

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G. E. Graven



Chapter XIII



Mountain Mouth ~ April, 1351

~**O**utside Mountain Mouth, Auvergne's luminous hills sprawled beneath a curtain of stars and the westerly wind was warm, blowing hard and steady. Like aimless ghosts, whirling dust devils rose and dove over uneven terrain. The eastern horizon flickered, lightning bursts growing brighter within an advancing storm. The sky rumbled, distant thunders blending as unending kettledrum rolls. The storm's front was massive; 'twas an electrified blanket, hugging the curve of the earth, swallowing up the sky. The encroaching tempest was a spinning supercell, crushed into perfection under rare climatic pressures; hence—a densely moulded sky-monster.

The winds reversed, thrusting hard, cold, and out of the east. Brilliant branching bolts spread over the sky, the giant blue veins of a noble storm king. Excited clouds glowed in eerie green as the front charged forth with its stinging winds, blinding crooked columns, and deafening explosions. Abruptly, the heavens split wide to usher forth sheets of rain as sweeping walls of glass. Torrents of water raged down hillsides, flooding the many

valleys with a fury that perhaps only Noah could know. Rocks of ice rained down, shattering atop boulders whilst valley pools churned beneath a ceaseless spray of showering hailstones.

At the southernmost edge of the valley of stones, atop a craggy ridge and against the passing backdrop of a brilliant flash of lightning, there towered the silhouette of an enormous knight, all of forty-five hands tall. Encased in armour black as pitch, the Giant wielded a long-sword that, from tip to grip, stretched longer than a man stood high. And in a sweeping thrust, which perhaps seemed to cleave the clouds, the Giant drove his blade to the heavens, bellowing in a deep and foreign synchronized voice, as of many giant men speaking at once; “*Mors ad vitam—Eljo! Come forth!*” In a violet flash, Lightning crashed into the sword and the silhouette exploded into nothingness. Yet the squall’s chaos continued: winds climbed and hail fell as rains whipped to-and-fro.

Where the silhouette once stood, a winding and twisting cyclone descended out of the heavens, swelled into an ebony nightmare, and wandered northward up the rear wall of the thunderstorm. Altogether, the swirling gloom towered three miles high whilst commanding no less than a quarter-mile of ground. Apparent as the Finger of God, the pillar scoured a polished line across the earth and, like fat insect feelers inspecting the ground, bolts of lightning streamed, whipped, and spewed forth from the monstrosity. Wholly, the sluggish column heaved and twisted, lugging itself forth like a meandering old man on a cane stick.

The rains flipped sideways. Gale winds yowled as the whirling Giant lumbered toward Mountain Mouth. Rocks tittered down the ridge. The column heaved itself over the crest of the hill and planted its dense foot inside the valley, altogether ploughing headlong for the mountain womb which, deep within, contained a laying statue streaked with guano and that clutched a worn goatskin satchel to its breast—the stony remains of a Grotesque—a petrified Eljo—since condemned by sunlight. In expression, his mouth stood agape in a frozen scream and his dead eyes stared at a grotto ceiling covered with a churning upside-down sea of trembling bats. About him, his tattered stained robe whipped and popped in subterranean winds like some charging war banner.

Since its death, the Eljo lay imprisoned in perhaps a rather peculiar place best characterized as the region of ‘*Void.*’ Void was an eternally empty limbo for creatures not human—for those living things unworthy of a divine experience. 'Twas where the bats, the birds, and the bees went when they passed on. Void was a dusty attic of Creation, cluttered with the memories of Life’s less fortunate. 'Twas feasibly the highest

hollow of Eternity, deserving of the swatted fly, the netted fish, or the slaughtered lamb. Wholly, the *Kingdom of Void* was as much a raven afterlife for creatures seemingly damned to an eternal nothingness for lack of a soul. 'Twas this Kingdom alone, which the Eljo since inherited.

Yet, with winds of immeasurable speed and terminal ferocity, the tornado slammed into the hillside and Mountain Mouth screamed, thoroughly assaulted by an abrasive wall of whirling sand, rocks, and tree parts. Debris exploded against its face, grinding down its features—waxing it smooth. Above and high in the sky, millions of charged regions ignited within the writhing clouds, connecting and collecting to spawn thousands of glowing and descending branches, whilst also converging as several thick adjoining bolts. They too combined to form a single colossal column that conceivably stripped all force out of the heavens.

BOOM! Like some incensed lance of God, the brilliant stream slammed into the earth and cleaved the crest of Mountain Mouth, blasting away its topside with an intensity to penetrate the mountain and violate its deeper parts. Within the cave, roof sections broke loose. An ocean of bats dropped from the crumbling ceiling and rocks and dust rained down over the Eljo statue, burying its legs and covering the leather satchel that lay draped over its chest. Riled by roaring winds, the inner grotto dissolved into a boiling mess as, outside, the monstrous vortex drew nearly a third of the bats out of their cavern haven and swallowed them up, crushing them into the *Kingdom of Void*.

The whirlwind lumbered away from Mountain Mouth only to heave its fat foot out of the valley and ascend into the black heavens from whence it came. Ultimately, the winds departed and the dwindling rains lessened to a mere drizzle atop swollen pools. And with the chaos ended, those surviving bats returned to the ceiling and the grotto fell motionless as Death, save the occasional echoes of clicks and titters of stubborn roof stones that surrendered their high positions for the cave floor, whereupon the statue of the screaming Grotesque lay.

Yet in that deathly quiet and from the corner of a battered leather satchel which contained several items, including broken bits of a once-sealed flask, a brown fluid ebbed forth, dripping a thin line down the remains of a tattered robe. The consecrated lifeblood soaked through the threads, moistening the granite ribs of the statue, and in the preceding moments, crackling echoes shattered the dark-still—noises much like popping pebbles in a hot bed of coals. And where the blood spilled, fissures fragmented the statue's smooth form such to radiate outward.

Even more thin cracks raced over the granite surface, connecting and collecting like miniscule streams of black lightning, enveloping its every extremities. Yet, the popping stopped; the stillness returned to leave the stony visage of an Eljo laying as a rock puzzle of perhaps a countless sum of irregularly connected pieces.

BOOM! The statue exploded in a shower of granite shards that peppered the cave. The satchel flew—briskly swept away—and at the core of the dissipating dust brume, naked flesh stirred atop a heap of gritty debris.

”*Fa-ther,*” the Eljo groaned, its weak and raspy voice wheezed like that of a fatigued man, long overcome with dehydration. It rolled over, vomiting clumps of moist sand. For it, perhaps a cloud of stinging wasps paled in contrast to the present and outwardly all-encompassing agony and, overwhelmed by fever-like trembling, it heaved itself into a fleshy ball. Its gasping and groaning echoed—cries of pain—dying in reverse.

