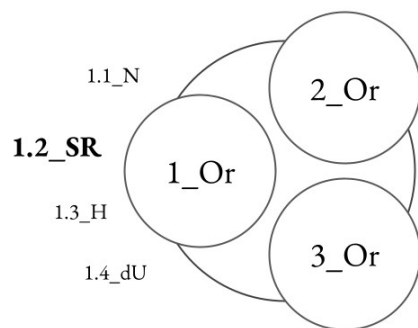


Halbmichel

Simian / Rex

1.2\_Or



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**30 December 1916**

St. Petersburg  
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He was not exactly bored. That would be the entirely wrong word to describe his condition. However, he was in an exceedingly strange predicament, unlike the other times. They had poisoned him before, shot him, stabbed him. He remembered the pain and the fear, especially the fear. It had always gripped him, inescapably and completely. There had been no time for thought.

Why was it the other way around now?

He felt three holes in his chest. So there was no lack of a reason to die. This ambush ranked high on the list of all the vile attempts to get rid of him. No trifle. It would have to be the end, if he looked at it objectively. And that was the problem: He was thinking all the time about his situation and about the last minutes that had led to him lying limply on the floor of the cellar. He could hardly move, but his head was racing. Where was the fear? He couldn't survive this assassination attempt, too!

Or could he?

No boredom therefore, rather too much leisure than appropriate for his misery. Again and again, his gaze lingered on his own hand, the right one. With the left he had examined the tattered fabric on his chest. The other hand was resting on a tile by his outstretched right arm. He could see its inner palm. And the lines on the skin.

Again he had to think of the quack who had once read his palm because he had been exhausted and irritated by the journey to the palace. The Tsar's boy lay dying then, once again. That was more important than any grudge the politicians and half the court held against him. Doors had been flung open so that he could hurry to the child. And behind one of them she sat, the quack.

She had done well to make herself small and avoid his gaze.

On his way back from the guarded sickroom, however, she had still been there. This was the greater impertinence, not that anyone had summoned her in high distress. No, having reached the boy himself in time, there was no need for the presence of charlatans. She confessed under his mocking questions that she had come to read the boy's recovery in his hands. Instead, he held out his own to her – and she had not dared to look at them for minutes. At least that: afraid of him. It had lifted his spirits a bit.

Now he was looking by himself at the thick line in his skin that ran once from left to right across his entire palm. The quack had been frightened by the sight back then. At his request, she finally told him about the two lines on each hand: the heart line running from the outside to the inside, just below the fingers. Then, just below the heart line, the head line, which runs outward from the other side. Two lines one above the other, in the middle of which the energies of headiness and passion are balanced. At least with most people. He himself had only one fold, where all others have two. Heart line and head line were on top of each other in his case – and that was not a good sign.

He had had to force the quack to tell him this, too. She had been a shuddering pile of misery when he had taken a pity on her and let her go amid resounding laughter. He scoffed at her superstitions. He knew himself that he was extraordinary. The whole empire knew it. And of a violent death, which the unusual line supposedly prophesied, he was not scared. He would be disappointed if his end came peacefully in a bed.

To his surprise, he now found himself sitting at the end of his thought journey. He was still staring at his right hand and the lines fused there. He looked around in disbelief. No doubt, he was no longer lying on the basement floor. The trickling trail of his own blood suggested that he had picked himself up and sat down at the table.

He thought this remarkable. Across from him, on the set side of the table, he saw the remains of his own supper. Some of the food on the plate had discolored, thoroughly unnatural-looking.

After a moment devoid of any thought, he stood up. He managed this quite well, given the circumstances. He staggered a bit, had to brace himself with his hands on chairs and walls, but he managed to make a run for it. The first few yards up the stairs to the first floor they brought stars to his eyes. It took him some effort to avoid fainting. Finally, however, he reached the hallway of the small palace, from where he stumbled out into the open.

They stopped him. He had not yet hobbled halfway across the courtyard when he recognized his assassin. The officer gave the impression that he had seen a ghost. And this made him obviously very nervous. There was nothing elegant or even threatening in the way he drew his pistol from his belt. The weapon wobbled pathetically in the soldier's trembling hands. The man held the barrel to the head of the unwelcome ghost and pulled the trigger.

Suspecting that the deed was now truly and irrevocably done, the assassin's accomplices showed themselves in the courtyard. They helped him carry the body from the yard, down the street and to the bridge over the Neva.

