

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

Chapter 16

Lazarus lay on a bed of hay; yet his head was elsewhere ~ in his familiar but boundless body of dreams. And he was quite aware that, should a dream bloom into a nightmare, he could easily stir himself, enough to conjure a more agreeable dreamscape. However, perhaps, in a peculiar turn of perception, Lazarus gathered that the only nightmare, from which to awaken, was the reality of his confinement behind a crude door. With that, he sank even deeper into his dream. After all, he sat alone, atop the crest of a grassy hill, hearing songbirds, and basking in the warmth of a summer sun.

Brilliant green against a deep blue ~ the rolling hills and sprawling skies continued in every direction. Looking about, only then did he spot the castle, sitting on the hill directly behind him. The narrow and wide structure towered into the heavens, breaking through the green and blue horizon with a brilliant shade of white. The many facets of its staggered and terraced walls seemed completely smooth, having no windows or doors. He rose to his feet and strode toward it, looking back only once, as if by chance, he might catch a glimpse of his body, still sleeping in a hay bed whilst he ventured away from it.

Nearing the narrow side of the edifice, he discovered a single white door, only faintly perceivable by a shadowy crack that ran the perimeter of its frame. Lazarus opened the door to expose a dark hallway, leading within. Like those of the abbey's Benion Tunnel, its wall stones were catacomb~gray and glistening with moisture; and the same sweet smell of decay hung in the dank air. Curiosity pricked him; and he crept forward with ever~swelling pupils, following the twists and turns of the unlit corridor. As he rounded another corner, he froze and perked his ears toward distant and echoing screams. Before him, a section of illuminated flagstones called to him with a soft glow.

And as it was entirely but a dream to Lazarus, he followed the light to discover an entryway. He peered around its corner to find a large room, filled with people. Then he stepped within and examined his whereabouts, attracting no attention with his arrival ~ 'twas as though his presence was not of consequence to the happenings within. He

absorbed his surroundings: scantily clad soldiers with broadswords lined torch-lit walls; and before him, a robed and fully hooded man stood behind an altar-like table, holding a tall walking cane beside him. Lazarus instantly knew him to be a priest of sorts. Lazarus searched for subtle features that might reveal the make of his face, yet found only a shadowy blackness beneath his cowl. However, the surface of the stone table was clearly visible, with its scorched and darkened face, perchance revealing the prior presence of frequent fires. Black, it was ~ even blacker than the cake of soot-covered carvings, which once adorned the walls of the abbey catacombs. He looked behind the altar, and toward a man who abruptly appeared beside the priest, showing himself as a large, naked, and scruffy individual, intently eyeing Lazarus.

“Bring him forth!” the priest called toward the entryway.

The Eljo spun about to discover two quickly advancing soldiers dragging into the room, an emaciated and naked prisoner. Lazarus stepped back and cocked his head, attempting to glean a meaning behind the sweating man’s ongoing distress. And wild, he was, with his captors; kicking and blowing, frothing from his lips, rolling his eyes, and slinging his boney and hairless head about. The two soldiers halted the man in the center of the room, forced him to his knees, and pulled his arms wide, stretching him into place.

“He must be made right,” the priest with no face, exclaimed, pounding his cane against the stone floor.

“Made right?” Lazarus asked.

The priest turned and informed him; “He must be fixed.”

Lazarus looked at the scruffy man beside the priest, who only nodded as he kept a cold eye on him. Lazarus turned away and wondered aloud, “Fixed?” Yet, before he could find the wild man’s eyes, a burly soldier swung a broadsword and hacked off the man’s head, sending it rolling across the floor beside Lazarus. He leapt away, darting his eyes betwixt the lone head and its limp torso, which the two soldiers still held tightly in place.

Immediately, two obese dwarfs, fully clothed in animal skins, strode into the room. One carried a curved carving knife; and the other wielded a mason’s mallet and a long iron spike. The dwarf with the knife scurried toward the corpse and whittled slices of flesh from the neck stump, leveling out the angular cut of the broadsword. The other small man collected the head of the dead man and carried it toward the backside of the torso. Then the two dwarfs worked as one; the first man hunched himself over and braced his hands on his knees, allowing the second man to climb atop his back, with head and hammer still in hand. The top dwarf placed the head backward on the torso, opened its mouth, and drove the iron spike through its tongue, affixing the head securely onto its body. And as quickly as they appeared, the two dwarfs departed the room.

Benumbed, Lazarus turned away from the grotesqueness and questioned the priest.

“Why?”

To which the priest evenly responded, “He was a devil; he was broken, yet now he is fixed.”

“Fixed? No; he is broken!” Lazarus shouted; “He’s dead!”

“He is no longer troubled by his wild passions,” the priest explained. “He is at peace with himself. Now he is fixed.”

“His head is backward! How is he fixed?”

For a moment, the faceless priest only stared at Lazarus. Then he nodded beneath his hood before addressing him, “I see that you are with a wild passion as well ~ also broken.” He pointed toward Lazarus and turned to the soldiers. “Fix him, as well.”

A large soldier with a bloodstained broadsword stepped toward him when Lazarus slowly retreated, stammering; “No; I am already fixed. I mean; I’m not ~

Lazarus spun and fled the room; tearing down the black hallway from whence he came, when he quickly discovered that the once familiar twists and turns of the corridor had now changed. And with every rounded corner, with every branching passageway, more arteries diverged, as though the hallway exploded into a web of tunnels that, altogether formed an outwardly inescapable black labyrinth. And each new passageway seemed to include even more stairs than the one before it, as though every direction of them only led him higher and deeper into the great white castle. And just as he remembered the quick footfalls and shouts of soldiers, whilst being chased through the abbey catacombs, he now heard the similar sounds of pursuing guards. In his head, however, he knew that he was merely dreaming, since his body was elsewhere ~ somewhere apart from him ~ sealed behind a crude door, in a deathly quiet, and resting motionless as perhaps, would a corpse in Baston’s Crypt.