In the numbness of healing—in that outwardly infinite drag of time—the damnable roar within its ears surrendered to a softer sweeter sound: the soothing resonance of a steady rain. Thus, with the pains of resurrection subsiding to but a dull burn, and with its senses partly-returned, the Eljo edged itself awkwardly across the debris-cluttered floor, sweeping clear a narrow forward path whilst dragging itself in arduous advance, evermore near and toward the mouth of the cave—to the unquenchable lure of fresh water on cracked and parched lips.

Without the cave, standing tall and defiant amidst a battered and bruised landscape, Mountain Mouth survived the storm with only its crown cleaved away. Its scarred and torn face overlooked the same valley of stones, which now lay engulfed with the rolling white-water of a roaring and raging river. A naked figure emerged from the depths of its gaping mouth. With the musculature of a mature man—defined mass wrapping a rather large frame—it crawled forth, slipped into a puddle, and lay still. In its undiminished form, perhaps the body best resembled a winged version of the former friar, Ivan.

Lazarus lived.

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And so it happened, that in the subsequent days since his resurrection, Lazarus healed, his mind cleared, his strength returned, and he entertained the more ordinary drudgeries

of existence. Accommodating for his nakedness and now larger dimensions, Lazarus succeeded stitching together a loincloth from the remnants of clothing that lay buried in his sack of provisions, since protected from the elements.

Perhaps fortunate for Lazarus, he soon discovered that flying was no more difficult a task than before, all things relative—his larger size offset by his greater wing span. Inevitably driven by hunger, he ventured out of the cave at nights, returning with a fresh catch of fish from a water pool standing betwixt Mountain Mouth's rear slope and an adjacent hill.

Once more within the grotto, a ring of rocks that had not seen a fire in several seasons, now encircled regular crackling flames that offered up the smoke of roast fish whilst casting long dancing shadows beneath a ceiling of hundreds of beady black eyes. On the surface, save Lazarus' larger stature and the more forgiving climate of springtime, maybe the current happenings within Mountain Mouth could appear as if never changed since before Lazarus' lethal encounter with the sun.

Days melted into weeks as the bats went about their routine, swarming out of the grotto at dusk only to return to roost, full-bellied, before dawn. And Lazarus left and returned with the bats, yet tearing off on his own to soar over luminous nocturnal lands, ever watchful of the first rays of the damning sun, lest they catch him too far removed from Mountain Mouth.

In such time, his diet grew more varied, as did his skills in aerial venery. Moles, hares, and even an occasional fox, he carried back to Mountain Mouth. Also, from the many books since memorized—a scriptorium's volume that his friar father insisted be firmly rooted in his mind—he reaped plenty from his kills: smoked and dried meats, tanned hides that he stitched into pants and leather shoes and an open-backed vest, and even crude instruments carved from sharpened bone.

Whilst employing these many techniques, the method of them that Ivan long made mentally and readily available to him, Lazarus came to understand the true magnitude of a father's undying love. The worn wooden prayer cross which adorned his neck, so frequently kissed, perhaps served as much an instrument to remember his father as to reinforce his faith. And maybe it hung as a final tangible thread that joined the fabric of his former predictable world with that of a wild and outwardly boundless one.

May, 1351

The night was young. Dusk had fallen merely an hour since when Lazarus leaned against the rock face just outside the cave entrance, huffing and sweating whilst looking down beside him at a full-grown boar that he had brought back from his latest hunt. The kill was his biggest and quickest yet, and with good cause. He kissed his cross and dragged the carcass into the cave, past the scattered bones of the swine that he long since slew. Also returning from their hunt, a stream of screeching bats dove into Mountain Mouth, blazed by Lazarus and flew deep into the cavern. Lazarus turned and yelled at them with a dry smile, “But mine is bigger!” He lifted the boar onto his shoulder and stumbled after them, groaning but smiling, balancing himself, wafting his wings this way and that.

Shortly, a long-flamed fire cast shifting shadows over the grotto, illuminating the bristly remains of the boar. It lay against a rock wall with its hindquarter cut out and a cleaned leg bone and strips of hide laying some distance from its head.

Nearer and toward the centre of the cave, Lazarus sat on a boulder, a steaming pork steak at his feet. The meat hissed atop a hot flat rock that served as a smooth cooking surface and the aroma of frying pork filled the cave.

“You shan’t be coming with me. You are no condition to make the journey. But I hope that you remember me, all the same,” Lazarus called out, smiling as he roasted several chunks of meat on a stick that he held suspended above crackling flames. “I’ve a promise to keep and keep it, I shall. I am truly leaving—on the morrow. You’ll see,” he glanced at the grotto ceiling and informed the bats—hundreds of beady black eyes looking down at him. With a free hand, Lazarus lifted a hewn bone knife from beside him, stabbed the pork steak, and flipped it over to sizzle afresh. Next, he pulled the stick of pork from the fire and, from a stack of small, soft, tanned hides he placed three of them at his feet.

“They must be cooked and dried enough,” he mumbled, pulling off the cooked pork chunks and placing them atop the hides. Lazarus resumed his conversation with the bats; “I’m going far away!” He rolled the smoked pork in the hides and grease fat, tying the bundles closed, “Across a great sea—to the land of Italy. I shall fetch Friar Salvitino and return with him to the Abbey for to close the Gatestone. And when he closes it, then I shall ask Abbot Vonig to be a friar, because I am now grown. And he can appoint me as friar of the catacombs because I know everything about them—just as my father.”

Lazarus rose with the wrapped meat and strode over to his leather-strapped goatskin

satchel, nestled betwixt two full bladders of water. He stacked the steaming wrappings within—additional provisions that he might carry with him on the journey. “And Migual and Thateus can help me with the torches. And I shan’t allow Friar Clodius within the catacombs—ever.” He chuckled, closing the satchel and returning to the fire.

Once returned to his seat, with a stab of the crude bone knife, he peeled the pork steak off the stone, chuckling; “’Tis a feast worthy of the famished *Friar Lazarus*.” He turned the tempting meat slowly in the light of the fire and, noting browned perfection, he blew off the steam.

But a large glob of guano dropped from the ceiling and splashed over the steak, washing away his smile. Several more splattered about him. Bats fluttered overhead. “No,” he groaned. He stood and pleaded with the ceiling, “Why?” Then the air abruptly chilled—enough that he saw his breath fog; and a nauseatingly-sweet aroma drowned all scent of cooked meat. The beady eyes of a million bats glistened in the firelight, all of them intently peering down at him. The crackles and hisses of burning wood fell unnaturally flat in the thickening air; and the fire's flames appeared to shrink and roll inward on themselves like the petals of a flower, blooming hastily in reverse.

