

## AN ALIEN HERESY

by S.P. Somtow

S.P. Somtow was born in Thailand, grew up in Europe, and had a career in music in the 1970s before emigrating to America. "A Day in Mallworld," his first story for *Asimov's* (as Somtow Sucharitkul), appeared in our October 1979 issue. After numerous stories for us, he tells us he "graduated to fantasy, horror, and historical novels; went off to a monastery in Thailand; reemerged as a composer of operas; and founded the Bangkok Opera." Although he has been very busy writing and premiering grand operas, he found he'd hit a fiction writer's block that lasted for seven years. That dry spell broke suddenly with the penning of "An Alien Heresy." This science fiction story offers the reader an intensely disconcerting look at a medieval inquisitor's reaction to the unknown.

*A word of warning: there are scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.*

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*I am not a heretic. I am a being from another world. I am lost. Send me home, I beg you.*

You may say I am young to be an inquisitor, but in my brief existence in this world I have not remained unexposed to evil. For, in the Fourteen Hundred and Fortieth Year of Our Lord, I was a novice in the service of the Bishop of Nantes, and because I could scribe a fair round cursive hand, I was often called upon to set down confessions of such horror that it is hard to think of them even years later without a shudder; I mean revelations of deviltry, sorcery, and heresy as would awaken doubt in the stoutest believer, and drive the purest of souls into the abyss of despair.

Thanks to that legible hand, I was appointed one of the scribes at the trial of Gilles de Rais, called Bluebeard, and I was compelled to write down, dispassionately and accurately, descriptions of the mutilation of small children, onanistic rituals, and perversions I had never even imagined. And when at last the Marshall of France came to be burned at the stake, I was asked to expunge some of the more lurid details from the record, for fear that the truth might give too much distress to future generations; and so my much-vaunted penmanship proved to be mere *vanitas*. What was torn from the pages, however, could not be expunged from our souls. We were scarred by it, and it still gives us nightmares.

Yet even that infamous trial could not prepare me for my encounter with

the lost soul who claimed to have come from another world. It was only through the sternest self-discipline that I managed to survive the interrogation with my soul, to all appearances, intact.

The Gilles de Rais case was a dozen years ago, and now I was returning to Tiffauges, that cursed place where Bluebeard perpetrated his crimes. I was to investigate a new incident. It was a simple, open-and-shut case, just the kind of thing a junior inquisitor can handle in a week's work. His Grace the Bishop of Nantes used to favor me, and often assigned me such routine cases, which help one to rise in the bureaucracy of the church and are not intellectually taxing.

These were the details: a fire from the sky. A strange man, mud-soaked, naked, seen by the river's edge. A strange man with strange eyes. Perhaps a demon; more likely a natural man, or a village idiot who had wandered back to the wrong village. I was either to quell their superstitions or, if necessary, act as the proper representative of the Church Militant.

Routine indeed. But of course no one wanted to travel to Tiffauges. I could feel the gloom long before I came in sight of the castle. Only three days by oxcart it might have been, but it felt as though I had left the world of men and entered a kingdom of ghosts. Beyond the hamlet of St. Hilaire de Clisson, it seemed that the sky became perpetually gray. Though it was already March, much snow still lay on the ground. The River Crame was still part frozen, and, where it joined the Sèvre Nantaise, which is where the castle stands, ice clanged against ice.

When we arrived in the village, the sun was already going down. We were well stocked with provender, and we had brought all the instruments for the Question with us, in case none could be found locally. Ahead of me rode two knights, or rather a knight and his squire. I had not bothered to find out their names. In the cart with me sat Brother Paolo, a Roman musician and general note-taker, the dour-faced Brother Pierre, and the ever-smiling Jean of Nantes, a genial fellow, by avocation a barber, by trade a torturer. And I, of course, another Jean of Nantes—how many are there, I wonder?—who am called Lenclud.

A few hours behind us marched the secular arm, a small detail of a dozen foot soldiers and a captain on horse; they would reach the village by midnight, perhaps, and would camp in the field.

My traveling companions had been garrulous all through the journey. Now, in the sunset, they could all feel the oppression in this village. No children played in the one muddy path that ran through the center, where stood a well. The huts were hushed. One, a little larger, seemed to pass for an inn. A bit of light came

from within and there had been noise, although the sound of our horses and oxen seemed to still it.

“We should press on,” I called out to the knights, our escort. “It’s barely one league to the castle.”

The chateau had been abandoned since the trial, but it must at least have walls, and a fireplace, and a room in which to conduct interrogations.

“We’ll put up in the inn,” said the elder of the two.

I had certain reasons for avoiding that, but they were not reasons I could admit. I said, “Sir chevalier, another hour’s riding at best will bring us to a place with stone walls; we’ll have a roaring fire and we’ll be able to sleep in real beds. And not have to pay,” I added, for the execution of Gilles de Rais had made his lands temporarily forfeit to the church, until such time as all the rights and papers were sorted out.

“All very well for you to say, mon père,” said the knight. “But think of us. And my squire’s frightened; he’s heard the stories.”

The younger one turned around and I saw that he was, indeed, younger than I had thought from just seeing the back of his head for three days; but I had to hold to my word, lest authority be lost. It is in our training.

“We’re not here to disrupt the village,” I said. “The inquisition is not a circus. Let’s get to the castle as quickly as possible, set up, and have the case brought to us properly.”

“As you wish,” said the knight.

But at that moment the inn door flew open. There were faces I knew; the innkeeper, even more grizzled than when last I saw him, some villagers who had given evidence in the matter of the Marshall of France; but I did not yet see the face I most dreaded to see, and so I breathed a sigh of relief. My traveling companions must have mistaken it for relief at seeing that this was not, after all, a village of ghosts.

“Father Lenclud,” the innkeeper said, “it’s best you came in.”

I started to protest, “We are bound for Tiffauges,” but he interrupted me. “What you want,” he said, “is all in here.”

The door opened wider. We saw tables inside, and we could smell a rabbit stew on the pot. There was a smoky light and the air heated up just a little; I could see the others were tired, and perhaps, perhaps the person I wished to avoid was no longer there. After all, it had been ten years; no, twelve. Perhaps I was safe after all. Perhaps she had gone away.

And in the grand scheme of things, it was, perhaps, a smallish sin, for which I had suffered seven painful penances already.

We piled inside, leaving our cart and our belongings unguarded; for who would steal from God? and we were offered benches inside; there were villagers there, and children, too, scurrying in the shadows; the walls were sooty and greasy; but the fire blazed, and the stew was filling.

The innkeeper said nothing while we ate, except to remind me of his name, which was Henri. I learned at supper that our knight was another Jean of Nantes; but this one we called Johan, because he had a Flemish mother.

It was only when we had eaten our fill that Henri was ready to tell us why the villagers had sent a letter to His Grace in Nantes.

“We’ve got him locked in the cellar,” he said.

“And he is well rested, and has eaten?” It is true that we torture people, but we do love them; I never want to begin an investigation with threats and violence; that comes all too soon.

“Yes, he’s eaten all right.”

“Twelve fish,” said a woman from the back. “I counted them myself. Raw. And all the bones. You’ve never heard such a crunching sound, mon père! Frightened out of our wits, we was.”