Nevertheless, Lazarus blazed around another corner to discover a rough, iron~strapped door, through which he quickly entered and sealed himself within, even as a bevy of soldiers poured passed him, their footfalls dwindling in the distance. Lazarus slumped against the door and sighed.

“You must not be in here,” a wheezing voice whispered from behind him.

A startled Lazarus quickly turned. Before him, in the small, sealed, and cluttered room, a man lay in a post bed with a sheet pulled over him, exposing only his head. And beneath the glow of a nearby oil lamp, Lazarus found the familiar features of the man’s face.

“How could you be ~ in here ~ and over there in the same?” Lazarus asked, pointing into the direction from whence he came.

“Oh, no, ‘twas not me. We greatly favor one another in appearance,” the man revealed,

in a sickly and hollow voice. 'Tis my evil brother, who you saw, standing beside the priest. And he shall slay you when he finds you. 'Tis not safe in here. He shall come; he always comes in here." He fell into a coughing spell, belching as he groaned, and pulled the sheet even tighter against his neck, as if, suddenly chilled to the core.

"What is the matter with you?" Lazarus asked, stepping forward.

"You are kind, young sir. I am better, now ~ better than I was. Yet, you must leave, lest he come for you as he came for me."

Lazarus turned back to the door with all intention of departing when he heard the loudening sound of heavy footfalls, and perhaps the same noises from the soldiers that he had once eluded. He quickly approached the man as he scanned the room. "Is there another way out of here?"

"You must hide," the man replied; "He comes for us!" He rolled toward the far side of the bed and sat upright, his pale back to Lazarus as he looked over his shoulder and scolded him. "You ought not to be here, rousting me from my rest! Yet, here you are!"

Shouts without; the door rattled, as with pounding fists.

"And now I must hide you from him! Come!" he exclaimed, standing on his feet and turning about. And when the naked man fully faced Lazarus, the Eljo felt as though his very insides melted; for the man's entire torso was completely hollow and cleanly gutted of its organs ~ the empty space revealed only a ribbed and gaping womb of red tissue that glistened in the room's lamplight. The hollow man stormed around the bed and pointed within his cavity. "Make haste! You must hide!"

Lazarus stepped away from him, even as the door pounding continued. "Inside there? No; show me elsewhere."

"There is no elsewhere! Now, come within, and I shall save you from him!"

'Twas as though the door planks rattled with the roar of the beat of an entire army; and Lazarus conceded, easing all of him into the warm and moist cavity of the man.

Once within, Lazarus might have appeared like a marsupial in its mother's pouch, with him peering from out of the man~shell. Now with Lazarus, the outwardly pregnant man turned and stepped toward the back wall of the room and approached a single open window that offered a view of the night sky.

"But I saw no window on the wall," Lazarus remarked. "And the light of day is no more? How can it be?"

"Hold your tongue," the man scolded him in a whisper, "Lest he discover us! We shall hide outside the window and he might gather the room to be empty." And as the man straddled himself over the window's ledge, Lazarus caught a glimpse of the ground,

which seemed every bit as far away from him, as the combined height of the many stairs that he had previously ascended before finding the empty man's room. "We shall hang ourselves out of view. He shall find nobody inside, and he shall continue his search elsewhere," the man added, dropping himself to dangle against the outside wall of the castle, with only his fingers to hold them from falling.

"Elsewhere?" Lazarus asked; shifting himself, only to feel his wings thoroughly pinned within the man's ribs.

"Still yourself! *Sushhh!*" the man hissed, when the sound of a crashing door alluded to the evil brother's successful entry.

Lazarus held his breath, hearing the barking words of the good man's evil twin, saying, "'Arrest him; no swords! I want that broken boy ~ unharmed!" which, to him, was the very voice of the man called, Captain Bourne.

Hearing the chaos from without the window, it might have seemed to Lazarus, as though soldiers ram shackled every corner of the room. Then a new silence followed, suggesting that perhaps, the search party had moved on.

Abruptly, the menacing voice of Captain Bourne, called down from above, "So, there you are, with Jonah in your belly."

"You mustn't! I beg of you, brother! Help me into the window! I cannot hold the both of us!"

"'Tis time, brother. You are not rightly fixed ~ there is something amiss with you."

"Help me! I am fall~

Lazarus threw an arm out of the hollowed man, attempting to grab a hold of the ledge, even as it fell away from him. Down, he plunged toward the earth, still lodged within a cage of ribs.

CRASH! He struck the ground with a might, even to steal the wind from him; however, he crawled out of the broken shell of the man, endeavoring to roust him. "We must flee! Make haste!" Yet, the good man was dead. Lazarus paused to consider the dreadful happenings as but the makings of a bad dream ~ and that maybe he could escape the moment by waking himself, somehow.

"*GRRRR!*" Lazarus turned to find a large red dog beside him, chasing its tail. He slowly stood and the scruffy beast suddenly stopped and turned, as if to instantly notice him. Then it crept forward and stopped. Beneath the starlight, Lazarus saw its sickly features ~ its eyes watered; its mouth foamed; its legs wobbled, and its crimson hair appeared greasy and matted. 'Twas like four~legged Death, which refused to accept itself. The beast pleaded with Lazarus, from out of its mind, showing broken and decayed fangs, "Kind sir, I must kiss you against your neck. I beg of you; please help me to be well."

“I ~ forgive me; I ~ cannot,” Lazarus muttered, back peddling as he retreated from the manifestly dying dog. He searched his whereabouts to find himself on a lone hill, with no trace of a white castle. And there were no trees; nothing shown itself apparent, save a landscape of seemingly endless rolling hills that stretched beneath a sprawling black sky ~ and the sickly beast before him.