“Have we been born again?” An unnatural, harmonized and overlapping voice—the questioning in perfectly synchronous tone of many women at once—whispered almost imperceptibly from behind. He had to consider further if he heard it through his ears or within his mind.

Lazarus spun about; his breath left him like a soul torn as Lucifael stood arms reach from him, thoroughly naked and grinning slightly to expose, betwixt crimson lips, the thick tips of canine-like fangs. Beneath her wild hair, a pair of wholly black eyes reflected an inverted image of the cave fire, with upended flames dancing downward in bluish hues. Moreover, with ebony nails and scarlet areolas against ivory skin, and with enormous wings of layered flesh and bone sprawling above and behind her, Lucifael could perhaps mock Purity by her presence alone.

Lucifael slapped Lazarus across the cave, snapped her wings closed, and marched after him. Lazarus scrambled backwards and struggled to his feet. He countered with splayed wings, hissing, yet back-peddaling in the same. She stopped and crossed her arms, heaving up her breasts at him and cocking her head as a curious dog; she looked him over with a satisfied smile.

She spoke softly; “You’ve grown well. However, lastly I recalled you but a rock

statue—a foolish Eljo boy, since slain by the sun whilst dragging a dead swine. Just as that one.” She pointed to a bony carcass across the cave.

“Yet here you stand, *alive* again—and with the very distinct *Glow* upon you, no less. You were not born with it. How did you get it? 'Tis freshly cast. You did not have it when last we spoke.” She narrowed her eyes to mere black slits; “Now I must wonder such: Is destiny inasmuch a mystery for it? Or is this uncommon resurrection a divine omen of sorts?” She looked over the cave floor debris and found the granite shards once serving to imprison Lazarus in stone. “Hmm,” she murmured.

“I did not pray or summon you,” Lazarus spat, stepping back and gathering his wings. “Yet in a manner, you did—the moment you defied death. Lazarus, nothing escapes my attention, especially something so grave as resurrection.” She spotted the small wooden cross dangling on Lazarus’ necklace and crumpled her face. “Why do you don that fruitless and rootless twig about your throat?”

Lazarus clutched the cross betwixt his fingers, “’Tis a prayer cross—the image of my faith—’twas my father’s.”

She tilted her head, as if to consider his claim, but fell consumed with a wicked laugh. “A God-fearing Eljo adorned with a priest’s graven image?” She chuckled. “Imagine that, of all the world’s perversities.”

“Why have you come?” Lazarus questioned her.

She threw her hands behind her and approached him, casually kicking small stones aside with black-nailed toes. Lazarus stood firm. “Not because you could possibly summon or excuse me at a whim. And because you did not see me before now does not mean that I was not always present; I was in the swine.”

“In the swine?”

“When you looked into the swine’s eye, I was looking back at you.” She halted before him, continuing; “You see dear, before you died, I sent you the swine because I wished to confirm in stone that a condition so simple as hunger might drive you to compromise your values. Yes, I put you to the test—and it bested you. Verily, it so happened that your slaying the swine came at the price of even your own life. Imagine that.” Lucifael grinned widely, fangs proud. “Recall your teaching, Lazarus—Thou shalt not kill? Yet still, you killed—you did compromise your values—and for what but a belly full?” She pointed to his latest kill lying beside the cave wall; “And now you slay another.” She raised her brow. “Perhaps you value your values merely when they serve you, yes?”

“The swine was but a beast. God did not intend His Commandments to apply to beasts of the earth—only men,” Lazarus informed her.

“Ah,” she replied, as if learning from him. “Then, if I slay you now, would I break such

rule?”

“Thou shalt not kill—yes, you would.”

“I see,” she nodded with raised brow and pursed lips, “And tell me Eljo, what do you recall after you died? Do you recall seeing Heaven or Hell—anything at all, even?”

Lazarus averted his gaze, admitting, “I—I do not recall.”

She smirked. “Then this could only reveal yet a simple truth. Painful as you might gather it; the truth is that you are not a man, Lazarus. Unlike your father, you are an Eljo—a mere beast of the earth like the swine that you slew. As such, you have no soul—no afterlife. Now answer me this: What good is your faith if you reap nothing from it in the end?”

He rolled back his shoulders. “I shan’t question my faith, my Lord, or His divine Will.”

“Well, of course you shan’t,” she snapped, “Since these notions fester at the very core of your existence, them serving pathetically as the foundation for everything else that you’ve since learned. And we cannot expect you to entertain fresh yet bitter concepts of which you might doggedly deny, even if reasonably presented, now can we?”

She turned and paced the cave, studying the floor, still preaching, “Because if you did, then perhaps you shall be forced to reconsider that foundation of yours. And doing such might call for the subsequent reconsidering of the rest of your worldly perceptions, that they be realigned more closely with perhaps harsh worldly truths. And we cannot suffer the pains of that, now can we?”

She kicked a pebble and stole a glimpse at him. “Too painful—reconsidering one’s foundation; too disturbing—shaking those presumably solid flagstones merely to discover the many fundamental flaws therein—merely to discover one’s own house was built atop shifting sands.” Then she turned and approached him, eyes glaring. Lazarus backed away. “Yet I did not show myself to you with intention of discussing matters of which you refuse to know, my dear Eljo.”

Then she stopped, leaned in his face, and whispered, “I am here to discover what you do know. You are the only of my Eljo children ever to be born again—the only one who has ever carried the Glow of the Throne about him. Yet in stone, you could neither resurrect yourself, nor cast the Glow upon your own head. As well, ‘tis remote that such happening occurred by chance alone. Now, I want you to share with me the one who brought you back.” Lucifael spurred his thoughts, “Recall everything for your dear mother, Lazarus. Who raised you? Was it a holy man, or a mystic of magic?” She cocked her head and searched his face, looking deeply for clues sunken beneath the oceans of his blue eyes.

Lazarus turned away. “I recall merely a dreamless sleep—a heavy darkness.” A sharp pain coursed his brain. He winced, grabbed the sides of his head and retreated further as Lucifael burned her prying eyes through his skull and cleanly into his recollections.

“Show me your mind’s eye,” Lucifael murmured, advancing in graceful pursuit. “Who resurrected you, Eljo?” His head pounded as she drilled herself deeper into his mind. Yet, the cave wall blocked all further retreat. She continued the torturous mental extraction, his mind roaring with the quickening strobe of his every recollected sensation—as though his life’s memory was but a book of pages thoroughly yet hastily flipped. She probed him, “Who made you flesh again? Who cast the Glow upon you?” Another Angel, perhaps? The Throne Itself? Answer me!”

