Embracing

Daniel Paul Eness
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Embracing

By

Daniel Paul Eness

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Debra Marquart

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Ames, Iowa

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Daniel Paul Eness

Has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
For Josh Borgmann, because I believe in you.
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CHAPTER 1. WHERE LIGHT COMES FROM

The most sweet thing about Village was view. Mikal recognized this truth, this truth to him, the day Father Poibus took him to the high window on the east face of the monastery. The doddering priest had held onto Mikal's shoulder as they navigated the twisting stairway, and then onto the boy's broad hand as he led the boy through the massive library, and into a closet. Mikal had then climbed a staircase so steep that one used one's hands, as if it were a ladder.

In the tiny stone turret, alone, Mikal looked through the ancient panes. The most sweet thing about Village was view. He knew this now, as the spring sun rose, raining light through the leaves of the lowland trees, greeting late risers with warmth, and the awakened with vigor.

In the entire life of the window, glass had been replaced at several different times. Some panes might have been as new as fifty or sixty years old, not yet very warped. Others were much older, perhaps original. They were thick and melted toward the bottom, and had delicate waves toward the top. Daylight ricocheted and blurred through the little tower. The stone walls
glowed, and the air was full of sparkling dust. Light was everywhere. Mikal could not, at that moment, tell if the light was sailing across the heavens, through Village and up the hill to where he was, or if all the light in the world was born in that room, in his belly. He wondered if the dawn streaked from this window, and circled the earth.

A moment later, or an hour, Mikal heard Father Poibus calling for him. "Hurry up, now. Hurry up, come down, please. It's time! We have much to do today!"

In his nine years, the boy had grown too quickly for his mind to handle. He was already taller than the diminutive priest. As he clambered down the tower steps, his foot, in a shoe that was, yet again, too small, missed a narrow landing about three feet from the floor. His fat hands slapped at the stairs. He dropped backwards. Father Poibus had only enough time to realize that Mikal had vanished from the dangerous staircase, and then Mikal was on top of him.

"Whoosh, hoof," said Father Poibus, as he fell to the floor, breaking Mikal's fall. Mikal swallowed hard and looked in fear at the priest. He crawled over to attend the fallen man. The large crucifix around his neck hung in a tangle of chain beside his head. He
wheezed for air. Mikal looked at his face, a frozen grimace. Father Poibus gripped Mikal's left biceps. It was like firm dough. Mikal pulled close to the old man, mouthing apologies that would not sound.

Fine gray hairs in the priest's ears were quivering. From laughter. Father Poibus was laughing, gripping Mikal's arm, and, with laughter, quaking. He feebly pulled the boy even closer, and whispered through the gasps.

"Here, too, even here, is love," he said.

+++ "Scratch her back. She's too mad!" said a girl with a thumb print of manure on her chin. Her name, Telme, was well-known and rarely spoken aloud. Boris Arcadis, a thin man, and simple, tipped his cap enough to stroke his head, then did as Telme instructed. He approached the sow from the left, and slowly rested his fingernails into the thatch of bristles on the animal's back. The sow's breathing slowed.

Telme was six years old. Her hair was brown and thick and hacked to one relatively even length, at her shoulders. She had learned from her mother, who had been dead now for a decent time, to use sheep shears on her hair to keep it that way. Telme was thin and strong and
fast. Arcadis had asked her to help him move his sow from the farrowing shed, down the hill to the rest of the herd.

"Good. I don't think she likes to go down the hill. Her babies have taken the milk out of her bones. They'll break if you try to push her," said Telme.

"Hai, but I need to get her down. I've got a cow what needs use of the chambers." Arcadis was entranced by the motion of his hand on the hog's back.

"I know," said Telme, "but the hill makes her dizzy."

"She went a up it just fine."

"But down is harder for a pig. She's too heavy, goes too fast. I think we need to make her go backwards."

"I never had this problem afore. She went a up it, just fine," repeated Arcadis, as his hand traced designs in a rubbed-bare spot on the ridge of the sow's body. Telme's plan was that Arcadis would stand at the sow's shoulder, behind her ear. Telm would kneel at the other side of the animal with a handful of oats. Arcadis was wary, but had no doubt that little Telme, as she usually did, knew something he could not see.
The man leaned into the hog as Telme leaned awkwardly on the other side, and held the oats to the sow’s nostrils. Before the creature’s jaw could drop to fill its mouth, or crush her fingers, Telme deftly slid her hand a few breadths beneath its chin. The sow took one step back. Squatting now, Telme repeated this quickly. If the animal tried to turn its body to avoid walking backward, Arcadis leaned into its shoulder, or Telme twisted its ear. Usually, this might not be enough to change a hog’s mind. After six weeks of lying down with piglets rooting out her milk, her strength and energy was a shadow, and keeping the animal moving backwards was possible, if not easy.

Before the sow could get too frustrated, Telme navigated to the gentler slopes of the lower hill. She smiled as it turned from them and slowly made for its old home among the herd. Arcadis sauntered to the field gate, and lifted it from mud. The hog went in. He turned and shook his head, not in disbelief, at the grubby child. Not in disbelief, no, but out of faith.

She lifted her chin once at him, and said nothing. Her face was as grim as Arcadis’ face, her mouth a line, her eyes shallow, but the sow was home, and here, even here, was love.
Father Poibus was not so old yet as to have to rely upon the wheeled sedan chair that he kept at the parsonage. The day's accident prompted it, of course, but did not require it. In fact, it was Mikal who had insisted upon its use.

"Monsignor," said Mikal, "I will get the chair for you."

"Please, I have corns twice your age. Do not tell me I can not walk. I am not so bad."

"Of course, Monsignor. It is only that we have so much to do today, and I enjoy riding on the back when going down hills."

On the way to the inn, Villagers noticed their priest in the sedan. He would greet their concerns with a comment such as, "No worries, please. The boy enjoys riding it down the hills! I'm fine, just a bit of tumble there, please."

Then he would ask about their fields, their forges, their shops, their hearths. Then Mikal would push on, up the gentle rise, toward the inn.

Father Poibus entered on foot. Mikal left the chair by the door. The inn's hostler was at the table eating lunch early. A heavy cup of usquebagh was ready for the
priest. It was the innkeeper's daily tithe to the Church. Father Poibus thanked God and drained it.

"Run to the stables, please, and gather the horseshoes," the priest said to Mikal. It had been some weeks since the Father had blessed the hostler's shoes, but it certainly had not been long enough to run out the supply of previously blessed shoes. Nevertheless, Mikal obeyed, happily.

The stables held only the hostler's horses, twins. Thick-necked pullers. Mikal's heart fell just a bit. The priest had set him on this task to keep him from the Inn for a bit longer than to retrieve the horseshoes. Mikal had hoped to find more than bridles and sleepy-faced geldings.

He approached the pile of unblessed shoes, but lingered at the ribbons that hung on the walls. The hostler thought of himself as a horse-milliner, although it was his youngest daughter who actually braided the ribbons, and decorated the medals she got from the smith. Mikal stepped on a small stool and removed a ribboned medallion from above the window. In the sunlight, it was oushous and dazzling. Little crosses thatched over one another in the silver inlay. Purple and red ribbons spilled away from its face. It had little slots on the
sides of the jewelry so it could be slipped onto a bridle joint.

He started at a familiar pattering. In a panic, as if he were doing something wrong, he hung the medal back up, and stumbled off the stool.

"Mikal!"

"I thought I smelled a little pig!" he replied, as Telme entered the stables. She slapped his hip, hard, and jerked her head to the left.

"I smell a bigger one," Telme said. Her face quickly tightened and her tongue shot out, with the rapid elasticity only a child possesses.

"I'm only teasing you," Mikal said. He was covering. He did not know if Telme had seen him admiring the decoration. He was nine years old, an apprentice, and did not need the people of Village talking about his unnatural attachment to colors and light.

"You had better be, or I'll swat your crupper again until it's blue," she replied. Her eyes shone at him.

"Don't use language like that. It is..." Mikal searched for the right word. Normally he wouldn't, because most people didn't always know if he used the right one or the wrong one. Telme often did. "...not proper." There was a new word he had just heard earlier.
at the seminary. He did not use it because he couldn't quite recall it.

She was a slight child, about as thin as a willow branch. She never broke. She had been kicked by Nulla before, in the chest, as she helped her father clean the horse's hoof. She sat there, blinking, then rose after the hostler barked at her, and went back to calming the steed. Mikal saw it just the other week as he collected prayers to deliver to the nunnery. He turned as if he had not seen it, embarrassed that he could neither protect her nor come to her aid. He turned, embarrassed, even to have witnessed another mundane disaster in the world. He was training to rise above such fallen nature. More importantly, he knew that he would not have risen so easily had Nulla kicked him.

"Help me with these shoes. The Monsignor is blessing objects today," said Mikal.

"Papa won't want me there like this."

"I was teasing, little piggy. I like how you smell."

"Papa won't. I'm going to go to the river. I left all the money in the world there. Besides, no one ever brings anything to be blessed," she said with exasperation. She wanted his company down by the river.
The river was actually a stream that ran right through the middle of Village. She was sure he could throw a rock further than she ever could, and name it twice before it hit water. Mikal just shrugged, and gathered the unblessed shoes onto an iron rod.

He headed to the inn. She ran off for the river, although she would probably think to stop at a shop or two, and chase a rabbit into the woods along the way. She returned later, dripping wet, and straightened the medallion above the window.
CHAPTER 2. AMRICKA

Summer that year was cool. Winter came at its own leisure; gradually and firmly. The meeting room at the Convent had gone from damp and humid to damp and chilly, yet few nuns remembered how to complain about the conditions. They had borne the conditions for too many years.

Mother Superior slowly spun the tip of her left index finger around her right thumb. Seven times. She did not look up. Sister Maria Constansa sat next to her, priming a fountain pen. The other nuns at the table waited for Mother Superior to make judgment on the papers in front of her.

The skin on her face had fallen so long ago that the bones almost shone through. Even her wrinkles were smooth. She breathed in and looked at the notes again, but this time, without reading them.

"Nothing." Mother Superior's breath showed.

"Mother Superior, our hopes are still high for some of the girls in Pache. The land has been sour there for years," said Sister Harbodin. Her voice was in her most northerly tone, subservient and false. "The poorest
can't even afford to marry. Amricka is beyond their dreams."

Sister Tomasa's guimpe was crooked on her shoulders. One end of the cloth was folded over onto itself. Her wimple had fallen forward some when she leaned forward into her praying hands. It looked like a cowl.

"Beyond their dreams, perhaps, but not their travels. Those few girls from Pache are out of the question. Two are not even devout! The others, the ah...Koromples?" asked Sister Tomasa.

"Krimpelts," said Sister Maria Constansa.

"Yes. They are dullards, the lot of them. The whole family is desperate. They should be wards of the Church, not its agents."

"The body of Christ has many parts, Sister," said Sister Harbodin. Harbodin looked at the disheveled young nun, and recalled the day several years ago when that pensive and even more disheveled girl arrived at the basilica on the back of a wagon. Harbodin could have, should have known, even then, that the clothes and the silence were a screen of smoke, that Sister Tomasa would soon be making plays for power in secret.

"But the Brides of Christ," insisted Sister Tomasa, "are not tongues and feet."
Some of the nuns gasped. Harbodin shook her head. Had she not grown used to Sister Tomasa's way of speech, Mother Superior would have said something. It was certainly years too late to bring a strap down on her wrists. As it was, Mother Superior simply assumed that Sister Tomasa would add the near-blASPphemy to her list of daily confessions. Secretly, the octogenarian agreed with Tomasa.

Mother Superior looked over the papers once more, this time assessing every letter. "Nothing."

+++ The remains of Saint Vitalus lay in a case outside the main sanctuary. The hallway was wide. The fourteen stations of the cross were depicted on the wall above the short altar. In the case, a jaw bone, a collar, the left forearm, and a shin lay naked and in place on thin velvet.

The bones had been gathered centuries before, even centuries apart. The collar had come last, after the last of the Crusades, after the Basilica had been finally completed. Every piece held a certificate attesting its authenticity from the Office of the Archbishop. The ancient paperwork was locked in a panel in the altar.
The chambers of council were up a broad flight of stairs at the end of the hallway. A painting of Christ, in the throes of Passion, a spear penetrating above his naked hip, His skull haloed in blood, hung on the wall near the stairs. Women's voices poured down the steps.

"Three trips to the north in two years. Five to the east. We have Sisters Ingeborg and Maria Fey in residence as far as Vienna, and no initiates to show for it." The northerly tone of Harbodin.

Voices. A cacophony, then a throaty old grunt of Mother Superior. One at a time. Harbodin's tremolo echoed down, "...appeal once more to the Archdiocese? Certainly there are convents in Europe with too many women? Perhaps they could be transferred here, for the love of God?"

Silence.

"Pray."

"We have prayed and we will pray, Sister Tomasa. God rewards those who serve him, though. We also must act. There is always time for prayer."

"No, pray. Now."

"Let us pray," whispered Mother Superior.

The bones in the case shivered.

+++
Telme stomped through the snow. Her skirt was gathered in bunches around her calves, and the hems were buried in her thin fur boots. The stream still ran, but slowly, and the snow upon its banks was murky and curved, like candle wax. In the valley, even the thinnest streams rarely froze completely in the early winter.

She followed the little river to a lean-to. Mikal had built it there, just as she had asked. She found him there, with a fire already begun with matches.

"Just like in Amricka," he said. His blue eyes looked brown, in the shadow of the lean-to, with the white and gray glowing across the rest of the countryside. His hair and his mink cap matched. His cap matched his mitts. His mitts matched his boots. To Telme, Mikal looked like a black bear, round and warm. "We are Indians! We are Indian kings!" He laughed at this, and she smiled when he did.

He never asked her why she told him to build the shelter there. She knew he would not ask, although she wanted to share her secret with someone, with him, most of all.

A chill shuddered through him as he noted Telme's hard red ears. He pushed a large log into the fire and stood up. His body-warm cap was on her head, over her
ears, over, in fact, her eyes, before she even sat down. She poked at the fire with her foot, singing the boot a little.

"Next year, I am going to school," she said. Mikal knew this was not true. Her father would not pay for it. If she was schooled at all, it would be at the foot of her eldest sister, who lived miles away, in the near county.

"At the Convent?"

"Hai."

"School can be a lot of work, you know. Do you have to go?"

She did not respond. A moment later, her face brightened, and she chirped, "I can spell 'door'. If I forget, I have that paper on my door to remind me." That autumn, Mikal had taught her how to spell that word and some others. He had written out the word 'door' with charcoal on some paper. He had told to pin the paper to her bedroom door in case she forgot how to spell it. She never did forget. She knew many other words. He was tickled that she mentioned the one he had given her.

"You need to know how to pray before you go to school."
"I already do," she said. She intoned the Lord's Prayer, inaccurately and as if it was in Latin, not her own tongue. She kicked her chin up a bit at him. He nodded back.

"I think God must get sick of hearing the same prayers over again. I'm not sure He always listens to that one." Firelight glinted off the trace of black beneath Mikal's eye. She had not seen the bruise before.

"What's that on your eye?" she asked.

"Nabas hit me on accident." Nabas was Mikal's friend. He was always hitting Mikal on accident. Nabas was always asking if Mikal was going to wear dresses like Father Poibus' when he grew up. Nabas had several girls his age who were sweet to him. Mikal had none.

"Swordfighting," said Mikal. Telme had seen the boys swordfight before. Nabas had a broomstick handle, and Mikal had a branch. Nabas always won, and in front of an audience, would always win handily.

She would forget to thank Mikal for building the shelter when, a while later, he would get up to return home, warning her not to play with the fire. She would forget to return his cap to him. She would not, however, forget to watch him disappear beyond the wintry ridge, and wish that she walking with him.
She would sit back in the shelter, shivering just a little, and wonder if the woman she had seen here would reappear, and enfold her in that summer light.
CHAPTER 3. LILIES

Four years later, Mikal had a much different dream. He had spent the morning in prayer with the men at the monastery. Certainly, this was a great honor. Acolytes were only in attendance during Mass, so Mikal had been the only boy to actually take part in prayers, and had been doing it for years now. Even the few parishioners able to appear on occasion knelt silently on blocks of wood. Certainly, it was also a great necessity, as Father Poibus' vision was now failing. Mikal would whisper the names of verses to be recited, or page titles for prayers, and Poibus would recite them from (sometimes faulty) memory. Mikal would correct any grave errors, as when, in the flooded autumn, the old man thanked God for the abundant harvest.

Mikal's growing knees popped on four distinct occasions that morning. He misguided Father Poibus' memory twice. No one seemed to notice. Still, Mikal was embarrassed, and wondered if he might not be given some rest from his duties.

No. Brother Hermonius was no where to be seen that day. The long monk with a duck's face was friendly, and occasionally took Mikal's duties to Father Poibus from
Mikal. Hermonius would say something like, "Monsignor, I believe that the Lord is calling Brother Mikal to the pub. I believe God needs him for a futbal game," or, "I believe there's a heathen in the heath and daisies. Perhaps Brother Mikal should investigate!"

Today, Father Poibus would not chuckle, a little aimlessly, at Brother Hermonius' intercessions, and release the boy, for Brother Hermonius had sauces to brew. Mikal looked, without hope, back at the monastery, as he pushed Father Poibus, in the wheeled chair, back to The Parsonage. Although the Spring day was pleasant, even warm when the breeze shifted back, Mikal knew to roll the priest close to the hearth, and stoke the fire. He was perspiring by the time the fresh log was alight. Mikal moved to the kitchen and pulled that morning's bowl and cup from the basin. He wiped out water and any food quickly, and set them on the table, to await lunch.

Finally, he went back into the other room. He quickly turned down the bed, without flipping the pillow. "Would you care to nap, Monsignor?"

"Yes. Please."

Mikal did not sigh in relief, but his heart did. His face lit up, and his cheeks rose to smile. "Let me help you."
"Yes." Father Poibus did not even raise an arm. "I often consider the lilies."

Mikal tried to ignore the comment, hoping the priest was on the verge of sleep. He took the man's hand. It was as frail as a cocoon, yet Mikal couldn't move it. It was too heavy. He waited.

"You will be minister to all of Village soon. You enter the seminary in a few months. So much, please, will come upon you," said Father Poibus. His breath smelled of vinegar and his lips were wet. "I have no idea what you face." Mikal didn't understand that. He assumed that the man misspoke.

Nevertheless, Mikal had heard this often enough; the hardship and sacrifice for the good of the Church, the hard work and the rewards. He knew it by head, if not by heart.

"I have...please. I have...Hm. Huf. I know," Father Poibus trailed off, turning his head to an unshuttered window, and the dusty sunlight streaming through. "Consider the lilies. They want nothing. They are simple, and do not covet. Rain falls on them, please. God covers them in the winter, and feeds them. He cares for them so, will He not care for you?"
"I am not worried about you, Mikal. I should be, but," said the priest, "I am not." This was new. He rarely addressed the boy by his name. He rarely discussed Mikal's disposition. "You will do this work well. It suits you. Please. I am not worried. Satis verborum."

Whenever Father Poibus said that, Mikal knew to take the man to bed. The priest sometimes muttered the Latin, which meant "enough words", in his sleep, even. Mikal took the dozing man's hand. Still it did not move. He spoke again, fluttering an ancient eyelid, blinking away pale blue. Mikal had been willing his own release all day, but the priest's silence was not enough to grant it. Mikal kept his face inscrutable, but his toes crawled against the insides of his shoes. He knew to wait. "Go," said Father Poibus, with a smile. "Please. Consider the lilies." He raised his hand, and gently pushed the boy away.

+++ 

Nabas was lounging at the river bank by the edge of the woods, as usual. The soil was soft with grass but poor enough to have hard, sunny spots in it. He was on his back watching clouds in the sky. One in particular was
fat and blistered. It looked like milk in boiling coffee.

His broad shoulders were at an angle to the ground, his blonde arm was draped across his chest, and his hand rested on the belly of one of the Prater daughters. Nabas had not ever called either one by first name, and could not remember which one was Valliett and which one was Varea. He had known them for as long as he could remember. They had been born less than a year apart, both had black hair and dark eyes, and skin darker than their mother's. It was well-known, and unsaid, that Bib Prater, the blacksmith, had come from a gypsy father. His wife gave him fair skinned sons, all smiths, but could not bear fair daughters.

Mikal knew that Varea was the elder, the one who wore tiny iron (yes, iron) stars in her ears. She was the one who called him "That boy." Valliett was darker than her sister, and wore white dresses more often than was decent, and deerskin sashes with brass buckles. Valliett was kinder to Mikal, sometimes, and called him nothing. From a hidden rise within the forest, Mikal watched the couple, touching and talking, on the river bank. Nabas was with Valliett.
Mikal crouched even further as he heard rough popping of sticks and undergrowth. Varea burst from the woods and bounded down to the river's edge. She held her skirts out. She approached her sister and Nabas, and snapped her hands with a flourish. Pine cones and berries rained on the two.

Nabas whipped his arms up in defense, but too late. Valliett covered her face and laughed. Nabas rolled on his belly and growled. Grabbing Varea's bare ankle, he twisted and threw her to the earth. Her head rocked back as the jolt shot through her.

Nabas was upon her like a weasel to a snake, and pinned her shoulders to the ground. Peals of Valliett's laughter rang. The younger girl leaped on the couple, flattening her sister.