All this eluded the aforementioned body. Only at some point he wondered where the table had gone. And the discolored food. Now he saw nothing of it, nothing at all of the cellar or the rest of the palace. It dawned on him that he had probably not been paying attention for a moment. Above him he saw the sky. A gray mush that nevertheless blinded him. His eyes hurt. He tried to turn his head to the side and then didn't understand what he was seeing for quite a while.

An ice floe. He was lying on it. At first he couldn't reconcile the cold feeling on his cheek with the shore moving leisurely through his field of vision. After a few minutes, which might have been hours, he ventured the only deduction that could explain it all: His clothes were clinging to him wetly. They must have taken him away and thrown him into a river. It had been bitterly cold for weeks, but noticeably milder in recent days. The rivers were cracking their thick ice cover. Floes floated everywhere and pack ice piled up on the banks. His tormentors had either been sloppy and dropped him onto a floe – or he had managed to pull himself out of the water and onto

one. Soaked as he was, he believed the latter. But he could not remember this feat of strength either.

What difference did it make? He couldn't get his right hand out of his mind. He did not understand it. Didn't understand why he tolerated still not being dead, adrift on an ice floe, not freezing, no longer seeing the red pool next to him growing, which was being absorbed by the ice.

To come to terms so readily with the deeds that had happened to him.

And then he did understand, from one second to the next. The force with which the realization crashed down on him seemed to penetrate through him into the ice. The floe cracked menacingly. His breath stopped.

It was his nature to come to terms. Even the most adverse circumstances had always been just another hurdle to him, not an insurmountable wall. For him, hopelessness was a non-word. He was able to find a way, for himself, for thousands, for millions. He remembered who he really was. And he saw through the game he found himself in. The extent of his punishment rained down on him in the form of countless faces. Faces that he had worn himself. A masquerade. They had turned him from an angel into a human being. Into hundreds of people.

The night had already fallen before the flood of memories had showered upon him fully. As if as a final act, the floe broke beneath his cold body and he fell into the water.

Arms and legs needed no commands. They brought him to shore, where he slowly crawled up an embankment. He was no longer paralyzed by the injuries that had hampered him all day. What paralyzed him was his roused spirit. In the moonlight he remained kneeling on all fours and looked at his right hand one more time.

He had reached with it for a spear that the angel above him still held while they were falling with all the others from the edge of Heaven into the depths. Where now this one wide furrow marked the flesh of his hand, the supernatural metal had impressed itself into his soul. It would have been impossible to climb up on it, nor somehow to prevent his fall. He had

nevertheless reached desperately for the spear. Full of fear.

Bottomless, all-encompassing fear – such as humans could not feel.

The quack had had a name for the line. She said he had a Simian line. Apart from the fact that that particular line imputed to him delusions of grandeur and a violent death, apes also had only a single such skin fold, instead of the two in humans.

It would be fine with him. Looking back now at the cascade of his accumulated lives, he might as well have been an animal. These humans were nothing but shoddy copies of angels. They were animals too, whether they cared to admit it or not.

He looked at his hand and gave himself a name. He understood that the person who had guided the fortunes of the Tsar's family was no longer there. Who would go in search of dry clothes and shelter for the night, was Simian.

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**March 1921**

London  
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What the head believes is not necessarily what the eye sees. Sometimes it would rather believe what it thinks couldn't be there. Simian quickly noticed that. People would not recognize him, even though his face was still the same. He had been known far beyond the tsardom for his long beard, so he cut it off immediately. He also shortened his hair until it barely reached his shoulders. In addition, he dressed differently, but that was it. No matter how intently people looked at him, they could no longer recognize the man who was as famous as he was infamous. For he had been murdered. Newspapers across the continent had confirmed it.

Simian took advantage of the fact that for the first time in many years he was able to move completely freely. He sought out the clandestine hiding places where he kept supplies, clothing and, above all, money and valuables. No one took any notice of him. He could have done this in broad daylight, yet he always planned his ventures for the night.

He crossed the border and traveled undetected for a while through the eastern countries of Europe. From Romania, where he stayed for a few weeks, he was drawn to Austria via Hungary. In Vienna he settled for more than half a year. He found his way into the city's social circles, which he was quickly able to impress with his talents. If at first he regarded them only as customers for the jewels and antiques he had brought to him from the new Soviet republic through intermediaries, they nonetheless came regularly into friendly conversation. Simian did not need to learn from them that the wealthy looked out for each other. He was a master in the art of maintaining relationships, now even more so than before his – so-called – demise.