“I do not recall!” Lazarus gasped. “I do not!” The pain ceased, his vision cleared and, before him, Lucifael fell into focus, now sporting a satisfied grin. “Ah! You hold many secrets. Yes, I believe you now,” she answered, immediately stepping away, perhaps allotting him but a moment to recollect his senses. “Not to fret; I shall cause you no more pain, my dear. ‘Twas for the best—that I understand your mind. And, now that I know it, we may start afresh—as mother and son.”

Now, since you thirst for knowledge and have an ear to hear it, I can reveal to you the secrets of everything that you ever wondered to know—and more. Conceive the consummate beauty of it: Omniscient Understanding.” She looked over her shoulder, past her wings, to expose a naughty radiant smile; “Would you enjoy that, my son—to have that burning curiosity of yours finally sated?”

Perhaps for Lazarus, her combined heathen stare and naked perfection seemed nauseating—the totality of her presence stirring some sickening bittersweet impeccability within—stirring only sin. Flushed and thoroughly embarrassed, he looked away. “Not by you. You are everything evil.”

“And are graven images not presumably evil, like that icon which hangs about your throat?” She innocently questioned him whilst alluding to one of God’s Commandments. Lazarus clutched his prayer cross. “‘Tis a cross, which symbolizes Jesus, the Son of God, who gave his life on it for our sins. ‘Tis not a graven image.”

“Now really, Lazarus.” She shook her head, outwardly disappointed in him. “Do you gather that this Jesus was the only man ever to die on a cross; or that this manner of execution did not exist prior to his life? Tell me, if instead they burned him alive, might you wear a flaming stake? Or, if they hung him, would you hang a knotted rope about your neck?” She raised her brow. “And how might you adorn yourself with the image of

your faith if instead they drowned him?”

She kicked dust from the cave floor; “No dear, your icon is but a graven image of a quaint execution device of Man. I’ve since collected many wicked souls from men who died on them.”

“Yet, never Jesus. And God allows you only to collect souls of the wicked since you yourself are wicked.”

She looked down her nose at him. “Allows me?” She narrowed her gaze, giving him warning; “I gather that you’ve enough of my blood flowing in your veins to know better than to raise my wrath, Lazarus.”

“Still, I speak only the truth.”

“Ah, yes—a faith-stricken beast who claims to speak only the truth,” she mocked him as she paced the ground, arms crossed, lost in thought. “So answer me this, Lazarus; if I protected your Jesus, sparing his life by slaying his judges before they had the chance to condemn him, would my doing such constitute an act of evil?”

Lazarus referred to God’s Commandment; “Thou shalt not kill. Killing even the wicked is evil.”

“Hmm. And if I washed Evil completely from the face of the world by slaying every man on it, would my doing such be an evil act—Is ridding Evil, in itself evil?”

“It would be an evil act—and Evil would still be. ‘Tis by you; Evil exists! And the world is not yours; ‘tis God’s creation. He would never allow you to slay it, for He is a merciful and just God.”

Lucifael leapt forth on splayed wings, planting herself squarely in his face. “Never allow me?” She marched Lazarus further into the grotto, bellowing at him, “Man is mine!” The world belongs to me!” Lazarus pressed himself deep into the cave wall. “Now tame your tongue, Eljo!” For Lazarus, in a moment that seemed eternal, their eyes lay locked: black on blue.

Finally, he replied with obedient voice; “Then I can answer you no more since your wrath does not permit me to speak freely.” Lucifael huffed and tore off to the grotto centre. Lazarus slumped against the wall. “Very well then,” she replied, spinning back to him, “As an Eljo of mine, I shall allow you space to speak your mind. Yet consider your place with me before you free that tongue of yours.”

“Then I shall speak my mind,” Lazarus followed.

She paced the cave centre, her gazed fixed on him. “So the earth is not mine, as you suppose? And your God shan’t allow me—as you claim?” She stopped, faced him, and

crossed her arms outwardly in proud support of the wide red eyes on her chest. She grinned, “Yet, whilst you were dead, Lazarus, I did slay half of the world. As it happened, two men stood, ploughing fields; I slew one of them. Two women bowed, grinding grain; I slew one of them. Two children played, digging the dirt; I slew one of them. Now I ask you this: Where was your merciful God then? Where, if not standing before you now as the true ruler of this world?”

“If you speak true, then God shall hold you in account for such evil.”

“Me—in account?” Lucifael meandered closer to him, retorting, “And who shall be held in account for a far greater evil—for casting a great flood over the earth and slaying nearly every beast on its face—for crushing every tree and shrub with oceans as deep as the hanging clouds—for pouring fathomless seas down the throats of every child on earth, both born and unborn? Oh, indeed! I recollect the very day that the world screamed as one, and with enough collective passion even to force the heavens to fall silent and lend a frightful ear.”

“And behold, with so many trees dying at once, I heard even their combined wails, together as a single choking hum, whole forests howling, their treetops snapping beneath raging salty seas. And, as well, on that brackish depthless day, I perceived even the smothering of all their seeds, soaked in brine such that the voice of their fruit joined in a single worldly cry; it alone, loud enough to drown even choirs of screaming Angels. Now, Lazarus, who is to be held in account for such absolute evil, if not your merciful God?”

“Man turned away from God. In His heart, God did not want to flood the earth. Man brought the Great Flood upon Himself,” Lazarus preached. “Yet after it, Man promised to return to the ways of God and, justly, God promised no more floods.”

Lucifael stepped beside him and, with long black nails, picked away loose rock from the cave wall as she whispered; “And, do the righteous ever promise never to repeat their righteous deeds?” She faced him with a coy grin. “Tell me, lest casting this flood be an unrighteous deed, why the promise? Is your God so truly righteous and caring as you wish him to be? In all your life, in all those countless prayers, when did your God even once give reply, Lazarus? And why has your God never shown his face to you as I now do?”

Lazarus flattened his ears and eased away from her in his reply; “My faith in the Almighty Lord and God is unwavering and I shan’t question his ways. You speak evil

only because that is all you know—that is all you can do. Yet your evil tongue shan't tempt me from my God or from truth.”

“Tempt?” She strode to the centre of the cave and called back, her voice echoing through the deeper corridors of the cavern. “Lazarus, would anyone, having both knowledge and vision, wish light to be cast upon its deeds for all to see?”

“I gather not.”

“And, Lazarus, would any mother, having knowledge and vision, strike her children forever dumb and blind?”

“No.”

“And can Truth, dear Lazarus, have more than a single face?”

“Truth is truth,” Lazarus stated.