“Bid her come out of the shadows,” I said, “she seems to have a lot to say.” And I regretted it as soon as I said it, because when she stepped into the light I recognized her, as I should have from the voice.

She knew me too. But she had the courtesy to lower her gaze, and gave no sign of it. In the firelight, in her grubby peasant shift, she was still beautiful, though. I looked longer than I ought to have. I was glad I had remembered to pack the flagellum.

“Your name?” I asked her, already knowing the answer.

“I am Alice, mon père. I am the innkeeper’s wife.”

So she had married. How much did the innkeeper know?

“Alice,” I said softly, “tell me about the man in the cellar. If it is indeed a man; I have read the letter to the bishop, but we tend to view reports of devils in the flesh with a degree of cynicism.”

The villagers looked at each other. Alice looked at me. Was there a hint of reproach? She did not reveal much. In the void in the conversation, all we could hear was the sizzle from the fireplace.

“Children, come out now,” the innkeeper said at last, speaking at the shadows and at the space under the stairs. “The inquisitor won’t hurt you.”

I realized then what it was that had subdued the noise. It was fear.

“You have to forgive us,” Henri said, “they haven’t trusted many people since ... you know.”

Three children emerged. One was a little girl with stringy hair, perhaps seven; an older girl, on the cusp of womanhood, her shapeless smock belying an incipient voluptuousness. The two girls curtsied. Then there was the boy. He was perhaps eleven; he had long blonde hair, a dirty face, and clear blue eyes. He seemed so familiar ... I could not place him ... he did not look at me at all. But Alice did. At me and him. And in that awkward moment I understood everything, and I knew that her marriage must have been loveless, born from desperation.

“They saw him,” the innkeeper said. “They’ll tell you.”

“We’re not to tell him anything,” said the boy, defiant. “They’re going to burn him at the stake. He’s our friend.”

“Let the church be the judge of that now, Guillaume,” Alice said. Was her voice not edged with cynicism?

“Guillaume, sit by me,” I said, with all the gentleness I could muster. “Tell me of your friend.” I reached out to touch his cheek. He flinched quite visibly, but overcame it, and sat on the bench. Meanwhile, the musician, the knight, and the

torturer were already heavily into their ale. I called for Brother Pierre to take notes.

Guillaume kept his distance from me. I did not yet dare think the unthinkable: that I should acknowledge him, that he should have my name, that I could, in this peasant village, live on; that I had a son.

He said, "I'm sorry about the mud, mon père; that was my idea. Not any of the others'."

I remembered that the strange man was reportedly coated in mud. I waited for him to go on.

"It was a week ago. I wouldn't have seen the fire, but there was this noise, first. It was a rustling sound. I thought it might be a wolf, and we've only the one cow. I took a knife. When I stepped out of our hut it was almost as bright as day. When I looked up it was like the sun was in the sky, only bigger and more blue."

"Our Guillaume is prone to fancifying," the innkeeper said. "You tell mon père the truth now, you hear, don't exaggerate." To me he grumbled, "The boy should have been whelped in a castle, not a hut, the way he carries on."

"Go on, Guillaume."

"I'm not making it up," he said. "I can show you where the fire fell."

"An accursed spot!" said Henri. "No one has gone there save the boy since it happened. A whole circle of forest seared into a blackened clearing. If it isn't the devil's work, I don't know what is."

"Me and my sisters," said Guillaume, "we wanted to keep him as a pet. But someone saw him and denounced us to the inquisition. Are you going to torture him, mon père? Are you going to torture *me*?"

I would have embraced him then and there. But I knew that the pleasure of having him in my arms, the warmth of human love, was not for me; I am married only to Christ. And so I only said, "Guillaume, take me to that place."

"By all the saints!" said the innkeeper. "Can you not burn the demon and be done with it?"

"I'll say this only once," I said. "Please listen. The men of the village could

have handled this matter by themselves. They could have clubbed the stranger to death, hacked him up, buried him in an unmarked grave; without a feudal lord nearby, with the village's legal status still under negotiation, such a crime would almost certainly not have been noticed by anyone. But you chose to involve the Church. That was the right and honorable thing to do. But the Church is here now, and things will be done according to procedure. If a trial is necessary it will be a fair trial. If torture is demanded it will be strictly in accordance with the Papal Bull *Ad Exstirpanda*, which set appropriate guidelines over a century ago. If execution is required, it will be carried out by the secular arm in Nantes. We are not barbarians, Henri, and we shall not fall prey to peasant superstitions."

And that, it was to be hoped, was that.

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And so I went out again into the cold, not yet having had a moment in private with Alice—for I dreaded that possibility—accompanied by Guillaume, by Brother Paolo, who fears nothing, and Brother Pierre, and by Chevalier Johan and his squire, who held aloft a burning torch.

We entered the woods. Guillaume walked swiftly, knowing the location of every tree. We reached the clearing in only an hour, and when I stood there, with the bright moon shining down on every charred stalk, and the wind howling, I saw many hallmarks of the devil's work.

For example, the clearing was completely and perfectly circular. No random falling object, no hand of man could have made it so. The snow had melted and refrozen into a glassy shield, from whose center there projected a strange metal artifact. I say metal, but it had a purplish sheen unlike any steel or bronze I had ever looked upon.

Guillaume took me by the hand. "I'll show you the spaceship," he said. "Come, mon père. There's nothing living; it's just twisted metal."

"Spaceship?" said Johan the knight.

"That's the word *he* used," Guillaume said.

He tugged at my hand again, and, all in innocence, he tugged at my heart, too. I followed him, bold as he was, for he knew nothing of the dark powers, and I could not afford to show fear. The artifact was mostly concealed under the ice; we were seeing only the tip of it. It was a thing of delicate needles, of twists and twirls

of metal, of gossamer webs no mortal hand could have woven. When I saw it my heart sank, for I knew that whatever was in the cellar of the inn was no lost village idiot. I prayed in my heart to the Blessed Virgin, and there sprang unbidden into my mind the image of Alice, Alice with unbound hair in the spring breeze, Alice of the ample breasts; and I trembled, knowing that the Dark One must have sent me that vision to divert me from my contemplation of all that is immaculate. I knew that tonight I was in for a long session with the knout, and that my hair shirt would be blooded come morning.

Now, I was truly afraid. But the boy was not. These infernal shards were just a new kind of toy for him, and the demon, perhaps, a new kind of pet. That is what it must be like, I thought, to grow up in the shadow of Tiffauges, in a world where evil, hanged and burned at the stake, still would not loose its grip. He bent down, stared at the metal with a natural curiosity, tried to pry the pieces from the ice, but they would not budge.

I looked at the boy, and past him, into the barren trees; beyond them I could see where the two rivers met, and I could see the castle as well; that is how bright the moon was, and how glistening the ice. The wind whistled. The chateau was a black and shapeless mass; one tower had already crumbled. Evil can rot even stone, rot it from within.

“We will turn back,” I said curtly. The squire with the torch turned immediately. He sensed it too. Brother Pierre had been taking notes, even sketching the diabolical device on a scrap of vellum.

“Come, mon père,” Guillaume said, “I’ll take you to him now.”

And on the way back to the village, the boy sang, in a hearty voice, the war-song *L’homme armé*, and because we were all afraid of the gathering dark, we followed his lead, and it was a raucous chorus; but as soon as we reentered the village something dampened our spirit and the singing petered out.