“But you must,” the animal insisted from its thoughts. It hobbled forth, closing the distance betwixt them, whilst showing more of its rotten teeth. “Only a single kiss, do I require. You must trust me; I shall be gentle.”

Lazarus shook his head. “No, I cannot. There is something the matter with you ~ and what you ask of me.”

“Nothing is the matter. One kiss and I shall be healed.”

“And what shall become of me, afterward?” Lazarus asked, stepping more quickly backward.

The beast trotted after him, thinking aloud, “Please lend me the side of your neck for a mere kiss, kind sir.”

Lazarus turned and bolted away. He leapt into the air and spread his wings, aiming for the evening heavens.

The death~dog followed him; it did not break into a run, as it continued to trot closely behind him, repeating the words from its mind, “Your neck, sir?”

Lazarus beat his wings and gained no altitude. Over and again, he hopped forward, thrashed his wings, and returned to his feet, himself appearing much like a wing~clipped bird, attempting flight. To Lazarus, it seemed as though the air had lost its tension, rendering his wings incapable of any significant lift. And he looked over his shoulder, to find the dog still quickly trailing him; however, the beast now trotted upright, on only its hindquarters.

“Your neck, sir?”

Lazarus retired his wings and broke into a full run. Across the hills, he fled from the grotesque beast, yet gained no ground ~ ‘twas as though the air had turned to gel; or that he traversed through water. He found no inconspicuous place to hide or forthright path to follow, since the land sprawled endlessly, uneven and in every direction. And for him, the most troublesome notion of all, was that he was not dreaming ~ that he could not simply awaken from the moment, which seemed in every way, like a relentless nightmare.

Again, he turned about, and found that the upright dog had now become the hooded priest that he recalled from the white castle.

“Your neck, sir?” the priest called out, chasing after him with his tall walking cane. “Fix me!”

“No!” Lazarus spat. “Leave me be!”

“No!” the robed man echoed. “Fix me!”

Still in stride, Lazarus saw the man pull his hood away to reveal the familiar face, which also belonged to the twin brothers ~ now there were three of them.

He shoved himself forward, leaning into the wind, which was like water, until his hands were nearly to the ground. Then he grabbed at the grass and pulled himself forth whilst he ran, using his arms as two more legs. With every new stroke of his legs, he clawed the ground with his fingers, dragging the earth evermore quickly beneath him. Again, he glanced behind him, and discovered the growing distance betwixt himself and the priest. Then he lunged forth, planting himself solidly on all fours, to gallop over the hills and slice a forward path, even as he witnessed an abrupt change in his facial features ~ a long snout protruded into his eye~view. And like a wild dog, he flew into the wind.

THUMP~CRASH! Lazarus scrambled from his bed as torches and armed soldiers filled the room and surrounded him. And in an outwardly vague and sweeping event, Lazarus found himself bound and whisked out of the room. The men pulled him through a corridor, which led further away from the pit door and toward the heart of the castle. Rows of ready soldiers lined his path through the unbroken passageway, up a winding staircase, and into a wider second~level corridor. His escorts led Lazarus through an arched entryway. In transit, the combined odor of hay, sweat, urine, and blood grew more distinct; and Lazarus wrinkled his Eljo nose.

At length, he saw the walls give way to reveal a vast enclosure ~ a great hall with towering walls and a vaulted ceiling. The men took him to the center of the hall and commanded him to remain there, as they joined their fellow soldiers, who stood against the perimeter walls. And Lazarus’ entrance set off a series of whispers and gasps that carried throughout the hall, the many noises blending into a single sound that might have resembled the incessant hiss of a monstrous serpent. Lazarus examined the great hall and its gathered masses.

To his left, distraught women and terrified children huddled together before a series of archways. In their company, he spotted the familiar face of the valet, who came to serve him, but whom he sent away with meat, instead. However, he did not see the washwoman or her three maidens. And behind the servants and children, he noticed a row of soldiers, craning heads for a better view of him.

In front of him, a raised stage~like platform extended from the wall, upon which stood and sat, in choir~like arrangement, several rows of men. Some were knights, in full dress, and others donned robes of dignitaries; yet, most were clothed in modest attire. Completely before them, a long, many~legged table also stood atop the platform. A tattered and bunched tablecloth draped over a third of its top, with its excess spilling onto the flagstones. Brown spots and smears stained the cloth, offering signs of slung blood from swung swords. The exposed part of the tabletop lay cluttered with helmets, blades, and other miscellany.

To the right head of the table, a man sat in an elaborately carved and partly broken chair, with his legs crossed, feet raised, and bloodstained boots propped on the tabletop. For Lazarus, his commanding presence and pervasive stare suggested the identity of absolute authority ~ he was the only man seated at the table. The man was of considerable stature, with largely spaced eyes, broad cheeks, and heavy beard. His thick locks of hair lay flat against his head, as though, compressed by the sweaty confines of a helmet. He bore a bandage on right arm and his good hand held a parchment. Altogether, his posture and demeanor was that of a bothered man, with thoughts disrupted by sudden distraction.

To his right, rows of ready crossbowmen lined themselves in front of massive, evenly spaced timber columns that lined a high wall. A large entryway centered the wall; and its casing and iron~strapped double doors were battered and bowed. The doors stood unevenly closed, offering Lazarus a glimpse of the night sky; and he spotted the topmost curve of a crescent moon that peered at him from over the crest of a rampart wall. ‘Never had the sky seemed so near, yet so distant,’ he gathered.

He glanced behind him, and toward the hallway entrance from whence he came, to find it equally congested with soldiers; however, the adjoining rear wall stood unguarded, with only a row of hay heaped against its base. Upon the face of the wall, there hung an arrangement of aged tapestries, embroidered with colorful insignias and coats of arms. Yet, the tapestries were in such symmetrical presentation as to reveal a blank spot betwixt them ~ an area that seemed to beg for coverage, as it was a region of lighter~colored wall stones.