She turned to him and threw her hands behind her. “You answer well. Now, I ask you this: Long ago, in those lush forests of Eden, who commanded Man not to partake of the fruit of knowledge and vision, that his eyes remained forever sealed from Truth? And in the light of all His generations to see, who tempted Man to such fruit, that His eyes fly open to Truth?” Then she loudly rebuked him; “I ask you, Lazarus; who shrouds Truth? Your tempting mother; your tempting God; or your blind self, who doggedly refuses to see it, lest you be forced to question the very foundation of your faith?”

Lazarus defended the Lord; “God does not tempt. You are the only one who tempts!”

“Yet who throws a carcass before wolves, commanding them not to partake of it? The tempter does! And who fashioned such a fruit, commanding Man not to partake of it? The tempter did!”

“You shan't—”

“Shan't?” She cut him off. “Shan't, give a fool the knowledge and vision to see the ignorance of his own baseless claims? Oh, but I shall, when I witness such reprehensible benightedness before me. Yet, even when shown it, still you refuse truth. If you were not my Eljo—if merely a man—I would have since slain you for such wilful impudence in my presence. Still, I shall allow you to live because, unlike your claim of me, I am capable of more than merely evil acts—good and merciful acts, even.”

Lazarus considered her claim and countered it; “Yet I'm already alive. If you allow me to live, then such an act is neither good nor merciful. 'Tis merely an act, absent of evil.” Lucifael popped with reply, “Yet you claim that I can speak and do only evil. How can I, being only evil, perform an act where evil is absent? More so, tell me Lazarus, can your God perform an act, absent of good?”

Lazarus crossed his arms and said nothing.

“I did not strike you dumb and blind; give answer.”

He remained silent.

She huffed, clicked her black fingernails at a stone on the cave floor and sent it hurling forth.

Snap! Lazarus caught it mere inches from his face. He found her nodding and smiling, brow raised, perhaps impressed by his speed. “’Tis a gift from your Mother,” she called out. Lazarus turned it about to discover its new form as a large and lustrous transparent purple gem, gleaming in the firelight. He stared into the stone, captivated by its shimmering splendour.

“Now, my dear, what does this prayer stone tell you? By it, how shall you measure my intentions? Was my act good or evil?”

Lazarus raised his gaze. “’Tis not so simple. The stone says nothing. Yet, if you wished the stone to strike me, the act would be evil. And if you wished to give me—”

He caught himself and fell silent.

Lucifael chortled and stepped toward him. “Yes, finish it, Lazarus. If I wished to give you a gift, then it would be an act of kindness.” She threw her hands up with a smile.

“Well there you have it; a beautiful gift from your mother.” Lazarus looked it over before narrowing his eyes at her.

She stepped beside him, visibly examining the gem in his hand with equal enthusiasm.

“’Tis of a shade that I favour most. Do you like its colour?”

“I’ve never seen a stone as this.”

“I gathered you might like such a gift—’tis from a secret cave which no mortal man has since discovered. There are many more wondrous prayer stones as this—and in every colourful shade that you might gather. Lazarus, I can share with you, where this unspoiled cave resides, if you desire it. And with your discovery of them, all the wealth of all the kingdoms on earth, would lay at your feet—all of these prayer crystals can be yours, Lazarus. Would you wish it?”

Lazarus eyed the beautiful purple crystal. ’Twas clear throughout with six smooth sides converging into sharp points on opposite ends of the stone. He shot a glare at Lucifael.

“Why might you offer me this, lest to tempt me into evil?”

Lucifael huffed and stepped away. She paced again, elaborating with proposition, “I offer you this in exchange for but a simple request: that you roll back a stone and open a cave. There is no evil in such an act. Open this cave and all its gems are yours.”

“If you truly wished to give me these stones, you would not had made but one of them

appear when you could have made them all appear. And since you ask me to open this cave when you are the Devil and could open it yourself, I can only gather that I would do evil by opening it. Or that you would do evil by its being opened.”

Then, by your reasoning, must one not bare children for fear they might do evil? More so, must one desire all of Creation destroyed so that an evil act never occurs? Where is such a line drawn that preventing evil does not strangle the good, Lazarus?”

“Betwixt good and evil deeds, and their intentions,” he answered.

“Yet, as your faith asserts, the consequences of my deeds shall return upon my own head, not yours. Thus, you can be held in account only for opening a cave—an act which is neither evil nor good.”

Lazarus cast the gem on the cave floor. “I would be held in account for helping you. I do not want your gifts. I ask only that you leave me be.”

She threw her hands on pale hips and glared at him. “Well, I cannot bring myself to honour your request, Lazarus; not after seeing into your mind. It seems that you promised a holy man, Nicholas, to carry a flask of consecrated blood belonging to another holy man, Odino. And you were to deliver this blood to yet a third holy man, Salvitino, residing at a monastery in Italy. Yet, in a rather strange and fateful turn, this blood somehow spilled on you, and now here you are, risen from the dead. I gather it too coincidental that such an act occurs by chance alone, particularly after the passing of over three seasons. Unfortunately, since you have no recollection of how it happened, it now remains a mystery for the both of us.”

“Nevertheless, I learned as well, from your thoughts, that you know another of my Eljo children, Naramsin; corrupted by the same foolish holy men as those who corrupted you. Indeed, you are much like was he, working alongside men, adopting their faith, duties, and mannerisms as yours. And both of you did so with an inane longing that perhaps they might see you enough like them as to accept you as one of them. Oh yes, the two of you could have been brothers of twin; and had you not the name of Lazarus, I would gather you to be Naramsin, resurrected.”

Recalling Naramsin’s last written testimony, Lazarus questioned her, “Why didn’t you help to free him? They imprisoned him beyond a wall.”

She chuckled. “Fate served me well. You see, if I helped to free Naramsin, then he would have never wrote the words now etched in your mind.” She stepped nearer and, with a grin, addressed him in foreign tongue; “*Eca tinum mi turnum ruva fler. Eca shuthi tularn zuchum*. What do these words mean to you, Lazarus?”

Lazarus replied, “Cleric Naramsin wrote those words, on that day he gave his brother a gift and the crypt contained his words.”

“And that *brother* who received the gift was in fact *you*, yes? Pray tell me, Lazarus—how might you know these words mean to say what you speak they mean?”
“I’m certain of their meaning—yet, I do not know how I know.”

“Then I shall tell you how. Like Naramsin, you know their meaning because they are the words of my kind—the language of Angels. You know them because you come from my seed. As with any Eljo, you were born knowing Angelic tongue, only, you never knew till you saw these words. And had you not learned the tongue of Man—had you been with others of your kind—you would speak your mother tongue, instead.”