Varea grabbed Nabas by the hair. They kissed. Valliett pressed her body against the pair, and rested. Her breathing slowed. Nabas closed his eyes and listened to his kisses, the heartbeats, the wind.

Varea grunted, and with the strength of a blacksmith's daughter, pushed the bodies off of her. She giggled like the devil as they tumbled away.

Mikal hated the water. He never approached it alone, but could stand to when Nabas was around. Mikal
could swim, for Nabas had taught him, but that did not stop the fact that he dreamed often of drowning. Mikal emerged from the woods, and the girls, indifferent to him, made no attempt to straighten their clothes. Nabas lit up. "So! Father Pastry has escaped from prison. We've been waiting for you," Nabas said. Irony was conspicuously removed from his voice.

Mikal's pants were new for a change, and thus too large. His mother always left for room to grow.

They spent the rest of the afternoon racing pinecones and sticks down the stream. Nabas's stick always seemed to veer. "She's coming around to return fire!" he shouted.

Mikal would laugh, and watch his pinecones sink. The girls fell asleep in the shade.

+++ That evening, Mikal kissed his father goodnight. His father was a surveyor and adjudicator. He spent much of his time settling property disagreements. He owned a pocket watch.

His mother was large, and as expressive as a pear. She was not in the house when Mikal got home, but at work outside of the servant's quarters. His mother was not his mother. She was actually his father's servant, whom
he had bought years before; before the morning his only son was born, before the afternoon his wife died.

The servant's name was Mathilde, but Mikal never called her this. Both Mikal and his father called her "Mother." It had always been so.

Mathilde had paid off her own family's debt years ago, but Mikal's father kept her on, and paid her a little money every week.

Mikal ate the soup Mathilde had left by the fire. Mother was not inventive. If the food she made was predictable, it was also perfectly prepared. The sausage was salted and prime, the potatoes delicate but firm, the gravy sweet.

He was in bed as soon as the sun disappeared.

+++ In his dream, seven things went wrong that he would not remember in the morning. Something fell away. What he would remember was walking through the library at the monastery. Shelves and stacks of books were arranged like the Labyrinth at Minos. Twisting, turning, towering, the books and shelves went up at angles and turned back into spiraling cul-de-sacs.
Mikal knew where everything was. He knew exactly every book and every word in every book, in French, in German, in Latin.

He filled each square hole on the shelves with a book that fit perfectly. Nearly every book he reshelved had a red cover. One was deerskin.

Valliett came around a corner. "I have a book for you. A book of scrolls. Under my tongue." She spoke in Dutch. Of course Mikal understood her voice. It was like deep chimes.

Mikal was sure. He knew all the books better than anyone in the world. The book beneath her tongue had to be catalogued. He was touching her arm. Her dress was green, and her blouse was green and thin. The top buttons were loosened, and he could see her collarbone.

He was sure of the books. He knew what to do with books. He hugged her very close, and she did not resist. She nuzzled her mouth up to his ear. "Mikal. Seven books."

"Yes," he said. "I know."

His hands were down her back. Hers were playing with his hair. He moved his left hand to her rump, and pressed. His body flattened against her, enveloping her. She enveloped him.
Quick shudders flashed underneath him and against his legs. Bile rose in his throat. The girl in the dress vanished. Mikal was very wet around his belly. Was he bleeding? He felt sick. He staggered through a wall of books which disappeared as he went.

At the end of a long hall was Telme. She was years older than when Mikal had seen her not long ago. She was taller now, and her brown hair even thicker. Her thick, slit eyelids betrayed no emotion, but she bounced as she came near him.

"We'll be late for prayers, Brother Mikal." She smiled, and took his hand.

He woke up, in the dead still, in the black, his heavy nightshirt soaked at the waist, and very cold. Minutes later, after listening to his racing, aching heart slow to normal, and his breathing deepen, he thought he might just live through the night. If he didn't die of shame.
CHAPTER 4. STABLING

"And so on," said Nabas. He looked over Telme's head, toward Germany. His face was carved as if shaving every day kept it angular and crisp. He had a moustache now, and a long lock of amber hair at his bangs that he flipped, often, with a casual toss of his head.

She stared up at him, measuring him for a coffin. In all the years, she rarely addressed Mikal's friend, but she had asked him about his clothing. The uniform was smooth and thick and tailored for a war tent. A thick pocket at the breast was reinforced, for medals, but devoid of any at the moment. Nabas had blathered aimlessly in response.

Telme rubbed her nose and cheek into her shoulder, reluctant to continue the conversation, knowing that Nabas would talk to a hog if it asked about his exploits, but she had to. "Does Mikal know?"

"What, about me joining the Army? Of course. I told him weeks ago. He's such an oddity," he said with a careless shrug.

Telme bit the inside of her lower lip, and sucked it back. Sometimes, around Nabas, she felt as faded as her ancient yellow dress. He could just as soon use her as a rinsing rag. "What did he say about it?"
"Oh, nothing much. Congratulations, and such. He said it was too bad I have to go all the way to Germany and enlist with them. 'They have the best army, anyway,' I said."

She rubbed the sole of her bare foot against some cobblestones. Her shoes dangled from her fingers. "Well, I need to go do chores. The horses will be hungry."

"Perhaps I'll make the cavalry," said Nabas, as he gazed above the rooftops. He would get a sword, then.

Telme's back was already to him, her long brown hair waving.

+++ 

The new stallion fought and danced when Telme had led it into the stables yesterday. It was the orator's horse, and would be here for two more days. A mare with a cracked front hoof was held, three stalls down. It had been winking and stamping since the early morning, and by now, the stallion had kicked a bruise into the side of the stall nearest to the mare.

Telme had helped breed horses before. The convent, where she was now finishing her second year of school, her last year, had some horses, for transport and garden work. The nuns' old stallion was a gentle animal, slow
and sleepy-eyed. It never ceased to thrill Telme to watch Signum on breeding days. Once, Editio Beati brought his best mare to the convent, and paid the nuns twice the normal charge. When Telme went to summon Signum, he was already at the gate, pushing.

He had danced at the fenceline, but took a halter with grace. He had been so proud, marching next to Telme, savoring the wind. The mare had been tied at a post around the corner of the shed, but she didn’t need to be. Although she had been taller than Signum, the horses’ spirits matched. She certainly had had the muscling to bear his weight.

Telme looked at this stabled mare, rubbing against the wood. She poured the oats into its trough. Although the animal approached the feed, it didn’t stop twitching its hindquarters, and idly stamped its back feet. It had none of the marking or joy of the free mare, Beati’s mare, the mare Telme remembered.

+++

Telme went to the attic where her mattress was, and lay down for bed. As soon as she heard the Hostler’s snores deepen, she lighted out from her covers and opened the shutter. She slipped, in her nightdress, out of the window and onto the roof. The roof slanted sharply to
the stables, and, from the stables, it was an easy climb to the ground. Telme scrambled off into the night.

Old Widow Ertl had stopped sleeping completely six months before. On the first night of her insomnia, she tottered through her fading house and saw a ghost slipping past her window, heading for the cemetery the same night. No one would believe her. Tonight, she saw the same ghost, pale as a moonlit nightdress, again.

The cemetery was on the property of the monastery. Mikal lived in the quarters at the monastery now, studying at the seminary. Telme headed there, through the graveyard, weaving a path through the headstones and crypts. She gathered her skirts and lifted her long legs carefully, trying not to step on graves, or break her toes.

She crossed her arm as flat as she could across her chest, and went sidelong through the gaps in the iron bars. Telme walked the perimeter of the courtyard and came to Mikal's window. She looked in to see another young man, named Petr, at a desk, writing something by lantern light. Two others were propped up on their elbows in their beds, facing each other, and talking. Mikal was asleep.
Telme pulled the narrow window open even further. "Petr!" she hissed. He started as if she had swatted him. His pen clattered on the desk. The other two turned to the window. "Get Mikal, please."

Petr looked at her face peering through the open window. This crazy little horsefly was unpredictable, unsound, and much smarter than he. She had explained, offhand, the role of the advocatus diaboli to him in about five minutes. He had been studying it for a week. "No. He IS important," she had said to Petr, "because, otherwise, a man like Brother Buber could declare himself a saint. Without the devil's advocate to show how his stigmata are actually juice from stolen strawberries, the Church might get fooled!"

He had laughed at this, picturing Saint Buber of the Stolen Strawberry. Still, he did not care a great deal for this girl who came out at night, dressed like this. Petr sighed and stood up. He went over and pushed Mikal. "Your sweetheart is here," Petr hissed.

Mikal's hair stuck up in spots, like dark quills. His eyes blinked fourteen times. He sat up slowly, moving his big body with deliberation, and heavy breaths. As he stood, he recognized that he was only wearing his
underclothes, so he quickly wrapped his wool blanket about him, like an imperial cape.

Still dreaming, he approached the window and looked at Telme. Her lips were thin, and, even in this past year, her face had hardened in the strong parts, and softened in the sweet parts. She may have had diamonds on her skin, it sparkled so. In the moonlight, at this hour, Mikal dreamed she was a wood-nymph.

"Oh, hello," he said, as he rubbed his eyes.

"Come out," she said. He gathered his blanket about him, and did so.

In the darkest part of the courtyard, in a windowless corner, the two companions sat, with their backs to the wall.

"Nabas is going to the army," she said.

"I know. We have talked about it."

"He said you were happy for him."

"He lied," said Mikal. "We fought." Mikal explained that Nabas was angry with his own cousin Lazari. Nabas thought Lazari was a traitor because he went to Paris to become an artist. Nabas said that everyone knows that one goes to Vienna if he is a real artist, and to Paris if he is an impostor. He said that all of True Europe would soon rise up and push France
back to where it belongs. Mikal had told Nabas that he shouldn't leave Village. That he should defend his own people instead. Nabas called Mikal selfish, told him he was not thinking of the Greater Ideal. He was going to join the army, and then be an artist in Vienna, and Mikal just wouldn't understand.

"I asked him about Valliett and Varea. They have waited long enough for him, I said. He said that he would marry them both before he left for Germany."

Telme gasped. She put her mouth to her hand to cover a smile. "He is too stupid to blaspheme," she laughed.

"Nabas is not stupid at all. He is confident. I told him that he couldn't marry them both, and he said that he knew that. He said he meant that he'd marry one and have the other as a mistress. He said he'd already talked to them, and that they were happy, as long as he were rich.

"Which will he marry?" asked Telme.

"He didn't know. He said it didn't matter." Mikal wanted to tell her that he called Nabas a whorer, that he would marry one, and whore the other, whoring them both. Mikal would never use such language in front of anyone but his friend Nabas. Mikal kept something else from
Telme. He thought of telling her that Nabas turned red when Mikal told him that his stupid army wouldn't pay him enough for one wife, and not two, and that Germany didn't need him anyway, and that Vienna wouldn't want him.

Telme shifted her hips slightly. She looked at the hem of her nightdress. The light from the monastery, in all of its convolutions, illuminated the green stains at her hem. Her ankles and the bottoms of her dark feet were even darker with the juice of cracked grass. Mikal tried to continue speaking, but his voice was shaking now. He could not always hide his feelings. He had too much body to try to control. Mikal's face had darkened, and his breath came in damaged packages. His only friend was going away.

Telme moved her hand to Mikal's shoulder. "Did you really say all of that to Nabas?"

His body shook a little. His hands rose to his tear ducts. Together, they looked like the wings of a butterfly. "No," he said. "I told him congratulations." His breaths echoed softly in rhythm. Telme pulled closer to him.

Mikal could not even remember exactly what he had said and not said to Nabas. His elusive dialogue with Nabas had been like kicking at shadows. Words had fallen
from his lips, racing contrary to his thoughts. The boys; Nabas, tall and mustachioed, and Mikal, wide, and growing taller, had been angular silhouettes, and were each shocked by the other. Young Mikal, who had lost so many battles to Nabas had refused to cast down arms as Nabas expected. Nabas had expected a stir of adventure in Mikal. Mikal had not expected his leader to take flight. Germany doesn't need you, Nabas, were the words Mikal would not say.

Mikal and Telme said nothing for some time, sentries to themselves. Then Mikal began to quietly mention the gossip around the seminary, and how some of his fellow students teased him about Telme. Soon, however, he had to return to prepare for midnight prayers. Before he arose, Telme bent to kiss his cheek, quickly. She wanted to give him no time to stop such affection. Her lips touched the side of his face. She held them there a second longer than she intended.

He turned his mouth to hers. They kissed.

They pulled back. "I should go," they said together.

+++}

On the more leisurely walk back to her attic mattress, Telme reminded herself to get her clothes ready in the
morning, because blood might be returning shortly. That evening, signs were strong. She had to cross her green ankles, and tense her legs. Sitting so close to Mikal had been good. She had wanted to take the back of his hand in her palm, and bring his palm to her face. She wanted to smell the lanolin oils, or taste salt.

Mikal had told her once that one student at the seminary had been with a woman. Father Poibus had even mentioned to Mikal that it was not a bad idea to do it once or twice before taking the vows, just so you never had to wonder. Several of the students had girls they would meet in the courtyard, or in the cemetery, if they could make it that far. Mikal thought that this was disgusting, although he recognized that most of the young men were boasting their wishes, not reporting their experiences.

She thought of this, and how powerful Mikal had looked, hunched over, hiding his tears. Her feet navigated a patch of stony ground.

The air around her was still, but the earth beneath her blurred past. In minutes, she was at the old shelter that Mikal had built for her years ago, and on her knees. Asking for another visitation.

It did not come.
She fell asleep waiting. She awoke to a gray sky, before dawn, and scrambled home. Moments after she made her way into the house, like a burglar, and fell finally upon her mattress, the Hostler was shaking her to arise.

The stallion had broken through the wall.
CHAPTER 5. RESURRECTIONS

The crippled stallion stared with wildness at the orator. Its breath was staggered, and it jerked, in vain, against the harness ropes. The orator shook his head and made his fat lips thin. He scratched a finger through a tangle of black curls at the back of his balding skull.

"Well," he said to the Hostler, "I think you owe me a horse."

Telme bristled. A bucket sat next to her bare feet, filled with poulticing rags and ointments that would not be used today. She looked at the Hostler, expecting something more akin to mercy.

"I happen to have one I can sell you at a good price," said the Hostler, carefully failing to notice Telme's eyes, and how some water trickled slowly at their rims.

"Look," said the orator, smiling now, smiling mean, "It is pretty obvious that any magistrate in the land is going to hold you responsible for the damage. What sort of horseman boards a hot mare so close to such a fine animal as mine?"

"This one did. This one has. I have never known a stallion to be so out of sorts. It went mad. Even if it
had not broken a leg, you could not have ridden it again. Either way, you can not expect me to pay for a horse that has gone mad," said the Hostler.

"I can, sir, and I do. I'll take it up with the constable, if I must. Look, you owe me a horse."

"Are you such a poor speaker that you haven't the money for a horse you are so clearly due, or such a good one that you think you can sway me with words?" said the Hostler.

The orator dropped his jaw, slightly, untheatrically, to think.

The Hostler finished the orator's thought. "I know the constable. Feel free to waste the morning with him. Otherwise, buy the gelding I have in the stable."

He gave pause. "How much?" asked the orator. His mouth was dry.

The stallion rattled against the boards, and swung its neck like a hanged man against the bindings. Telme's nightdress still stuck to her back from that morning's sweat; the panic and the fury of helping the Hostler pull the animal back in line was still with her. The Hostler turned to her.

"Go. Get the Butcher."
Without thinking, she turned, then turned back. She almost never addressed him. "Papa. You cannot kill the horse. We need to see if it can heal."

Perhaps it was the money the Hostler had just made that morning, or perhaps it was the glaze that had come over Telme's face. It was the sort of face that a knight in Old Europe might reserve for just when he lifted his visor to greet an enemy. For once, the Hostler did not dismiss her out of hand.

He bent toward her and drew her close. "The horse will not get better. That is the way of horses. Their legs are more important than their hearts, even. With a broken leg, they suffer, but always they die. The Butcher will take the horse, and even the poor will eat well tonight. I will have money to take care of the family, and this man will be able to continue his travels."

"There is another way," she pleaded.

"No. This is the way. Do as you are told." He patted her firmly on the hip. It was one of the rare times he touched her on purpose, and it would be the last.
The Butcher arrived with a sledge upon his shoulder. Telme's head swayed gently, as if she would be sick. There were traces of blood on her. There was more on the Butcher's apron and his hands.

The orator took one look at the hammer and shook his head. The three men congregated. The Butcher shrugged, the Hostler smiled with half of his face. The orator produced a pistol from his luggage.

The Butcher and the Hostler each took a rope, untied it from the posts, and pulled. The horse frothed and tried to rear. It staggered to the left, and scrambled in place. With some effort, the two men pulled the wheezing animal to the cattle cart. After two halts, the stallion had no fight left, and limped anywhere the men led it.

Once it was in the large four wheeled cart, the orator raised the pistol and fired. The huge stallion collapsed against the bars of the cart, straining the wood, and slid to the floor of the wagon. The orator was a good marksman, the Hostler would give him that.

Telme decided she would join the convent.

+++Mikal took the hand of Father Poibus. He had been summoned from the seminary.
"How are you today, Monsignor?" he asked.

"I have taken. Please. I have taken." The man's body was withered. Blankets were wrapped tightly about him. The previous Sunday had been the last Mass he would perform. Mikal recalled it, the stammering, the confusion, the stops that no prompting could save. Poibus had taken to delivering the service from a chair, but he had nearly fallen over in any case.

"You know," said the priest, "war. Please. War. All the boys of Village are going to war, joining foreign armies." This was because the Land had not yet embroiled itself in any alliances, and would remain neutral. Only men of a certain age enlisted in the home defense forces. Young men joined, for the most part the German army. "You must stay home, please. Yes."

Mikal thought that Father Poibus's urgency was unwarranted. Mikal had pledged himself to become the priest of Village when the time came. Combat was not for the elect. "Certainly, Monsignor," said Mikal.

"Such beauty," said the priest, as a smile waned from his face. He ran his fingers down Mikal's cheeks, and back up into his hair. "Such beauty, that you will never see until it is too late." Both eyes of Father Poibus were clouded and blind, the insides of the lids
were lined with pale pink. Mikal thought him delirious, speaking of beauty in such a way, to such a figure as himself, of all people. "You must be strong, for Village. So much beauty will never return. You must seek the beauty that remains, and show it. I saw the revolutions. They failed. My brother died in 1366, please, in 1766, in 1866."

Mikal nodded, as if he understood. He had recognized some time ago that useful information would be had elsewhere, in his classwork, in the library. He honored Father Poibus, for the things he had taught Mikal in his youth. As for learning, Mikal sought that elsewhere.


His words descended into gibberish. Mikal drew near him. He had not seen the man go so far, so violently. The man gripped Mikal's shoulder. Mikal suddenly recognized that the priest had been an incredibly strong
man in his youth. His ancient fingers pulsed with accidental power, and the memory of force. They dug into the young man and pulled his solid body forth. Father Poibus absently slid his hand across the folds of his blankets. He produced a photograph. It was made of metal, perhaps tin. Mikal had not ever seen a photograph that was not on thick paper. The man in the picture was bearded and mustachioed. He was thirty, perhaps, and uniformed. He held a helmet with a plume. Mikal palmed the photograph, and slid it into a pocket that he had sewn himself, inside his light coat.

Napoleon the Third the Third de profundis de pilo pendet non sum qualis eram. En passant, en todo, vel caeco appareat, continued the priest. Gibberish followed gibberish. Mikal would tell the monks, who would have Father Poibus finally moved to the ward at the convent on the other side of Village. The priest would live for two more weeks, never once speaking a single coherent word.

+++ Giza, in the Holy Land, was, for centuries, believed by the inhabitants of Village to be at the farthest reach of the world. This was where St. Vitalus, whose remains rested at the Convent, was from. This was where he was
killed. A saint, so close to heaven, so otherworldly, certainly did not live nearby.

The only direct acquisition of a fragment of St. Vitalus's remains came shortly after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. A command to subdue the Holy Land had been issued under broad powers invoked by the Church Council. A small expedition, consisting primarily of Village soldiers, set out with this task, or a portion of this task, in mind. Their ship, constructed poorly, and piloted even worse than that, had floated without direction for days in the Aegean Sea, en route to Italy. There, they planned to join a convoy of ships, and take up arms against the Moors either in Spain or as far as Turkey. Frankly, the soldiers' directions had been very unclear.

As the ship circled aimlessly in the rough seas, any plans (as vague as they might have been) disintegrated. Some soldiers took to one another. Some took to fighting. Some took to prayer. The deck was a madhouse, and below decks were flooding slowly.

What arrived, a thousand miles or more, off course in the port of Nicosia, was a listing ship with starving, raving soldiers on board.
Some Moorish fishermen rescued the men, and fed them. At this point the soldiers wanted simply to return home. They traded all weapons and treasure for safe passage back to Village. The Moors were fair, and gave them tapestries and books, as well as trim transport and a good pilot. One final item was presented to the soldiers: a human jaw bone. It was said to belong to a Christian saint. The Minister of Nicosia had ordered it removed from the Academy there, as he feared that the Christians would pillage his city in search of artifacts and heathens. The soldiers were told to report to their generals that all of Cyprus was Moorish, and that nothing Christian remained.