“Lazarus Gogu; so you say, you are?”

Lazarus turned about and found the man now standing, and with the parchment still in his hand.

“I am Lord Hugon; reigning authority over these lands.”

“M’lord.” Lazarus acknowledged him with a deep bow. He raised himself to find Hugon examining the parchment with peering eyes.

As he read, Lazarus saw him tilt his head; purse his lips and raise his brow; lift his head and cut a gaze at him.

To which Lazarus nodded and curtly replied, “M’lord.”

“So you say,” Hugon trumpeted. He turned behind him and summoned, from out of the choir~like arrangement, a robed dignitary. As the man settled himself at the table, Hugon pointed his parchment at Lazarus, adding, “And so I shall see.”

Lazarus watched the middle~aged and well~groomed man position a pile of new parchment atop the table. The robed man placed several inkwells with ready quills beside the pile before busing himself with the intricate assembly of a brass~like tripod contraption. Lazarus sighed and stole a glimpse of the battered hall doors and the exposed moon.

“Step forward, slowly,” Hugon commanded.

Lazarus approached when Hugon stopped him with a staying hand, saying, “Hold yourself there.”

Lazarus complied and returned his attention to the man’s meticulous preparation of the metallic apparatus. The unusual device stood just over a foot tall on three unfolded legs; and it supported, vertically within its frame, a fixed and concave brass dish, measuring slightly less than a foot in diameter. Lazarus spotted the gleaming inner surface of the dish that shone like a fine brass mirror, all of its surface shimmering, save a thin, unbroken, and unpolished perimeter band, which appeared to contain detailed engravings. The man secured the disc against brackets and; as he adjusted the object’s horizontal and vertical pitch with a series of mounted levers, Lazarus studied its unrefined backside. The surface contained a large ornate engraving ~ that of a winged serpent, coiled onto itself, eating its own tail.

Yet the complexity and extraordinary design of the contraption did not end with the dish. The two legs of the tripod, which stood closest to the man, supported a suspended and protruding shelf, upon which held, a small, reflective housing with a sliding shutter. The man placed a lit candle within. He adjusted the shutter, whilst focusing on the brass mirror, until Lazarus saw the man’s face glow from the flame’s reflection. Then the man turned toward Hugon and nodded with a beam in his eye; yet he gestured with a raised finger, as if to suggest that he required a bit more time in preparation.

Lazarus’ eyes also turned toward Hugon; yet, in their sweeping path, he recognized a

familiar face in the choir~like arrangement of persons behind the table ~ and with it, an unexpectedly cold and distant stare of none other, than Lord D'Alcicourt, himself. Lazarus locked eyes with him, perhaps in hope that he might glean a gleam of willful assistance. Yet, D'Alcicourt only peered at him from over the shoulder of another seated man, offering Lazarus nothing more than a blank stare.

Hugon challenged Lazarus, whilst shaking the parchment. "In my hand, I have a record of your words. You profess yourself to be, Lazarus Gogu, and a Christian flying man." Hugon hardened his brow and nodded. "We shall see."

"Lord D'Alcicourt," Lazarus called out in the direction of the deposed lord. "If it pleases you, m'lord; I beg of your assistance." Yet D'Alcicourt never showed his face.

"Still your tongue!" Hugon bellowed, tossing the parchment on the table and leaping from the raised platform. He charged at Lazarus, whilst drawing a dagger. Lazarus held his breath as Hugon placed the blade at his throat.

Hugon's words resounded throughout the hall, "I am the only lord of these lands! Another utterance of his name and you shall find your head at my feet! Do you gather me?"

Lazarus swallowed and nodded. "Forgive me, m'lord."

"Only this time," Hugon sternly replied. "I shan't forgive such offense but once."

"You are merciful, m'lord," Lazarus stated, lowering his gaze to the blade in Hugon's hand.

Hugon retracted the knife, grumbling, "Indeed, I am; yet not with those who would conspire to murder me in my sleep." He clutched Lazarus' arm and led him to the robed man and his queer brass device, whilst asking the man, "Is your dish prepared?"

"A moment more," the man offered before correcting Hugon, with a heavy Italian accent, "Moonwindow, m'lord ~ 'tis not a dish."

"Make haste," Hugon barked at the man as he faced Lazarus. "I must know."

He peered deeply into Lazarus' eyes and wondered aloud, "Truly blue, as the deepest sea." He tapped his blade against Lazarus' cheek. "Open."

Lazarus opened his mouth.

"And what large teeth, you have ~ like those of wolves." He tapped his blade against a canine tooth when Lazarus leapt back and sealed his lips. "Truly, they are." Hugon smirked at a frowning Lazarus before stepping beside him.

Lazarus watched him from out of the corner of his eye.

Hugon gently worked his dagger to shift a lock of black hair and expose Lazarus' down~turned ear. "What odd ears are these: cat, dog, or demon?"

"Christian, m'lord," Lazarus defended.

“As you say,” Hugon responded, now circling behind him. “And these monstrous wings are, of what bird, bat, or beast?”

“A flying man, m’lord,” answered Lazarus. “I am a Christian flying man.”

“So you say; yet, I have only seen such wings in sketched accounts of demons and dragons. They are naked of feathers, and bare no beauty, as do, the wings of angels. And I have never seen a sketched account of a Christian flying man.” Hugon leaned beside him and whispered, “What say you to that?”

Lazarus set his jaw, turned, and addressed Hugon, “If it pleases you, m’lord; you might have someone sketch a likeness of me.”

In a sweeping moment, Hugon stepped away, raised his blade, lowered it, chuckled, and nodded, admitting, “And clever, as well. However, it would please me all the more if you would...kindly unfurl your wings.”

Lazarus sighed and spread his wings; and the entire hall gasped.