She lifted the purple gem and examined its many faces as she addressed Lazarus. “You can help your mother gain her freedom, dear. I shall require your help.” She tossed the gem, caught it again, and cast him a clever smile.

“Yet you are already free,” he stated.

“Not truly. You see but a mere shade of me; I stand before you in spirit only. My true Self lies on the other side of a *Great Seal*, a gate that you shall open for me. You’ve read of it in apocryphal books.”

The Apocrypha writings speak of a Great Seal—to the *Great Abyss*. Yet, if the Abbey Gatestone is that seal, ‘tis already open.”

Lucifael informed him; “‘Tis only part. Two are open; there is yet a third. Three seals comprise the Great Seal and all three must stand open at once. So long as the last is closed, I remain imprisoned. And since you stand on the other side of this gate, you hold the key to my freedom.”

He recalled the prisoner in the catacombs. Lazarus stepped away from her. “I shan't help you.”

Oh, you shall,” she followed him as he withdrew deeper into the cavern. “By your reading Naramsin’s pages, you have come to learn every incantation, every verse, and every word on the face of the very seals that hold me captive. A particular assemblage of these verses, when recited in precise order shall open any of the three seals. I need merely to tell you which verses and the proper order of them for you to open the final seal.”

This is what you intended by asking me to roll away a stone and open a cave—the stone is another Gatestone and the cave is Hell.” Lazarus backed into a rocky recess. “And this

is why you cannot do it yourself.” He shook his head nervously. “I’ve given my life to God. And I’ve likewise given my word that I shall journey to Italy and fetch Friar Salv—”

“Oh, indeed! You shall be going to Italy, since the third seal stands within a cathedral of the very monastery where you promised to fetch this holy man. Yet rather than fetching him, I command you to open this last seal for me. And as your faith calls for it, you shall honour your mother by obeying my commands.”

Lazarus stammered in effort to explain the Commandment to which she referred; “To honour thy mother—God meant—what it means—”

She cut him off. “Well done, Lazarus. You unearthed a truth. Yet, in doing so, now you discover yourself in a quandary, since you cannot very well honour your mother and dishonour the Devil in the same, now can you? And this can only mean that the words you recite were not meant for you. Simply, you are not a man and have no soul with which to bargain. You are an Eljo—merely a beast. And like any beast of the earth, your only time is—*now*.”

He defended himself. “Perhaps, yet I shan’t abandon my faith merely because I might lack a soul. And with my faith in God Almighty, I gather myself more than a beast—and I shan’t honour you as a mother when even a beast shows more care for its young.”

Lucifael snapped open her wings and leaned into him, fangs in his face and growling, “And kill you, I shall, lest you obey me! You have nothing to gain or lose, save life itself and, for you, life is all you have! ‘Tis your eternity!” She snapped closed her wings and allowed him space.

She softened her tone. “I want you to use Naramsin’s words to roll open the seal at Canello. Do this for me and I shall give you eternal life—unending flesh. With it, you shall have as much as any soul could afford you—a world of life everlasting. This is my covenant to you: everything an immortal soul could possibly promise an Eljo. Open it, Lazarus—live forever.”

He forced a swallow and sought the dark grotto depths for ready reply—yet, only blackness stared back at him, every bit as empty as his mother’s gaze.

“If you refuse me, Lazarus, then you leave me no further course but to slay you, here and now. And I truly do not wish it.” She crossed her arms and kindly searched his face.

He lowered his head. He sighed heavily and choked, “I—‘tis wrong—I cannot.”

Lucifael turned, yet spun about, eyes as ebon daggers. She swiped her black fingernails through the air betwixt them as if clawing a gash in it. “Enough of you!” She eased a glaring gaze behind her and grumbled, “*Veni, vita ad vitam. Altera pars facta.*” And instantly, the shrilling squeals of a swine enveloped the cave. Lazarus reeled to discover his once dead boar flopping about like a land-stranded fish. The reanimated beast gained its footing and rose awkwardly on only three legs.

She shouted at him over the boar’s snorting and wheezing, “A fool in foolish faith falls hastily in his grave! As now you shall, Eljo!” Awestruck, Lazarus watched as the boar hobbled forth toward Lucifael, its hip missing and liquids glistening from a large hollow that once held its hindquarter. Wheezing heavily, it stopped before her and looked up, its eyes streaming water.

She corrected the animal; “Your pains do not lay at my feet, swine!” She thrust an accusing finger at Lazarus; “There! ’Twas the Eljo that carved out your backside!” The boar turned to Lazarus, eyes drowning in his, as if possibly it realized its awkward predicament and sought his further explanation of it. Yet, Lazarus stood speechless, head wheeling, stomach swimming. He looked away.

“No! Look at it!” Lucifael bellowed. “See it suffer! You stole its leg!” Lazarus stole a glimpse of it to discover the boar hopping about in a circle, whining, as if insisting upon exhibiting all of its appalling condition. It briefly stood still and stared at him. Finally, the beast fell into a choking and heaving fit before urinating, again spurring Lazarus to turn away from the perverse display. He mumbled to a smirking Lucifael, “You wield a deception only. ’Tis not real.”

Lucifael rounded the boar and approached him, grumbling, “Oh, ’tis quite real, Lazarus; as true to form, hot of blood, and suffering still as the moment you slew it. And it desires to know why you stole its leg—why you killed it.” She halted before him. “Thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not kill. Recall you, these things?”

Lazarus defended himself; “You twist their meaning. The Commandments do not apply to beasts.”

The boar complained with a wheeze as she rebuked him. “’Tis you, who twisted their meaning! Were these not the very words you told a holy man after he chased a rat down a tunnel? And did you not feel divine for throwing the pail and saving that rat?”

Lazarus refused reply.

“Confess the truth; did you not see that holy man as perhaps some great demon,

wielding his wrath against a lowly innocent rat? And did you not envision that rat as yourself in that moment, chased by a giant devil that intended to slay you merely because it found you offensive—ugly and ungodly, even?”

Lazarus crumpled his brow, pretending to be confused, and he looked beyond her to spot the three-legged boar staring up at him.

“Well of course you did,” Lucifael stated calmly, “As your mind since confessed it to me.” She threw her hands behind her and shuffled her wings.

“You stand certain in your faith; yet, such certitude makes you quite useless to me. No doubt, I shall seek another to open the Canello Seal. As well, I shan't have you undoing my past efforts and fetching a meddling friar for to close the Gardiens Seal.”

She spun away and walked back to the boar. “Unfortunately, at your mother’s expense, you have demonstrated a foolish loyalty to a fruitless faith—we have yet seen a demonstration of how this faith serves you well, when pressed. And thus, we shall.”