When the men finally returned to Village, nearly naked, and thin, they were welcomed with great fanfare. The tapestries and books were taken to the monastery. The jawbone was immediately declared to be that of St. Vitalus of Giza, in part because the soldiers had believed they had been stranded in Giza, not Cyprus.

The jawbone was properly placed among the other bones. At that time those included the forearm and the shin.
About seven hundred years later, those bones, as well as the collar (which would be acquired in 1402), began to move again.

The nub of the forearm propped up against the seal on the case. It tapped twice against the glass. The yellow bone was thin. It looked frail enough to dissolve. It did not. It stretched and pressed against the glass, lifting open a crack between the greaves in the glass. The bones thinned themselves, bent, and wrapped around the edge of the case. They spilled onto the stone floor of the convent hallway. They clattered together, and tumbled swiftly down the hallway, seeking cloth.
CHAPTER 6. HANDS

Telme's fingers, fresh and washed, were folded neatly upon her lap. She balanced her feet, lightly, upon the rung of the stool she was sitting on. Telme's hair ran down her back, and sprayed auburn across her shoulders. Chestnut wisps touched her wrists. Her face was straight, her mouth a line, her eyes without passion.

An ox in a nun's habit stood behind Telme in an ill-lit room. Sister Gorris even slept with her mouth open. Her eyes were dull-blind and the other sisters had long since stopped telling her to wipe her chin. She held a dull pair of scissors in her hand.

The hair fell in ribbons to the floor. Often Telme's head jerked back as Sister Gorris tore instead of cut. Telme's scalp ached. More floating hair danced in the dim light. Soon, a field of it surrounded Telme's stool.

Sister Gorris slabbered, and wheezed the saliva back into her mouth. She looked at Telme's patchwork scalp to be sure that no long strands remained. It was done.

Telme bounced from the stool, and began to gather up the sheaves. She would be sure that the convent sold the
hair to a wig-maker in Vienna. It would pay her entrance into the order.

Her cheeks seemed higher now, perhaps sharper. Her ears, which had been hidden for most of her youth, now showed themselves to be keen, and close to her head. Her face glowed.

+++ "Bless me, Father. I have sinned."

Mikal recognized every villager who ever sat behind the screen. The confessional was a small oak room. It was not separated from the chapel, but in fact, attached, and located twenty feet south of the nave. The room was longer than it was wide, and half of the room was screened off by oak latticework. The far half of the room was where Mikal sat, cut off from the world. There were no windows.

Varea sat on the other side of the screen.

"Confess your sins, my child," said Mikal. Mikal's voice cracked as he spoke. It often did during confession, Mass, or any other time Mikal was supposed to hold authority. He hated calling everyone "my child", but did so because that was Father Poibus had done. He sometimes used "thou" and "thy" outside of Mass, and felt silly. No one in Village ever questioned it.
Varea, as she often did, wove her long, dark fingers into the latticework, although she was supposed to keep her hands held in prayer. "I have disobeyed my mother. I have been slothful. My family has eaten lamb all week long. I have told lies."

Mikal looked at her fingers. The nails were short and white from chewing. They knotted against the wood. Mikal pulled his lips together and made them disappear into his mouth. Varea's silhouette was not stark, but he could make out the curves of her face. He could smell lilies as he leaned towards the screen to whisper absolution.

"Anything else?" he asked. He never put it any differently. It was uncomfortable for him to pry at all, but Father Poibus had always made it very clear that the cleansing of sins only worked when sins were confessed, and confession often worked best with a prompt. Father Poibus was so adept at grinding away to the heart. Mikal was not. Nevertheless, he was not about to let any sin go unreconciled, if that was possible.

"Father," she said, hesitating. It was strange for Mikal to hear this from her, even after having heard a half-dozen of her confessions since he had become the parish priest. This girl, woman now, who had never
called him anything but "boy." "What do you hear of the war?"

"It is going well. Our battalions are pushing through French lines. Our fleets outnumber the enemy. It may be finished shortly," Mikal said. He could not recall if battalions were larger than divisions. He was not precisely certain about a military line, either. A line could be rows of soldiers, he thought, or a boundary on a map that the two sides agree to not cross. He imagined briefly a passage from an ancient poem, where the bodies of defeated soldiers float down a river.

"But what of Nabas? What have you heard of him?"

Varea drew in a breath.

"Should not your sister know before I do? Doesn't he write to her?"

"She won't tell me anything. No one will. Please, Father, tell me what you know."

"I know that any news will be posted in the square if it comes to that, which it very well may not. Nabas's whole division is filled with Village soldiers. If anything happens, good or bad, believe me, the town will know." Mikal watched her fingers tighten and go pale against the wood.
He continued. He cleared his throat twice, and deepened his voice. "Don't worry about Nabas, my child. He will be fine. If his wife isn't worried, you certainly shouldn't be. Have you anything else to confess?"

During the silence, Mikal's stomach burbled.

Varea looked down at her hem, above her ankles. "No."

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, you are forgiven," said Mikal. His speech was too quick, and he realized he had absolved her as if she was a brother at the monastery. He hoped she would not notice.

She leaned forward to rise, and sat back. Her fingers released the latticework, and then paused at her mouth. "Father?"

"Mm?" said Mikal.

"Penance?" she asked, as if she were returning something Mikal had dropped.

He winced. "Oh. No. Not this time. Oh. Light a candle for each one of our soldiers."

She disappeared, slowly, from the screen.

+++
The next day, after one o'clock, a ring echoed back and forth through the streets of Village. Children in the forest came running homeward in the summer sun. The Hostler put down his fork. People slowly migrated to the town center. Mikal rose from his afternoon nap, pushed out into the daylight, and jogged down the hill, trailing after a few of the brothers who had been allowed to represent the monastery.

In the kitchen in the convent, three figures in black habits stood in front of three basins, cleaning the dishes from dinner. Telme's hands were red from lye and hot water. She said nothing. The two other nuns were more broad than Telme, and shorter. They were twice her age, and spoke with accents.

"Hai. Thann bells are uppa on thann axel-yeschpanna. We should tell Sister Harbodin or Mother Superior," said Sister Yorge, a pretty woman with the eyes of a doe.

Sister Laiolo rubbed cloth into a plate. Her face was pale and her lips and chin were tucked secretly beneath her twisted nose, but one could tell that the two women had grown up in the same region. They came from mountains. "Sister Harbodin, hai, she'll have on us. She'll say for us to listen for Iesus, not for bells!"
Mother Superior would not hear the bells. She was quite deaf.

Sister Yorge turned to Telme, and placed a wet hand upon her shoulder. "Go, sister, down through thann chapel hall, hai out. Go to thann square, and find out what is thann bells ringing."

Telme nodded, and dashed away.

In the square, most of Village had gathered. Perhaps a thousand people crowded around a small platform that the Alderman had dragged outside for the occasion. The Alderman was literate and thin. He had read the documents to himself when they arrived, and quickly sent for Brother Vinian, the monastery librarian, who could speak above a north wind, if he had to.

Mikal had taken a place near the platform because Villagers expected him to. They had parted like pages from a book to let him through. Even at this distance, he could barely hear the Alderman. His voice was like cream, but as light.

"Brother Vinian is ill today with the dropsy. He can not make it. Could the dear Father take his place and read this news to the people?" The Alderman looked down at Mikal.

Telme looked on from an alleyway behind a bundle of
millers' wives. Her heart, pounding from the run from
the convent, bounced when she saw Mikal rising above the
crowd. His frock was thick and still, although there was
a breeze. He cut a large figure, and his hands dwarfed
the papers he held.

His voice wavered and cracked. "I have been asked
to read these documents which became, which arrived, that
is, this morning today." He cleared his throat and
swallowed. The women in front of Telme whispered about
the war. Rumors of victory had been circulating all
week. Mikal read from the papers. Although it was still
difficult to hear, Telme could make out that it was,
indeed, news from the front, and that it concerned the
dispatch of soldiers from Village. Repeated phrases
whispered through the crowd confirmed this. Mikal's
voice strengthened as he continued to read.

"In three days of fighting, all objectives were
achieved, but not without cost. The following is a list
Mikal swallowed again, gazing at the list that ran down
the page, and onto the next. Gasps were released from
the crowd. A morbid terseness fixed everyone in place.
The names were too important. "Crchk, Herve Aclan." A
boy that Mikal had taught letters to, years ago, before
Mikal was even in seminary. "Daza, Apollo Burl." The banker's son. "Denn, Arnulf." One battle, and Village was empty. Bodies began to fall in the crowd. Mothers fell into fathers. Fathers dropped their empty hands to their hips.

Telme watched Mikal shake as his voice grew stronger. Her hands genuflected double-time, over and over. Her head bowed below the weight of this news.

Mikal's voice caught again. "Ercka, Nabas Yosef." He lingered only briefly on the name. His friend was dead now. The ink proved it. Somewhere in the crowd, Valliett screamed and threw her fists at someone. Varea leaned hard into a wall and closed her eyes to tears.

The list blurred as he read it. It blurred again and again. It blurred again. The breeze stalled. The people had gone blind, and numb, and deaf, and silent.

Telme looked up again and stared at Mikal. He would need her. He would need her.
CHAPTER 7. LISTING

Mikal unfolded a book. It had been written centuries ago, by a monk, Thomas of Kempis. Mikal’s eyes ran, without aim, across the pages. His heart knew there were passages on loss and comfort, but the words had no white spaces between them. The monastery library had no white spaces either. Books were pressed together and stacked high, making towers and landscapes of leather and paper. The room reminded Mikal of a painting Nabas had made once: a painting of Vienna, with angles and busy architecture and bricks and importance.

The book had been a favorite of Father Poibus, and Mikal had, not so long ago, known every heading. "On Obedience." "On Compassion." "On Mourning." Now, the words would not reveal themselves. Mikal flipped the pages backward, until he came to the first page with ink upon it. The title, in Dutch, was hand-painted in indigo. On the Imitation of Christ. He could not remember what that meant.

He had not slept in three days. The crush of mourners had been large, like a mill-wheel, turning him, dunking him, dunking them all. Even with the Brothers and Sisters opening themselves to the bereaved, there were not enough. None of those in the monastery had
grown up in Village, and had no relations in the town's dispatch to the Front. In the convent, however, everyone had lost someone.

Even so, Mikal traveled the most. No funerals had been given, because no bodies had yet returned. A few had been asking about when their sons would be coming back. Although Mikal had not yet received the paper work indicating that the bodies would not return, he had already assumed as much. He could not tell that to Old Widow Ertt, that her dead daughter's son was not to come home. It was best to let her rattle on, without ceasing, about the ghost, black now, that had slipped past her window on the outskirts of Village, two nights ago, and one.

Mikal lowered his face to his hand. His head weighed down against the flesh, and pressed his elbow to the table. His eyes closed, and he was asleep.

His eyes opened and he intended to rise. His eyes closed, and he was asleep again, but not as deeply. He could hear the silence of the library now, instead of the muffled thrum of his unconsciousness.

He prayed in his dream that Telme could get away again tonight. Perhaps her wards would sleep soundly, or that she would be granted enough private vigil time to
make the trek over here. Although Mikal had no wards, he could be called on at anytime, and would be guilty were he not availing himself at every hour. In a few days, he hoped to be able to meet Telme in the dark, at the river, between the convent and his home.

The dream was this.

+++

Telme slipped in through the narrow rows of the shelves, four times. Six. Her face pushed from her habit, in bas relief, and her feet, hidden by the hems, were bare. They made gentle slaps against the stone floor.

Mikal's happiness lifted his head from the table, and almost out of sleep, entirely. He had to press his mind back, so as not to rouse himself, and disintegrate the young woman.

She sat upon the table, facing him, her leg touching his arm. He reached up, and brushed his hand against her cheek. His left hand became his right, although he would not remember that when he awoke. Mikal smelled paper as he drew nearer to her. His face and hers were very close, and he was standing. His hand descended under her hood, ran through tangles of thick hair, to her ear. Telme's hair was silk and down, long and thick. Mikal
cupped his hand, as if to draw her near and whisper into the tunnel of her ear.

Instead, he moved his face to her, and kissed the palm of his hand, to test. Then he kissed her ear. She spoke six words, then five, to him, and whispered them. Her arm went around his shoulder, and her hand moved to his neck. The ends of Telme's hair fell from the binds, and rested against his chest as she moved in to him. He smelled sliced-thin wood, soft and aged. Paper.

Mikal thought of butterflies. Her lips talked into his cheek. Once, her tongue tapped his skin.

She turned her head from him. Her neck was bare. She turned her head the other way. Telme pushed gently against his chest. Mikal fell from sleep. She was gone.

The clatter of shoes startled him. Several monks, all years older than Mikal, approached the table.

"Father," said Brother Zutrof.

Mikal blinked his pale eyes back to dark blue. His dark hair lay in opposing directions. "Hai--Yes. Yes?"

Zutrof's jaw bristled with patchy white hair. His disheveled but generally unflappable thin face was turned nearly upside down. With a flat voice, spoken mostly through his nose, Brother Zutrof said, "Unter Barko."
Air spun from Mikal's mouth as he shook his head once. He rose, pushing up from the table.

+++ "Spies! Witches and spies!" cried Unter Barko, as the monks approached the inn. He raised the rifle to his shoulder, and pointed his one good eye at the monks. His voice pealed. "Spies!"

Barko had cut his own hair for fifty years. He had not changed his shirt in one. The shoes on his feet were torn open from the joints of the toes forward. A small heap of orange lilies lay by his feet. His head struck the tops of most doorways. Thus, his own brick home in the forest had none, but only a gaping hole high enough for a horse to trot through. He hunched his back, even, under the awning of the inn. The rifle, however, was steady and straight.

Mikal came forward. Surrounded by the browns of cobbles and robes, Mikal's black smock made him even more broad, a field surrounding a silver crucifix. He ducked his head and scratched his nape.

Barko slapped the rifle. Its ancient hammer wiggled, twitching to slap the pan that would set the flintlock off.
"State yer busnuss," he rasped, fixing the gun on Mikal. "Give up yer arms and state yer busnuss."

Mikal crooked his elbows up, as if he had hand puppets upon his hands. He raised his chin a little and his eyes much. He sighed. "I am an envoy, with special orders for Loyal Leftenant Barko. My name is Mikal."

Mikal regularly had made visits on Unter Barko's hermitage. He brought him food from the monastery, and news. He had learned to address him by watching Father Poibus engage in strange fellowship with him. Unter was well-known in Village, but hadn't been seen there in thirty years, at least.

Barko squinted his one good eye. "Ah," he said, "Father Envoy."

Mikal blushed. Faces from all around Village were peering from windows, looking around corners. Barko stiffened, raised the end of the rifle, and, with one hand, slammed the butt to the stones. The entire firing mechanism rattled loosely. His other hand snapped a salute that nearly blinded himself.

"What are my instructions?" Barko asked, as he gazed beyond the rooftops.

Mikal's hands shook. Barko had fired once on Father Poibus, years ago, having mistaken him for a fox. "Give
me a gun, Leftentant. And all of the ammunition you have."

"Yes sir. There's a war on. A bleeding mess."

Something like tissue paper rattled in his throat. His one good eye was doused and red.

Mikal took the end of the gun, and peeled it from the giant's hands. Barko unbuckled his belt, and handed the balls and powder to the sleepless young priest.

"You are dismissed, Leftentant."

"But the war, sirrah sir. I'm sworn to keep the homeland safe," said Barko. His breathing slowed his words.

"The war is over, Leftentant. It is done. Go home."

Barko saluted, but did not move.

"I'll await the regiment, sirrah sir. If I may."

Unter Barko owned a hundred paintings of flowers, and they were scattered and piled throughout his house and his leaning shed. Right now, he would have roses climbing his outside walls, and carpets of violets on the roof. Barko spoke to the flowers, living, cut, and painted, as if they were speaking back.

The priest went to his knees in front of the old soldier, and gathered up some lilies. He stood and
placed them in Barko's arms. Barko cradled them, and
stroked their faces.

"Your regiment is here. Go home."

Unter Barko marched, always leading with his left
foot, cooing his way through the streets of Village.

Mikal turned his back to the inn, with a rifle in
his grip. Faces were crowded, white shirts, light
skirts, thin pants, summer caps. The town of mourners,
united for the first time in days, smiled at Mikal, not
for long, but for a moment. Then they clapped.

Mikal blushed, and looked down at the rifle. It was
nearly a hundred years old.

+++

That afternoon, Telme and Sister Tomasa were scrubbing
the floors and walls of one of the wards, to keep it
healthy. Tomasa giggled incessantly nearly every time
Telme opened her mouth.

"I think this would go faster if we soaped our
habits and rolled around the floor," said Telme, and then
stuck out her quick little tongue. Tomasa giggled.

Telme deepened her voice, sagged her eyes, and
frowned, to mimic Mother Superior, and said, "Oh,
children, each corner has its own detail." Tomasa
giggled even more, wondering if it actually was Mother Superior on her knees cleaning the floor.

"See," she said, in her own tripping voice, "this corner has a beetle in it! What character!"

Tomasa giggled. Her laughter bounced like a loose board on a wagon.

A low, withering groan made the two nuns jump and look up. Sister Harbodin was in the doorway, switching her eyes back and forth.

"So, you think it is jolly to be ill? Have you no compassion? Do you think people wish to hear your laughter?" she hissed.

"Sister Harbodin," cried Tomasa, softly.

"Sister Harbodin," said Telme.

"You will shut your mouths. Tomasa, I am disappointed in you."

"Yes, Sister Harbodin," said Tomasa.

Telme said, "There is nothing wrong with laughter."

Harbodin cut swaths from Telme with her glare. With surprising swiftness, Harbodin was above Telme, jerking her to her feet. "Have you been stealing potatoes?"

Telme looked incredulously, "Potatoes? No. What would I need potatoes for?" Tomasa cowered back.
"You are the type to think that stealing potatoes is funny. You are not funny. No one likes the trouble you bring. You get back to work or there will be trouble like you've never seen. I'm sure you have been taking the potatoes and the flour and God knows what else has been disappearing here since you've arrived. When I catch you, you will wish you weren't born. Stop laughing. Start working."

"You interrupted my work to tell me to work?" asked Telme. Harbodin's face flushed red and her eyes rolled back, partially beneath her lids. She shoved Telme against the wall, hard, and left with a desperate grunt.

Telme could not feel her breath for many seconds.

Tomasa came to her and hugged her. Telme got her breath back, and said, "It is fine, Tomasa. Don't cry."

+++ At midnight, Telme held the hand of Bianche Porte. The young bride was dressed in black, and lay flat, as if her cot in this south chamber were a death altar. She had dark red curls which had turned gold in the summer. Her lips were silent and her eyes fixed against a lantern above her bed.

Sometimes Telme had to pull Bianche back into bed, and stroke her arm until her breathing slowed and her
legs slowed and her veil stopped twitching. She had just done this, and Bianche's eyes were beginning to flutter closed.

"Sleep. Go to sleep," Telme said. Her voice was steady, but filled with violets. She stroked Bianche's hand and nearly even hypnotized herself. Telme knelt by the bed, and contemplated sleep. Sleep, she prayed.

"Lord God, I ask you in the name of your Son, Christ Jesus, comfort Bianche in her misery, for He has decreed that Blessed are those who mourn. Be with us, and forgive us our trespasses. Restore Village." Forgive us, she prayed, and forgive me my trespasses. Lay my own desires to rest. Put my fire down, put it to sleep, my God. I have gone to Mikal two nights now, to comfort him and pray.

She thought of the kiss they had, so long ago, more than a year, in the courtyard of the seminary. Four kisses, in succession, in fact, but so sweet they seemed like one. The fourth one alone was so long it could have been five. That draw she had been so sure would disappear when she entered her marriage to Christ had come back. The day of the news, Mikal had been so bare, in his weakness and strength. The draw had come back. Worse, it had never been gone.
"Mother Mary. Intercede. Where are you?"

Visions never came when Telme asked for them. They always came around blind corners, beside idle river banks, or when Telme was fishing the last coins from the alms jars.

"Sleep," said Telme, to her ward and to her heart.

+++ 

A shadowed nun slipped into the room where Bianche Porte lay sleeping and Telme dozed against a straight chair. The nun touched Telme's shoulder. Her fingers were as light as tassels. Telme nodded awake, and the nun swung her arm to the south door, and nodded. Telme went the door, the door that did not lead to her own sleeping quarters, and left, unable to rouse her dormant voice.

St. Vitalis of Giza, shrouded in a habit, with swatches of cloth where his hands should be, lowered into the chair, and crossed his sleeves upon his lap.

+++ 

The doors and windows were open to the breeze in the parsonage. Telme's wimple flowed from her crown nearly all the way down her back, and cast a flowing moonlit shadow. Mikal lay cramped upon his bed, which was once Father Poibus's. Telme crouched over Mikal, and gazed at his sleeping face.
It was the first night that he was not awake, swaying beside the hearth, staring into the cold fire place. It was the first night that Telme would not hear Mikal, in a voice that shivered with effort, recount the days visitors and mourners and disasters. There would be no stories of the dead, and of the uselessness of priests. Mikal was sleeping, truly sleeping. Mikal would not tell her of his day with Unter Barko, the madman of the forest, or of his dream. Even if he were awake, he would not ever speak of his dreams to her.