“Silence!” Hugon barked, unable to take his eyes off Lazarus. He stepped back and absorbed the imposing span of them, tip to tip; and he shook his head. “Truly not the wings of an angel ~ too beastly ~ ghastly, even.”

Lazarus refolded his wings as Hugon circled around him, and looked passed the table, and in the direction of a partly clad knight. He questioned him, “Have you found the Bishop and scribe?”

“No, m’lord,” came the soldier’s gruff reply. “And they were not amongst the dead.”

Hugon nodded and turned back to Lazarus with express disappointment. He cleared his throat, quickly approached Lazarus, and refolded his arms in an outwardly defiant gesture. “In a record of sworn confession, you claimed that you are able to fly, without need of rest, for half an eve.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

Hugon narrowed his eyes and leaned forward, adding, “Which brings me to ask: why did you say, ‘for half an eve,’ rather than, ‘for half a day?’” Hugon leaned toward Lazarus, being so near, that Lazarus could feel the breath from his nose. Hugon pulled on Lazarus’ leather necklace to expose the wooden prayer cross from beneath his black blouse. “Is there anything that might keep you from flying in the light of day?” He rubbed the cross betwixt his fingers as he drilled his eyes into those of Lazarus, awaiting response.

Lazarus averted his gaze before giving a reflective reply; “The cooler skies of the eve are more suited for the labors of flight, m’lord.”

Hugon considered his reply with pursed lips before nodding. “And I suppose, flying is no easy task; just as some battles are better waged beneath a moon.” Then he cut a hard

stare at Lazarus, continuing, "And just as some men are best slain in the serenity of sleep."

"Perhaps, as you say, m'lord," Lazarus offered.

Hugon released the prayer cross, stepped back, and flashed his dagger. "Raise your hands."

Lazarus clenched his jaw as Hugon cut the rope that bound his wrists, saying, "You've the teeth of a demon; with devilish ears; wings of a dragon; and a cold blue gaze that flows from your eyes like that of an icy sea."

The rope slid away, coiling on the floor.

"M'lord, I am a Christian flying ~

"So we shall see!" exclaimed Hugon.

Lazarus cocked his head.

Hugon remarked, "I do not free you of your binds out of trust or kindness."

"M'lord?"

Hugon explained; "So long as a demon is bound, it shall say and do anything to free itself. Now you are free to speak and act before me in any manner you choose." Hugon retired his blade and presented empty hands. "If you wish to slay me, your time is now." Lazarus stole a glimpse behind Hugon to find D'Alcicourt still hidden behind other men. He addressed Hugon; "I do not wish to bring harm to anyone, m'lord."

"No matter, your wishes or words," Hugon rebuffed, taking Lazarus by the arm and moving him even closer to the robed man at the table, "I shall gather your true intentions from the moon plate." He questioned the man, "Are you ready?"

"Nearly, m'lord," the man replied before peering around the side of the contraption and whispering to Hugon, "'Tis not a moon plate ~ not a window dish ~ not a plate window. 'Tis a Moonwindow."

Hugon dismissed him with a petulant wave of his hand. "So it is! Do what you must; I now bring the winged man before you."

"Moon window, m'lord?" Lazarus inquired.

Hugon glared at him. "The one and only ~ the divine eye of destiny ~ where the lives of men who have not yet lived, and the shapes of kingdoms, still unborn, are forever carved in stone." With a gesture and an open hand, Hugon introduced Lazarus to the robed man; "Might I acquaint you with my astrologer and priest, Albeard de Elhosie. As a prophet of prophets and my personal seer, Albeard is the man who saw you steal into my tower window and slay me with a dagger whilst I slept."

Lazarus clenched his jaw, closed his eyes, and considered the seemingly absurd

accusation. And in his brief reflection, he gathered that someone had informed Hugon of a proposed plot, which included him, a dagger, and a tower window. He looked to the direction of D'Alcicourt; and his eyes probed for him; yet the overthrown lord remained concealed in the crowd. And he quickly turned and scouted the servants, looking for another familiar face in the masses; yet he found no sign of his valet. Likewise, he did not find the washwoman or her maidens, amongst them. Lazarus sighed and defended himself with an appeal to the obvious, "Yet, you are not dead, m'lord. And I have remained under constant guard since my arrival. I could do no such act."

Hugon smirked and nodded. "Oh, but you did ~ three eves from now. Yet, I stayed your murderous hand!"

A dizzy spell washed over Lazarus; and he drew a deep breath. "M'lord, if it pleases you, I do not gather your meaning." He shook his head. "If you stayed my hand, as you claim, then I could not have done such a thing ~ even three eves from now."

To which Hugon replied, "As it is by the Grace of God, my astrologer and his wondrous window plate ~

"*Moonwindow*, m'lord," Albeard kindly interjected.

"The one and only;" Hugon affirmed, continuing, "And with Albeard's gift, and his ~ thing, I can witness events before they occur. Truly, I have seen my own destiny ~

Hugon proclaimed to the entire hall, "~As imminent king of many kingdoms!"

His soldiers raised arms and shouted as a choir of cheers. Hugon smiled before silencing the hall with a calming hand. He turned to Lazarus, asserting, "It shall require more than a flying man and a dagger to undo my God~given destiny."

Lazarus looked to Albeard; yet the robed man only returned a narrow~eyed stare and nodded as he repositioned the parchments before him. The man plucked a quill from a well, tapped dry its tip, and without turning his attention from continuing preparations, informed Hugon; "M'lord; 'tis time."

Hugon affirmed with a nod and commanded Lazarus to remain where he stood. Then he stepped onto the stone platform and rounded the table whilst tossing his dagger atop it. As he returned to his partially charred chair, Hugon called to all persons in the hall; "All of my men~at~arms know the practice ~ I shall have complete silence." Then he turned to the castle servants. "And I expect my new servants to abide by the same. With that, every woman is to care for the child beside her; and each shall answer for the disturbance of her child. My men shall move swiftly to silence every disturbance ~ even to strike! Make no mistake in my word, as there is no plea, with which to bargain, once done! Now, assume your new roles!"