From the side of her head, Lucifael peeled off a large patch of hair, a layer of pale skin dangling at its roots. She suspended the matted mess betwixt the boar’s tusks and issued it command, “Partake of it—the flesh of my body, given unto you.” The beast sniffed, licked, and then devoured the bloody offering as she again “grumbled, “*Veni, vita ad vitam. Altera pars facta.*”

Then she turned and cast an eye at Lazarus, half of her smooth red skull glistening, and she informed him in many voices: “Hear me now, Eljo. Since you saved the rat, justifying it by your faith, now you shall become the rat. And since you slew this swine, likewise justifying it with your faith, now the swine shall become your Giant Devil. In this way, we shall take your precious faith to task, only now, without obstruction or delusion. And in your final moment, when torn limb from limb, you shall cry out, asking your faith why it forsaken you. Then you shall gather, in that brilliance of terror—and with utter certitude—that I am God of this world.”

Lucifael allowed the boar space as it morphed, gradually swelling into an upright mammoth beast—tusks elongating, hooves transforming into six-fingered claws, and massive bony wings spreading wide out from its back.

Completely upright, with two bristly pillars for legs, the Swine Giant towered twenty feet tall in the forty-foot grotto. Tilting a black eye down at Lazarus, the Monster growled; its deep expression resonated through every surface of the cave. Lazarus

glanced at the grotto entrance and the Giant responded, stomping toward the opening, blocking all escape. Lazarus hissed and backed deeper into the shadows; ears flat like a cornered cat.

And standing in the cave centre, Lucifael shot glares betwixt them. She chuckled, spun about, and strode toward a deeper cave wall, calling out to Lazarus whilst in stride; “Your faith is now taken to task!” She demeaned his prayer cross; “Perhaps you might wield that fruitless and rootless tree against it!” Again, the Giant growled, outwardly as if to underscore the devilish humour.

She stopped at the cavern wall, turned, and addressed Lazarus once last; “If I were not the one who gave you life, for insolence alone, I might certainly savour your death! Canello awaits and I have yet a final seal to open!” And in a climbing hum like a swarm of locusts, Lucifael melted into the rock surface, leaving her Lazarus to fret his fate.

Lazarus glanced in the direction of her departure to discover the Swine Giant wielding a massive boulder over its head. The Demon hurled it down at him. He dived sideways onto the cave floor as the sailing rock screamed over him and exploded against the wall. In a shower of stones, Lazarus rolled to his feet and raced ‘round the rear of the cavern, up one side, and beyond the fire. There he squatted, feet apart, hunched, and ready for escape, yet the Giant had already turned on him, standing ready for the Eljo’s charge—too late.

Psss! Beside the fire, atop the ring of rocks, a glob of guano dropped and sizzled on a scorched stone. Lazarus stole a glimpse of the bat-covered ceiling, then threw his eyes into the fire. Slowly, he stooped and slipped a still-blazing branch from the flames. And the Giant growled beneath its breath, spreading its claws. Yet, both of them stood still, eyes locked, perhaps anticipating any due move by the other.

Lazarus leaped, popping his wings as he tore straight up. The Giant thundered forth, swiping its monstrous claw, grazing his thigh. “*Screech!*” Lazarus released a piercing cry as he circled a path against the cave ceiling, strafing the torch flames against it and sending every bat into a whirlwind that rapidly engulfed the grotto. Bats poured past the beast, drowning and blinding it with a flood of fluttering wings. The Monster roared, raking at them when Lazarus dived into the bevy and slung the blazing torch betwixt its tusks. And in the pouring chaos, he swooped and shot sideways through the great bristly arch of its legs, crashing through the narrow exit

passage, where he scrambled for the mouth of the cave.

The Swine Giant spun and lunged after him, howling, crushing itself through the grotto opening, gouging it wider with flailing tusks. In a shower of stones, the Demon exploded from the grotto passage and tore out of Mountain Mouth. Spotting Lazarus in flight, it threw open a pair of monstrous wings and heaved itself toward the stars, every heavy downward stroke of its wings slapping down entire clusters of fleeing bats.

Lazarus peered down behind him to discover the Giant ascending hastily after him. Faster, he climbed—higher still—till the rugged details of the landscape smoothed into an endless blanket of earth. Yet, the Swine Giant gained ground; Lazarus could now spot details in its hideous face. At length, the air chilled and his lungs burned. Lazarus levelled off, gasping for air, his eyes watering from the pain in his strained back and wings. He stole another glimpse to see the Giant nearly atop him, swiping claws at his heels.

Lazarus tucked his wings and rolled into a steep dive, pitching nearly thirty degrees below the southeastern horizon. With eyes pinched, teeth clenched, and wings bleeding, he blazed downward. His speed soared, winds roared, and the blasting air blistered his skin—Lazarus was a plummeting star.

Through roaring and stinging winds, he finally broke speed and peeled open his eyes—within *treetops!* Lazarus popped his wings and pulled up, still barrelling forth betwixt tangled limbs of massive twin oaks, their lighter limbs slapping him over with cuts and bruises. He escaped to safe altitude and found the Swine Giant to be but a speck on the northwestern horizon, level with him, hovering just above the treetops. Again, Lazarus climbed into the heavens. The speck rose with him. Again, he dipped into a howling dive. At last, his Devil-spawned predator was gone.

And for an hour more, battered and bleeding, he winged his way south-east, till he found the river that he recalled from the Abbey maps: the River Rhone, which emptied into the Gulf of Leon and the ocean. Rhone was his marker—the very road that would lead him to Italy. He banked right and followed the winding glassy ribbon southward.

Another hour flew by as a thin red line fractured the eastern horizon—the break of day was finally upon him. In his warming skin, he knew that the giant of all demons—that savage scorching sun—would soon lay claim to the skies. Thus, Lazarus swooped low, searching the lands west of the river for any heavy shelter that might protect him from

the encroaching light-storm of day.

At length, he found it—a narrow slit cut into the side of a ridge. He lit before the hole and slipped inside to discover a cavern that swelled into a large hollow—a sanctuary more than adequate to shield him from the day’s deadly rays. Stumbling toward the rear of the cavity, he crumbled to hands and knees. Cramped, sweating and bleeding, he collapsed atop the cave floor, plummeting into a sleep of complete exhaustion.

A shepherd stood tending his sheep a short distance away; yet upon witnessing a winged man swoop down from the dawning heavens and steal into the cave, he gasped, dropped his staff, and fled fast afoot.