Telme listened to him breathe. It was a deep, slow lowing, of pleasure, of no resistance. She rested her head upon his side, and closed her eyes. She would not touch him again for twenty years.
CHAPTER 8. INTERREGNUM

A dog with a broken shoulder loped across the hills of Village. It was gold and black and barrel-chested. The shoulder had healed out of place, so the animal ran along with it drawn against its body. It never touched the ground. The clockmaker had taught the hound to sit and cock its ear. Mikal's mother, even, smiled every time she saw the dog turn the corner and approach, awaiting her rough hands to tackle at his jaw. The Butcher would throw him sweet fats, sometimes even half a heart. Even Old Widow Ertt, nearly eighty now, cuddled her bare feet beneath the dog when he would come by her home for a long autumn nap.

The dog's bad arm was very tender. Even to rest it from its awkward position irritated it. No one ever touched it, or even around the shoulder. Other than that, though, the wound never slowed the animal.

Telme was twenty-five, then thirty. Her days, every day, each day, the days, all days were different. One day, she knelt for an hour, before prayers, even. There were wards left, years later, mothers of the war. Although widow Bianche had moved back with her parents, and then with a boy from another county, years and miles
away, Telme still tended to the few others, too frail or too strong to return to life.

The women, and one man, were all old, older than most of the active nuns, even. The man was Harter Crchk, who had lost his sons and his brother to the war, his wife to heartbreak, his daughter to suicide. He would speak, but only to a washbear-skin muff. He'd slide his hands into the muff, even on warm fall days, and talk mostly of the wind. Some days, he would clean the convent for twenty-four straight hours. He told the muff that Telme's name was Princess Ellanora. Mother Superior was Hastener the Listener. Sister Harbodin was Goliath Unsuitable. Sister Gorris was Sister Gorris.

Telme and Harter walked across the horsefield together. Although Harter may only have been fifty, his body was riddled with the angles of antiquity: knobby elbows, streaks in his eyes, shuffling feet. Telme kept her head up, for she knew that Harter would keep his bowed to the muff.

The dog loped up from the bubble of a hill, and ran to the pair. It looked like a living tricycle, running with one front foot. Its tongue hung out as it bobbed back and forth, lowering its head, and panted.
Harter's voice was paper thin. "A dog is here, my darling, come on the wind," he told the muff. "It is named Predictions. It is a Villager."

Telme did not hear Harter. When he spoke, he did so without ceasing, in one flat whisper of a tone. What he did say generally made very little sense, a code which codified nonsense.

She knelt, and took the dog to her. She could feel the stamping of a horse. Seconds later, the young stallion came running past. He was the offspring of the convent's Old Stallion, who had also died during the war. Harter named the young stallion Boris, after his own son.

+++ The librarian had died to library work. After that, Mikal had never once seen him away from his table, facing the sunlight beaming through a slit window, dozing. Mikal became the custodian of the books, which, after 1918, were becoming more confusing and fantastical. Furthermore, the work was less than it had once been. Few books ever found themselves off the shelves. The older clergy found little time for the activity, and the young were scarce in number and found no pleasure in reading. The old books seemed to be anachronisms, and
the few newer ones which made it to the monastery seemed only to undermine what security was left.

Thus, the library was Mikal's, and his alone. Mikal had taken up witchcraft, according to the few who took note of the books he read. He read subversive works by Jewish scientists. He spoke, when asked, of x-rays and a universe designed like a wet rag, with bent light and sagging spots where gravity warped vision.

It was jolly Brother Hermonius, of all men, who brought the trouble upon Mikal. Mikal was spending less time with penitents, or, more to the point, they were spending less with him. Prayers had fallen in recent years, compared to the gush he'd heard and said in previous ones. Mikal served the Lord dutifully in those days, but nevertheless found more and more time for the library. Simply, his duties to the Lord had become less, and Mikal didn't question that anymore.

The sweat of Brother Hermonious was covered by the steaming cedar scent of wheat biscuits. He carried a short-handled basket, lined in linen, filled to the brim and covered also with linen. Mikal was becoming less difficult to track down. Hermonious wove a happy route past the sleeping librarian, through the labyrinth of
shelves, and sat next to Mikal, who pored over a fresh book.

The priest's black hair was thin now, and even faded some. His heavy shoulders sloped more, as well, from the persistent hunching to which he had become accustomed. His face was still a baby's, but overgrown with hair. His beard was untrimmed.

"Biscuits, my most gracious Lord," Hermonius said with a brittle bow and flourish. He laughed to himself with two short breaths through his wide nostrils. His smirk was the one of a boy who had just spied his schoolmistress bathing. Hermonious loved Mikal. Mikal filled his heart with dreams that were beyond his baker's brain and his artist's hands. Mikal would never comprehend why Hermonious was so giddy around him.

"Thank you," said the priest. "You are so thoughtful."

"Good Biscuits for a good man, I say?" said Hermonious, "Of course I do! I used new cèdar. A slow fire, a sweet biscuit." Hermonius thought of the newborn dough that had been beneath his fingers only hours ago. He rolled the skin to perfection. He had kissed it before covering it to rise.
"What have we today?" he asked with a full mouth, pointing at the pages in front of the priest.

Mikal wiped his face against his sleeve, and took another biscuit. "Biscuits," he said with a wry smile.

Hermonius laughed, looking more like a duck than ever.

"I'm not sure if I joke with you, Brother Hermonius," said Mikal, still smiling. "Do you often open the oven door to check your bread as it bakes?"

"You know that I don't. I bake by heart. Opening the door will steal the flavor. I open it only when the bread is sealed. Why do you ask?"

"Heisenberg's principle. When a man tries to observe particles, he changes them, only by opening the door to look, in a way," said Mikal.

Hermonious said, "Hai. I suppose that's why it's best to keep the door closed!"

"But a scientist can't keep the door closed. It is his business to say what happens to what we can't see. When what he sees is that he is affecting what he sees, he has to take responsibility for the fact that he can't be separated from looking. He is responsible for what happens in the future, at least in some way. He can't
just look and record," said Mikal. His voice was loud for the library, almost loud enough to say Mass.

"That is why I am a baker and cook!"

"Hermonius, it is science that rises the dough, not cookery. It is science that binds the water to the flour. It is science that heats and bakes."

"Hai," said Hermonius, then with another grin, "funny that. I always thought it was God."

"Of course, God," said Mikal, "but science tells us how to repeat and organize what God gives. At least, it used to. Heisenberg says that isn't true. You can't look at biscuits without changing them, so if you look, you are responsible for what happens. If you don't look, you are responsible for not knowing what happens."

"I don't look, and I know what happens. Like I say, Father, I bake by heart."

"You can't, my friend, make x-rays by heart. You can't split atoms by heart. You can't save lives by heart," said Mikal, as he flipped a few more pages.

Hermonious hugged the half-empty basket and pressed it to the table. "That is why," he said, "I am a baker!"

+++ St. Vitalis spent most of the time resting in the case. It had been years since he had risen and donned the habit
to take Telme's place for her. Once he had arisen when
the Mater Dolorosa made an appearance to Telme, the night
Telme, quivering and small, had begged the Virgin Mary to
place her passions to sleep.

He was called now to do something else. To speak.

+++ Brown leaves, with the corners turned up, skittered in to
the library. An ancient monk, thin and unbending, swept
in behind the little gust. His cowl was drawn back, and
his light skirts swished. It was Brother Pur. He was
known to strip to his underclothes and do strange bending
exercises in his quarters. He was the treasurer of the
monastery.

"Mikal. What is this about biscuits and the
universe?" Brother Pur's voice sounded as if his tongue
were made of tin. Sometimes, all one could hear were dry
clacks. "Brother Hermonius was laughing himself
senseless over things he doesn't understand."

Mikal's head lowered, like a twelve-year old
acolyte's caught sleeping at Mass. "I didn't...I was
only telling a story. I wasn't serious."

"Don't lie to me Mikal. You must know how this
seems to parishioners. People are saying awful things
about you."
Mikal pursed his lip and stiffened his neck. He looked up. "With all due respect, my Brother, I'm not sure that anyone here knows what people are saying. I'm in Village everyday, and no one says much of anything anymore. They certainly don't gossip about me."

"Oh," said Brother Pur, "so you know everything everyone is saying now? And paying attention to gossip, are you?" Clack. Clack. Clack.

Mikal ignored the irony (except for his left foot, beneath the table and his robes, which clenched), and pressed the man. "There is no gossip, Brother, and not because Village has repented. They have no words left. A place with something to say, something in the heart, also has the sin of gossip. I hear their confessions, Brother, and they are hollow. The order of things is gone."

"That is why we are here, Mikal." Pur's eyes were slits, and black. His overbite made him look like a gargoyle. "Help them in their unbelief. Turn them to the order."

"What order? I am trying to find it, and I can't."

Pur said, "God's order. You won't find that in Jewish heresies, Mikal. You are a chosen servant of God, not alchemy."
"It isn't alchemy Brother. It is true."
"Truer than the Word of God? Truer than His saints? The Prophets?" said Pur.

"Father Poibus knew that science had worth." Mikal thought of the time Poibus lit gunpowder in a shuttered room, just to show little Mikal how God made the sun.

"Father Poibus and I were friends, Mikal," Brother Pur said, with gentle clacks. "He would not approve of you."

+++ 
"Bleth me Father, for I have thinned." Sister Sara Coak had a lisp and melodious voice. Her disposition was cheery and her sins banal. Mikal smiled to himself after he released her, knowing that forgiveness meant something to her.

After her, Sister Judith Fransessa confessed again to vague sins she had committed once again with Sister Harbodin. The two were dear companions, and Mikal could never get Fransessa to elaborate. He had long since decided that they routinely skipped prayers to play dice, even as old as they were.

Finally Telme knelt in the left alcove of the confessional. The booth in the convent was simple, a box
with two screens on either side. Mikal sat in the box with the curtain drawn.

"Father," she said. "Why are you taking confession today?" The muscles in her thighs shifted.

"I don't know. When I arrived, one of the sisters told me I would take confession."

"Who?" said Telme. The screen framed her wimple. Her wimple framed her face. Her face had soft curves, and was somehow still lightly bronzed.

"I don't know. She said Mother Superior had been expecting me." His eyes still wandered like a convict in his cell. He was stunned to be here.

"Why did you come here?"

"I don't know." He really didn't. Brother Pur had been right to talk. Mikal was becoming mad.

He told her some of what had happened that day.

"Father, Brother Pur and Father Poibus were not friends. Father Poibus called him a jackass. Everyday he called him that," said Telme. Mikal had forgotten that.

Mikal jerked against a weight around his neck, like a dog on a chain. "I don't...He called me a Jew."

"No. Not to day. Not to day." Mikal sucked air up through his mouth. The air was wet and heavy. "Before. He said I was straying from the church, believing Einstein, following deceivers." Breath came hard. All roundness melted from his face.

"Oh, Mikal, Mother Mary, Mikal, what did you say?"

"Telme I said nothing. I stood there like the cow I am. I was so quiet. Brother Pur told me he loved me and wanted to help me come home to the Church. Telme I said nothing."

Telme pressed her cheek and breasts against the screen, assuming a pose of hunched penitence in the dark candlelight. She could smell the mold of books on his robes, sweat and salt. "Mikal, you are God's own. He knows you. Brother Pur doesn't even love himself enough to know what love is. He baits cats, for goodness sake."

"No you can't say that anymore no. I can't. He's right. The only prophecy I believe, that I really believe, is the Theory of Special Relativity. Science tries to predict what the world will do. When the science is good, it is correct. Einstein tells me light will bend, and light bends. He's right you know."

Mikal had told her these wild tales before. The problem was that Telme could read, and sometimes secret
newspapers infiltrated the convent. She sometimes read about the things Mikal would talk about: a universe warped like wet paper, the subjectivity of time, and the race for factories that split apart atoms.

"I know light bends. Who made the light?" Unlike the other nuns, Telme's skin had grown darker, darker than even her eyes, as if nights in moonlight, covered in robes, slippering through stone hallways had tanned her. Now, her face shone. She raised it to the screen.

Mikal squared his face to her. "I do not. Know. Telme. Those boys. Who bent those boys? They are still gone. Tomorrow, they will be gone again. Where was prophecy then? Where was I?"

"You were a boy then," she insisted, her eyes, a doe's, her face ferocious.

"I am less a man today." The words were weak. They did nothing to distract Telme from slatted candlelight glinting off of Mikal's small tears.

Telme pressed the screen. Mikal breathed against the restrained flesh of her palms. It looked like sweet butter. "You are not Our Lord," said Telme. Her voice was full of hard breath, exasperation. "Those boys were not yours to save."

"Village is my protectorate," said Mikal.
"You are not a soldier."

"I know."
CHAPTER 9. ELECTRICITY

Years before, Mikal's birth made no sound. His mother did not weep. Mathilde, who delivered him, shook her hands beneath his blanket, but had no voice. Mikal stared at her face, blinking slowly, as if everything were expected.

On that same day, leagues beyond the mountains, a man named Oskar stood in a building, the shape of a steamer trunk, in a city named Berlin. Oskar's ambition, and his moustache, had flourish. He had not spared a coin. Every one he owned, including coins and papers he did not own, but had borrowed, he had laid down to build a power house. Like a magician's cauldron, or a troll's shaker box, the power house made mischief and lightning. 20,000 volts.

He built a fairyland of coils and fences next to the power house. It took each volt from the power house, and spun it into a frenzy, and split all the volts, multiplying them. More than a hundred thousand volts would streak away from the fairyland. He called it a switchyard.

Oskar ensured that the volts would fly from the switchyard in formation. He bought cables and steel and trees and built substations, distribution powerlines, and poles. Everything was in place.

To his small audience of partners, writers, and the mayor's men, Oskar bowed, like an illusionist. His mustache
cocked to the left as his smile climbed up his cheek. He turned to the largest lever in the room. His empty hands clinched, and he threw the switch.

The room hummed.

Oskar's company was not the first, but within three years (Mikal, ducking behind the skirts of Father Poibus, making eyes at a duck-faced young acolyte named Hermonius) it was the largest. Oskar found favor with the local government, and employed more men than even the nearby ironworks. Yet he knew the world was just beginning to bubble over.

As Mikal grew, so did Oskar's net of lines and fire and dynamos. A rich citizen could now spark his lamps from across the room. Chandeliers in ballrooms flickered with glass and filament. Street lamps popped on like flash powder.

By the time Mikal stood before Father Poibus, taking his first communion, Oskar's tendrils were writhing about, and most of the city named Berlin was blanketed in the light of luminescent glass. It would grow, and survive wars and governments. Still, Oskar's power grid may as well have been in Novosibirsk, it was so far from Mikal.

Not long thereafter, however, the river in Village changed. The mill had begun to slow, and the river banks spread as the water lapped lower and lower. Oskar's magic had
crawled across the countryside of a country foreign to Mikal. Oskar built more and more power houses. This time, however, he had built one that didn't need to catch coal on fire to boil water to spin a turbine to generate electricity. He made a dam in a huge river with a pretty name, and the water squeezed through the dam to spin the turbines.

This huge river had a tributary, which had a tributary, which ran to the sea. From that tributary ran an even smaller river, which ran through Village. The dam, four hundred miles away, Oskar's dam, changed Village's river to a stream. Oskar did not know this. Neither did anyone else.

Oskar died, years later, on a Sunday, lying on the marble floor of the entryway of his mansion. In his hand was the tin automobile his grandson had left there that morning. In the pocket of Oskar's finest coat was a note from the government, informing him that plans his company (which was now run by his son and other men) had made for further expansion crossed the national boundary into independent territory, and then back into Germany. Oskar's men had known this, but argued it would be cheaper to run lines over foreign land, as long as there were no objections.

"To avoid governmental intervention, high fines, and the forced demolition of substations, the proposed 222,000 volt grid system must be modified in the Passau sector," read one
portion of the note. The jacket was never checked, because
the family was far more concerned with another note, one which
lay open and in plain view on the desk. The second note was
from a woman named Chareaux, whom Oskar had met during the
Great War, when his own wife was still very much alive. The
note, the first note, the one which might have protected
Village from the snakes of illegal German electricity,
remained in Oskar's pocket, and was buried with him.

Oskar's company ran lines through Village.
CHAPTER 10. WHAT LIGHT DOES

Harter Crchk's one good shoe hung from his ear. He sat, and gnawed at his bare toe. The sun was setting, unless he was facing east. He could not remember. Princess Ellenora cast about in black robes. Animals gathered to her as if she were St. Francis. Her skirts spun gently in the cold wind.

Telme scattered grain in a bald spot on the hill. Chickens fought over the abundance.

Sister Harbodin, who shunned the daylight, crested a near horizon. She moved like a knife through water.

"Mother Superior is dead. You will be cloistered."

+++ Under orders, the bones of St. Vitalis were sealed into the walls by masons. Two novices, the only two, under orders, escorted Telme to her new quarters, high in the north corner, up twisting stairs. One wept. The other scratched beneath her wimple.

Telme's new room was large and cold. A mat lay in one corner. A bench sat beneath the narrow window. A splinter hung loosely from its underside.

Demonic wailing echoed up the stairs. Telme imagined thunder rolling up the stone passageway. Instead, what burst into the doorway was a hunkered
Sister Gorris, holding Harter Crchk in a crushing embrace. He lathered at the mouth, and twitched. The pair staggered in. Sister Harbodin floated into the room behind them.

Telme looked at Sister Harbodin. The old woman's face perched inside the habit. Telme blinked. A small spray of water flicked off her lashes.

"This," Harbodin said, "asked he be allowed to speak with you. He will not be silent." She gazed at the wall beside Sister Gorris. "Let him go."

Crchk quieted and approached Telme with obeisance. His hand turned to the ceiling above her, in courtesy.

"If it may please." His voice was even.

She was unsteady. Telme pointed to the bench, with little authority.

Harbodin choked efficiently. "No. He will stand. Keep it quick, Harter. I did not bring you up here to watch you cultivate a hedge of smoke." He had been fingering his tattered vest for cigars.

"I cast no gramarye," smiled Crchk, as he drew out a bent cigarillo. "If you might be so kind," he continued, gazing at Telme, "and consider the honor of your father, Sister Harbodin. Let an old man rest. I am unused to such stairways."
Sister Harbodin remembered Harter from when they were both children. Even then, he could smile and find his way through her. Even forty years ago, her father knew the Crchk family had curses and poverty cast upon them. Father had made the right choice for her.

She ignored him as he sat down.

"These are great days for all of us," he said to Telme. What was left of his hair stuck up at angles. He popped his lips, once, around the end of the unlit cigarillo. "I will miss you. Stay strong, you will not be alone."

"Of course not," said Sister Harbodin, "she will be surrounded by the saints and the love of her sisters. She is making a most holy sacrifice to Our Lord."

Telme stood completely still. She considered casting herself from the window.

"The Foreigner will be well," said Crchk.

"Pardon? What?" said Telme. The Foreigner. He was talking about Mikal.

+++ Mikal read the poetry aloud to himself. It was in French. He did not know what it meant. There was no rhythm. Even on the page it looked as if the author paid no attention at all. Lines were short. Lines were long.
Words that Mikal did recognize, useless words, like "oui" and "c'est" had whole lines to themselves. Other lines were packed with nouns, suffocating one another.

Poems filled the table in the library. Books were stacked two feet high, pages filled with grandeur, beauty, rhythm, despair, eloquence. Mikal wanted to burn them.

Not a single one of them gave an answer. The only questions they raised were of useless philosophy. "'Whither this? Whither that? What of it?'' No poem had ever predicted an earthquake. No poem charted stars. No poem baked biscuits.

Mikal knew another war was coming. He pushed himself from the poems. Without thinking, he grabbed a thin and tattered volume, and left the library.

Electricity had not yet come to Village, although some began to speak as if it might someday. From what Mikal knew, the monastery would be impossible to wire for it. Lanterns and candles would be used to light the dim passages and basements for years to come. Mikal descended a winding case near the southwest corner of the complex. His lamplight quivered in the damp drafts.

Mikal opened a heavy door in the deep basement. The room he entered had once been an ancillary wine cellar,
four centuries before. Until recently, it had only been opened once, in 1590, to bury the body of a monk who had committed self-abuse, then suicide. The room now had relatively fresh candles on pedestals and shelves. A chair was in the center of the room, and a small table was full of metal. On the floor beneath the table was a box made of metal, and ropes and lines and blown glass tubes were everywhere. A large box of electricity, called a battery, was on the floor behind the table.

Mikal sat in front of the table. He twisted some large ceramic pots which were inverted on the face of the box. Noise slowly filled the room. Mikal twisted another pot. A quiet voice came from the box. Mikal smiled. It was the Vatican.

A few phrases in Latin came through, and then nothing but the sound of wood burning. A tube rattled. Mikal touched it and the tube stopped rattling. Mikal let go, and the tube rattled again. He could not hear the faint latin whispers above the noise.

Mikal lifted the book he had taken from the library, and opened it. A poem was on the page. It was in the old language, and hardly comprehensible. He read it aloud, trying to bring sense to his ears.

"So see a scene
seen by me and
dreamed--midnight as men kept their eyes shut sleeping.
I saw this then: That cross truly
on fire with light, lancing to the sky, fire
high, arcing upon arms of gold and,"

said Mikal.