Women scrambled amongst the gathered servants, grabbing children and pulling them to

their breasts, throwing fingers against their lips and whispering fiercely into their ears. Children nodded and women cradled them as a new calm settled over the servants.

Hugon looked over his shoulder and addressed the choir of robed dignitaries and knights, who lined the wall. He waved a dismissing hand at them, saying, "Step away from us; make space for revelation." Like a wave, the arrangement began to disperse, offering room for only Hugon and his astrologer. He turned and pointed to Lazarus, issuing a curt and dire warning; "Move, or speak, and you die." Then he snapped his fingers toward the row of crossbowman that stood against the battered double doors of the hall, before gesturing to him. They complied, leveling bows on Lazarus.

Lazarus held his breath, turning his attention from Hugon to the astrologer, and then, to the choir of shifting men, behind them and the table. And, as the men continued their disbursement, further down the wall, Lazarus again spotted the face of Lord D'Alcicourt and locked eyes with him. Yet D'Alcicourt did not move with the rest of the men; he remained steadfastly in place, his eyes coldly affixed on him. And Lazarus shook his head and shrugged his shoulders at him, silently suggesting the question: "Why?" And in that moment, Lazarus knew fully well, the reason for D'Alcicourt's continued distance. Before he could settle himself from the shock of his revelation, Lazarus let loose with a loud hiss that stirred the entire hall ~ as Lord D'Alcicourt had no torso; instead, only the pole of a tall floor candelabrum supported his decapitated head.

"Bows up! Ring him!" Hugon yelled. Soldiers flew to his command and; as the crossbowmen raised their weapons, and adjacent rank of swordsmen broke from their ranks and swarmed Lazarus, enclosing him with a tight circle of drawn swords. "If he moves, run him through!" Then he addressed Lazarus directly, "I forbid all devil~speak and demon scream! Flying man or no; if you hiss at me again, you shall die where you stand."

"Thou shalt not ~

"Silence!"

Lazarus looked away; yet, from his every angle, he saw only raised blades. A coursing bead of sweat stung his eye; his ears burned, and his memory flashed with the recollection of Friar Clodius and his raised cane of correction.

Hugon quickly rounded the opposite side of the astrologer, snapping his fingers impatiently and pointing to the moonwindow.

The astrologer positioned a dipped quill over blank parchment and tilted himself squarely before the mirrored dish.

Throughout the hall, not even a cough or sneeze challenged the mandated state of

silence; as the astrologer sat, entranced in the converging glow of the moonwindow. Lazarus focused on the man; whose piercing stare became one with the light of the tripod's reflecting plate. The man's brow hardened and his eyes drew back like those of a searching bird~of~prey, outwardly staring into eternity. The man's lips quivered as he murmured to himself, and Hugon carefully backed away, such to cause him no disturbance.

Hugon stole around Albeard's backside, peering over his shoulder, and at the blank parchment. The hypnotized astrologer, although transfixed on his contraption, scribed words whilst Hugon mouthed them silently to himself:

*Where wild creatures gather with jackals
Demons convene with heckling calls
In repose, so perched over owl nests
A ravaging angel shadow rests*

*Conjuring lust, such to steal His seed
In dreams, does this queen of demons, breed
Sparring with Man, whilst she ~*

The astrologer turned to Hugon as his face burned brightly in the moonwindow's glow. "God, no!" he gasped, his eyes welling.

Hugon cocked himself back, considering. "God knows what?"

At once, the moonwindow drew the attention of the two men; as it now shined with a bluish hue; and, in its very center, a point of brighter blue light spread outward, swelling into an azure ring that slowly expanded outward and toward the round perimeter of the brass mirror.

"What new thing is this?" Hugon asked, stepping away from the astrologer and his moonwindow. "What happens?" He pulled his dagger from the tabletop. "What comes over you?"

The astrologer peered upward at Hugon, chuckling and crying in the same. He shrugged his shoulders. "'Tis his mother."

He crossed his forehead with his thumb, in the sign of a cross, continuing with tearful laughter as he rose to his feet and faced Hugon. "Saint Denis, protect us."

Hugon pressed his dagger against the astrologer's chest. "Collect yourself! Tell me!"

The man tried with uneven reply, "His mother ~ no ~ we cannot speak of her, m'lord!"

He grabbed Hugon's arm. "Not here; not now! No!"

Hugon turned and slapped the moonwindow off the tabletop, sending it to fly across the

hall. It came to rest before the terrified servants. He pressed the blade against the astrologer's neck. "What of his mother?"

The man soiled himself and wept.

Hugon pressed him. "Who is she?"

"She is ~ I beg of you, m'lord."

Hugon pressed the blade beneath his jaw.

"She is: Lil ~ m'lord, we must not!"

Hugon drew a trickle of blood. "L'il ~ little what?"

"No," the astrologer insisted, "M'lord, not now!"

"Now!" Hugon growled.

"Lilith!" he cried before collapsing to the floor, and crumbling into a self-absorbed and sobbing mess~of~a~man.