People had always listened to him out of fear. With his newfound yet ancient perspective, he saw in retrospect that this argumentative advantage had only made him lazy after all. Mentally lazy. This Simian here, who was climbing the societal ladder with breathtaking speed in Vienna, could no longer rely on fear. That was too dangerous for someone who had to remain undetected. He preferred to sharpen the knives of wit, charm and conciliatory gestures. Not only did this bring him at least as much success as ever, it also felt more like himself.

As well-placed in the web of the well-heeled as he soon was, his new acquaintances showered Simian with career suggestions. He seemed to be made for banking in particular, they said. Or for stock market trading. There was no investment that he couldn't evaluate accurately after a brief explanation, even if he freely admitted that he knew nothing about the field in question. At first he received pats on the back, then requests for investment advice, and finally access to portfolios worth millions. He was trusted.

Less than a year later, Simian had an office on the London Stock Exchange that was second to none. It was more like a palace than an office, and in the early days after his escape, he would have scolded himself for so much unnecessary attention. But the world had changed, especially after the end of the Great War. Who he had been seemed to become a complete string of anecdotes that people rarely told each other anymore, and when they did, it was for entertainment. He grew less cautious. The circles in London he now frequented were the same as in Vienna. The same men in similar suits, the same topics in any case. And the same interests. Here he didn't stand out unless he made it a point to do so. A pompous furnishing of workrooms was also no sensation, but followed the laws of the stock exchange: It was about business. Where gold was processed in the offices, the assumption went, the investments had to be profitable. In this sense, Simian had actually just sat down at a gambling table where the rest of the brokerage offices had long been playing with high architectural stakes.

That evening, soon to be four years ago, covered in wounds and with nothing but wet clothes on his body, Simian had owned nothing. Nothing but the most precious knowledge on Earth. A truth that no one would believe him. Nor had he rushed since that day to confide his story to anyone. Now he was richer than before, and burdened with fewer obligations. The time was ripe, the moment favorable to look around for the others. Simian doubted that he was the only one of the fallen angels to escape his punishment. He did not believe in coincidences. And he did not believe in uniqueness. As popular, even revered as he had been in the ranks of the rebels, he had always differed from Lucifer and Beelzebub in this. They did not understand him, insisting even in defeat on being kings among kings. He had enjoyed challenging the order of the world in their shadow. Whether that was his right as a god, he did not know. Even if it was, they were millions of gods.

And not all of them could remain uncompromising.

Nothing he had ever seen more clearly than that. Nothing happened without reason. He, the only angel who had escaped the fog of being human? That made no sense. And why now, in this time? Simian by now knew his way around the spiritual library, where all the memories of all his lives on earth were neatly lined up, as if he had experienced them only yesterday. There were more curious fates than his last one. More traumatic ones, too. No, there had to be a reason for his awakening. Even if he didn't know it, he decided on the most logical assumption: it wasn't about him at all.

So he had taken his time. There were prestigious meetings to attend. When boredom became unbearable, he went to the theater. He seldom cancelled a lavish feast. In short, nothing urged him out of his hidden role as a rich bon vivant. Others would come with greater bitterness than he. He could adapt. Besides, he couldn't rule out the possibility that the whole thing was a trick after all. Or better, a test of his remorse. Had he rebelled against the throne? Why, yes! Did he have to live with the consequences? Probably. There was no point in shirking responsibility.

Not from him.

Maybe there would be a reckoning with all the rebels if they bent the knee this time? He kept thoughts like these to himself. He often brooded over them behind the window of his office, which looked directly onto the trading floor. He had enough practice at it that he could have correspondence read to him on the side, by one of his secretaries. Not the business ones, which he liked to read himself in the morning, but the social letters and cheerful notes that business associates and party friends sent him. So one evening he heard about the manuscript for the first time.

"Voynich is back from America. For a few weeks, I heard. He's inviting people to his antiquarian bookstore. It's going to be fun! Send for you. Thursday, seven o'clock. Neversham."

"Who is Voynich?" asked Simian, without turning to his secretary, who had read the terse message tonelessly and was about to put it aside.

"Sir?"

"Read that back to me..."

The secretary did as he was told. But he had no answer to contribute to the question. At least not right away. His memory needed a nudge, which Simian quite unintentionally finally gave him himself.