But Brother Paolo whispered in my ear, “That boy has a sweet voice, though untrained; one could really make something of it. I’ll have him for the morning mass; he will brighten the gloom.”

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And so, with the others all fast asleep, or turning in, Guillaume led me down to the cellar. Always, our dour chevalier followed, his hand never leaving his sword-hilt. Brothers Pierre and Paolo had joined our friend the torturer in a room



for six. I was to sleep alone.

The lad unlocked the door, lit a few more candles, and showed me what manner of creature had arrived at Tiffauges in a ball of flame.

Completely covered from head to toe in mud, as they said he would be. He was naked, a state permitted only before the Fall of Man. Hunched over, chained to the wall by his ankles. Perhaps this room had served as a holding pen for Gilles de Rais' victims; for they were slender chains, such as might be used to subjugate a child.

Guillaume lit yet more candles, and now I could see the face clearly. The eyes were large and round, haunting, oddly beautiful.

"Len ... clud," he said. A sweet, small voice. It chilled me.

"Have you ever told it my name?" I said to Guillaume.

"No, mon père. He just knows things. He plucks them from people's heads, I think."

The eyes peered at me. Yes. I could feel something invading my thoughts. An alien presence. I tried to block it by thinking the words of the rosary over and over.

"Are you a demon?" I asked the stranger. When properly bound to answer by an emissary of the Church, a demon must speak the truth; for hell is ever subject to the will of heaven.

Suddenly, images filled my thoughts. I tried reciting the rosary aloud as though to drown them out. There were creatures with goats' horns, forked tails, hideous leering faces. He was answering me after all, in pictures if not in words.

"Stay back, Guillaume! This creature has just shown me ... terrifying things."

"Mon père," Guillaume said, "he is only showing you what's in your own heart."

"It's a monster!" I cried, and I leaped to shield the child from its gaze.

And it said, "I not a monster."

Tears rolled down its cheeks. They dug great chasms in the mud. And now I could see what lay beneath all that mire. It was something green. The squamous, reptilian skin that was a certain mark of the dark powers.

“My son,” I said, “you tried to hide his skin from us?”

“They would have killed him,” said Guillaume. “They get frightened easy; they’re superstitious.”

“There are worse things than death,” I said, and more images sprang into my head ... flames and bright red devil eyes, and I could almost smell the brimstone. “Tomorrow you will douse him with water, and we will see the extent of his monstrosity.”

“I am not a monster.”

His speech was much clearer than before. Before, he seemed to speak like the village idiot I had once thought him to be; now he had the more sophisticated accent of the city.

Guillaume said, “Mon père, he first learned to talk from us, but now he’s getting it from you.”

I stared into the monster’s eyes and saw within them such a great despair that I knew he must be among those, once blessed by divine light, who were now eternally deprived of the presence of God.

“Perditus es,” I said, for I knew that the devil must speak Latin.

“Per-di-tus.” *Lost*. I did not know whether he understood, or if he was merely aping me; but then he continued: “Do-mum.” He wanted to return home. He had even used the correct accusative of motion towards, so he could not have been simply copying my words.

“Ubi est domus tua?” I asked him where his home might be.

In response, he looked up at the dank ceiling. The candlelight flicked on old grime.

“In caelo,” he said softly.

*My home is in the sky.*

Like Lucifer himself, he dared to claim heaven as his patrimony!

The cellar was cold, but the chill I felt was not from natural causes. I called for Chevalier Johan. "Sir Knight," I said, "the secular arm must have arrived by now. You must ride out quickly and tell them not to pitch their tents, but to ride straight to the chateau. They must clean out a few rooms and they must prepare a dungeon, and tell Brother Paolo to asperge the rooms with holy water, and celebrate mass in the chapel at dawn so as to purge the taint that hangs over it and over this village. Tell them to tie the accused up firmly and admit him there as the Church's ward. Ask them to clean the mud from the accused and to clothe him so that we do not have to be shamed in the sight of God with his nakedness."

The boy looked at me with alarm. "You'll burn him!" he said. "Our friend. He played with us."

"He is not your friend, my child. Go now."

I dismissed them all and told them to make fast the door of the cellar behind us.

And the stranger said, so quietly that indeed I was not sure whether he spoke aloud at all, or whether the words simply sounded within the confines of my mind, "I am not a monster. I am from another world. I am lost. I beg of you, send me home."

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I hoped for a few hours' peace before going to the chateau to say mass, but it was not to be. In the little cell they gave me, which was behind the kitchen, I scoured, by candlelight, the books I had brought with me, trying to glean some knowledge of just what this creature might be. Was he a denizen of hell who had somehow escaped the confines of the Dark One, and by saying "Send me home" was he actually begging for some kind of salvation, some reconciliation with God? Was there a village idiot underneath this skin, who had been possessed by a devil, who could yet be cured, if the devil could only be driven from the flesh? Was it a devious impostor, come to tempt me?

These were all possibilities. That was why a fair trial was essential.

In the brief hour of twilight, before the sunrise, I knelt down to pray. Before I did so, I stripped off my habit and my hair shirt, took the bloodstained knout

from my satchel, and vigorously flagellated myself. To no avail. I had barely begun the *paternoster* when Alice, unbidden, entered the room. It was almost as though my penance had conjured up a further test.

“Mon père,” she said. And then, again, “Oh Jean, my love.”

I shook. My back was still bloody and it was perhaps the pain that convulsed me, though I should have been used to it by now; but no, it was the spiritual turmoil. “That was years ago. That was weakness. We can never think of it.”

“That’s easy for you to say, mon père,” Alice said. “I’ve paid for it every day since then. I haven’t come to reprove you. I know that you scourge yourself. But there are other kinds of penance, too. Guillaume should not be growing up here, in this desolate place. He’s part of you. Can you not acknowledge that?”

“It’s a lot to comprehend in a single day. Does the boy know?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I’ve seen you look at each other. He may have guessed. And he has your eyes. I love him most for that.”

“Alice,” I said, “there are cardinals who have sired children, and popes who have made their bastards cardinals. But the Bishop of Nantes doesn’t have a very modern mind. And I’m a Dominican. A *teacher*. How if it is seen that I do not follow my own preaching? Shall I give up even my vows to God?”

“Did you not do so already, Jean?”

And there she had me. But I had done penance. God forgives, even if the Bishop of Nantes would not. “But what would you have me do?”

“Take your son with you. You don’t have to acknowledge him. Make him your servant. He could learn to read and write. He has a beautiful voice. He could have a future life as a court musician, or a cathedral chorister.”

“But they would have to cut him for that,” I said. “And some boys do die under the barber’s knife.”

She has never seen what they do, I can tell. Oh, I have seen fine chan-teurs with the voices of angels. The timeless melancholy of their songs comes, I think, from the wound to their manhood, which even when it has healed leaves a longing that can never be fulfilled.

“I don’t understand those things. All I know is that you have resources. You sleep in castles. You can call soldiers to throw people into dungeons. Your son has a grudging stepfather who doesn’t want to spare the food to fill his belly, and he is the most powerless person in a village that men say is already damned. You must take him. Whipping yourself is all very well, but can’t you see that you’re also punishing *him*?”

I had come to Tiffauges to investigate a crime against God. But was I myself also to be subjected to the Question?