"*WA~HOOM~WA~HOOM!*" Abruptly, Hugon turned his attention toward the half-secured double doors of the hall, and to the sounds of battle horns that resounded from without the castle. And betwixt the pauses of blaring horns, Hugon heard hasty commands of defense, and the overlapping screams of soldiers. The doors rattled with the beating of fists and halberds; and with a tension, underscored by cries of urgency. All eyes lay fixed on the double doors when Lazarus looked at the huddled servants and spotted a lone boy, weaving his way through weeping children and women. The boy crouched near the moonwindow and looked for eyes upon him when he spotted Lazarus' stare. With a gleam in his eye, he gestured toward Lazarus, pressing his finger to his lips before collecting the moonwindow and stealing his way back from whence he came. Lazarus turned his attention to Hugon and found him spinning about and addressing the head of D'Alcicourt; "What, in the name of ~

Outwardly, Hugon's brief stare suggested an attempt to glean from it, any revelation that might somehow disclose a strategy; however absurd, which might include attacking him after he had secured enemy fortifications. Yet, he quickly dismissed the severed head, and his own disconnected reckoning; and he turned to the stricken astrologer. "Lilith? Who is this, Lilith?"

BOOM!

A colossal explosion rocked the hall through its very footings. Servants and soldiers scattered with their lives as a torrent of roof stones crashed onto the centermost floor of the hall; and the shear power of the blast all but slapped every guard to the ground. Debris poured downward from the roof, as a dense column of dust fell to the floor and mushroomed outward to fill every corner of the hall with billowing grit and ash. And in

the aftermath ~ in that brief and settling moment, when men clumsily collected themselves ~ when a new silence fell over the hall ~ when the dust cleared ~

Women and children screamed; men scrambled behind themselves; and the ring of swordsman fled from Lazarus, leaving him crouching near the floor and appearing as though ready to pounce upon the unveiling presence before him. Ears back, eyes wide, wings splayed, and fangs at the ready, Lazarus hissed at that which the dissipating brume revealed. Before him, the swine giant beat its wings, raked its claws through the air, raised its tusks, and introduced itself with a resounding roar.

Beneath compromised ceiling arches, massive oak columns took turns splintering and snapping beneath the shifting weight of support stones. Gradually, like a crumbling tower of Babel, even more of the hall roof surrendered its hold on the heavens. Whole sections gave way. Altogether, their stones fell to the earth like that of a crushing blow from Thor's hammer, flattening stands of soldiers. Unscathed men engaged the beast as crossbowmen and archers loosed their weapons to cover its nearest side with lodged bolts and arrow shafts. The giant roared and reeled about to face them when a second wave of shafts found their mark in its front. Yet, it only growled heavily and made no advance. Instead, it dismissed them and cast its black eyes toward Lazarus.

"Slay it!" Hugon screamed as he dived behind the table and scrambled across the floor. He scurried over the curled and weeping astrologer before concealing himself beneath the table. Robed dignitaries followed his lead, crowding the underside of the fixture; and he fought with them in defense of his space.

Lazarus fixed his eye upon the swine giant as he retreated around the side of the table. And he watched the movements of the hunched giant as it continued forward with open claws and splayed wings even as more arrows peppered the walls of its bristly and bloodless hide. Lazarus stopped and spun about; and with his back to the wall, he glared at the winged giant. Eye to eye ~ flying man to flying beast ~ Lazarus assumed an equally unyielding stance; as he crouched, spread his arms beneath splayed wings, and let loose, a malicious hiss.

The giant snorted and charged Lazarus, wielding a set of mighty claws that sent the table, flying. Yet, before the fixture exploded into splinters ~ even before it struck the wall, the monster swiped its other limb through the huddled mass of men, sending them tumbling, end~over~end, over the hall floor, and settling into a scattered mess of contorted remains. In the firm grip of the demon's claws, Hugon might have appeared as but a dazed and delicate doll. Lazarus turned to flee and the giant lunged forward and

slammed the tips of its tusks against the wall. A trapped Lazarus slowly turned and, in that moment, gleaned a likeness of himself in the eye of the ogre ~ the image of the Eljo's own reflection, that shown from its glossy black surface. Lazarus' hair waved in the putrid breath of the beast. The monster kept Lazarus pinned betwixt its tusks and against the wall.

"Help~ help me, fly~ flying man." Hugon wheezed from within the tight ball of its clutch. The beast tucked Hugon beneath its tusks, bringing him near Lazarus; and Hugon began to cough and chuckle in the same, as if to find a macabre humor in the outwardly gruesome moment. He glanced at Lazarus, asking whilst in passing; "A flying Christian, you say?" even as the giant pulled the laughing man away from Lazarus, turned him sideways, and chewed the marrow of his head.

A torrent of arrows and spears poured over the beast as Lazarus tucked low, rolled his self beneath massive tusks, and reclaimed his footing. He charged toward the double doors and halted in the face of level crossbows. Yet the beast took after him. Soldiers raised their weapons over Lazarus and filled its face with shafts, just as he spun and doubled back in the other direction, around the hall's periphery. Through the dust and debris that continued to rain down from the ceiling, Lazarus spotted stars through a massive hole in the ceiling; however, the hastily moving giant kept itself betwixt him and a clear shot into the night skies.

The room rumbled and widening cracks creased the hall walls, them descending quickly from the ceiling like black lightning; and the wall stones crumbled into the beginnings of ruin. Lazarus cleared the opposite side of the platform and charged passed the triple archway that sheltered the now departed women and children. Abruptly, the buttress columns collapsed as an avalanche of stone poured down around him, its falling debris knocking him to the flagstones. He rolled and scrambled to his feet as the ogre roared beneath a shower of stones ~ and he saw the much wider hole in the ceiling, with its welcoming black sky and sea of stars. At once, the sky disappeared behind the massive splayed wings of the beast, as it tromped toward him. Then it halted and blew.

Lazarus hastily considered the moment ~ 'twas as if the beast knew that he wished to escape through the gaping hole, and dared his any attempt. And Lazarus supposed that, given the swine giant's demonstrable swiftness, he would not be able to achieve enough swiftness in steep ascent, to steer clear of its enormous reach. What was more, Lazarus gathered that, in the fortunate event that he did escape the beast's claws whilst in flight, the monster would certainly have an equal start on him ~ and from experience, he knew that he could not escape the powerful wings of the beast when climbing into the skies.