"Neversham is getting whimsical. If he wants to appear enigmatic as in a telegram, he might as well send one. What's the use of a letter? Do I have to know every single one of his friends now? As if that were a celebrity!"

"Voynich, antiquarian bookshop...", murmured the secretary, lost in thought. Then his eyes flashed with an inspiration. "Isn't that the art dealer who owns that mysterious manuscript?"

Simian did not respond.

"The book that no one can decipher," the secretary continued. "Have you heard of it?"

Now Simian turned to his co-worker. He just looked at him, unmoved and not saying a word. Still, the secretary understood perfectly. He cleared his throat, finally put the handwritten note aside, and opened the next envelope.

Arthur Neversham was punctual. That he would have Simian picked up, he had written. Not that he would be in the carriage as well. The whale-bearded old man had a soft spot for anything he thought "classic." His hansom carriage with its lightweight body for exactly two guests was one of them. He effortlessly managed to ignore the legion of modern motor cabs around him and enjoy the "classic" ride.

"My good man!" he greeted Simian gleefully as the latter squeezed beside him onto the guest bench.

"Neversham...", Simian returned. "Where are we riding today?"

"We are being pulled, good man! We are not riding."

"Splendid," Simian stated with a nod. "I was worried about not being properly dressed. Feathered hat and saber I had not in my wardrobe."

Arthur Neversham laughed heartily. He appreciated a good joke at his expense, especially in regard to his old-fashionedness. Simian did it often and charmingly. Neversham liked him for it.

"So where are we headed?" asked Simian.

The carriage jolted to a stop.

"I wrote that," Neversham pretended to be astonished.

"Voynich..."

"...You're not familiar with him?"

Neversham wrinkled his nose at that, but only playfully to sportsmanlike retaliate against Simian regarding the remark about the carriage.

"He's been on the move for a while now," he explained, this time seriously. "Has a new business in New York. But he still owns his antiquarian bookstore and has it kept in good repair. Not that I've looked in there in the last few years. The man himself is the bigger spectacle, you must know. Probably only half of the incredible stories he tells about his collectibles are true, but the way he does it! A born salesman, Simian. An artist, an entertainer! Now that he's in town, you have to meet him. You might even

find something you want to buy. Your concourse of an office could use something ornamental."

Simian looked at Neversham in surprise. The latter put a hand to his mouth and beard, chuckling behind it.

"What's he selling?" asked Simian.

"Everything!" said Neversham.

Strictly logically, it was impossible for the small store to make good on the promise, and yet Simian understood what his business partner meant. He had expected a smorgasbord of furniture, paintings, antique weapons and the like. To his surprise, he stared at walls full of books as soon as the heavy weather curtain behind the front door was lifted. Shelf upon shelf, many books, obviously ancient. The smell of leather and parchment hung in the air. This antiquarian bookshop was not a fair of oddities, but a pedantically organized laboratory of the written word. After Voynich personally led the guests through some of the highlights of his inventory, Simian had no doubt that this man could pull a thick-backed tome off the shelf on any subject, no matter how outlandish. He had it all.

More guests arrived. Neversham hadn't indicated that it would be a large gathering. Simian didn't care either way. He knew all of the other visitors. People greeted each other, exchanged regrets or congratulations on various stock prices, depending on their perspective. In short, everyone in the room had a foot on the city's financial floor.

It could have been a usual Thursday evening, in seriously rich company, if Voynich had not lived up to his reputation and regaled his guests at breathtaking speed with punch lines and exciting reports from America. They willingly followed him to the cigar room at the end, which was deep within the store's walls – far enough away from the delicate rarities. The antique store had this in common with the best of his exhibits: it was considerably more complex than it appeared from the outside.

Only Simian did not follow the procession of guests into the back section at first. He stopped in front of an open book lying under glass.

Voynich had acknowledged it in passing with the laconic remark that he didn't need to introduce this piece to anyone. He walked carelessly past the display case while his guests clapped appreciatively. They did not stop either.

Its unusual writing immediately caught the eye of every person who had a chance to look at the famous Voynich manuscript. No linguistic luminary to whom Voynich had shown his find over the years could make anything of the language. If it was language, that is – according to the critical voices. In fact, the antiquarian divided the experts with this strange manuscript. So inaccessible and yet so simple were the glyphs and drawings in the book that it seemed inconceivable that no single expert could decipher the text.