Alice kissed me. My flesh hardened, but I could not harden my heart. I turned away. I needed to be pure for tomorrow.

“I’m sorry, mon père.” She curtsied and left the room. Her scent remained. And so did the wound.

Why the wound, what wound? There was no wound. Should I not have followed the example of almost-martyred Origen and made myself a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven? Obviously a vow to God was an empty promise. Only the slice of a knife held truth.

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Both Brother Paolo and Alice had told me Guillaume could sing; I only knew how well that morning, when I said mass in the chapel. Brother Paolo had found an old psalter, and he had badgered the boy into coming up to the chateau and had taught him, neume by neume, a short chanson by Dufay, the Burgundian; and during the offertorium they contrived to perform it, with the brother playing the tenor on the psalter and essaying the contratenor himself, while Guillaume took the upper part, with the high notes that seem to hover in the air....

I should say first that, at breakfast, over a loaf of black bread and a beaker of wine, the Chevalier Johan told me that all had been done as I had asked. They had requisitioned some of the peasants to dust and mop some of the rooms in the chateau; for they feared the soldiers more than they feared the curse of Bluebeard.

The chapel, wherein the Marshall of France had permitted the most repulsive abominations, had been scoured of dirt by dawn. The peasants who had been commanded to do the work stayed for mass, but several from the village came, too. Perhaps they thought that the touch of the host upon their tongues

could take away the lingering taste of terror.

It was during the offertorium that Brother Paolo's ad hoc consort performed. The peasants had, of course, little to offer but a few loaves and cheeses; yet our torturer went among them, gracefully taking the gifts with a smile. They could never have guessed his normal profession.

The music was a setting of a holy sonnet by Francesco Petrarca; I knew this must be Brother Paolo's doing, for though the composer was Flemish, he had been in service in Italy, and the chanson had an Italian lilt to it, for the Italians have the fashion of giving a soaring melody to the highest voice, reducing the others to little more than accompaniment.

When I heard the words, I ached; for Petrarca speaks of the beautiful virgin cloaked in the sun and the stars, and then the poem goes on to say, "I want to offer thee my prayers, but I cannot even begin to pray without thy help...."

And it was the issue of my loins who sang those words, and he made the notes linger in the chill air as they climbed, note piling upon note, like a stairway to the sky—

*In caelo.*

That pitiful creature claimed to reside in the sky! And now he had put a curse on me, and I could not see the face of the Blessed Virgin with the raiment of starlight, but instead, a more earthly woman, a woman whose earthy scent and moist lips cried out for me to sin, whose every gesture was derived from the temptation of Eve and the wiles of the Serpent. I stood there, sweat pouring down my face even though the chapel was cold.

And my son's voice rose above the turmoil ... and there came dawn. A ray of light burst through the east window and illuminated the altar. And my son's voice was in that light. It lifted me out of darkness. In that melody was the voice of God himself.

And I saw the beauty in his eyes, my eyes....

I knew now how I had to redeem my sinful past. I had to rescue my son. Woman though she was, Alice had been a messenger. Those sweet sounds must not perish. He must be cut; surely the Lord would guide the knife Himself, for the saving of so perfect a voice. My son was not to know the sins of the flesh. He could not fall as I had fallen. I knew then why God had sent me back to Tiffauges.

But for now, I kept this revelation in my heart.

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The papal regulations allow for only two sessions of Question; it is therefore the custom never to declare a session ended, so that the prescribed methods of ferreting out the truth may be applied until the truth is actually obtained.

The first session, which is intended to proceed without torture, I always like to stage in a well-lit room, without a threatening atmosphere. So we used the largest room in the chateau. Apart from a minimal chaining of the ankles, the prisoner was given free rein to stand or sit as he chose, and given a stool. I myself occupied what must have once been the Marshall's magisterial chair; flanking me were Brother Paolo with his reference books, Brother Pierre, with his quill, ink, and parchment, and Jean the Barber; that, and our Chevalier and a few of the soldiers, were all that the huge council chamber held.

Now that I saw him in broad daylight, I knew why the children had covered him with mud. He was green. Oh, not *obviously* green, like grass or an emerald, but he had a gray-green cast to him. With a tunic, belt, and shoes, it was less noticeable, because the eyes were what held you most about him. But I did not fail to notice what I did not see in the dim light of the innkeeper's cellar; his hands were webbed, like the feet of a duck.

Once in a while, one hears of a child with webbed feet and hands being born in some remote village, and the peasants do not hesitate to kill it, for to dispose of a monster is not deemed murder. I had never heard of one surviving to adulthood.

Still, save for the odd coloration, the scales, the webbed hands, the creature did not exude an aura of evil. Not in this light, at least. I thought him more pitiful than terrifying.

Although I knew that he could speak Latin, I decided to begin the interrogation in the vulgar tongue.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"We have no names," he said. "We are all fragments of an All. Names are bad. They fracture us from the One." It was nonsense.

“But you must have a name,” I said. It was a bureaucrat’s nightmare; you have the papers, and you cannot even begin, because such things are filed away by name, and there is no name, how can one begin?

“We shall give you a name,” I said. I turned to Brother Paolo. “Pick any name. We shall not fumble this case over mere sophistry.”

“Call me Guillaume,” said the creature.

Like Jean, Guillaume is one of the commonest names in France. But I could not help thinking that he took that name to taunt me with my sin. I was about to stop Brother Paolo, but he had already written it down.

“No, you are wrong,” said Guillaume the Monster. “I honor him, he my first friend in this world.” His French comes and goes; sometimes it is perfect; sometimes it is disjointed, as though he were stringing the sentences together from a heap of words.

“Why do you say this world? Know you another world?”

“I am lost. My world is far.”

“Where is your world?”

Guillaume the Monster points only at the ceiling.

“Are you an angel?”

“Angel? ... Oh.” He seemed perplexed. He looked as though he was searching through some store of information to retrieve the word. “Oh. You mean Aggelo. Then he said in French, “Messenger. Yes. I messenger.”

“So you claim to be a member of the heavenly host.”

“I fall from sky.”

Brother Paolo cried out, “Listen! He condemns himself from his own lips. He is a fallen angel.”

This was an outlandish claim; why would such an apparition not appear in some royal court, or before His Holiness himself? Why would a fallen angel choose an obscure village to bring his message to the world? But the answer was



obvious when I thought about it. It was clear that the foul rites practiced by Gilles de Rais had left a sort of spiritual chasm here. When a man murders hundreds of children to satiate his sexual appetites, all the while invoking the names of the Dark Powers, there are surely consequences to the natural order. For the tiniest sin is a hideous affront to God, and these were monstrous. It was as though Bluebeard had dug a well straight through to the heart of hell. Why not, then, a fiend shooting forth from the infernal depths, cloaked in fiery brimstone, to tempt the mind of an innocent?

Still, there were some elementary tests. "Can you say the Lord's Prayer?" I asked him.

The monster said, "How can I know these things? I come from the sky."

Jean the Torturer said, "I'm afraid that there's very little we can do about this." I knew he was not anxious to get out all his instruments, but like all of us he understood the meaning of duty.

I said, "Let's not be in a rush to be cruel. I suggest we try an exorcism first."

As was the custom, I declared, and entered into the record, that the session was adjourned; and we took our midday break, after leaving the prisoner more securely chained up in the council chamber, and well guarded.