His voice weakened. The tube continued its rattle.
Mikal pulled the page from its binding. He folded it in half, in half, in half. Mikal slipped the wedge of paper between the tube and a wire. The rattle stopped. The Vatican spoke again through the machine.

+++ 

Crchk was on his knees now. His left hand clutched the hem of Telme's garment. "Remember you are loved," he said. Her skirt twitched between his old fingers. Telme was mute. Her eyes were frozen slits. Her lips had frozen shut.

Harbodin rolled her eyes. "Telme knows God loves her. How will she forget that? Show some dignity, sir. Get up."

Harbodin had seen this man of paper toss Sister Gorris, a rhinoceros, across the refectory when she first tried to stop him from finding Telme. She hoped reason would prevail.
He did not get up, but clutched more cloth, raising the hem further. Telme's bare foot flashed before him. Harbodin could not see it. Crchk blocked her vision.

"You are loved," he whispered to her foot.

"No," she said, looking down on him. "Don't torment me."

"Armies will free you. Prepare for the apocalypse. God will send armies to avenge this injustice. You must prepare, my good doctor, my princess, my love. I have seen it, and so have you." His body had curled over itself. His voice filled the cracks in the floor.

Harbodin shook her head, and nodded briefly to the potato-faced Gorris. Gorris wrapped her claws around Crchk's neck, and dragged him up and backward. His legs were slack, and his mouth had fallen into a quivering silence. She pulled him through the doorway. His heels slapped against the stairs as they descended.

Harbodin blew frost through her nose. "Sister. Even the madman is right. Fear nothing. God is with you. His angels will attend you." She brushed her fingertips over some brown moss on the wall. "It will be a paradise, to be so close to Him. If it were my lot, I'd envy you. I assure you, you will be attended."
Telme cocked her head, and peered through the face in front of her. The sharp slits of her eyes were wider than usual, and blank.

Harbodin pressed her lips, once, and nodded, once, at the young woman. She turned, exited, and pulled the door shut behind her. Telme stepped forward. Metal slid against wood, and the door was barred.

Her hood fell away, and, like Job, she rent her mantle. Black cloth fell away, to the floor, around her bare ankles.

Telme grasped at her short, patchy hair, and fell to her knees, her side. Her white body curled into a circle, within the circle of black cloth. The tears would not stop for hours.
CHAPTER 11. SUSPENSION

In the lowest floor of the convent, a blanket of bricks lay upon a field of rocks. Mortar clotted the seams between the bricks. Beneath the bricks, beneath the rocks, sprays and hills and a sea of rough dirt. Pressed down. Beneath, beneath, St. Vitalis suffocated.

The bones strained, hoping to heave, praying to shift.

A heart of soil beat within a rib-cage that was not there. St. Vitalus could feel his phantom arms, pressed into place. Every panicked breath snuffed more loam into his sinus passages. He strained, and stopped inhaling, could not blow, but death, he knew, would never come. The earth at his back was damp, and a chill rose through him. Although time for asking questions had long since passed, he could still think of one to ask.

Feet above the buried body, not even dust stirred. It had settled only hours after the last brick was laid. There was no light in the mouldy chamber. The only door led to a rough hewn hallway, at a slope, up into the lowest basement.

A soft click sounded in the chamber, followed by a louder click. Soft click, loud click. No one was there to hear the sound, except the maker of the sound. Soft
click, loud click. One foot, two feet. The dog had made it into the secret rooms of the convent, following a scent it had never smelled before.

The dog hunched on the floor and lowered his nose. His head swayed in lines, tracing a silhouette on the floor. He hunkered down and puffed his chest against the bricks.

The dog smelled stone and dirt and struggling bones. And deep, deep down, the trickle of a subterranean stream.

+++ Mikal knew that fire was coming, hard and fast and wild. There was nothing the pope could, or would do, but whisper into a knob of steel and fabric called a microphone, and, in codes only Mikal could understand, mention the great and horrible Army.

Mikal’s dreams were becoming full of soldiers, and foreign crackling sounds. Sometimes, the odor of eggs and coaldust blossomed in the dreams. Often, officers with skeletal bat wings wandered up and down giant Roman avenues, and threw pencils at one another. Once, Nabas came stumbling down the stairs and fell to his knees. Even in that position, he was tall, very tall. His eyes
were sunk deep into his sockets, so far that when he blinked, it was as if twin matchlights went out.

The dream he had just had was vivid, lurid, and made him recall all the dreams he had had before, but as soon as he woke up, he could not recall any of it, and was glad for such fortune. He swung his legs heavily out of bed, and sat himself up, facing the fireplace. Wrapping a blanket around himself, he walked to the embers.

Mikal picked up a long handled iron, and poked it into a piece of wood. Tendrils of smoke rose reluctantly from the half-burnt bark. Mikal shivered, and blew into a small glow. Quick as the beginning of a dream, flames ignited in the atmosphere around the charred logs. Mikal pulled the poker out, and weaved smoky patterns in the retreating darkness of the room. He spun with the poker, and made a sleepy en garde. He shook his head, and thought of Telme, then put the poker back on its hook beside the fireplace, and returned to bed. He would speak to her in the morning about his worries.

+++  
"Hello Sister Tomasa," said Mikal. His spirits were already up on what was altogether a rather dashing winter morning. Snow glinted about, and the air was cool, but still. Mikal's breath billowed through his smile.
Tomasa, who had, in years past, been easy with a smile, and youthful was unusually slow to return such graces. In the last ten years at the convent, her face had fallen, and her sharp grin had become fragile and ghostly. Her face, which for so long had been smooth, even buddingly unformed, now seemed to have collapsed against her cheekbones and jaw.

"Father, how good to see you," said Sister Tomasa. For a moment, the colors in her eyes turned bright and liquid once again. She was still honest and earnest. Even so, she seemed tired.

"How is your back?" asked Mikal, as she welcomed him through the main door, and down the chilly hallway.

"Oh, better, thank you, much better." Sister Tomasa was lying, but she straightened up a bit, and tried not to wince. She could not remember what she had done to her back, but figured she must have fallen. The bruises across her spine were deep and horizontal. "Will you be taking confession?"

"No. Not today. I need to speak with Telme directly."

Tomasa blinked in surprise. Although there had been talk about Telme's long sessions in the confessionals,
the priest had never been so direct. Mother Harbodin would not be pleased.

"It is important, Sister Tomasa. It is about her absence from Mother Superior's funeral." He had presided over three funerals in the week, which had been three more than the previous month. The day before Mother Superior's collapse, Old Widow Ertt had died at her window. Two stains of salt had streaked the pane. Three days after that, while surveying his modest yard of hogs, Boris Arcadis found the body of Unter Barko, the hermit and madman, naked and writhing in filth. Arcadis drew up Unter's tall frame, as if it were straw, and brought the raving man into the cottage. Arcadis bathed him and wrapped his papered flesh in his best wool. Unter Barko died of pneumonia, and clean, and warm.

In the business of memory, the present is often delayed. This is why, at Mother Superior's funeral, Mikal so quickly accepted Mother Harbodin's excuse for Telme's absence: she was away from Village, visiting with families of novices-to-be.

The dreams of the previous nights had spurred Mikal to investigate further. His silhouette blacked every lamplight ahead of him in the hallway. Behind him, Sister Tomasa, still quiet now, and hunched and small,
skittered in the half-dark. She had never before seen Mikal's, or any man's, strides so confirmed.

She said, "I'm afraid you'll need to speak with Mother Harbodin."

Mikal barely turned his head to the side, talking more to the walls than to Tomasa. "I'm afraid not. Take me to Telme, Sister, if you please." His voice had no echo, no tin. He smelled of worker's sweat, yet the day was cold. Sister Tomasa raised her head and deeply filled her lungs. Her heart was racing, as it did on days when she recalled the stories of Mikal reading names on that horrible day.

Nevertheless, she would not help Mikal as he commanded, for she could not. Her bruises ached, and she knew that only Mother Harbodin could help him now. "I don't know where the Sister is, Monsignor. Begging," she begged, "your pardon, I can only take you to Mother Harbodin."

"Very well," he said, and his countenance stiffened even more.

He led Tomasa to Harbodin's quarters, and left her at the door as he walked in.

+++
"Father." Harbodin was seated at her table, dressed in all black. White trim and undersleeves had been replaced with black. Her face appeared as a patch of pale wax. Her quarters smelled of rancid paper. She said, "I am surprised to see you." She was not surprised.

What she was not prepared for was the grim, broad line of Mikal's lips, or the jut of his jaw. Although his demeanor had often reminded her of a pony's, today it did not.

"Sister Tomasa tells me you can direct me to Telme," he said.

"Sister Tomasa, I'm afraid, is once again mistaken. Her mind is small, you know. Her meekness is a burden on the earth, but blessed by God. Telme has gone to the mountains."

"So you say," said Mikal. Harbodin bristled.

"I do," she replied, pressing her fingertips into a peak, "for the truth is in me."

Mikal moved forward and pressed his palms flat against the table. The wood creaked. Harbodin did not move.

"I am quite joyful that you appeared today." She dug through a stack and produced an open envelope, pressed with the Archbishop's seal. "I do have some
relevant news for you. The Sisters will no longer be taking confession here at the convent. I will send pilgrims to the main cathedral."

Mikal cocked his head, as if he had gone suddenly deaf. "Why?" he said.

"To ease your burdens, to be sure," she said. Even her smile could not secure sweetness to her words. "And to ease my mind."

+++ 
The lichen on the walls of Telme's cell was thick and so green that it might have been black. On the very first day, Telme drew her thumb down in a straight line. On the second day, when she awoke to a silent fire and a winter draft, she drew another line perpendicular to the first line. Every day she scratched a line. After eighteen days the scratches formed an elaborate grid on the wall. On the nineteenth day, she began a new grid.

Telme awoke and stared at the lichen. There were now ten grids cut into the moss. If her memory and calendars served her, Telme was now as old as her mother had been when she died.

Telme raised up on her elbows. Her hair stuck up at angles, or flat against her head. It was shiny and dark and a third of a foot long. Her rat's nest of torn
cloth and bedding fell away from her. She was naked. She had remained so since her first day in cloister, even through the hard winter freeze.

She stood and padded to the window slit. She reached her long naked fingers, her naked hand, her naked arm, her naked shoulder, and pressed the flesh of her strong naked chest through the opening, and touched the early morning summer. This was the first thing she did every morning, if only for a moment when the air was frigid.

Telme closed her eyes and conjured a river, and a running stallion.

An hour later, Telme pulled back in, and stretched. She walked to the wall, and pressed the long, long nail of her thumb against it. She scratched another line.
CHAPTER 12. RETRIBUTION

Mikal sorted through piles of paper. Fine parchment with handwriting and elaborate seals was mixed with the coarse paper smacked with black type. Every letter, each missive, each memorandum bore witness to ignorance. The bishop directed Mikal to the Archbishopric. The Archbishop's secretary assured Mikal that the issue was of local jurisdiction. Letters from a certain German constabulary complained that no envoys had been sent from the convent in Village for many years now. From Trieste came an invitation to give generously to a fund to rebuild a sewer system, but not a single mention of Telme.

Mikal scratched at his beard.

Not one note would confirm Mikal's hope that Telme was indeed, far afield, seeking young women to join the convent. No affirmations from burghermeisters of murdered or amnesiac strangers in their towns. No news from the Vatican.

Half a year had gone since Mikal had last seen or heard of Telme. None of the nuns would even speak of her. Those who knew anything at all kept their lips pressed together, and quivering. He could not make
inquiries in Village, save a few subtle ones, and those had been fruitless.

The old Hostler, Telme's own father, was addled. When, in the Hostler's confession, Mikal had asked about his family, he only mumbled something about how Telme certainly took her time polishing tack.

Boris Arcadis, whose elbows creaked every time he rubbed his chin, and who had been in strange love with Telme, in his own unaware way for years had been no better use to Mikal. When Mikal asked Boris about Telme's disappearance, he only replied, "Ayah. I hear her call the hogs at night. She's a sister, you know it, at the convent. A virgin there still," he had said, with a dim smile.

Mikal looked at the papers once again. He turned each one over, as if a secret message would appear. He had even taken to spying on the convent once or twice, under starlight. He had gathered nothing, and today's radio broadcast increased his fears. Armies were on the march.

Poland, a nation of fierce potatoes and fiercer men, had fallen to Germany. Finnish soldiers screamed down hillsides on skis against plodding Russian tanks. Buildings in France burned. Mikal could not tell what was
months'-old news from what was about to happen, for he heard it all and understood nothing.

In this chaos, Mikal's desperate letters seeking Telme were spider webs cast into candlelight. He needed an assistant, an acolyte, as he had once been. Yet the few boys, the very few boys, who might have been of age to do so, had cast themselves far afield into the world of war, hoping to avenge their long-dead fathers.

Mikal stood up and cast the paper into the air with a sweep of both arms. Most spun like wild feathers to the floor. Some slipped through the air like artillery shells, before they caught a draft and spun about. One sheet, a heavily-wrought note from a Transylvanian professor, made slow backwards loops in the air, and landed in the coals of yesterday's dead fire.

Mikal bit his lip, and ran his fingers through his beard. He had embarrassed himself with his rage, and reached to the browning letter in the hearth. He jerked his sleeves back as the letter blossomed into heat and fast fire. Some ash quickly floated up the flue.

Children in Village still wrote letters to the elves in Norway. The only way for a little girl or boy to get wishes to the elves was to burn letters and lists of wishes. In time, the ash from the letters and lists
would rise and float north, until the ashes became so cold that they froze together, as letters and lists once more. At least, this is what children in Village, at least the very young ones, believed. This occurred to Mikal as he watched the last of the ash flutter away. Then, his eyes widened.

The hem of his garment twisted as he spun back to his cleared desk. He dug ink and paper off a low shelf. He pulled an old straight-razor from a box on the desk, and sliced the large paper in half. He began to write.

Telme.

The summer nights have been cold here, and I do not know where you have gone. I have sought you out, and your sisters at the convent will not betray you to me. My brothers, they are fools, and they grow more foolish as they age. I have become quite desperate. There is a great War on, and I fear you have become stranded. If you are dead, I will never forgive myself.

His hands were furies: one gripped the table top like it was a woman, the other scattered mad ink across the page. He filled a page and turned it over and filled that side, too. Paper was scarce.
Mikal grabbed another blank piece. When he filled that, he grabbed another.

...am I so, and such a fool? I have no army, Telme. I have no power. There are none beneath my command. My breast is ripped open with rage. If I had an army, we'd scourge the nations for you. Where are you? Where are you? I swear that I will find you or kill myself.

Mikal had exerted his sensibility, and his nose ran. He rubbed it against his sleeve. He rubbed again to dry his mustache.

Telme my heart is full and broken. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. And I will, every day, love you.

Mikal breathed hard. He signed his name with great care, in his most attractive script.

The big priest pushed his chair back, and picked up the stack of paper with black fingers. He knelt at the hearth, said a prayer, and laid the letters in. Even as they were browning from the old coals, Mikal drew a long match across the brick, and lit the letter on fire.
The burst of life cast the still-burning scraps into the air. Fire consumed what was left.

+++  
The following morning, Harbodin jerked her head up, out of an early nap. A bald-pated goliath with spots of blood on his head and a bare face stood in her office, seething. His frock was motionless, and filled the corner of the room. His ink-black hands were clinched, and in one, he gripped a reddened straight razor.

Harbodin blinked, and slowly opened her dry lips. She hoped she were dreaming. She stiffened out of her slouch, and arranged the slop of papers on her desk. For the first time in her life, she regretted that there were no windows.

She cleared her throat.

Mikal, shaven and hulking, did not breathe. They regarded one another.

Harbodin placed her hands on her desk and rose up. She finally recognized the priest. His features were harder than she had ever imagined, and his jowls had muscle.

"I will have you defrocked," she hissed.

"What has happened to Telme," Mikal said, in a tone that was not a question.
"You get out."

"You." A streak of blood which had dried, was now trickling down Mikal's temple.


Mikal did not tell Harbodin that the few nuns in the hallways, including Sister Gorris, had fled from him, to the far corners of the convent. He cocked his head.

Harbodin flared her nostrils. She glared at him and blinked again, as if her wrinkled eyelids would crush him to dust. She rounded the table and led with her chin, as if she was going to shoulder her way past Mikal and through the open door.

Harbodin stopped, and stared up at Mikal. He could feel the air shiver between them. Harbodin was quaking, and full of hatred. She reached out and gripped the tassel around Mikal's waist in one hand, and her free arm struck him in the side. She pulled and struck him again and again.

Mother Harbodin was an old woman, but strong and ferocious. Her face of abject control had broken into a mad ecstasy. Her lips pouted, and were twisted at cruel
angles. Her legs were drilled into the ground as she flailed and cursed and shoved.

Mikal did not move.

Harbodin's hard, withered hand came up and across and raked Mikal across his raw cheek. The slap echoed and died in the dingy room.

Mikal folded the straight razor, walked over, and placed it on the desk. Harbodin stared at the handle, became transfixed by the pearl. Mikal walked out.

Harbodin looked down at the palm of her hand. There was blood on it.

+++ By the river, six furlongs south of the convent, the dog with three good legs rested beneath a little bank. The rain was strong, but would not last, and the dog panted lazily. The dog had made something of a home here. The water was good and he could smell fish most of the time. There was something more than the food, the quiet, the drink, and the shelter of the embankment that had kept the dog there for half a year or more. What that was, the dog did not know and did not question. All he knew was that it was something akin to loyalty.

+++
Telme bathed often, three times, even, on rainy days. She would slip the bowl through the slit of the window, and let it fill. She'd then splash the water from the bowl back through the slit. Telme could do it all with her one hand balancing the bowl. Her arms had developed much endurance. Bathing had become a true ritual. Whether it was from the sky or from the well, the water was never warm, and it bristled her flesh. She baptised herself, pushing the wet chill through her dark, growing hair. She splashed her face and shivered. She would soak a rag, and run it repeatedly across her shoulder from her, back to her nest. She walked to the window to find a dark and delicate piece of debris flapping on the narrow sill. She reached at it, but it flew off like a butterfly. Telme's long arm punched into the outside air, and grasped. The paper flitted in the wind and sailed back to her. She plucked it from its flight and brought it back inside.

The edges were burned, the paper was small, and the ink had bled. Still she could read it. "and they grow," was written in fine, masculine script. She recognized the author. It was from Mikal.

Telme took the wet paper and pressed against her right breast with both hands. She held it there,
sometimes ferociously, until she fell asleep, sprawled and on her back, in the growing narrow beam of sunshine. The paper dried against her flesh, and the ink left a tattoo.
Mikal rested his shorn head against his pillow. His quarters were still collapsing around him. Papers lay everywhere, books lay flat on facing pages, with their spines bent. He looked around, and could see the chaos in the dark, even when he closed his eyes. He slept.

Although the night was warm, needing no fire, Mikal’s bare ears and chin were unused to exposure. Unconsciously, Mikal pulled the blanket over his head, burying his entire body from the world.

Mikal bent arrows. He was dreaming now, and was certain of it. He stood up, or had been standing, or would be standing. In his hand he held a shovel. He was on a hillside in Lourdes. Professional diggers in black caps, with rough skin, stood about, motionless, smoking cigarettes. No one worked.

Mikal pressed his shovel into the ground, and quickly unearthed Telme. Her body was pure and undecayed. He crouched down to her. She was breathing.

+++ At dawn, far off, in Germany, a mile above the ground, in the cockpit of a small single-payload bomber, Gustav Schuster brushed ashes from the dials and meters in front
of him. He popped his cigar back into his mouth, and chewed it so that it sprang up at an angle. He considered himself dashing in his leather cap and shiny goggles. His hands were quick and light on the steering mechanism.

Two fighters balanced slightly behind his plane, guarding his wings. The one on the left kept veering, and Gustav figured that the problem was due to a combination of the pilot's inexperience and his airplane's shaking rudder. This was, after all, virtually a training mission with a live bomb.

Engineers needed to build a new dam that afforded more power, as well as strategic advantage, to the New Germany. A small and inefficient hydroelectric dam had to be removed before water would, further north, be at acceptable levels to build the new dam.

When Gustav's Colonel had told him that he would be bombing a dam owned by his own country, and operating in the friendly Lichtenstein, Gustav didn't balk. He thought it strange to waste the fuel, the time, and the tonnage to do what some sticks of dynamite could do with more accuracy. Yet, it didn't occur to him to raise a question. It was, after all, the first mission he would fly in which no one had to die.
The dam was in sight. As planned, the planes would pass over the dam from the north, and hook around for the final approach. This way, Gustav could drop his bomb on the dry side of the dam, which would allow for more of the dam to be damaged.

Gustav gripped the handle and pressed forward. He looked down and out his windows as he tipped his bomber slightly. The planes buzzed over the dam, and traveled for another mile. At that point, Gustav led them back around, toward the dam. He slowly allowed the plane to descend.

Gustav examined the dam. It was, indeed, small, but looked sturdy. The bomb would have to hit the heart for it to have a chance of cracking it. He really could not comprehend why this mission had been concocted. The bomb he was carrying was much smaller than many of the larger ones he had dropped in his career.

Gustav dropped his cigar to the floor, where it bounced near his foot. He bore down on the stick, and approached the dam. He came in at an angle, and realized he had made a misjudgment. He would pull up for another approach. Just as he did so, the plane leveled off, and seemed to have good position.
The opportunity was fading, but Gustav decided to take it. Two unknown fighters were watching him, and he didn’t want to have to take a second approach. He released the bomb, and pulled up.