"Ah," Neversham groaned with satisfaction. "There you are! Are you reading a bit from the manuscript?"

"Yes," Simian confirmed.

"Well, exciting?"

"Nothing I didn't already know about..."

Neversham laughed.

"Splendid, Simian, just splendid!"

He patted Simian appreciatively on the shoulder, inwardly pleased once again that he could introduce this articulate man into new circles, who was never at a loss for a snappy retort. After all, it reflected positively on him, too.

"Seriously, my good man," he continued. "Come and join us. Voynich will talk us all into a delirium if you don't. Give him a run for his money. It'll be formidable!"

"Just a moment, Neversham, if I may?" said Simian quietly. He stared into the glass case as he did so.

"Oh, of course!"

Neversham cleared his throat.

"Just don't turn into a bookworm on me! It's not worth it with this one. Others have found it to be a hard nut to crack. These days, even more than in the beginning, poor Voynich has to contend with rumors that he fabricated the gibberish himself. The price of fame, I say! People don't begrudge..."

And with that statement, Neversham withdrew as requested. He hurried back to the cigar room, while Simian remained paralyzed in front of the display case with the manuscript.

He had not lied. Neversham took it as a joke, for how could he take it otherwise when the best cryptographers of the nation were incapable of reading the book? Simian, on the other hand, was able to. The first glance at the sweeping letters made him understand. He spoke all the languages of the humans, and he kept that to himself. But this was his mother tongue put on paper. It pervaded him like nothing else he had ever seen, heard or felt on this Earth. This was the language of Heaven, albeit in an indignantly compressed form. Angels did not write; there was no need for it. And yet there was no doubt. Simian could read this writing, and it felt as if the very act could transport him back for a second to the eternity of his homeland.

If there had not been the bitter content. The passage in the manuscript that lay open under the glass described the evening before the great battle. And Simian had only to skim a few lines to be overwhelmed by the accusing, regretful tone of the text. He didn't like reading that, didn't like being talked down to by a man-made piece of paper. Only, at the same time, he knew that everything he read was true. He had experienced it. Whoever had written this, though he had to resort to man-made means, was undoubtedly an angel. One of them. No one else knew about it, was able to tell about it in this vivid way.

Simian felt his heartbeat pounding at his temples. He couldn't help but slowly lift the glass of the display case and gently place the protective lid on a counter next to it. He made no sound in the process. He didn't have much time, because he couldn't stay away from the meeting forever without attracting attention.

He read another page, turning it, randomly, to skim other passages. He had to stop doing that quickly because the memories were overwhelming him. It was one thing to have remembered everything so far, another to have these memories described by a third party in the most beautiful and at the same time most ghastly facets. He felt dizzy. He clung to the irony of fate that he

had wanted to let others do the searching. But now this book was in his hands and it was his turn, whether he wanted it or not. He could not ignore this sign. These few moments, alone with a testimony of eternity, drove out all calculation from Simian. What remained was nothing but longing.

His fingers acted quickly. They tore one of the last pages from the manuscript, folded the paper, and let it disappear into Simian's jacket. He put the book back, flipped open in the same place as before. In this position, at first glance, he could make out no difference from the intact state. This would have to do. He placed the glass cover over the Voynich manuscript and headed for the cigar room, where the namesake of the unreadable book was in the process of complaining about envy in his line of work.

Many a folded piece of paper comes to an inglorious end in the inside pockets of coats, jackets or pants. Usually their career begins with an aura of urgency or with the vague feeling that the note on the paper may not be of great importance at that moment, but at a later time. With some notes, it is. Others will simply be forgotten. Perhaps they are brought out at some point under a questioning look, uncrumpled and then read in disappointment. The reader is disappointed because he or she immediately realizes that the information has become superfluous. Maybe it was important once, but not anymore. Had been urgent, now a useless reminder of a past that can no longer be changed. Still other slips of paper reveal neither one nor the other because they have become illegible through friction. Indecipherable – in the most mundane, utterly banal way.

The folded book page in Simian's jacket was threatened with a fate similar to that of countless notes, shopping lists or other scrawl notes. That in itself is an absurd notion, given the fact that it was, after all, a document of world importance. The wearer of the jacket made the difference: while art lovers and historians would not have dared to even fold the valuable paper, let



alone put it in their jacket pocket, Simian not only had no qualms about doing so. No, he also left the stolen item in it for days.