The day came and went, and the last red rays of dusk dissolved when Lazarus leapt to his feet, ears flat, retreating to the rear of the cavern whilst hissing at three yelping dogs that strained forth on taut leashes. Their master, a burly bearded soldier, eased in after them, leaning back on the leather tethers. Another man slipped in beside him, wielding a torch. Again, Lazarus hissed at the beasts and they flew into fits, nearly squealing rather than barking. Spotting Lazarus, the torch-bearer yelled to a shifting sea of torches outside the cave, “We have it trapped! Ready your weapons! Secure the entrance!” Torches swished in the night air.

A third soldier leaned inside, howling over the chaos, “Get those damned yelping dogs out of here!”

The burly soldier backed them out through parting torches as another voice called out from the fray; “Inform my lord that we have the Devil trapped! Make haste!”

“Aye, Sergeant,” came a reply.

Lazarus perked his ears to the galloping of a hastily-departing steed. And all fell silent, save the sounds of shifting soldiers and crackling torches. Then an armoured knight, helmet in hand and sword drawn, eased into the cave. A row of crossbowmen poured in after him, lining against the front wall, their bolts trained on Lazarus. The knight issued orders in a harsh whisper, “Keep your weapons on the Devil. And do not shoot me in the back.” He turned to Lazarus and slowly stepped forth, brandishing his sword.

“Do you speak?”

Lazarus straightened himself. “You call me the *Devil* and then you ask if I can *speak*?” He brushed his hair back, “I am not the Devil and, yes, I can speak—and read—and scribe.” The knight lowered his blade.

“Do you go by title or name?”

“Squire Lazarus Gogu of *Abbaye des Gardiens*. I merely come in passing.” he offered. “Do you come alone? Might there be others like you—winged and toothed as yourself?” Lazarus stood silent.

“’Tis Lazarus then,” the knight said, “Tell me—um—*squire*; did your devils bring the great pestilence upon the lands?”

“I am not *the* Devil, and I am not *a* devil. And if you allow me passage, I shall be grateful and kindly leave your cave and lands.”

He pointed his sword at Lazarus. “If you advance on my men, or attempt to flee, I shall run you through where you stand.” He spun about, instructing his squad, “Be certain of it.” The knight left the cave as his bowmen levelled off on Lazarus with lethal aim.

A scruffy soldier entered the cave with a long dagger drawn, continuing with his own threat, “And aft, we shall hack ya to bits no bigger than meat cakes.” He warned Lazarus with a twist of his blade. “Now sit yourself down, devil-man!” Lazarus eased himself seated whilst hearing one Bowman whisper to another, “Look at it—in the flesh—the Devil, himself!”

As the soldier stepped away, the torch-bearer stepped nearer to Lazarus, addressing him, “Be still or be slain. I shall have a better look at you.” He raised the torch on high, illuminating all of Lazarus and the men mumbled in awe.

“So you’re the Devil, aye?” The torch-man questioned him. “I gathered him a bit more fierce—with fire blazin’ from his eyes and bloody horns and a long barbed tail, even.” He turned back to comrades and chuckled through missing teeth and they responded in kind—with nervous chortling.

One of them called out, “Have him open his mouth! He has the teeth of a dog—and can devour your heart with but a single bite.”

“Open your mouth.” The torch-bearer leaned closer and opened his raggle-toothed mouth in demonstration. “*A-h-h-h*.” The row of bowmen leaned forth for better view.

Yet, Lazarus merely dismissed them with a crumpled brow.

Then one of the bowmen cried out, “Stand clear of him! He’ll cast a spell over you—strike us all with a pestilence, he shall!”

Startled, perhaps by the Bowman’s claim, the torch-bearer behaved as if Lazarus had bit him, swiping the flame at him whilst scrambling away. Soldiers’ weapons shifted and, at perhaps a safer distance, he condemned Lazarus; “We are men of God, Almighty! Your powers are bound in His presence!” He spat on the ground. Again, the men mumbled whilst touching themselves hastily in the mark of the cross. Lazarus dropped his gaze to the torch-man’s spittle and ignored them.

Without the cave, soldiers took turns poking in their heads to gawk at him.

At length, Lazarus heard the rapping hooves of a steed rein in, with the chinking of chains playing a rhythm within them.

A muffled voice yelled, “Move aside! Make way!” The torches rippled open as three men entered the cave, toting prisoner irons. Lazarus rose slowly, as with the row of crossbows. Once inside, they dropped the pile of chains in the centre of the cave, before Lazarus.

The knight, still holding his helmet under an arm, stepped forth and instructed Lazarus; “These irons are for to bind you. Either accept them or be slain where you stand. Make your choice known.” Impatient weapons shifted.

Lazarus replied, “And if I accept, you shall slay me because you can—claiming me as the Devil, captured. And if I refuse, you shall slay me because I refused, claiming me as the Devil, slain.”

The knight countered, “These orders are not mine. They come from my lord, *Ceryce d’Alcicourt, Comte de Languanaise*, and lord of these lands. He seeks an audience with you, yet only if you accept to be restrained whilst in his presence. What is more, he has ordered that no harm may come to you. “ The knight stepped closer and perhaps his voice took on a tone more of that of genuine plea, “My lord is just; his word is binding. He sends these words: If you help him with yet a simple matter, one of your—um—abilities, then you shall be free to go.”

“What matter is this?” Lazarus questioned.

“My lord does not say. Yet, he wishes to speak with you now. Shall you allow us to restrain you for it?”

Lazarus recounted both *Naramsin* and the *Poor Man in Christ*. And as he recollected, *Naramsin* had faith in the Council's promise of freedom, whilst the *Poor Man* had faith in the notion that he never saw himself as truly bound. Apparent to him, faith seemed to have cost both of them their very lives—lest perhaps, neither of them maintained their faith in light of proper respects owed themselves. Yet, Lazarus now found himself standing before a heap of chains, perhaps in a moment where, more than mere faith, might determine his fate. And with a straw of reason, a heap of doubt, and a mountain of trust, he humbled himself, thus allowing the soldiers to bind him in irons.

Yet, hours before, even in daylight, when Lazarus lay asleep on the cave floor, word of the Devil’s capture blazed across the land as speedily as a blinding crusade, the tale of it growing evermore fantastic with its every retelling. The last of many rumours was that Satan was discovered in a cave, sucking the hearts out of slain priests, and a hundred

men fell before capturing him—before stopping him from releasing a great pestilence over the lands.

A tide of free and indentured servants, soldiers, priests, women and children poured before the gates of D'Alcicourt's castle. Many papal scribes came to record history, for posterity's accurate retelling of it. And beneath a sky of stars, everyone gathered; young and old, rich and poor, righteous and not, to set eyes upon the Devil, *King of Demons*.

It might have seemed that Satan, Himself, was now to face punishment for his every evil deed against Creation.

[End Chapter 13]



This literary work was created exclusively in dedication of

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)

— May his legacy live on within all of us —



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