Gustav knew he’d been hasty. The bomb sailed down and away tangentially to the dam. It would hit, but not cleanly. It hit.

The explosion kicked up concrete and dirt. Suddenly, a percussion of explosions followed. The dam fragmented, and water pushed through the debris. The river became a flood, and coursed along.

Neither Gustav, nor the fighter pilots believed that it was the work of the one bomb that brought the dam down, which shorted out the nearby power station, which unceremoniously neutralized the power supply to surrounding cities and industries. Gustav shrugged. It would not be until a few days later, when the rumor of a secret attack by foreign planes began to circulate, that he would smile knowingly to himself into the mirror, recognizing that he had unwittingly galvanized the nationalism of what had been a somewhat isolated rural area.

The planes zipped away.
South many miles from there, an old tributary filled up as the river passed. That tributary connected to streams further along. One of the tiny streams which flooded a few hours later was the one that ran through Village.

The banks built up and burst over. Water ran over and into the lowest trees of the forest. Telme's childhood shelter, which had been abandoned for nearly a quarter-century, suddenly had a new carpet of water. An underground stream, which had dried to almost nothing since the stream had fallen, filled once again, so quickly that its walls burst. The subterranean stream burgeoned, and twisted the dirt walls away in a mad rush. The tunnel widened and ran far from the original stream. It curved its way underground, and spun eddies under places in the earth where no man had ever looked for water. It twisted under the hill of Boris Arcadis, through cracks in the earth, and sprouted wet spots on the surface. It wound well away from Village, which was were the main stream ran, and further east and south, toward the Convent.

The stream was now carrying stones through its ancient caves. Instead of tracing a route around the foundation of the Convent, its old burrow went straight
underneath. The water gushed through, and stole dirt from the ceiling of the tunnel. More and more dirt collapsed, and streaked away.

Above the water, into the dirt, but below the deepest basement, the gasping bones of St. Vitalis felt the ground give away. After an hour, he could tell the shift was continuing. He strained against the dirt. After two hours, a full collapse was on, and shortly thereafter, the whole world of St. Vitalis fell apart, and the bones plunged into the rushing underground stream. He breathed hard as he fell, filling his nose with old dirt and new water. The river was fast, and the obstacles were hard. St. Vitalis still could not breath, and was now being swept away, into bouncing rocks and natural walls. The bones spun and danced in the water. St. Vitalis did a helpless somersault, and smacked against stone. The force of the water held him there. The aches of his long interment were wrenched into new pains of violent activity. The wall fell away, and he was spinning, spinning, spinning.

+++ The dog with three good legs had smelled the flood coming for hours. He poised himself on his bank south of the Convent, his one bad leg held against his chest.
Although the dog had never known it, an underground stream reconnected with the main stream only thirty feet north of the bend in the bank.

The dog smelled new waters, and jogged from his bank. He stood at the rim of the river trench, and wagged his tail, surveying the floodwater. All sorts of fish and debris flew beneath the dog's watch, like birds in the air. The dog with three legs smelled a man.

A large body turned the bend and rolled in the water. The dog dove in and swam against the angry current. He ducked his head beneath the water, once, then twice. His jaws clamped down on the man, and both man and dog went under, spinning.

The dog broke the surface, his jaws clamped down on a limp human arm. The animal wheezed and bobbed, as he made it to the slower water, and then the shallow water. Finally, the dog with three good legs dragged the body onto moderately dry land. The man who lay in the sun, was made entirely of bone and mud.

St. Vitalis didn't move, save for slow, painful breathing. The dog sprinted away, in search of bedding. 

+++ 

That evening, Telme gazed out her window as the stars began to appear on a clear sky. She knew nothing of
bombs or floods. There had been no rain that day, and she had spilled her water. She had been sleeping too much.

She could not stay awake, and had begun to forget to mark the day, and sometimes went the day without praying. Time had expanded and stopped for her. The space of her cell no longer seemed tiny, nor drafty. It did not seem to occupy space at all.

She slouched against the wall, and slid down onto her bed of rags. She dreamed of something she had never seen: a radio. In her dream, it made no noise.
CHAPTER 14. FORGIVENESS

The man of mud slouched through the mire, slowly trailing the dog with three good legs. They were on a broad flood plain two miles from Village, three miles south of the Convent. St. Vitalis did not know which direction they were heading. The muck clotted on the rags he had fashioned around himself, and he looked like a frayed rope, flapping in the wind. Mud and puddles and bent wet grass spread for acres; there was no escape from it.

Soon, the dog led the weary figure into a small grove, whose landscape began to rise out of the valley. The trees sprayed their branches over slightly sloping ground. The man and the dog were near the foothills of a small mountain.

The dog slopped forward, and eventually made it to drier ground. St. Vitalis stumbled up the hill a bit, and made his way to a large sun-warmed stone of granite. He arched his back and lay against it. His unseen joints popped about as he stretched, and relaxed his body into a deep rest. Strips of his cloth slowly drained of mud and water, leaving streaks which ran to the base of the rock.

There was a dead fire nearby, which St. Vitalis had not seen before, because it was a bit higher up on the slope.
An hour later, the dog, who had been rooting dirt from the roots of an ancient tree, stopped, and pricked his ears. He cocked his head, and then remained perfectly still.

A branched snapped, and some very old leaves crinkled. The damp, dirty air was layered with a new odor, sweat and linen. Harter Crchk picked his way through the grove, doddering a bit, but single-mindedly. The old man's back was hunched, to keep his head from hitting tree limbs. His arms were full of scrub firewood.

The dog sucked in his panting tongue, and sprinted for Harter. Harter popped his head up in surprise, and then smiled, a little vacantly, to see the dog.

"Hello, Lord Thorvald," said the old man. His voice had become strained and weak. He had not spoken much more than that in nearly half of a year. When he had spoken, it had only ever been to the dog.

Harter dropped his load near the cold fire, and shuffled a few odd twigs into the old coals. Wisps of smoke rose. He looked about for a place to sit, and only found his usual, a wooden crate with smashed corners. He approached it, turned with fragile leisure, and eased himself down upon it.
St. Vitalis did not stir for a moment. He had heard the gentle commotion of Harter Crchk, but could not yet muster in his bones strength to move. Finally, he tipped his black head forward and rolled his body off the rock. He approached Harter.

The old man tousled at the ears of the dog with three good legs. He smelled roots. He looked up to see a stout brown man with no eyes and thin lips, treading through the underbrush.

Harter stood, and towered over St. Vitalis. His eyes squinted. He slapped his hand down against the shoulder of the little saint. Then, more gently, Harter ran his other hand down St. Vitalus’s cheek.


+++ In the otherwise empty tavern, Mikal leaned against the bar. He held before him a glass half-full of usquebagh. Lamplight danced off the amber surface, and bent through its sloe tanin spirals. Mikal was the only man in all of Village who came to drink at the bar. The innkeeper otherwise stayed in business by selling liquor by the bottle.

Mikal rarely drank. When he did, it was half a tall
glass, and unwatered. It was always usquebagh, a
favorite of Father Poibus.

Mikal wiped his lips once. Drank. Wiped his lips.
No one was keeping the bar. No one had been in when
Mikal stepped through the front door, and he figured that
no one would watch him swagger out, which he planned to
do in a moment.

He was surprised to hear the door open. He turned
to see an old man, a ghost, a madman he had not seen in
years.

Harter Crockk stood in the doorway, panting, and
heaving his shoulders. "Good man Crockk!" said Mikal. He
could not move, for fear of falling flat.

"You have aged, little one, fair priest, slayer of
the world," whispered Crockk, between gasps, "and grown
bald. You are as fair and hairless as a newborned goblin
prince."

Mikal only ever could follow the old man's ramblings
as well as anyone else, but his advantage was that he
made an effort, whereas most men never did. "I had my
hair cut, and my beard, good man. I have changed less
than you think. You look well," he lied. "I have not
seen you for so long." There had been talk that he died
last winter, as no one had seen him since then.
Crchk loped across the plank floor and leaned next to Mikal, as if there were more than two of them in the room. He spoke in hushed tones, "The Eorthalic has come to me in a dream."

Mikal nodded his head with determination. In his years, Mikal had mastered this response to all sorts of folly. He took another drink. The local story of the Eorthalic, the mud-troll, had been known to Mikal since he was a tiny child, and by the children of generations before him. In his younger days, he had never been fascinated with stories that his friends told, because the stories ultimately contradicted one another. Mikal had once tried half-heartedly to rid Village of the stories, discrediting them with reason and faith. Now, there were very few children who told the stories, and fewer believed them, so Mikal humored Crchk, out of a quiet longing, if not out of complete respect.

"Do not look at me like that, little giant. I know what I have seen, Prince Jabbernaught."

Mikal held up his hands, a bit drunkenly. "I am sorry, good man Crchk. I do not dispute you. I mean no disregard. I have never seen the Eorthalic."

"Of course not," said Crchk, "no one ever has. It is a child's tale, a lie, a game, and I have seen it with
my sane eyes. Not your pig, not your field, but nonetheless, your business now." Crchk was whispering hard now, breathing slowly, clenching Mikal's wrist.

Mikal drew the glass to his lips with his free hand, and drained it. He set the glass, upside down, on the bar, and wiped his lips. "Of course, of course, please," Mikal said absently. The room seemed to him to be tipped backwards. Light sparkled off the dregs in his glass, which ran down the inside, and pooled at the mouth in a ring on the table.

"The Eorthalic spoke to me in the woods," said Crchk. Mikal looked down at his own wrist and Crchk's hand which gripped it. Crchk's knuckles were covered in dried muck.

"What did it say?"

"He told me to forgive you."

Mikal turned at this. "Have I wronged you, good man Crchk? I am sorry, and what have I done?"

"Nothing," said Crchk. "You did nothing to hurt me, and nothing to offend. You did nothing in error, nothing in hatred, nothing in fear. You come from God, you are God's, and I have nothing to hate you for. The Eorthalic said that did not matter."
Mikal nodded, as if he understood. He blinked his eyes sleepily and wondered if the floor would lurch if he walked across it.

"You did nothing, Mikal, little monsignor, to save my sons. You did nothing, but read their names."

Mikal stopped looking, stopped thinking, stopped breathing.

"You had that list, you read that list, and when you said that list, you spoke my children, my bride, my family into death. That is why I fled into the woods last winter. I did not want you to know what I knew."

Mikal squared up against Harter Crchk, and lowered his eyes into the eyes of the old man. Mikal’s face faded.

"What did you know? Please, good man Crchk, what did you see? What did you know?"

"I know now to forgive you. The Eorthalic was right. I forgive you. I hid in the woods with my knowledge and hope, because I could not face you. Now I can."

Summer brightness did not penetrate the room. It was dim and brown, and the greasy windows did as much to keep out light as to bring it in. The air was stale, and thickening.
Crchk breathed in. He said, "Telme is in the high tower of the convent. Harbodin has held her there ever since Mother Superior died."

+++  

In the cell, Telme lay on her back on her pile of cloth. She stared at the black ceiling. Her eyes blinked rarely. She absently, and without looking, traced the tattoo on her breast. She traced it again. She traced it again. She traced it again. She traced it again.
CHAPTER 15. THROUGH THE GRAVE

Mikal leaned against the tallest crypt in the cemetery, and looked up at the stars. They were pale, and the moon was grey, when it could be seen at all. The silhouettes of headstones stood low and hunched in the night. Even here, in the higher land near the monastery, Mikal could still smell the flood, thick, and seeping, and permanently in the earth.

Harter Crchk stood nearby, his head hung in thought, his hands pressed against one another, and nestled under his chin. He wore a long, thick summer jacket, but was shivering, and stamping his bare feet. Periodically, he snapped his mouth open and shut, or mumbled to himself.

Mikal had not looked at the sky in so long. It was so broad that even massive clouds thinned trying to stretch over it all. Many years ago, he had begun to catalog the stars. The only such book in the library had been in Dutch, and old and faded. Mikal, and no one else, knew that now a thin companion with fresh pages and black ink stood beside it on the shelf. Inside were simple, but accurate charts, and legible sentences, naming constellations, both in Greek and in the common names of Village, and giving guidance through the arcane
convolutions of the Dutch book. On the last page, Mikal had signed his name.

That had been years ago, before Mikal realized that light was twisted by gravity across the galaxies, before it became known to him that the stars were not where they appeared to be; that the light in heaven was a trick in his mind.

Tonight Mikal saw the few stars and did not, for once, think of gravity.

Crchk spoke. "When, in times of sweet compassion, the hearts of paradise file past, and the earth quakes. I wonder where my dog has gone."

Mikal rolled his eyes. He could do so only under the veil of the night and fog. His patience had begun to wither. "Yes," he replied, absently. "When will you take me, good man Crchk," he said, pressing his back hard against the crypt, "to the place where you saw Telme?"

Mikal knew that Crchk would never directly admit that he had seen Telme. But Mikal would not play daylight games in the dark. He would not entertain a lot of talk about the Eorthalic, not at this hour. Crchk cheerfully disregarded any sense of reality. "Wait here, he says. The Eorthalic won't be seen, but in shadows. He sent me
into town to bring you here. Wait here. Have some patience, little giant Father," he said with smile.

Mikal knew better than to pretend that he saw the Eorthalic. Crchk's delusions came in their own hour. Mikal did not care which lies he had to accept, if it meant that the old man would eventually bring him to Telme. Mikal did not believe the old man's fairy tales about a tower and a princess, but he also knew that buried under fantasy was something real. Crchk had seen Telme, and Mikal was desperate for any clue.

Muted but heavy noise approached. Mikal turned in surprise to some of the southern headstones. Through the blackness he could see a low figure. His skin tingled. Then he heard the panting. It was a dog. Mikal rubbed his hand across his stubbled face, and laughed quietly.

The dog with three good legs wove through the headstones, and came to Crchk. The dog licked Crchk's naked toes.

Mikal's heart slowed. No one said a word for many minutes. Mikal dozed standing up. Crchk folded his hands over one another countless times.

Mikal imagined Telme. Her lips were lavender. She had grown younger. Her habit was streaked with purple and scarlet, and had sunshine-colored trim.
Mikal's eyes snapped open. He heard weeping.

He looked about, and Harter Crchk was gone. So was his dog. Mikal staggered around the crypt, and stumbled over something hard and peaked. His vision blurred, and more fog had settled in.

Mikal's heart surged as he noted a hunched figure in a stark white dress, kneeling on top of a grave. Still drowsy, he believed her to be Telme. Mikal took a few tentative steps toward her, but the shock of recognition extinguished his hope.

It was Valliett, Valliett of his youth.

Still she wept, having heard nothing of his bumbling commotion. Her elbows were on her knees, her face was in her hands. Her hair was thick, and about her shoulders, and a dim grey.

Without thinking, Mikal approached her from behind. He knelt down, and put his hand on her shoulder.

She jerked and yelped and turned in terror. She looked upon the hulking figure in the dark, and every part of her shook with spasms. Mikal forced his arms around her, and brought her shaking body to him. She resigned her fate to him, and collapsed. Her face was full of tears, which trickled down Mikal's frock until his chest was soaked.
"Oh, Nabas," she cried. Mikal had not heard his friend's name spoken in open air in twenty years. "My Nabas, my Nabas." Her words were muffled in his cloth. She wailed. Her sobs halted and her fingers quivered inside the folds of Mikal's sleeves. Mikal rocked back and forth, moving with her cries.

Her dress was very thin, and Mikal could feel the chilled texture of her skin through the material. He held her body close, as if his chest could swallow her completely. He stared blankly into the earth. He noticed the headstone which marked the grave. It was not Nabas's. Mikal knew this, because Nabas did not have a grave here. None of the bodies had ever returned from that war.

Valliett gently pushed away. "I'm so sorry, Father. I'm so sorry."

"Do you come out here every night?" he asked.
She nodded without words, sniffing.

Mikal put his fingers under her chin and lifted. Her face turned to him, and, even in shadow, he could see that the muscle of her youth had fallen. Her skin was pale now, and folded at her eyes. Mikal looked into her face and felt old.
Her voice was small. "Why do I still love him, Father? When may I go? When will it finish?"

Soon, Mikal wanted to say. Tomorrow. In the morning. "I don't know." She fell back into his arms, with no fear, no sound, no strength.

She fell asleep that way, hunched against his body. In one movement, he stood up, straining slightly, and picked her up in his arms. He looked about, but saw no sign of Harter Crchk or his dog. He certainly saw no Eorthalic. He began to walk through the cemetery, seeking the gate. Valliett curled against his chest, making soft sounds. The hem of her dress trailing in the breeze. Mikal stepped through ghosts of fog, and found the open gate, which had not been locked, or even shut, for decades. He stopped and repositioned the woman in his arms, resting her shoulder higher up against his chest. He leaned back, and walked down the slope out of the graveyard.

He descended into a valley black with fog, where only the smudge of a moon could be seen. His stumbled once, and nearly toppled on top of the still unconscious Valliett. A sound from below stopped him. He heard the tumbling of wood, the shuffling of cloth. Valliett groaned quietly. She shifted her head, then fell
unconscious again. Her weight was dead, like a rolled carpet or a bucket of water, as if she had not slept in days.

Mikal tensed. He did not know who approached. He prayed that it was not a brother who approached, but he feared who else it could be.

It was Harter Crchk, pulling a two-wheeled wagon. The old man strained up the hill, and in the blackness, did not see Mikal standing not ten feet away. The wheels were old, and the metal bolts squeaked, sometimes sticking, which made Crchk's bare feet slip in the wet grass.

Mikal hissed, "Good man Crchk!"

Crchk started, looking up. Both feet slid in opposite directions. He compensated by twisting them violently about. His legs shot out, the cart rolled backward. His silhouette tumbled and slid alongside the cart, which had tipped backwards, sticking its two prongs upward. Mikal lost sight of the old man, as he sped downward into the fog, on his hindquarters.

Mikal heard nothing. He thought to set Valliett down, but could not bring himself to break her clutch, or disturb her desperate sleep. He stood like a statue.
"oof." A tiny chuckle rose up from the fog. Soon, Crchk's bent shadow once more appeared from below. "What are you doing out of the cemetery, little giant Father? I said that you could not leave!"

Mikal shrugged, lifting Valliett, and shyly indicating, with a nod, his intentions of taking her someplace warm. Crchk righted the cart, grabbed the handles once again, and slowly approached, and noticed the woman in Mikal's arms.

"Oh," he said flatly, "I had that taken care of, can't you see? While you were sleeping, I went to fetch the cart at the bottom of the hill."

Mikal said, "Why is there a cart at the bottom of the hill?" He rounded the cart and noticed that it held a bed of dry straw and many blankets. Crchk dropped blocks behind the wheels, and propped a handle.

"Wait!" Crchk hissed. He went to the back of the cart and stripped the top blanket away. "The top one is wet."

Mikal laid Valliett in the back of the cart, then climbed in to position her more safely and comfortably.

"I keep the cart there," said Crchk, "so I can get her," he nodded to Valliett, "back home without dropping dead. She's a big girl, and I'm an old man."
The moon opened a fresh hole in the sky, and then receded some. More starlight fell to earth, and filled the hillside. Mikal looked down at Valliett. Some of the dryness and age had fallen from her face, and her grey hair looked silver. He bent over her and put his arms under her. He balanced, leaned over, and pressed his lips to her throat to keep her steady, and he shifted her to the middle of the cart. Her skin held an air of cracked black pepper seed. Mikal wrapped her in two blankets. She turned her face from the moonlight.

The fog parted further, and the moon became increasingly bright. Mikal secured Valliett one more time, and then carefully dropped out of the cart. The fog seemed to be burning away. Mikal looked up the hillside, but all he could see was moon-colored light, filling the space where blackness had been. Crchk gripped Mikal's elbow, and they looked intently up the hill. They could see a dog with three good legs jogging down the hill, haloed by an corona of moonlight. Behind the animal walked a figure in swishing nun's robes, with a man's gait.

As the figure neared, Mikal saw that its hands were gloved, its face completely veiled. Crchk crushed

"Oh. You should have stayed up there."

Mikal could not speak. The top of the nun's habit was only as high as Mikal's abdomen, even though the figure stood on higher ground than he. The habit ruffled, the person nodded, examining the cart, the priest, the old man. The figure turned to Crchk. She put her hand on him, and made no sound. Crchk nodded, turned, and picked up the handles of the wagon. He trundled Valliett away into the night.

Mikal swallowed. The nun put out her arm. Her hand was hidden in her sleeve. Mikal watched his own hand reach out and slip under her sleeve. Her hand surprised Mikal. It was moist. His fingers sank into her palm. The crook of her thumb was crusted. His hand warmed in hers, as if she had a fever. He looked up at the moon, which was skewered by a pale cloud. The nun led Mikal away, up into the cemetery.
CHAPTER 16. DANCE

Mikal breathed hard as he hunkered down and leaned against the tombstone of his great uncle Orth. Orth's family name was etched in worn limestone above Mikal's head. The fog and late hour made Mikal's eyelids heavy. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, a quarter of an hour had passed. The nun still stood before him, her head bowed, her hem nearly motionless.