However, he no longer wore the jacket. It hung on a coat rack in his office. He did not want to bring the garment and its contents into his house. He preferred to look at it from his desk, elbows up, chin in his hands, thinking. He spent hours in this posture, especially after the stock exchange closed and until deep into the night, when all the employees had left his premises, and the entire London Stock Exchange was asleep.

Simian did not dare to release the book page from its soft prison. He avoided it as if it were an unwelcome person whose path he had crossed once too often. That made the least sense to himself. This was not just the find which confirmed his theory. His theory that he was not alone and that there was something bigger going hand in hand with his awakening. This was an experience he had not seen coming: Reading in the manuscript was as if Simian had heard a voice from Heaven, if not a real one, at least an echo. A true echo of love and infinity.

Why didn't he rejoice in this? Why did he avoid his own jacket?

Because he had had time to think about the text. No doubt an angel had written it. Yet for all the purity that lay in the words, they lingered strangely in Simian's mind. There was something crude in their melody, something that seemed to put fetters on the description. Simian thought about it for a long time, and was a little glad that he could do it by his intellect alone, without having to get the paper out of his jacket. Meanwhile he had been reading up on the manuscript, very discreetly, of course. Not a word to Neversham, and certainly not a foot back into Voynich's antiquarian bookshop. His interest had to remain hidden. From all he had been able to gather, the manuscript was old. Estimates stretched back to the 15th century. It wouldn't make sense to Simian that an awakened angel had been walking the Earth for 500 years. Or rather, he shuddered at the idea.

He came to a different conclusion, which he thought was more likely. Perhaps the angel had not been awakened when he wrote the manuscript.

Perhaps it was a human being who didn't know what they were doing. Who at least thought they were writing down a story, a theory. Only not knowing the full extent of the undertaking, not suspecting that they were literally scratching cosmic truth onto paper with ink. A monk? That would explain the slightly out-of-tune melody of the words, which Simian eventually interpreted as a flaw of the human spirit.

If so, two questions followed. The first was a biological one: if it had been a human, then that human had died at some point. And with them their intuition of the truth of Heaven. Simian had himself for an example. He remembered the multitude of his earth lives. He had had many professions, seen many countries and continents, suffered very different fates – at least from a human perspective. From that of an immortal creature, the vast majority of his life stories seemed filled with the same monotonous patterns and events. If he had to name a unifying element of his biographies, it was the despondency that resulted from these patterns in his many lives.

Possibly the written word, poetry, was the unifying element in the other angel's biographies? Simian could not be sure, and he thought the proposition daring. On the other hand, he had nothing to lose by advocating it. No matter how hard he thought about it, he could find no alternative explanation for the age of the manuscript.

The second question was less of a mystery than the first. It was the uncomfortable core of the musings Simian fell into every night at his desk. He knew how the book would read if Beelzebub were the author. Or Moloch, who would force onto paper a hateful battle speech against the wretched and cowardly multitudes of a cowardly God. Beelzebub would have chosen finer words, but no less hurtful. Only, the book did not attack in that tone, either in the direction of one army or the other. What it did do, on the other hand – and this alone worried Simian – was to condemn the rebellion with pity.

No, no one from his camp would have dared to do that, humanly transfigured by the quill or not.

An angel faithful to God?

Simian did not understand how that could be possible. Mortality was the punishment of the rebels. They had been thrown down as humans into the obfuscation of their immortal souls. The victors, on the other hand, henceforth had Heaven to themselves. What were they supposed to be doing down here? He would never have come here if he had had the choice. Not even out of curiosity, if the angels were allowed at all.

Unlike the first question, this one did not come to a conclusion he could handle. Once he admitted this to himself, going to his jacket seemed easier than before. One evening he snatched the detached page of the manuscript and studied it. What it continued to withhold from him as regards other conclusions, it made up for by the sight of it. When Simian had read the contents of the page so many times that he had them memorized, he could focus on the beauty of the characters. He gazed at them with a devotion that others would give to their favorite painting in a museum. Freed from the now hopeless prospect of further information, the typeface of the lines and the numerous sketches struck Simian all the more in his soul. It was a piece of the heavenly essence that lay before him. Even as morning dawned, Simian still paused over the single page of the manuscript, admiring and perfectly still.

