were equally empty. He set his jaw and wondered over the odd recollection. By itself, the notion of a dead rat was of no great concern to him. What was truly troubling Lazarus, was that he found, for the first time, that his recollected perception of reality was now at odds with Truth. In all of his days, within the abbey catacombs, he had always perceived and sensed things for what they were. If he heard a noise, then the sound was real and had distinct origins. If he saw a movement from out of the corner of his eye, then there was truly a variation of light and shade, which made the image of motion. If he sensed the presence of Good or Evil, then there was a nearby article or subsequent revelation that always justified the feeling. And since his recollections never before failed him, boldly underscored by his ability to retain every word and illustration, of every tome, of an entire scriptorium ~

He sighed heavily and strode toward the table, dismissed the mystery of the dead rat,

and pressed his hair back.

He perked his ears toward the crude door, hearing new noises without. At length, sounds of the door's metal latch preceded the entering of the obese washwoman, a black cloth draped over her arm.

Lazarus smiled, yet she did not return the same welcoming expression. Instead, she unfurled the cloth and held it up to present a black shirt, especially fitted for him. "For what good it serves, this one shall better suit you." She cut her eyes at him, adding, "The white shirt is ruined with the wine stain." She stepped forward, popped the shirt in the air, and held it open for him. "Shall we?"

"Oh, yes," Lazarus rejoined, backing into the shirt, as she clothed him. He suggested, "Perhaps, I might scrub the other shirt ~ I have cleaned many robes, stained by wine." "And what color were these robes?" she smugly asked.

"Shades of brown; mostly, they were."

"Precisely; they were not white. White is unforgiving. Now you may wear black ~ from neck to toe ~ so that you are no longer troubled by corruptible stains of wine or vice, gaucherie, or other debauchery that soils you." She fitted the shirt snugly around his wings, spun him, and busied herself with the buttoning of his blouse. She offered no further exchange, and kept her eyes on her hands. Lazarus watched her lips repeatedly pursing with every new button, as people are prone to do, when their fingers become less agile with age.

A somber Lazarus looked away. "Please forgive my foolishness; I did not mean to stain the shirt."

"Oh, 'tis not the stain," she remarked in haste. "'Tis nothing."

"Then, what troubles you?"

"Nothing, I say. And you should not concern yourself with an old and foolish widow like me. Now, give me your arm."

Lazarus extended his arm whilst she straightened his cuff. He asked, "Please tell me, if you would; how have I crossed you? Can I make it right?"

The woman laughed mockingly and rolled her eyes, only moving to straighten his other cuff.

Lazarus placed a gentle hand atop hers, and stilled her fingers. For a moment, when their eyes locked, Lazarus saw the pain in her gaze. Abruptly, she pulled her hands from him, stepped back, and crossed her arms. "You've no right, Master Lazarus."

Lazarus stated, "I do not understand. If it is not the shirt, then, what have I done?"

She shook her head and narrowed her eyes at him. "You've done nothing; and

everything is as it should be, for you. ‘Tis certainly not my place to meddle in your own affairs.” She briefly extended a presenting hand over him, continuing, “You’ve had a nobleman’s bath, a king’s feast; and you now don the finest clothes. What is more, you are polite in every respect, and hold deep convictions of, what you believe to be, right and wrong ~ a quality that shall undoubtedly serve you well. Even more, you enjoy excellent health and should live a long and eventful life ~ bound by nothing, save yourself and God. And with all of your good merits and blessings, you now have the good fortune of knowing that m’lord intends to set you free, so that you may fly far away from here and forget this troubled place.”

Lazarus instantly beamed with joy. “He has agreed to free me?”

She nodded, solemnly saying, “This, he has. M’lord is a man with a good and kind heart ~ even with those who might be lacking his same virtues.”

Lazarus lost his smile. “I only wish to ~ what he asked of me ~ perhaps you do not know

~

“I know everything, Master Lazarus ~ even more than you might presume.”

“Oh?”

She huffed, threw her hands on her hips, and rolled her head emphatically as she spoke. “Indeed, I do. I have served as the personal chambermaid for Master D’Alcicourt and his children, for the most part of all my days. I know every happening, even as it unfolds. As such, I know that he has extended a courtesy to you, unmatched with any distinguished guest that he has ever welcomed into his home. I know that, even the boots on your feet belonged to his father; and the blouse you now don, belongs to him. And I know that, even with food in short supply, he insisted that you enjoy a feast that he never once called for himself ~ a banquet surely fit for none less than His Majesty, the King of France. And this day, I now know, when I begged for an audience with him, insisting that he open chamber doors, that you shan’t save us from Hugon, on account of your own convictions.”

He opened his mouth to speak yet, she cut him off, “Master Lazarus, I saw something today that I have only seen once in all my years ~ the unforgettable expression of pain that I saw the day that m’lord learned that m’lady and his sons were butchered at Hugon’s hand at Gildard’s castle. Would you like to know that, which I saw, Master Lazarus?”