The innkeeper sent up a brace of duck to the chateau; it was my son who brought the food, for though we had dismissed him after the morning mass, he had begged for some excuse to return.

We ate quickly and prepared our vestments as well as an aspergillum and a large cauldron of holy water. I asked the Chevalier to send a swift rider to Nantes; I suspected that reinforcements were going to be needed; not more soldiers, but more expert demonologists. Reverently, I kissed the violet stola before placing it over my surplice. I have never taken exorcism lightly.

But when I returned to the council chamber, I found the two Guillaumes alone together.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

My Guillaume backed away. He had been bent over the prisoner; he had a cup in his hand.

“I’m sorry, mon père. I was giving him water.”

I said, “You, of all people, need to stay away from him. He has invaded your mind more than anyone. He has plucked things out and will use them against us—against you in particular. Your immortal soul is in grave peril.”

He looked at me and I could sense—defiance. And then, with bowed head, my Guillaume slunk away.

“Do you know what I am going to do?” I asked the monster.

For normally, when one is about to perform an exorcism, the demon has foreknowledge. When the holy water is brought into the room, he begins to howl. He hurls obscenities at the priest, and malodorous fumes begin to rise, which are best counteracted by the liberal use of frankincense. To that end I had already prepared two censers and the sweet fragrance was already seeping into the room. But Guillaume the Monster did not respond at all.

I began the asperging, dipping the aspergillum and calling on the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the Blessed Virgin, St. Peter, St. Michael, St. Denis, and all the company of heaven to witness. While Brother Pierre held open the book of exorcism, an ancient illuminated tome bound with rusty clasps, Brother Paolo held up the crucifix to the prisoner’s face, but the creature did not flinch; he merely stared at it curiously, blinking.

I started the preparatory incantations and then, summoning up all my inner strength, I bellowed out the words of exorcism: *Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus, omnis incusio adversarii, omne phantasma, omnis legio, in nomini domini nostri Jesu Christi eradicare...* and with each sign of the cross I swung the aspergillum, knowing full well that the power that resided in the water would burn the devil from the being’s flesh....

But Guillaume the Monster merely sat there. Blinking. Was he so oblivious to the word of God?

When the ritual was done, he spoke to me. “That was an interesting ceremony, Father Lenclud. What does it mean? May I see a repetition, so that I can play back the recorded memory to my companions in the sky?”

There arose in me a terrible anger. He was *mocking* me! He was ridiculing God Almighty. I knew that my blind fury was a sin. I went outside to get some fresh air. I was panting and my heart was beating fast. In the courtyard, I saw my

Guillaume, sitting by a well.

My son pulled a fresh bucket of water, and gave me to drink. Though the noonday sun was brilliant, there were still piles of snow among the cobblestones. He held out the bowl for me, and the sun was behind him and the wind stirred his hair and I saw in his face all that I once wished to be, but could no longer, for that I had long descended into tainted ways of sin. I wanted to tell him right then and there, but perhaps it was not the moment. I drank deeply, and the water dampened my choler.

“How is he?” my son said. “Is he in pain?”

I saw in his face a profound compassion and I thought to myself, “Guillaume, my son, you are good to feel such Christian love for even a creature such as this.” I wanted so much to embrace him. But we are taught to avoid the warmth of human closeness, for darker dangers may lurk behind an innocuous caress. The mere touch of a boy’s hand has aroused unnatural passion in many a cleric. It were better not to risk it. Love is best experienced solely in the spirit. I cursed myself for a hypocrite to think such things when only last night Alice had flung herself at me and I had released myself only with reluctance from temptation. I only said, “We are not torturing him at the moment, my son. It is possible that he will reveal all without recourse to the second stage of the Question. And we will all be spared much grief.”

All afternoon, I wielded the aspergillum with a will. I asked my brothers to asperge the creature when my own arms tired. I shouted out the words of the ritual. Three times we commanded the devil to depart. Three times I flung the water and shouted out those puissant words, words designed to make Satan himself quiver in the very bowels in hell; yet the prisoner did not yield, did not even show fear; if he evinced any emotion at all, it was curiosity. Exhausted and exasperated beyond all measure, I finally hurled the entire basin at him. It struck him in the head. The water scattered and clouds of steam rose up. And at this unexpected turn, he slumped over and I was immediately concerned, for it is not a priest’s place to inflict pain. But then, when I looked about him, I saw that the pools of water were all boiling, and that there poured from a gash in his forehead a thick green rheum; and the creature began to tremble as though he had the falling sickness, so that the chains clanked and made a racket that should have woken the very dead. A blast of heat emanated from him, and unearthly sounds poured from his throat; at last, I could see the normal signs of possession.

Then, as I gaped, the wound in his brow knit itself together, and the pools of water ceased seething, and the room was as icy cold as before.

And he sat there, unperturbed.

I sank back on my inquisitorial chair. I was sweating. I called for wine. Slowly, the creature seemed to regain his senses, and sat up as before.

I folded my palms and began to pray. "God," I whispered, "I am already worn out. The demon will not budge. Oh God, give me strength. My faith is sorely tested." These words I spoke for myself alone.

So I was surprised when an answer seemed to come, not from heaven, but from my green-skinned adversary. "You know, Father," he said, "there is another possibility."

We are warned never to engage in conversation with the devil, for it leads only to despair. But before I could think of that, I had already said, "And that is?"

"Is it not possible," he said, "that I am *not* in fact possessed, and that I am simply what I say I am?"

I dared not respond for fear of further temptation. For I knew then that we were in the presence of a very powerful force indeed; that this was a stubborn being and that the light of truth would reach him only with the utmost difficulty. If the creature were not inhabited by a demon, he must be making those impious statements out of his own free will; which meant that he must be a heretic.

I took another gulp of the wine, and I commanded that he be removed to the dungeon. This investigation was inexorably moving down a path I did not wish for. Nonetheless, I reflected, *thy will be done*.

\* \* \* \*

I rode down to the village because I could not bear to sleep in the vicinity of that being. Of course, in the village I faced demons as well, but at least they were my own.

At the inn, I supped on boiled leeks and a morsel of greasy pigeon. I sat alone, long after the others had retired, nursing a warm ale. I dozed a little. I was startled awake, perhaps by the sound of the embers collapsing, for the fire was dying. I saw that my Guillaume was in the room, and that he was standing over me, gazing down at my face.

“My son,” I said. A priest would say that to any boy. Yet I immediately feared to have revealed too much.

“Mon père, I would speak to you alone.”

“Shall I take your confession?”

“It’s not that. Mon père, Brother Paolo has been speaking to me. He says I should leave the village and seek my fortune as a singer. He told me that a voice like mine could gladden the hearts of prelates and of kings. He told me about cities and places I’ll never see if I’m stuck here minding the pigs until I die. My mother told me the same thing. But they also say I will have to give up something—my manhood. I don’t want that.”

“Did they explain it to you?”

“Yes. They said that if I undergo the cutting, I’ll never become a man. But I’ll never lose this voice, either. They say it’s a sacrifice I must make. Otherwise I’ll always be a peasant, and a bastard at that. But I know it’ll hurt and I know people die, sometimes.”

“What did you say to your mother?” I asked him.