All of this, Lazarus considered and dismissed in but a blink of his eye as he tore himself away from the standoff and bolted further down the wall.

He dashed into the direction from whence the soldiers firstly escorted him into the hall; and he charged toward the now unmanned entryway, which led deeper into the bowels of castle. Through sheets of spilling mortar, the arrow~riddled giant gave chase, carving a quick path through mounds of rock and rubble. And in a moment perhaps indivisible by perception or marked event, Lazarus tore through the entryway even as it exploded; and the blast of disintegrating stones hurled him to the floor. Yet he rolled to his feet as the giant rammed its head deep into the corridor, to root, roar, and thrash its tusks against crumbling walls. Lazarus lunged forward, broke into a run, rounded a corner, and descended a winding case of stairs that adjoined a lower castle corridor. He leapt to the base of the stairs and turned again, whilst looking back to see a great wave of stones, spilling from the staircase hold and cascading toward him. Thrashing tusks cleared the stones to reveal the massive and burrowing head of the pursuing beast. The walls of the hall bowed outward and the ceiling collapsed around the colossal frame of the beast, as the smaller dimensions of the corridor could not accommodate its mass. Still, the monster pressed forward, slamming itself evermore deeply through the hall.

Lazarus charged down the passageway and flew past the familiar crude door of his former confinement. He coursed the twists and turns of the hall, rounded an archway, and halted. Before him, where he expected a welcoming iron pit door, a mound of dead soldiers lay in a tall heap. He advanced and spotted a familiar face near the base of the pile ~ that of the giant red~haired soldier, with a sleepy~eyed gaze, and staring at nothing but a nearby and broken butt of a sword. Over the steady thunder of a collapsing castle, the resounding roar of the beast quickly spurred him to pull bodies from the stack. Individually, he moved the slain soldiers and lined them against the wall and, with every roar of the beast ~ with every quake of its new thrust, the walls around Lazarus rippled with shifting and crumbling stones. And when he had sufficiently cleared the dead men from against the door, he scrambled over top of the remaining corpses and struggled with the door's iron latch, which refused to give. He pounded on the latch even as the flagstones shifted beneath him. Mortar spilled from the around the pit entrance as the iron door bowed beneath the collapsing capstone of its rock casing.

“Open!” Lazarus yelled, slamming his shoulder heavily into the door. And as quickly, the latch shattered, hinges broke away from stone mortar; and he fell atop the door of a steadily collapsing and dust~filled pit. Yet, through the roiling debris, a waft of evening air washed over him and he found a blanket of sprawling stars overhead. He scrambled

to his feet, leapt upward, and with a pop of his wings, grabbed the topmost edge of the pit. He pulled himself out, planted his feet, and searched the easterly heavens, with its rising moon.

Lazarus drew a breath, spurred his wings, and made ready to fly; when the voice of the Christian prisoner called from within the pit, "Lazarus, help us!"

He turned about and peered down into the haze of dust and darkness to find the prisoners struggling with their chains, and attempting to pull their attached irons from out of the caving wall of the pit.

BOOM! The courtyard grounds trembled beneath Lazarus' boots, alluding to the swine giant's unwavering determination to burrow itself completely through the corridor and exit the pit after Lazarus. Abruptly, Lazarus saw the Christian fall on his back, with his chain now pulled free of the crumbling wall. Likewise, the north man slammed a foot against the broken stones and yanked his shackles loose.

Lazarus stooped beside the pit, vehemently waving and yelling, "Throw me your chain!" The Christian threw the loose end of his fetters at Lazarus. And Lazarus grabbed the chain and yanked the prisoner from out of the hole, rolling him aside whilst calling down to the north man, "Now, yours! Make haste!"

In turn, the giant slung his chain; and the Christian helped Lazarus pull him to safety. "You both must flee! A great evil comes this way!" Lazarus warned them before tearing into the darkness.

The north man rolled on the ground, wincing from the pain of a badly bruised elbow when he spotted the Christian, with hands in the air and skirting the grounds, attempting to calm and contain a large white stallion. And when the spooked horse made moves to charge passed him, the Christian repeatedly sidestepped, to and fro, opposing its every escape. The north man called out, cradling his arm; "So, yer gonna steal another steed, are ya?"

The Christian cut a quick glare at him. "No, I am going to save a steed from a great evil. Now, get up and help me!"

Yet, the injured north man only rolled on his side and returned to his pains.

CRASH! Beside him, the walls of the pit caved inward, stones quickly filling its void, as a plume of dust roiled upward, from out of the pit. The north man leapt to his feet and darted toward the Christian, quickly suggesting, "Well, if we're gonna save it; an' all ~ The Christian tossed him the loose end of his chain and instructed him to fall back and form a makeshift and movable fence by which to barricade the beast. In mere moments,

they had the horse contained in the corner of the courtyard. The Christian climbed atop the steed, helped his comrade to mount behind him, spurred the steed out of the courtyard, and toward the castle gates. The white horse blazed passed the rampart walls and pounded the ground in a wild gallop.

“So, the flying man saved you from the very pit of hell! What say you to that, north man?” the Christian asked from over his shoulder, and over the roar of thundering hooves.

The north man yelled over a yowling wind, “No, the flying man stole ya from the glorious valkyrie; so, I gather that yer ja~zeus man is gonna have to wait a bit longer fer ya?”

“Oh, He doesn’t mind,” the Christian called back to him. “Though, I don’t believe your seventy~seven virgins to be as forgiving!”

The north man firmly tapped his shoulder. “Do watch yer tongue, Christian man.”

The former pit prisoners galloped over a moonlit plain and into the freedom of night when they spotted a flickering moon and the miniscule but still apparent silhouette of a lone flying man, crossing through a moon’s window of yellow and bluish hues.

[End Chapter 16]