Lazarus began; “What did you ~

“I held m’lord whilst he wept ~ wept,” she spat, “like a little boy!” Her eyes swelled to tears; yet, she contained herself and continued, “But you see, he did not weep for himself. No, no ~ I know his heart. He wept for us ~ for all of us whom he cannot protect. He knows what Hugon shall do to us and feels powerless to prevent it.”

Then she stumbled to the table and fell upon the bench, cupping her hands over her face. She exploded with tears and muffled sobs.

Lazarus now stood over her, feeling utterly helpless. He turned and looked toward the door, perhaps hoping that her cries would be heard by others who might sooth her. Yet the door never opened for the wails of the washwoman. He clenched his jaw and searched the walls, as if to find, somewhere written on them, the proper words to comfort her ~ to rid her pain and settle the racing of his own heart. ‘Twas as though her cries stemmed from his own bottled pains ~ as though she cried for everyone, including himself. And with her every new outburst of sorrow, he felt as though a knife sliced evermore deeply into his chest, whittling away at his very core. Within him, emotions reeled; as pain, anger, and sorrow seemed to boil upward from some deep and ruptured vessel. Lazarus looked at the woeful woman, with her face in her hands. And the next tear, for which he searched, did not roll down her arm, yet down his own cheek. Two more tears trailed the first. And it felt as though, it began to rain everywhere ~ even in Eden.” Lazarus bit his lip and wept for the washwoman’s dead family, because they could not cry for themselves. He wept for D’Alcicourt and his people, because they had little hope for salvation from Hugon. And he wept for himself because he was not ready to become more than his father, and save hundreds from Evil.

Within him, convictions turned, as anguish and anger ~

He slammed his hands atop the table, frightening the woman into silence.

“Master Lazarus, forgive me,” The woman pleaded, collecting herself.

Lazarus hastily dried face and drew a breath. “I shall do his bidding. If you would, I seek another audience with Lord D’Alcicourt.”

“Oh, dear God ~ you shall save us?” The woman quickly stood and threw herself upon Lazarus with such glee as to nearly send him of his feet.

Then she released him and wiped his cheek. With a wide smile, she informed him, “I shall fetch m’lord this moment! He shall be beside himself!” She made herself to turn away before grabbing his arm. “Oh! Do you require anything more, Master Lazarus?”

Yet Lazarus did not respond, or even acknowledge her. He stared intently at the crude door, absorbed in silence.

The woman followed his eyes to the door. “Master Lazarus?” She turned back to him. “What goes?”

Lazarus tore his eyes from the entrance. “What do the two horns mean?”

She looked back at the door for some semblance of horns, affixed. “There are no horns there, Master ~

The blare of a distant trumpet carried through the lower corridors of the castle and Lazarus pointed toward the door, adding, “Now a third, as men scream.”

She quickly covered her mouth. The woman only gazed at Lazarus, spilling her soul, wholly through her eyes; and he saw her terror as the horror of imminent doom. He watched her complexion pale to the shade of his former shirt ~ as white in appearance, as perhaps, the formless effect of a specter. She stood there, before him, outwardly dying within. Only the color of her eyes remained unchanged, as the white of them darkened to a crimson shade and welled with tears.

“What happens?” he asked.

And before he could still her, she bolted for the door and beat on it. “Open! Open the door!”

Lazarus heard the sounds of shuffling guards as he neared the washwoman. “What is it?” “‘Tis Hugon!” she exclaimed whilst kicking the door. “Guards; unlatch this door at once!”

Lazarus joined alongside her, and beneath his pounding fist, the door trembled against its frame.

The door swung open to reveal a bevy of battle-ready soldiers. Lazarus recognized their lead ~ a giant soldier who had red hair all about him.

“Praise God.” the woman sighed heavily. She grabbed Lazarus. “Come; make haste!” She leaned to his ear and whispered fiercely, “With your wings, you might find a means of escape by way of the topmost window of the castle. I can take you there.”

The red-haired soldier stepped forth and wedged himself betwixt them. He peeled the woman’s hand away from Lazarus, informing her, “The flying man stays; you go.” He summoned two guards. “Escort the washwoman to the inner keep. She is to care for the injured.”

“Wait! No!” She protested, struggling against the grasp of the two guards. “He cannot remain ~ get your hands off me!” They pulled her toward the door as she fought and screamed, “He has agreed to slay Hugon! Let him go ~ leave me be!”

The red giant held Lazarus at bay, pressing a firm hand against his chest as he yelled over the washwoman’s cries, “He cannot go, unprotected!” He bellowed to her escorts, “Away with her!” He drew a dagger on Lazarus and grumbled, “Away with you, as well.”

Lazarus retreated deeper into the room as the large man back peddled toward the entrance and barked over his shoulder. “We seal the flying man within and hold this door.”

As the echoing cries of the woman drowned in a distant wash of overlapping screams, Lazarus leaned against the table and watched the red-haired man pull his soldiers out of the room. And before the man completely closed the door, he peered through the narrow opening to ask Lazarus, “You agreed to slay Hugon?”

Lazarus set his jaw and nodded.