“I said, I really don’t want to do it. I’m scared. I hate to be hurt. The innkeeper...” He hesitated. “Well, I am a bastard,” he said. He turned his back to me and lowered his tunic a little, and I could see old welts in the firelight. I burned with rage, but I held myself back, for anger is one of the seven deadly sins. Truly, my one night’s sin was being visited on the next generation. But if my son was willing to be cut, I reflected, at least the cycle of penance would end. “It’s all right, really. I don’t mind getting whipped that much. I’m used to it. It’s like I can’t do anything right for him.”

“Sit here beside me, Guillaume of Tiffauges,” I said. He obeyed. His closeness terrified me. “Did your mother say that you should undergo this operation?”

“She said that it was entirely my decision.”

“And what is your decision?” I dared to caress his hair for a brief moment. This time, alone with me, he did not flinch.

“I told her that I will do it if you command it, mon père.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are my father,” he said.

And I saw that he knew, he knew it with utter certitude, as I knew of the existence of heaven and hell. “Who told you this?” I said. “Your mother swore to me she would never speak of our—”

“She didn’t betray you, mon père. I found out for myself.”

“But how?”

“*He* told me, mon père.”

Should I now say that the boy wept, and told me how he had dreamed for so many years of knowing his father, that he had imagined him a crusader, a warrior, a hunter, a prince, a troubadour, a sorcerer, but never in his wildest dreams a priest? Should I tell how his tears broke down my reserve at last, and how I embraced him and felt at long last the joy of an untainted love?

I may not say these things. Because, at that time, they did not happen. Rather I answered him very simply, “Then I do command it.”

And he said, “I will do what you tell me, father.” And he got up, and planted a single dry kiss upon my tearless cheek, and he left me.

I thought of the pain I was about to inflict upon him. But I thought also of God the Father, who must have known full well what pain our Lord his Son would have to undergo; I thought also of Isaac, consenting to the knife with joy because it was his father’s will; and only then, only when there was no one to see me, did I give way to tears. I cried myself to oblivion, and before dawn they found me there, and woke me for the ride back up to the chateau, so I could say mass.

\* \* \* \*

As the “gentle persuasion” portion of the investigation was now over, it seemed more appropriate to continue in the dungeons. The use of torture is never to be undertaken without proper reflection. After all, anxious as they were to obtain a conviction, the Inquisition did not torture Joan of Arc.

The dungeons were the dark heart of Tiffauges. It was there that Bluebeard

once made a pile of the decapitated heads of the children he had murdered, so that he could compare them to see which was the most beautiful. It was here that the Marshall of France kept his captives, lured to the castle by the promise of a place in the chapel choir or a position as page in his service. It was here that he sated his lusts, culminating always in a gore-drenched, erotically charged slaughter.

No torture unto death would, of course, be practiced by us. Indeed, the papal instructions are very specific, for we may not even shed one drop of blood during the Question. Bloodletting is the domain of the secular arm; our concern is only with the soul.

Only a single session of torture is permitted by church law, though one can by unwritten custom extend that session over many periods if need be.

I entered the dungeon they had selected, one with no light but torchlight, and an odious damp, with vermin underfoot—for it is important to produce in the Questioned person the feeling of utter hopelessness, so as to hasten his confession. Jean the Torturer had already set up the strappado. The Inquisitorial chair had been brought down, and a rich rug placed to receive it and the desk, at which Brother Pierre already sat, with his notes and quill at hand, making the initial log entries by candlelight.

Guillaume the Monster had been stripped of his clothing, for the shame of public nakedness is often enough to induce a confession. Naturally, I averted my eyes, for it is not seemly for a spiritual man to behold such things; but curiosity made me look anyway, and when I did I could not help but stare.

The greenish cast of the skin was made more reptilian in the dungeon's smoky light. They had already tied the cords to the shoulders, and attached the weights to his feet, but the torturer was waiting for my signal before beginning the actual excruciation.

As I grew used to the dimness, I stood up to examine him more closely, hoping for some sign that would allow me to avoid torture. For example, a clear supernumerary nipple could indicate his involvement in witchcraft; a circumcised *membrum virile* would signify that he was a Jew. We could have proceeded straight to the conviction.

But this monstrosity possessed no nipples at all, nor anything resembling a reproductive organ. His chest was a pattern of scales. Below his waist, his legs began. The scale pattern continued straight down.

He said, "You seem surprised, mon père."

"You are ... you are a natural eunuch! And without even vestigial nipples ... you are neither male nor female ... were you female, you could not suckle a child ... were you male, you could not engender a child ... you are an abomination!" The horror of it was unspeakable. Such prodigies are always killed at birth.

"Perhaps my kind does not require this type of reproduction," said Guillaume the Monster. "We are already aspects of the One."

"So you claim to be without original sin?" I said.

"What is sin?" said the monster.

"Do you not honor God?"

"Who is God?" he asked me.

"God is everything."

"Then am I God?"

I could listen no more. I gave Jean the signal to hoist him up. As the weights left the ground I could hear the crack of the shoulder joints dislocating. "You mock God?" I shouted. "You claim to be in a state of grace?"

He writhed, and a serpentine hissing escaped his lips.

"More weights!" I screamed. "You will confess!"

"To what shall I confess?"

"That you are a heretic! That you claim to be free of sin, a state the Church alone is empowered to bestow through the holy rite of confession and absolution! Confess!"

"I am not a heretic. I am from another world. I am lost. Send me home."

"And how shall that be, when you claim that your home is in heaven?"

"I have already told your son how I may go home! There are two ways; the



first is for me to communicate with the mother ship. The device is under the ice! You have but to wait until the spring thaw is complete and—”

At the mention of my Guillaume, I became more furious. With what corruptions had he been feeding my son? I commanded the torturer to add more weights, while every croak, every hiss was carefully noted down by Brother Pierre. The arms were already quite out of their sockets; the muscles were tearing; the monster’s eyes bulged and he appeared to gasp. But what I did not hear were cries of pain. And so I hardened my heart and told Jean the Torturer to add weights until there were far more weights than any human could bear, which proved that Satan was behind his unnatural resistance, and which inflamed my fury still more.

“Confess that you have denied the sacraments! That you’re a Jew! A witch! That you have had carnal knowledge of Satan! That you’re a Cathar! A Waldensian! You have but to admit to a single heresy and I will cease tormenting you!”

It was at that moment, with my emotions aroused to fever pitch, that our captive’s arms tore loose and he fell to the floor with a crash. It was horrible, especially as the rats began scurrying over him. A greenish sap began to ooze from the sockets. The arms flailed back and forth as though independently alive.

“We’re spilling blood!” I gasped, horrified that we had broken the papal regulations. “Jean, you must stanch it quickly!”

“I don’t understand,” said the torturer. “I haven’t applied enough pressure to rip off any limbs.” He was upset; a professional should know his craft better than to make such a bungle of things; I could tell that he was utterly appalled at himself. Quickly he found some rags so that he could prevent too much blood from touching the ground, which is the actual letter of the law we were violating. There was some straw in the dungeon—it was the prisoner’s bedding—and he threw it over the heretic to try to absorb some of the gore.

But Brother Paolo said, “It is green, Father Lenclud. It is not blood.”