Mikal did not say a word but the nun moved her arms. She stood with her feet very wide apart and her arms straight in front of her. Her stiff, small body shifted, and she leaned to her left. Her right knee raised in the air. She stepped forward lightly, then stepped back, and then turned with a hop of both feet. A faint song, like that of chimes, buzzed from her throat, through sealed lips. Her arms slid through the air like butterfly wings.

She repeated this, slowly, three more times, until she faced Mikal once more. His eyes were hypnotized, darting with every move.

The nun froze. Fog pressed over the walls of the yard, concealing them. Her shoulders raised as she
turned her back to Mikal. The nun's silhouette made an archway in the dark, dark fog, and then disappeared.

Mikal followed.

+++ An hour later, Mikal continued to stagger through the fog, catching glimpses of his strange companion only briefly. His path was beginning to grow more clear, as the sky brightened with a high moon, and the mist began to thin.

He followed the nun downward, and knew that they were eventually bound for the floodwater basin. He hoped that they didn’t have to try to cross the river.

Mikal was trudging now, and had lost track of all time. His huge feet ached from every bone, and his broad back was sore. He could smell mud on the breeze. Miles had passed beneath him, but his view had changed little: fog and earth and vague sky.

Mikal could hear the rapid burble of the widened stream.

The figure of the nun had halted, and appeared with some distinction as Mikal approached from behind. Mikal looked around and saw nothing. Chimes jingled in her throat as the nun sat down on the ground, wrapping her
arms around her knees. Mikal sat also, letting his legs collapse from under him.

The ground was soft beneath him, yet he lay down on his back, letting his clothes soak through. He still could not stay awake. His sleep would be troubled by his final thought before dozing: that the river water might rise as he slept, and the fog would descend, burying him.

+++ Mikal awoke, yet it was not quite dawn. The fog had burned away considerably, and a slit of dim light filtered over the horizon. The figure in the habit was hunched, and her cowl covered her face completely. Although there was more light in the land than Mikal had seen in many hours (even his dreams had been dim) the figure was cloaked in shadow, more than ever. Her chimes were still muted, but melodious and emphatic.

The figure stood and held out an arm to Mikal. Her sleeve extended past her fingertips. Mikal sighed, and twisted himself over. He sighed, then stood. He sighed again. He yawned and looked around.

No Telme.

In a weak voice, Mikal said, "What do you want from me?"
The figure said nothing. Instead, she turned and put her hands together in front of her, and walked to the edge of the stream.

Mikal followed carefully, wary of the grey riverbank. They stood inside the turn of the stream. Mikal looked across the wide water. He could see the outline of the top of an underground tunnel. Mikal shook his head. His breathing shallowed to a stop. The strange nun teetered on the edge of the river. The music of the flowing river harmonized her voice. Mikal warily approached within arm's length of her.

"I can not go further. What do you want from me?" he said.

Her chest billowed. She studied the horizon. The fog broke entirely away and the rim of the sun pierced the horizon. Sunlight glinted off the current. The nun pointed. Mikal gazed in the direction of her arm. The veil of mist receded, and the old tower at the back of the convent jutted skyward. Mikal knew exactly where they were standing. Years before, he had built a shelter for Telme here.

The nun sank into the marshy edge of the stream. She turned to Mikal and pulled at the hem of his frock. He stepped back with a start. Her shrouded face lifted
to his. Her head cocked. Mikal shook his head in resignation, and took a step closer. The nun reached up and pulled Mikal's shoulder down, as if she was to whisper something in his ear. Instead, she bent over and yanked Mikal's frock over his head. "No!" cried Mikal. "What sort of woman are you?" He was not about to be made naked before a bride of Christ.

The chimes in the figure's chest echoed, rose and fell in a pattern of laughter. Her shoulders shook. Her head shook crudely, like a jolly man's head would shake. She stepped back, facing Mikal, although her face was still quite dark. She pressed hard, where her breasts should have been, and stroked to her belly. Her chest was flat. Then, like a Venetian thug, or a backwater farmer, she put her hands between her legs and squeezed, chuckling musical notes the entire time. Mikal was shocked twice: first that she did it and second that she appeared to hold something of substance in her hand.

"You are a man?" Mikal said. The nun shrugged brashly, affirming what he already knew. Again, the nun knelt and ripped off Mikal's clothes. His mind was puzzling so rapidly, still unable to consider any creature in a habit to be anything but a woman, that it took him a moment to recognize his own nakedness. Mikal
blushed and shivered, and shivered again when the nun untied the rope around her waist.

The nun's sleeves wove and flapped as she tied one end of the rope around Mikal's wrist, and cinched it. The other end remained around her waist. She nodded briskly at his feet. He made odd angles with his body, and removed his shoes and stockings.

She descended quickly into the river, until the current surrounded her shoulders. With one tug on her rope, she dragged Mikal into the river. He lost his footing and slid quickly to the cold riverbed. His flesh stung and recoiled in the chilly current. Nevertheless, he was glad to be without the wool frock. His clothing would have dragged him under in an unflattering struggle.

The nun had already bobbed against the current to the other bank. She was at the mouth of the large hole, which thirstily drew in as much river water as it could hold. Dirty water swirled around Mikal, but he did not realize that the trail of muck was flowing from the flesh of his companion.

She disappeared beneath the water. Mikal resisted for a brief moment, and looked up. He saw the tower again. He breathed in deeply and plunged beneath the
water. Deep black deafness swallowed him. He crawled his way down through the tunnel.

Dim brown light from above illuminated nothing in front of him. Mikal’s heart launched desperate blasts through him, telling him to pull back, find air. His chest tightened. He followed the tug of the rope on his wrists, kicking his legs in a panic. It had been twenty years since he had last been swimming. He felt a stream of grainy particles washing past him as he swam deeper into the twisting tunnel. Mikal balked. He was against a wall of slime. His wrist was numb, so he couldn’t feel the rope. He had no direction and no air. He flailed.

A jerk at his wrist changed his motion. He pulled himself along the rope. His chest strained, trying to breathe in. Mikal blew out his last pocket of air.

Knowing now that he was dying, Mikal grew sober. He swam with force and deliberation, pulling himself along the tunnel wall.

The current behind him was strong now, pushing Mikal against rocks. Mikal felt two jerks on the rope. Water rushed over him.

He was blacking out.

Some thing light and hard like a bone, and then another, struck him in the face and spun away.
The suffocation reversed itself with ferocity. Mikal broke the surface of the water. His lungs flooded with air and he choked and cried out. He splashed under and then splashed back up. The water in this low cavern had only a slow flow to it. Mikal's feet scrambled and found shallow footing. He could still see nothing. His eyes stung.

His quivering had become chronic and his skin felt like a crust of ice. He pulled his wrist toward his chest, hoping for some resistance on the rope. There was none. He reeled the rope between his hands, and heard the dim swish of water. He sighed in relief as he felt the soaked cloth of a nun's habit.

Then he realized that it was empty. The nun had disappeared, leaving her habit behind. Whether a man or a woman, Mikal did not like the idea of finding what physical malady his guide had hidden so fiercely. He touched his head where the bones had struck him, wondering if they were bones at all, and hoping they were not. He wondered if he was in an old burial catacomb.

"Hello," he called out, but his ears were hardened and nearly deaf. He heard no response, if there was one. He reached out, wondering if his hands would touch the
drowned, nude flesh of a disfigured nun. His bare feet grew weak against the rocks.

There were three tunnels out; the deep one below that Mikal had come through, and two higher ones. He discovered the new tunnels when he scaled his bulk against the walls of the cave, delicately trolling for his mysterious guide.

The first opening was completely underwater. Unable to duck under one more time, he continued to search, and moments later found the second. Currents pulled into each hole, so he presumed them both to be tunnels. The second one was not completely full of water. Mikal could walk into it, with his arms on the walls and his head tipped back.

He walked slowly and spit water with almost every breath. His chin struck rock, and his nose filled with water when he jerked back. His feet slipped forward, he ducked his head, and before he could feel for the walls again, he was stuck, wedged, with his back to the current. He knew immediately, and too late, that he had picked the wrong tunnel, if there was even a correct one. The tunnel had narrowed, and the water continued here through a crack that Mikal could not penetrate. He had forced himself into a bottleneck now, and was blocking a
current which, along with the unforgiving narrowness of
the tunnel, held him in place.

He stood quietly, but then sobs began shaking his body.
A rhythm of tears began and Mikal realized that he had no
spirit left in him. The water was pushing him, the stone
was crushing him, and his head rang with a dull thunder.
His arms were senseless and pinned.

Consciousness slowly evaporated. The last thing he
heard was the barking of a dog.

+++ Barking echoed wildly through the cavern. It was a wet
bark, and a thin one. Mikal could not stay dead with
such noise. He raised one free arm, the arm with the
rope around it, in resigned frustration, and, like a
miracle, the barking stopped. The dog pulled at the
rope. Mikal could tell it was the dog. He recognized
the snapping motion, for it was the same thing Mikal had
felt many times before, when he had found the time to
play with the stray. He knew, however, that, even working
together, a dog in water was as useful to him as fish on
land. Mikal nodded a prayer to God, thanking Him for the
valiant but useless acts of a three legged dog. He
exhausted water from his lips. He thought of Valliett,
wrapped in blankets. He thought of Telme, and imagined bayonets.

His arm jerked from him, yanked by the rope. It jerked again. He struggled to free himself once more, but could tell it was useless to try. His foot was stuck, his shoulder was stuck. He had no leverage. The dog could do nothing but harass him by tugging on the dead nun's tether.

More barking, then silence. Mikal cursed himself.

Blood from a wound on his head had frozen. He shut his eyes and concentrated on the pain, hoping to disbelieve it.

Minutes later, another jerk on the rope made his shoulder stretch. Mikal then felt a steady pull. His arm began to break away from his body. The socket groaned. Something was tearing him in half. The water rose up, and swallowed him. He felt meat slap across his mouth and pull him backward. Mikal was in someone's grip. Someone's hand was on his mouth, someone's arm was on his arm, someone was going to drown him. Mikal twisted. He was free, if only briefly, from the tunnel's clutch, and struck out at his murderer. His lungs had stopped, yet his arms fought water, rock, and other arms. He bit at flesh. Punches now landed on his stomach, but
the greatest punch choked his lungs as he gasped a
violent wind. He could breathe and choke and stagger.

His eyes went blind with light, and Mikal was
wrestled to the dry earth.
CHAPTER 17. FLIGHTS

Mikal could see again. A small fire was burning, and a man was covering him with cloths. The man was old and bald on top, but the hair on the sides scattered about his shoulders at random lengths.

"You went in the wrong way," the old man said. His voice sounded like tin. He dried Mikal off, and carefully covered his body. The ground beneath Mikal was soft, like a blanket and mattress. Against a rough wall was a half-empty sack of potatoes. Some horse ribbons glittered in the firelight. A few books lay upon a rock. A dog with three good legs shook its coat, splattering the wall near the fire. The smoke went up into a hole in the ceiling. "You should have taken the other tunnel. It comes here."

"A woman," Mikal whispered. "or, perhaps a man. Did someone come this way?"

"No," he replied, "I've had no visitors." He pushed Mikal onto his back when he struggled to his elbows. "No, rest right now, Mikal. I'm certain your guide can take care." He smiled.

Mikal recognized the grin, but it was misplaced on the craggy face of a pale revenant. It belonged to
something dashing, mustachioed, and a hundred years younger. This man had strange scars spread across his face, like the flowers of a lightning strike. Beneath the scars was a memory.

"Nabas?"

The old man said, "It's good to see you again, Mikal. I have missed you."

Mikal embraced the old man's arm, and quaked.

+++ Mikal could sit up.

"I was buried alive," said Nabas, "in the War." He would say nothing further until he ran rags over Mikal's stubbled head. "You got your hair cut. You look like van Gogh. Or Samson."

Mikal's voice was dead soft. "Nabas. How did you get here. How long have you lived under Village." His flat tones echoed in the cavern.

"All time," he said with a wan smile. He pushed spiced meat under Mikal's nose. Mikal took it and bit into it without even tearing it. Soon, the whole strip had disappeared between his jaws. Nabas passed him a cold pot of wine, and Mikal drank it down. "Mikal. Keep me secret. Remember me as a buried man. Do not tell Valliett."
"You must go now. The Poisoner is finishing her task." Nabas patted Mikal's shoulder. Mikal's eyes slitted.

"Where do I go?" said Mikal.

"Up."

"Do you have any clothes I could wear?" said Mikal. Nabas regarded Mikal's wide frame, undulating muscles, broad waist, gnarled thighs. "I don't think so," said Nabas. "You look fine."

+++ The hole in the ceiling had been shrouded in smoke. It was low enough for Mikal to pull himself through. The room he climbed into was dark and windowless. The only light came from below, where Nabas stood, looking up. The floor appeared to have collapsed in the recent flooding, because fragments still spilled freely into the fire below when Mikal moved about. The smoke filled the room and climbed through a chimney hole. Mikal loosened the rope around his wrist, and slid it off. It tumbled through the smoke, disappearing. Mikal stood at the edge, towering and completely naked.

A door stood closed at the far end of the room. Mikal cranked the door open and looked in. A crumbling flight of narrow stairs spiraled up around a corner. His
bare foot popped on the jagged stone of the first step. His bare hand steadied on the chilled wall. Mikal navigated the stairwell. His bare back shivered.

Stairs slipped beneath him, and light began to fill the hallway. Mikal turned a corner and saw a faintly lit hallway open up at the top step. He stepped back, with his chest to the wall, and stuck his head around the corner. He felt as if he were dreaming the dream where he is naked, performing High Mass before the entire village, and crouching behind the altar.

He heard slippered footsteps. Mikal crept back down along the wall, rubbing his belly against the wet stone. The footsteps passed. Mikal waited a breath, another breath, and then a third breath. He crouched and went up the stairs. He peeked out into the hallway, and saw a pair of habits vanishing around the corner. The soft scratches of their footsteps pulsed down the hallway. The thin down on his chest and stomach pricked. He then looked both ways and saw no one.

He recognized the hallway. It was at the far end on the south side. When Mikal had taken confessions here, he had often been led through this sparse, drafty hallway. It was on the south side, and used rarely.
Mikal pattered down the hallway, hoping to find the main stairway. He knew that Telme was held here, and knew he needed to take stairs. Other than that, he didn’t know where to begin, and that his white flesh shone brightly, even in the grey light.

Mikal smelled something burnt. The grunts of a hobbled troll echoed in the hallway. Mikal turned around. Slopping and cursing noises approached, and would turn the corner in seconds. The blood in Mikal’s chest staled. He turned his back, dreading the eyes that were to fall upon him, and saw a thin closet door. He pulled at it, but the moaning nun turned the corner as he did. Mikal crouched over himself, then realized that the woman was Sister Gorris, blind, half-deaf, lame, and further anchored by a heavy bucket. He pushed into the closet, and peeked through the crack.

Gorris set the bucket down and stretched her side. From fifty feet away, Mikal could hear her thick, wet breath. Mikal tried not to move, but his heel cracked against stone. It was another step. Gorris was making her way for the closet he stood in. Mikal had never been naked in front of a woman, at least not since he was a child in his mother’s arms, and he did not want his first one since then to be Sister Gorris.
Mikal turned and took the black flight of stairs, three at a time. Light came through glass slits and holes in the walls. He stumbled, bloodying his legs.

The staircase widened and aged. Some steps were completely crushed. The tops that were still intact were of thin, bruised marble. Light was filling the staircase from above.

The doorway from below wrenched open, and cried out like a crow. Mikal stumbled further, further, up and up. The stairs ended. A short stone floor spread before him. A thick oak door stood closed. It was twice as wide as Mikal, and taller. An oak bar held it shut. It had an iron lock set into it which held the door fast in place. The hinges were iron, and nearly rusted shut. At the bottom was a thin slot with an iron cover and a pad-lock holding it closed.

Mikal went to the door and listened, hearing nothing. He lifted the bar and pulled at the handle, but the door didn’t shift a hair’s breadth. Hollow rustling, incoherent cursing rose from below.

Mikal knocked.

He knocked again, fiercely.

"Hello?" he said. He heard nothing. Gorris’ feet were plundering the crumbling stairway, her elbows were
shocking the walls. Mikal could hear her wheeze. There was no place to hide.

Mikal yanked on the handle. The door didn’t give. Mikal’s entire body reddened. His arms swelled. He yanked again, but the door was resolute. Mikal pushed his palm into the stone jamb and yanked, with a severe twist of his back.

The door squealed, popping the lock, wrenching the hinges, and then fell away in defeat. Mikal stepped into the mossy room, split in two by a beam of bright sunlight, and saw Telme standing before him, her ribs showing, her thin fists clinched. A faded black tattoo scrawled across her breast, just above a circle of hard brown flesh. Her eyes had tremors. Mikal fell upon her, and held her thin body in one arm, and the hair of her head gently with his free hand. Three fast drops fell from her eyes onto his chest, and ran down. They were all she had left to give.

+++}

Mikal’s arm was numb. His fingers on Telme’s back could not move. His elbow ached. He realized that he had broken his arm out of its socket pulling on the door. It throbbed.
Sister Gorris was breathing more heavily than usual as she came to the top of the stairs. She felt at the broken door. She could make out lights and shapes that were not usually up here.

"That had not been there," she said to her self, sucking on her thick tongue. Her face worried. Then she smelled Mikal, and saw what could only be a huge streak of flesh. Gorris dropped the bucket, which tottered and spilled. She stepped back. To her faint, faint eyes, Mikal was a grey blur, a bleak gorilla.

Mikal released Telme gently, but turned on Gorris like a ravager. Gorris took two steps back, but Mikal took seven forward, and grabbed the old woman’s shoulders.

"What is that?" he growled.

Her eyes were melting and wide. "That had not been there," she wheezed.

"In the bucket. What is that?"

"Food. Of God."

"Why," he said, pushing her closer to the top of the stairs, "does it smell of sulphur? Why have you brought rotten meat to a starving woman?"

"Mother," cried Gorris.
"Listen to me." Mikal quieted, held his venom. "Go to Mother Harbodin. Tell her the Father is coming to see her."

Gorris looked without comprehension. "Go," he said, and pushed her to the stairs with only as much force as he needed. She backed away. "Wait," he said. "Your habit. Take it off." She stood dumb. Mikal shook his head, bent, and pulled Gorris's outer garment off, as if he were undressing a child. She even held her arms up obediently.

"Now go."

She limped down the stairs, dressed now in white. Her wimple fell from her head, and fluttered behind her as she descended.

Mikal returned to Telme, and slid the habit over her body. He ran his good hand down her side, knelt, and straightened her hem. She smelled of straw, moss, rainwater. Her fragile body appeared stronger with cloth around it.

She looked on him. Words would not rise in her mouth. She put her head against him and began whispering.

"Please," she said, her voice smooth and low, "we must go."
Sister Gorris lurched into Mother Harbodin's sleeping quarters. Mother Harbodin was sound asleep. She had taken to late nights and even later mornings.

"Whar," snuffed Mother Harbodin as Gorris tapped her. Harbodin sat upright with a start. She slept long, but always lightly. She rubbed her eyes and blinked with disdain at the slobbering Gorris. She looked for Gorris's bucket. It was nearly empty. Harbodin's eyes brightened. "Did she eat?"

Gorris shook her head.

"What happened to the sister's breakfast?" said Harbodin.

"Nothing. I left it on the floor."

Harbodin sighed and laid back down. "Well, then. She'll eat eventually, when she gets hungry enough."

Gorris nodded. Harbodin closed her eyes. Gorris turned and mumbled as she left. "What was that?" called Harbodin.

Gorris said, "Oh. The Father will come see you soon. I smelled blood on him."

Harbodin sat up again. Her nose pinched in and became quite narrow when she inhaled. "Well then. I should get ready to receive him."
+++

Harbodin had left her office door open, and would not be surprised by Mikal again. She sat with her back to the wall, her face to the door, and one hand on her lap with Mikal's green-handled straight-razor hidden beneath the folds of her skirt, just in case he became disorderly again. Gorris had probably been confused, possibly more than usual, from smelling Telme's breakfast, but Harbodin figured that Mikal would not leave her alone so easily.

Her back was quite stiff when two nuns appeared.

"Mother Harbodin," said the wilted one in a wavering voice, "there is someone here to see you."

The tall one looked helplessly at Harbodin, then back over her shoulder, then back at Harbodin.

"Show the gentleman in," Harbodin said, pressing her voice with lurid charm.

The tall one looked back over her shoulder, then helplessly at Harbodin, then back over her shoulder.

Mikal appeared between the two nuns.

His bare knee was swollen, and his shin had turned dark red. His skull was bruised. One arm was long, like an ape's. Harbodin stared at his legs and his waist.

Mikal looked down upon Mother Harbodin, and extended his hand. "I have come to escort you, my child."
Harbodin's gaze was fixed, on his legs, and his waist, and her own legs were immobile. The razor tumbled from her skirts and clattered beneath her desk.

"Whatever do you mean, Father? Whatever do you mean? I have not made arrangements for travel. I am not ready to go." Her words trickled out.

"You are relieved of your duties to this convent and to Village. I will escort you away from all of your worries."

"I have so much to do, however," cried Harbodin. Her hands went limp. Her eyes would not be held in his, and were fixed upon his legs and his waist. Mikal's body had warmed in all of the activity, and he stood before Harbodin, naked and raw. His body was full of heavy, tumbling heat.