The man’s eyes sunk to Lazarus’ boots as he admitted, “Hugon touts himself as a godly man, yet we see his butchery. And you look like a devil; yet you would slay the butcher for us.” He shook his head. “If God’s angels are with us on this day, I pray hope that they know, better than any, who should be spared.” He sighed heavily and nodded. “If the decision were mine, I would give you my blade and send you on your way.” Then he shrugged. “Yet, who am I ~ to capture you, or free you, by my own accord? My hands are bound. I am only the man behind the sword.” The soldier dismissed himself and sealed Lazarus behind the crude door, leaving the Eljo to recall the terrible fate of Naramsin ~ entombed alive, and certainly condemned to perish for what he was. Lazarus crossed his arms atop the table and mulled over his grave ordeal, and began to search for his sole sense of purpose or meaning in life. ‘Perhaps,’ he thought, ‘the Poor Man in Christ, of the catacomb prison cell, likewise did the same.’

He stared at the polished brass base of the candelabrum as the image of his own reflection looked back at him. He leaned closer to the twisted reflection of himself and examined its grotesque features. Like a lying mirror, the shiny surface presented a new representation of him, with all the facets of a strikingly handsome man, and with no sign of large ears, dogs’ teeth, or pronounced characteristics of the Eljo that he truly was. “Look at me now, father,” Lazarus said with a smirk, “I am made anew; in the image of you.”

He chuckled, slapped his hand on the table, and called toward the door, and its guards; “I am FIXED now! I am like YOU; so you can release me ~ I am not a flying man anymore!”

He feigned laughter and awaited response. Beads of sweat coursed down the side of his face. Yet he only heard the voices and sounds of soldiers, readying themselves for defense.

A soldier barked from without, “We hold this door with our lives.”

Lazarus countered the soldier’s command, “Then do hold it! And hold it open, so that I might be free!”

The soldier seemed to ignore him, perhaps continuing with battle preparations.

Lazarus shook his head and chuckled again, murmuring, “They wish to safeguard me by denying me the means to save myself?” He wiped the sweat from his brow and drew a

deep sigh.

THUMP~THUMP~THUMP...

The sound of a slow and steady pounding echoed from afar. Deep and resonating as it was, the noise might have resembled the massive and relentless heartbeat of the entire world as reverberations rumbled through every surface of the room. Lazarus sat like a statue, staring at the whirling flames of the candelabrum; his ears perked and listening to distant but growing shouts and screams of murder and mayhem ~ a battle seemed to rage, now within the castle interior. As the noise of death rolled evermore near him, such that the once indecipherable shouts of men formed into audible words, and into distinct names and calls to arms of determined men at war, Lazarus could only sit, listen, speculate, and wonder his fate, under Hugon's hand. "Father," he mumbled, "I have learned more, since the day of your death, than in all the days of my life." He stared into the flames. A tear traced his cheek.

Invariably, Hugon's men did overrun D'Alcicourt's door guards, replacing them with a new arrangement of men. Lazarus heard all of it ~ even the last words of a heartfelt prayer, when Hugon's archers dropped the entire formation where they stood. He heard injured soldiers pleading with Hugon's men, before their words fell short, with a howl or groan. He heard the voices of command, instructing men to remove the bodies and take charge of the door. He heard the apprehension in the conversations of the newly replaced guards, when they whispered amongst themselves of flying devils, hideous monsters, the Great Pestilence, ill omens, revelations of Evil, and other hear~said prophecies. Indeed, Lazarus heard all of it ~ and he had heard enough.

He glared at the candelabrum. Individually, the dancing flames of the candles began to die. And in the light of the last burning wick, he spotted a grotesque reflection of himself. Within the brass base of the fixture, he found a beast of a man, with tall ears and an elongated face that might have resembled a protruding and overly pronounced snout of a dog. He set his jaw, dismissed the twisted image, and gave his attention to the direction of the door, where he could still hear the guards, whispering, and wondering aloud about him.

He stood from the table, grabbed the candelabrum, and hurled it against the crude door; its pieces clattered across the floor. "I am no flying devil! I am not a monster! I am ~ He caught his breath, stormed forward, and beat his fist against the door, yelling, "Who is the true monster, if not the man who slays his brother? And for what reason? To guard

the same door, as did his brother, before him ~ and to hold me here, when I have never killed? No, you are the *monsters!* You are the *devils!* You are the pestilence of ALL that is Right and Good! YOU!"

Only inches of wood separated him from the guards; yet he heard no reply ~ not even the sound of shifting feet or steady breaths. He turned away and collected himself with a heavy sigh.

An overwhelming sense of peace humbled Lazarus; and he calmly rounded the table, heading for the bed of hay and grumbling, "Perhaps I am what they say." He fell to his knees, on the straw mattress, and reflected upon Naramsin's fate. "The world belongs to them. There is no place for a flying ~

Lazarus dropped onto his belly and sought only his world of dreams; hoping that he might never awaken; and never again, face the nightmare that he had grown to know as the world of Man. Truly, he longed for a place of darkness and deep shadow, where even the days were like night. He wished for nothing, save perhaps, something akin to the Kingdom of Void, where everything is nothing. 'Twas that cluttered attic of Creation, where all less fortunate and discarded creatures gathered; like the swatted fly, the netted fish, the slaughtered lamb, and maybe even ~ flying monsters.

[End Chapter 15]