The severed arms swung back and forth and now began to sizzle and char, and an acrid green smoke began to fill the dungeon. I ordered more torches to be lit. We had to see what we were doing. A foul green fluid was spurting over our faces. I saw that Brother Paolo was right. This was not blood. It had neither the consistency nor the characteristic stench. Jean the Torturer had not broken the law.

Meanwhile, Guillaume the Monster was writhing on the stone floor among the vermin. A cacophonous babble issued from his lips. Doubtless it was some appalling witchery such as the Lord's prayer backward. Indeed, clearly there was necromancy afoot, because the creature's shoulder sockets were quivering, vibrating, and small green stalks were pushing their way out through the flesh ... he was growing a new pair of arms, as though they were the tails of a lizard! I simply stared. The babble resolved itself once more into words:

"I am not a heretic. I am from another world. I beg you, send me home. I can wait until the spring thaw is complete. Or you can set off my internal monitor to signal the ship...."

Words they may have been, but it was still nonsense.

"His body magically repairs itself," said Jean the Torturer, and I was reminded of the tale of the hydra, who grew more heads whenever one was chopped off.

"But," said Brother Paolo as he watched Brother Pierre finish a sentence of his transcript with a flourish of his quill, "the regeneration of the flesh, and the fact that his body contains no blood to be spilled, opens up, by the legal constraints imposed by the papacy, a loophole in the process of excruciation...."

I understood at once. Without blood, without any permanent destruction of the flesh, there was no legal limit to the violence that could be inflicted upon this monster in the interests of saving his immortal soul.

Much relieved, Jean the Torturer immediately strung him up again and, secure in the knowledge that he was committing no excommunicable crime, brought out more extreme instruments of pain. The scourgings, lashings, and burnings made us all wince, but the creature's stubbornness continued to inflame me, and by late afternoon I had almost taken complete leave of my senses. His stubbornness caused almost a reversal in our roles; for where normally the accused would be pleading for mercy after a few hours' torment, it was the Brothers and I who were so worn out by the monster's equanimity that we were begging, pleading, cajoling the creature to try to get even the vaguest confession.

Half a dozen pairs of arms swung from the rafters. Piles of straw were soaking up puddles of greenish phlegm.

Jean's art had punctured the monster's skin in several places. There were

holes through which we could see the workings of his innards, and now, as he lay, his skin pulsating, yet another pair of arms pushing forth out of his sockets, his words were hoarse and accompanied by a bizarre whistling as breath passed through the many extra channels in his flesh. And he continued his talk of coming from the sky, and returning there, and incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo about his mission and about his internal sensors. We must have made some kind of an impression, surely! For his voice wheezed, and it seemed to me that I saw some weariness in his eyes.

I was about to declare an official continuation of the session until the next day, when the door of the dungeon creaked open, and my son Guillaume entered the torture chamber.

“Church business is not to be interrupted!” Brother Pierre shouted, and threw a cape over the monster. But I knew that Guillaume had already seen.

“Mon père,” he said, “I have come as you commanded, to receive the operation.”

There was a dead silence. Under the cloak, the monster twitched and fibrillated. Guillaume looked up at the ceiling, where the creature’s many pairs of severed arms still dangled. The cloak slid off the monster’s face and we could all see his eyes, peering back and forth with a discomfiting watchfulness.

Guillaume looked at me and raised his arms in a gesture of remonstrance, and I said simply, “What can I do, Guillaume? He won’t confess.”

“Mon père,” Guillaume said, “You could have asked me. I know what will make him confess.”

“Child, there is a manual of instruction composed by His Holiness himself about these matters. We deviate from it on pain of eternal damnation. Leave these things to us. Come upstairs, now, into the light. We’ll talk of your operation and of your future. Forget what you’ve seen.”

“But mon père,” he said, “my mother tells me you have an expert, who will wield the knife deftly and who will give me as little pain as he can. Who is he?”

“I,” said Jean the Torturer, who in an ideal world would have preferred to be known only as Jean the Barber.

And he held out hands of welcome, hands from which oozed the heretic’s

green rheum.

\* \* \* \*

The torturer had not, of course, brought a gelding knife. He had to make do with an instrument that had that same day sliced leeks in the castle kitchens.

I wanted the cutting to occur in a room as distant as possible from the squalor of Guillaume's former life. The peasants looked askance when I requisitioned the Marshall's own bedchamber, and commanded that clean linens be set out, and a goose-down pillow; but they could not argue with me, for I represented the Church, and the Church had jurisdiction over the chateau for the present.

I had them gather plenty of wood for the fireplace. I even went so far as to order Jean the Barber to bathe, so that my son would not see the spattered traces of the monster's excruciation upon his hands and face. And I had extra candles brought in so that he would not wake up in the dark, and be frightened. The finest silver basins were brought in to catch the blood and to hold water to lave the wound.

Guillaume was terribly afraid. We held him down, I by the arms and Brother Paolo by the legs. I gave him a stick to bite on. I could not look into his eyes, could not gaze on the terror which was being inflicted by my will alone. The barber lifted the boy's tunic and sliced and Guillaume started screaming almost before the knife touched flesh, and he went on screaming. We held him fast. I did not realize there would be so much blood. I squeezed my eyes shut as the boy screamed and the torturer turned barber sliced, steadily and methodically, until the boy's scrotum was completely severed. Then, working as swiftly as he could, he applied bandages and a salve, wrapping as Guillaume screamed himself into a frenzy and, at last, exhausted from it all, sunk back onto the bloody sheets.

"You can let go of him," said the barber. "It is done."

I realized I was still gripping the lad's arms tight. I relaxed, but he clung to my wrists and murmured, "Papa, papa." And then he fainted.

The others looked away. I knew then that they knew, they all knew. "I will sit with him," I said.

"Yes, you must," said Jean. "The first hours are critical. He is in so much pain that his soul cannot decide whether to flee his body. It isn't only the physical pain,

mon père; it's the feeling of eternal loss. He doesn't even *want* to come back ... but you can give him something to hope for, to live for."

And all of them left me, and I sat alone, by the side of the bed, listening to him moan. I could not sleep. I did not know whether Guillaume slept; he twisted and turned, and sometimes his eyes opened; he never let go of my hand. The one Guillaume I had meant to hurt, and not the other; unwittingly I had caused their fates to be reversed. I prayed; oh, how I did pray. "I'll give my immortal soul," I whispered, "if he will only pull through."

Toward midnight, he seemed to quieten. I wiped the sweat from his brow. He stirred. At last, he opened his eyes. He said, very softly, "Don't you want to know how to get him to confess?"

I said, "Don't think of it, my son."

"You hurt me," he said. But he said it without rancor. I loved him for that.

"I know," I said. And squeezed his hand.

"I don't mind," he said. "It's what you wanted."

I said, "The pain will go away."

He said, "I did what you wanted. So now, I'm going to ask you to do something I want."

"Anything," I said softly.

"He will confess if you promise that you will burn him at the stake," Guillaume said.

"Don't say such things," I said. "There's no need for you to become involved in—"

"No, Papa, please listen. I will tell it to you exactly as I heard it, because I don't understand it, but he made me memorize it yesterday, when I gave him water. He may not seem to be in pain, but he is desperate. He can wait until the thaw to retrieve his communication device, but there is another way for him to go home, another, more desperate way. He has a sensor embedded deep inside him. It's not a machine, it's a part of him because he's connected to all the others. It's as if they only have one soul between them, he told me. If his vital signs suggest

that he's in imminent danger of death, it will start to transmit ... he told me they're cold-blooded. Extreme heat will set it off."