"Sister Telme will take over. She has told me that you have trained her sufficiently," said Mikal, with an honest smile. "She would say so herself but she has lost her voice." Mikal put the bucket on Harbodin's desk. A ghastly reek steamed out, pushing Harbodin back in her chair.

"I have many things. Many things." She rustled papers across and off her desk. A pen rolled to the edge, and began to leak.
"The Vatican may need you, my child. We do not. I'll make sure you are sent there, along with this bucket. Perhaps the pope would care to smell it."

Harbodin didn't feel the hand on her shoulder pulling her up. She didn't notice her feet shuffling to the door. She didn't notice Telme, sitting in the hallway, her eyes arrayed against the old nun. She didn't see the convent door shrinking behind her, or the road beneath her feet, or the bright blue streaks of sky framing the clouds. She couldn't feel the eyes of her servants and pupils gazing from windows or over fences. She didn't hear anything but her own heart, roaring in her head.
Mikal's quarters were clean. He had taken every book back to the shelves of the library. He cleaned out the ashes of all sorts of papers from misguided bureaucrats that he had burned that morning. His desk was neat. His bed was made. His clothes were washed and straight. Even his hair had grown out to a point where it was trim but thick, and covered most of the few remaining scars on his head. He had even gathered up the radio, and cleaned out the hidden room in the monastery, and buried all the equipment in the forest. Everything had to be in order before the envoy from the Vatican arrived. Mikal had to do his best so that he would appear to be in control of himself, and of his parish.

Harbodin vanished the very day of the rescue. She had not been seen since, but Mikal fretted that she might appear as soon as the envoy's party arrived. His blood frothed as he thought again of her wily escape. Shortly after Mikal had hauled her from the convent, she had slipped into what he thought was a catatonic hysteria. He left her sitting on a rock for a moment, when he returned to the convent to beg shamefacedly for one of the sister's bedsheets to wear. She must have sprinted over
the hills and into the trees, for there was no trace of her when Mikal returned.

Mikal could laugh a bit to himself now, a month later, when he tried to count the number of stunned, open mouths he left behind that day. He returned the next day and took almost nine hours of confession from the nuns alone.

Mikal looked at the sun, descending past noon. He worried a bit, less that Harbodin would arrive, and more that the envoy would not. His party had been expected the previous night, and the investigation was to have commenced at first light. Mikal had been terrified to defend himself to the bishop, but was eager to clear Telme of abandonment, and hopeful that Harbodin would be punished.

Now, he wondered if anyone would come at all.

+++ Telme spent most of her days strolling the grounds with a novice on her arm. Her legs were growing strong, but she still so thirsted company. Loka was a good girl, and earnest, and also quick-eared. She was one of Telme's favorite companions since her release. She had not seen Mikal that month at all, although his face still appeared to her every morning like the sun. She held beneath her
clothes, always, a letter from him that he had sent in secret the day after the rescue.

She read the letter everyday, and had memorized the end of it.

"I look forward to having conversation with you when the investigation is over. Until then, I will make sure you receive the best care. Destroy this letter. Sincerely, Father Mikal."

His signature was looped, and measured, and blessed by God. Telme would look upon it frequently. The first petition of every prayer she spoke had Mikal's name in it. Her thoughts, even as she walked with Loka to the chickens, were lit up and airy, and swimming in Mikal.

Loka looked firmly at Telme. "Why are you smiling so, Sister? Have I done something foolish?"

"No, little Loka," said Telme, as she patted her arm. Telme meant for it to be a bit patronizing, for Telme hoped Loka might think her still somewhat infirm. Telme's pace was too buoyant for Loka to believe it. To Loka, the gesture seemed to indicate a confidence. "I am just so happy to be freed."
"I still feel so badly, Telme. We all do. Mother Harbodin had us frightened."

"Mother Harbodin made sure that most of you did not know where I was," said Telme. "She would have poisoned the few who did, if they said anything."

Loka rubbed her pudgy face. "Why are you always comforting me? It is my job to comfort you!"

"It is a comfort to comfort, Loka. Remember that."

Loka smiled, showing a set of teeth with three gaps among its ranks. "I still think your smile means more than freedom."

Telme shrugged without comment. The chickens surrounded them and pecked at their shoes. Telme reached into the bag of feed which Loka held open. Cracked oats and split corn scattered into the yard. The chickens scrambled amidst the plenty. They watched the chickens for a long while.

"What will they do with the Father?" Loka had heard many rumors, and believed none of them. Her voice wavered, and she hoped Telme would believe that the trembling was from worry, and not from what it really was, curiosity.

"He," said Telme, her voice lilting, "has done nothing wrong."
"Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I was just wondering, well," said Loka, as she positioned her tongue against the gap in her teeth that would give her voice the most innocent tone, "have you seen him?"

"I'm afraid we've all seen him," said Telme, "more than we might have hoped." Telme's eyes were bright and mischievous. Loka blushed, but did not back down.

"I mean to say have you seen him personally? Recently. I just wonder what he is hoping to say to the pope."

Telme said, "He won't answer directly to the pope. This little catastrophe isn't exactly pressing church business, what with cities being bombed and all that other nonsense. And no, I have not seen him. You've seen him since I have."

"Oh?" said Loka.

"Yes," insisted Telme, "at confession."

"Oh yes." Loka blushed again. She remembered the priest's deep and pleasant voice through the screen. Loka also remembered that she did not confess to seeing Father's nakedness. She could not bring herself to do it, although she had seen him that day, and many of the other sisters before her claimed to have confessed it.
Loka was afraid that if she were absolved of it, she might lose the memory.

"Listen," said Telme, "and I will confess something to you."

Loka shook the sack empty of the few remaining kernels, and the chickens scrambled after them.

"I have known the Father since before you were born. He is a great man. He is a blessing to Village, though Village may not always know it, and he certainly does not. I knew he would come for me. In my heart, I knew it." Telme recalled him on that day, in the doorway. The sweat and the strength and how she wanted to fall at his feet and bathe them in her tears.

"That is your confession?" said Loka. "What do you confess?"

"Too much already," Telme said, cocking her head. "Come, let us see the horses."

Despite Mikal's threat to Harbodin that Telme would replace her, which was, of course, untrue, Sister Tomasa was now acting head of the convent, at least until the investigation was completed out by the envoy. The first thing Tomasa did after ordering four attendants to feed and bathe and be nurses to Telme, was purchase new horses to celebrate her return.
+++  

A hog walked through Mikal's front door, and startled him. It was one of Arcadis's, with bushy hooves and a lazy eye. Mikal got up to drive it away, hoping that the envoy would not be greeted by pork and a crouching priest.

The hog was sleepy, and took several hard slaps before it noticed Mikal. Mikal leaned against its thick back, and heaved. Mikal's shoulder was still sore, especially when he shoved, but his strength was hardly diminished, and grew every day. Eventually, the hog moved back through the door. Mikal dusted himself off as he stepped outside, and chased the animal down the hill.

A large whistling cry broke in the sky above the parsonage, and fell to the earth. A mortar shell punched into the house, and exploded. Mikal tumbled down the hill.
A crowd had gathered in the square, and surrounded Mikal. A long canvas wool-sack lay at his feet.

"No," said Mikal. "Not rifles. A mortar shell. It is like a bomb. It landed on my chair at home, and broke it all to bits."

"We are under attack!" cried someone. Already, people were scuttling from their homes, or pulling tight their shutters.

"Father," shouted the Butcher, "where did it come from?"

Mikal lowered his broad hands, quieting the crowd. His appearance was impeccable. His voice was quiet. "It came from the forest. Has anyone seen any strangers, heard any gunshots?"

"I might have, I think," said a miller's wife. "I thought it was a loose grinding stone."

"Because it was," said her husband.

"No one else said anything."

"To arms, we must take up arms," said Asa Denn, and many of the other old sonless fathers began to nod in agreement. "We must go," they said, though their muscles were soft and their knees made noise when they moved.
Mikal looked around at the faces of the old men whose sons had died years before. He thought of the children of Village that were never born, and of the women Mikal's age whose loves died. He looked into the face of Liese Daza, the daughter of Apollo. Her younger brother was away in the mountains, fighting, along with every one of his friends. She was one of very few young faces in the crowd. Mikal saw weary years in the faces around him, and felt his own age perching on his shoulders, hunching him over. The mothers of ghosts stood silent, while fathers shook their feeble fists.

Mikal picked up the sack and reached inside. He let the sack drop away and pulled up an ancient rifle. The crowd stepped back. They recalled the day that Mikal had taken the rifle from Unter Barko, the madman. They did not see the rust, or the loose fasteners that riddled the weapon. They saw the defense of Village in his hand.

Some heads nodded, while many held perfectly still. "We will go."

"We are certain to be outnumbered, so a small number may actually be better than many. We can move quietly that way. You do not all need to go," said Mikal.

A clear, full voice, a woman's voice, cried out. "Mikal—No!" It was Telme. She wove between people and
approached him, with Loka weaving close behind. She ignored the gasps that arose when she grabbed Mikal's free hand. "They'll kill you. They'll kill everyone. We can't defend against them. They are looking for armies to fight. If you show them one, they will tear Village to pieces."

Mikal looked at her. "I must do this. Thank you, child for your concern. Return now, to your quarters, you must rest. They will not attack a nunnery."

"They will not attack Village, if you don't goad them."

"Many innocent towns have been ravaged by armies before. I doubt they will take pity on us," said Mikal. "That's right," said the Butcher. "After all, they bombed our priest!"

"Then why you, Mikal? What of Christ?" she said. She spoke in latin, "Put your sword back in its scabbard, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." The crowd stepped backward.

Mikal looked into Telme's almond-colored eyes, and replied, "What can I do? I can not wait for them to come. I must go to them." Mikal turned to the crowd and judged a few faces. "Come," he said. Then he walked away, and Telme collapsed against her companion.
At the edge of the forest, Mikal stood with a group of six old men. Three brandished axes, and two gripped heavy canes as they hobbled over the soft ground. The Butcher had a long cleaver, and sharpened it as he walked. Mikal looked them over.

"We must lay an ambush. I will find the army and lead them out. You must be prepared, because they will have guns. Our only chance is to surprise them."

Mikal's words were stolen ones, not his own. They had come from a book he had read. He hoped that it would convince the men. The only reason he wanted them along in the first place was so that his body might be found in case he died. Had he followed the mortar shell after it first landed, he might be dead already, and Village unaware.

The men nodded. "If I do not return," said Mikal, "in two hours, return to Village, and get ready for an invasion." He nodded, and plunged into the forest.

Mikal could guess where the mortar had come from, and moved quietly, listening for voices. He heard nothing but his own huge feet, crushing branches.
Mikal began to ramble through, wondering if gunmen were behind him now, no matter where he turned. He launched over fallen trees, and crashed limbs to the ground. No matter what thought ran through his mind, he could not recall what had brought him here. Where was the constable? Mikal had never fired a gun in his life. He began to growl, exhilarated by what he knew was certain death. He wanted to run to Telme, but he was Village's, not Telme's, and he would add his name to the bottom of the list of Village's dead. It is what Village wanted, he was certain.

Mikal smelled something sour, and ran to it. He burst into a clearing.

Eight men in German soldier uniforms lay about. Two of them were slumped up against a tree. The others were scattered, prostrate on their backs. Mikal caught his foot on a root and stumbled. The rifle slipped in his hand and butted against a rock. The explosion blew smoke into Mikal's face, and sent leaves scattering down.

The Germans jumped. One soldier looked at Mikal with moon-colored eyes. He raised his arms in gentle surrender. He could not have been fifteen years old. The older ones had sickly beards and hollow cheekbones. All of them raised their hands easily, without despair.
Mikal's ankle was broken.

He stood over them on one foot, and stared. They stared back at him, without passion. They stayed like this for a moment, when another figure arrived into the clear. It was a woman in white. Her grey hair splayed about her head, like a witch's, and her hem was torn away.

"Harbodin," whispered Mikal.

Her eyes were feral, and her hands shook as she staggered toward Mikal. She collapsed at his feet. "Oh, Father. I am so lost, so lost, so lost."

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Of the six men at the edge of the forest, four were not completely deaf. They all heard the rifle shot.

The Butcher gripped his cleaver. "We must go in. The shooting has started. Swing for their spines, those are easiest to hit."

Mikal's trail was easy to follow with the eye, but several of the men began to lag, either because their canes stuck into the ground or because their minds wandered. The Butcher led the way, but the company stretched back, fifty yards, then a hundred. The Butcher suspected that this would not be the most coordinated attack in military history.
Eventually, the Butcher heard voices. He held up his hand to halt the column, but had to wait several minutes for the men to catch up. Banker Daza had a thick steam upon the lenses of his little round glasses, and was breathing heavily. "I lost my axe," he whispered.

"Sh," said the Butcher. Old Tode never arrived. Daza had last seen him trying to pry his cane from soft mud. There were now five. "We will have to do," said the Butcher. "I hear them. Move quickly," he hissed.

The men hobbled through the underbrush. The Butcher stepped into the clearing, absently picking cockleburs from his apron. He looked at the German soldiers, and Mikal, sitting on a large rock, and an old woman leaning against the rock. The four other men appeared in the clearing, hefting their weapons.

"No!" Mikal shouted, waving his hands. "They did not know their mortar would explode!"

The men did not comprehend, and would never comprehend. They looked at Mikal with awe. He had captured them all, by himself.

+++ The soldiers filled the ward at the convent. Even the most conscious men were severely ill, starving, and as helpless as broken-winged birds. Nun's shuttled between
rooms, bathing and feeding and dressing wounds. There
had never been so many men in their care.

Mikal had been taken to Telme's quarters, against
his protests. The doctor had set his leg and gone
downstairs to check on the soldiers. As the men laid him
into her bed, he could smell her in the sheets and
pillows. It was a deep scent, like beer and wine, and it
warmed his body and soothed the ache in his leg. Mikal
did not sleep well, but when he would wake in the night,
Telme was there, sitting beside him.

Harbodin was in jail, praying by her cot. She had
explained to Mikal that she had run into the army in the
mountains. They were the remnant of broken ranks, and
were sick and wandering. She tried to guide them to
Village, but she would not go past the forest, for fear
of being caught. They soon became too exhausted to
advance, and she could not bear to leave them. At the
time, Mikal could not tell how much of the story he could
believe, but he knew he would not probably get a better
explanation.

The constable was good to her. He was a sleepy man,
and a religious one. He did not understand the charges
against her, and only knew her from the convent. He had
brought blankets from his own house, and pillows, and
good meals. Harbodin seemed grateful enough, but she spent most of her time huddled beneath the cot, or praying against it.

Nabas visited the very young German in the night, when the nuns slept or switched shifts. He would tell the boy stories in German, about a beautiful girl named Valliett. He would smile, and Nabas would kiss the German’s forehead before sneaking back underground.
CHAPTER 20. WHERE LIGHT GOES

Mikal had been out of bed only on brief occasions in the past three weeks, and his leg was not improving. His strength waned, yet Telme rarely left his side, and only to sleep, or to let him bathe.

That morning, Mikal was too weak even to bathe himself.

The room was bright, and amber-hued. Sparkling dust danced in the broad beams of light streaming through the windows. Telme had the best room of the convent. A gentle fire burned constantly in the corner fireplace. Mikal stared at the ceiling, wincing.

Telme came back in and looked at the basin. "The cloths are not wet, Mikal. Could you not bathe?"

"No," he said, breathing slowly. "My body aches so much."

"Hai. The doctor said it might happen. You must rest." Telme tugged at the strings of his nightshirt. Mikal did not resist. The halves of cloth slid away, down his sides. He filled the bed entirely. His shoulders touched either edge of the mattress, and his feet extended beyond the end of the bed, and rested on a small soft platform. Telme pushed the dry cloth into the water. She drew it down the mountain of Mikal's chest,
and in hidden places beneath his arms. Mikal looked at her, at the detached motions she made. Her eyes were on his body. To Mikal, it appeared as if her eyes were closed, in meditation, but she was only looking down.

Telme stroked Mikal's arm with water, soap, then water again, and dried it off. She massaged the palm of his hand, his fingers, his thumb, between his fingers. Tendons popped in his wrist, and across the back of his hand. She rubbed deeply. She rinsed his neck, behind his ears, and drew the cloth down his sternum. She brushed his short hair back with wet cloth, and drew it across his brow. Telme rubbed his cheeks. She studied his face, and he blinked many times as water trickled past his eyes. Their eyes met, and Telme's lips were parted.

Telme washed his other arm. She spent some time soothing the old soreness in his shoulder. His hand relaxed, and the muscles loosened.

Telme brushed her hand across his waist when she brought the cloth back over him. She had seen animals before, raring. She had seen stallions, hogs, and dogs going up on a mate. What they had was so rigid and direct. Mikal's was not soft, but it wasn't a prong, either. It moved gently when she touched his arm, or
more when she brushed his waist. It was leaning against Mikal's leg, and rising.

Telme raised a skirt and put her bare knee against Mikal's hip. There was barely enough room for her to balance. She put her hands onto Mikal's chest and felt his skin stiffen. Carefully, she swung her other leg across him, so that she straddled him.

A point of looseness grew under Telme's skirts, and she wanted to press down, and slowly rub it out.

"I saw something this morning," said Mikal.

"Oh," said Telme. "What of? A dream?"

"No. I was on the shore of a river."

"How awful for you. Were you afraid?"

"No," said Mikal. He smiled at how well Telme knew him. He had certainly never admitted to her his fear of drowning. "It was not bad at all. The water was peaceful and blue. There wasn't a fish swimming in it, and you could not see to the bottom. I was resting against a hillside, and my leg did not hurt at all."

"I'm glad," said Telme. She could feel Mikal's beauty rising up against her. She kept perfectly still.

"I was waiting for you. The hill was so green. I've never seen such a color of green. There was
something around the hill, a palace or an eternal field of wheat, I didn't know, because I was waiting for you."

Telme smiled distantly, and thought of wheat fields and blue rivers and running horses. Mikal swallowed. His mouth was very dry, and he wanted to put his hands on Telme's waist. He did not want her to leave him.

"You rose up in the middle of the water, but you were dry." Mikal recalled something else, something he would not mention. Telme's head had been uncovered, and her hair tumbled about her, clothing her otherwise naked body. Telme shifted now a bit on the bed, and Mikal raised a hand, past her hip, next to her ear. With a soft push, Telme's wimple tumbled from her head. Although it was shorter than he had seen that morning, Mikal smiled to see her locks fall and frame her face, and drape down, past her throat. She had tiny wrinkles near her eyes, from smiling.

"You saw me," said Mikal, "and called out, 'What are you doing here?' and I said, 'Waiting for you. I asked and He said that I could.'"

"Mikal," said Telme, "where were you?"

"It wasn't a dream, Telme. I know dreams." Mikal's face was serious.
Telme wanted to bear down. Mikal wanted to bear against her. They both refrained and stared at one another. "What happened?" said Telme.

"You said, 'How long have you been waiting for me Mikal?' and I said, 'Not long. All time.' The water was very still, and you came bounding across it like it was a stretched tarp. Oh, how you bounced into my arms. Then we walked around the hill."

"What was around the hill?" said Telme.

"I do not know," said Mikal, sadly.

Telme bent down to Mikal's face, and kissed him. Their lips had aged together, and fit more wonderfully than ever before. A hum passed through Mikal's mind, and he forgot his leg for a moment. Telme's weight upon him, her lips upon him, drew him up to her again.

"Telme," said Mikal, as he lay back down, "we cannot do this."

"Please Mikal. Once, we can."

"I want to," said Mikal.

"I know. You," said Telme, with a halting voice, "are right. I'm sorry."

"Please, no, you have been so tender to me. I'm glad. Thank you, Telme. I want more, you know, I want to. I do. I love you."
"Oh," said Telme shaking her head, and rolling her eyes up a bit, so as not to meet his gaze, "I love you." She smiled, although tears splattered from her eyelashes. She lingered over him a moment, and then lightly slid off of him.

Mikal's breathing was very shallow. He swatted his bad leg lightly, and grimaced.

"Why did you do that?" asked Telme.

"Sometimes it helps me to clear," said Mikal, with a gasp, "my head."

Telme covered him and tied the tassels.

+++ The infection in Mikal's leg spread, and his condition worsened. Telme never touched him in such a way again, but she stopped sleeping in a separate room. The doctor was called in several times, and each time, his own face would become more encouraging when he talked to Mikal, but out the hall, it became more grave.

In the hallway the doctor told Telme, "I don't have the medicine he needs."

"Find it, then."

"No one has medicine. There aren't medicines in Rome, there aren't medicines in Switzerland, even. If there was any, anywhere on earth, I'd steal it. I have
written letters to doctors from England, even. Perhaps they will respond to me soon."

Telme nodded, hoping to make his words reverse themselves.

She returned to Mikal's room, and sat next to him, taking his hand in hers. She coiled his arm about her, and rested her head upon his chest. His heart was strong. She thought to tell him of the plaque that had gone up in the Town Square, commemorating the single-handed capture of an enemy army by Father Mikal, the Protector. Instead she listened to his breath, which was deep.

She fell asleep there, curled in his arms, and they dreamed together of a currentless river, a green hillside, and bouncing across the water to the other side.

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The envoy from Rome never arrived, having turned back due to reports of soldiers scouring the countryside and looting. No second report was ever made. The inquiry, as they say at the Vatican, died in the file.

The End.