He took Neversham at his word. He wanted to parry the jab the man had made at Simian's unadorned office in the carriage the other day. Not necessarily to Neversham, because from now on he preferred to receive him outside the stock exchange. In business terms, they hardly had anything to do with each other anymore anyway. In any case, the old man was never to have the pleasure of marveling at the two colossal wall hangings that Simian had fixed on either side of his desk. This meant that he could also never draw parallels between the peculiar motifs and that visit to Voynich when he had found Simian so fascinated by the manuscript.

They were obvious, the parallels. Simian had picked out a few passages from the loose page. Now they were emblazoned in embroidered letters on the wall hangings, each as high as a forearm. The banners were made of silk. The fabric dealer had strongly advised Simian against it. Silk was unsuitable for

such use, he said, because it was far too fine and delicate. The work would have to be replaced too quickly, and he could not let a customer do that in good conscience, no matter how much he cared about the business. Simian ignored the objection. He wanted snow-white banners, floor to ceiling. They were supposed to shift a little in the draft when he opened the windows to the parquet floor. Shifting like the ether beneath his feet that he remembered.

So henceforth the house-high walls behind Simian shone brightly into the great room. The letters, which nobody could make any sense of, hung pitch-black in the air. The sight was imposing. Simian had not looked for subliminal beauty either. The oversized work was not only meant to balance the enormous size of the office, it also had a less obvious purpose. And for that, the client wanted to be sure that the words would be noticed by every person who walked through his door. Simian was looking for reactions. As much as the unexpected discovery of the manuscript had shaken him to his very core, in the end he had resigned himself mentally to the new situation.

That was what he always did.

Simian resisted the impulse to personally search half the world for the book's author. The experts had already tried that and found nothing. Sure, they had searched under other presumptions, namely for a person who had died a long time ago. They were only looking for evidence, for relics, for traces in the past. Simian, on the other hand, believed that the punished soul was not resting in peace, but had made its way through the centuries to the present. Until this, his time. Without doing it intentionally, perhaps without any idea of what was weighing on it. In conclusion: he was looking for a real person, not a historical figure. Just because he wanted to find them, however, did not mean his own traveling was the best means to that end. Simian suffered no delusions. He had absolutely nothing that could give him clues. The manuscript? His stolen page? That was just a confirmation of his theory that he was not alone. How was he supposed to recognize his peers if he had to assume that they had not yet regained all their knowledge?

More than once, visitors asked him about the unusual wall decoration.

Depending on his mood, Simian would either shrug it off in embarrassment and say that it was nothing more than an heirloom, or he would tout the installation as daring new art for which he had already been offered vast sums on the market. In any case, when someone asked about it, he knew the person had no clue what they were really looking at. There was something he wanted to hear, and he didn't give up looking for it in every guest. Maybe someone would recognize that kind of writing? Have seen it somewhere before? In short, signal anything but perplexity that might offer Simian a lead.

He would have admitted himself that this kind of search was not very spectacular. It was flatly not a search. Simian had gained a firm foothold in this world, and his tactic was not to jeopardize the same hastily. Nothing had changed about his situation. He only knew more than before the book. It did not follow that he had to do more. Actionism was for fools.

Patience, he told himself. Patience.

Months passed in which the office witnessed only conversations Simian had always had. Nothing distracted from debates about money and the speculation of the competition. Simian soon forgot what was emblazoned on the wall behind him. Even the greatest display of a new achievement eventually becomes commonplace, the same thing found in the same place every day. Routine slowly but surely settled over Simian's life again, and something in him was very quietly very grateful for it. At some point, he didn't even see the giant banners stoically watching over the room behind him. Admiring glances he sorted indifferently in his mind, immediately seeing that nothing was happening in the expressions of the people that would be helpful to him. His explanations came across as nothing but boredom. His guests took it personally and quickly changed the subject.

*"So they stood shoulder to shoulder, united in love instead of hate..."*

"What?" said Simian gruffly. He hadn't been listening properly, for the pile of files the unfamiliar accountant had placed on his desk overwhelmed him. He had been searching for the listing he wanted to find for considerably longer now than he would have liked.

The accountant choked. For a moment, he didn't know what to say. He needed time to evaluate for himself whether he had just spoken inappropriately to his employer, and it became embarrassingly long. To his relief, the latter beat him to it, because there was something going on in Simian, too, during the awkward silence. He didn't yet know exactly what it was that made him stop, alarmed, to attend to the files. But he knew it was important.

"What did you say?" he repeated his question, this time both more varied in words and less rude in tone.