"You are delirious," I said. "You're speaking nonsense."

"But promise me that you will tell him you'll burn him at the stake."

The boy was clearly maddened by his agony, but I knew I had to promise. I did so. He squeezed my hand again, and finally drifted into slumber.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning, I did what my Guillaume had asked me, and the monster immediately, to my astonishment, confessed to an entire litany of heresies. I fell to my knees and thanked God that I no longer needed to have recourse to torture. I swore then that, though I had promised to burn the creature, I would give him a final chance to repent and accept the mercy of strangulation; I owed him that much at least, for it was because of him that I had learned what it is to love a child.

And in the afternoon, we put the heretic's cap and robes on our prisoner and shut him up in a cage, as one would a circus animal, and hitched the cage to an ox; and I wrapped my son up in many layers of blankets and loaded his pallet onto my cart for the drive back to Nantes.

Alice and the innkeeper came to see us off; but I did not say a word to them. I tried to avoid Alice's eyes completely. I knew that she had given up her only treasure, and the only token she had ever possessed of the single night when I had forgotten my vows to God.

There are not so many heretic burnings as there used to be; and so it was that by the time enough heretics had been delivered to the secular arm that a reasonable spectacle could be had on market day, the days had lengthened and there was no more snow to be seen. And each day, my son grew stronger, and we never spoke of the night of his delirium. But as for the burning itself, Guillaume would not leave the house, though he was hale enough to have started his singing lessons.

Yet I had made a vow to God that I would personally try to urge Guillaume the Monster toward an eleventh hour repentance. And thus it was I found myself standing beside him at the stake, holding up a cross to him and urging him to turn to God.

“Who is God?” he asked me.

Around us, the other heretics were already on fire. The crowd was festive; they laughed, they sang, they jeered, they frolicked; music played, sausages were grilled, church bells rang. But it all seemed irrelevant. What transpired now was between the two of us alone.

In my whole life, I have made love only once, and that was in shame. And yet I have heard, in the confessional, enough to know what it is like for laypersons. Lovemaking is not permitted to men who have given themselves wholly to Christ, and yet, to us inquisitors, there is an alternative. For the process of the Question is not unlike carnal knowledge of a woman.

First, you see, there comes the foreplay, the teasing, the flirting; that is the first stage, where we try to extract the confession swiftly; yet if we succeed, it is somehow not entirely fulfilling. Then there is the physical part; the writhing, the flailing; that, you see, is the torture, and that can lead only to one thing: the final explosion of passion, the spurting of the seed; that is the confession, you see. And at last, with the violent emotions spent, comes the afterglow, the gentle conversation, the quiet descent into slumber.

And this was the manner of conversation now, at the ultimate hour. It had a preternatural calm to it, even as the flames raged and the crowd roared about us like an ocean. There was no going back.

He had asked me who God is, and I was bound to tell him: “God is the one who made us all, who loves us, who knows us inside out; and he dwells in Heaven. He who does not seek God is bound forever to the darkness.”

“If that is true,” said Guillaume the Monster, his scaly face utterly serene, “then I already know God. And I am going to him now. For the being of which I am a part does dwell in the sky, and when I am cut off from him I am utterly desolate.”

“You have rejected God,” I said. “What you call God is a Satanic lie.”

“And what sane sentient being,” said the monster, “would *not* reject your God? You have made a mockery of compassion. You have twisted the truth in a thousand ways. You care only for your confessions, never for the truth itself.”

“Repent,” I cried out, and I held the cross right up to his face. It cast a cruciform shadow on his alien features.

“It is because you humans are all fortresses, impregnable and isolated, incapable of empathy; because you are not part of some greater consciousness, that you have invented these fanciful stories about gods and demons,” he said. “If you only knew how alone each one of you is, how incapable of the weakest psychic communion, you would despair. You would not care to live.”

A soldier of the Secular Arm called up to me. “Come down, Father Lenclud! We need to get going, this is the last one.”

“For the last time,” I cried out. “You can be saved if you only say a few words of repentance. You can be spared the earthly flames. You can dwell in Him, in the unity of the holy spirit—”

“Then I am already God, for I already dwell in Him,” he said.

And the fire began to blaze. I knew that I myself would be consumed if I did not leave. The piles of kindling crackled. The flames hissed. Already, the creature’s extremities were beginning to char.

Suddenly, at that moment, the sky abruptly darkened. A monstrous dark *thing* descended and blotted out the sun. A shaft of brilliant blue light shot out of the heavens and struck the heretic, and he immediately vaporized. And then it was over, and the sun shone as before.

I looked wildly about. The revelers in the streets still danced and sang. Hawkers sold wine and food. Had no one seen what I had seen? And was the creature not gone? There were only the chains. Had my eyes played tricks on me?

Or had this heretic really been snatched up into the sky in a chariot of darkness?

I was troubled that night. I could not reconcile what I had seen with all that I knew and believed. Yet, as time passed, I came to believe it might have been an illusion. For the alternative made me far too uneasy. And I had to be steadfast in faith, for I had a child to raise.

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In the bedchamber of the new King Louis XI of France, my son Guillaume is singing. I am not permitted to enter; it is a performance for the most intimate circle of the King’s friends.



But as I wait for my son behind the arras, I realize that the song is another by that Burgundian, Dufay, whose song to the Blessed Virgin once moved Brother Paolo to demand the boy's emasculation. This is a secular song, *Donnes l'Assault*, in which the poet compares his lady to an impregnable castle to which he has lain siege. He speaks of battering down the gate to enjoy the treasure within. It is a bawdy song, turning images of war into double entendres. There is laughter in the bedroom; men's laughter, the high-pitched silvery laugh of a loose woman.

I wait for the song to end. It is a tawdry song, but haunting, too. And the wounded innocence of my son's voice transforms it from a jest to a thing of vaunting beauty. Oh, the song moves me.

For did not the other Guillaume declare that we humans were all fortresses, impregnable, doomed to be forever isolated from one another? That it was this that drove us to torture and maim and burn others to death? Oh, that is true. But it is also what gives us this yearning. Guillaume's song is filled with the unfulfillable; he sings of what he is doomed never to possess; and that is the source of its searing beauty.

Was it for this beauty that my Guillaume gave up becoming fully a man?

Or was it for material gain? He will be wealthy, I know; he will be a courtier. He will become far more famous than I. But he did not do it to become rich, or to know the honeyed compliments of court ladies. He did it as a proof of his love for me. He did it because I demanded it of him.

Yet who was I to play God?

I too have become powerful. I too have become rich. But something in me has died. Or perhaps was plucked from my soul and has ascended into the sky along with the body of my heretical monster.

I too was transformed by the fire.

I have sent many more to the flames since that day. I have signed many death warrants. I have consented to innumerable sessions of savage torture, and always with the knowledge that my scruples have ineluctably eroded until the act of condemning a man to an agonizing death has become but a figment of bureaucracy, a flourish of a signature.

Am I evil? I have come to believe that I am. I care not. I accept it, because

my becoming evil is the price of being allowed to love my son.

Though the heretic from another world has proved incontrovertibly to me that Satan exists, I am, alas, no longer certain of the existence of God.