"I...", the accountant continued. "I apologize, sir, I didn't mean to..."

His already brittle voice gave up trying to find a meaningful ending to the sentence in its head. It found none.

Silence again.

"Why did you say that just now?" echoed Simian.

"I didn't think anything of it," the accountant stammered uncertainly.

"What's that supposed to mean? Nobody speaks without thinking!"

"I was just reading aloud, sir," the accountant assured him. And when Simian didn't seem to understand, the gaunt man in the armchair in front of the desk pointed to the wall hangings to Simian's left.

Now it was Simian's turn to be at a loss for words. At least his head was not occupied by shame or fear, as the accountant's was. Simian's thoughts had now caught up with the subconscious alarm. He knew why it felt like every fiber of his body was tightening.

"You can read this?", Simian heard himself ask softly. His words almost sounded like whispers.

"The banner?"

A dialogue didn't really seem to develop between the two of them. They answered each other's questions with counter-questions, and now it was the accountant who didn't understand.

"Yes, of course," Simian said. "You just pointed to it yourself!"

Was the man stupid? Simian lost interest in pulling each sentence one at a time from the accountant's mouth.

"Yes?"

"Read it again!" ordered Simian.

The accountant did so.

*"So they stood shoulder to shoulder, united in love instead of hate..."*

"Go on!"

*"...Legions without enemies, where only lines separated who fought for the others no less than for their own side..."*

Simian was silent. If he had so far maintained his posture bent over the files, he now leaned back and finally let go of the papers on the desk. He slowly sat down in his chair.

The accountant watched this silent scene in discomfort.

"Sir, I would like to apologize! Did I disturb you? I shouldn't have interrupted just like that. I'm sorry, sir!"

"What?"

The portents of the halting exchange seemed to turn. Now it was Simian who couldn't follow.

"I didn't mean to disturb your concentration," the accountant made an honest effort to clarify.

"It's all right..." soothed Simian. Even though he couldn't fully grasp what was happening, it was obvious that the man before him knew even less than he did about the significance of this moment. The accountant had not the slightest idea that he was the first person to comprehend those lines. His recital had been flawless. The words were written exactly like that on the snow-white banner – in the most unknown language in the world.

"Babbling is really far from my mind," the accountant added. "I don't know why I spoke out loud..."

"Good man!", Simian stopped him. "Listen to what I'm saying. I don't hand out platitudes. There's more than enough of that, don't you think? If I tell you it's all right, ...it's all right. Relax! I'm just asking..."

This speech worked. The accountant slumped a bit, which was a good sign. At least that's how Simian took it. The man actually relaxed. This gave

Simian the opportunity to keep talking. And that was the recipe that always helped him in any situation, no matter how confusing. If he didn't understand, couldn't draw any conclusions for the next steps, he would simply keep talking until the situation cleared up.

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said.

The accountant smiled. Cheerful it was not, that smile. His eyes betrayed that he was putting it on out of politeness. What his boss was aiming at was unclear to him.

"You? Do you believe in coincidences?", Simian forced the accountant into the conversation.

"I don't. Well, ...probably."

It was a dead end. The man wasn't getting into Simian's insinuation. So he changed tactics on the spot.

"Do you know who wrote that?" he asked abruptly, pointing to the banner. "That one?"

"No, sir."

"Really?"

"Like I said, I just read out what it says," the accountant blurted out. "Is it someone famous?"

Simian thought about his answer for a second before giving it.

"I don't know either."

"Oh!"

The accountant didn't fake his astonishment. Simian had no doubt about it.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he explained.

"Unfortunately, no!" the accountant said, relieved. His boss's admission accomplished something that the preceding conversation had been unable to do: Making sense. The accountant now thought Simian's behavior was rooted in an interest in art.

"Since you quoted the text, I thought it might sound familiar," Simian reinforced the man's interpretation. "And you could tell me the author..."



The accountant shrugged. He smiled again, this time lightheartedly.

"No?" purred Simian, friendly and likewise smiling.

Repeated shrugging under even more smiles. The tension of the first moments had faded.

"What's your name?"

Simian sat up straight and collected himself internally.

"Stevens, sir!"

"We haven't made acquaintance yet, Stevens. Is that right?"

"Indeed, sir!"

"New here?"

"In your service since two weeks, sir," the accountant confirmed.

"That in my defense, good! Who hired you?"

"McIntyre, sir."

Simian pursed his lips appreciatively. Everything seemed to be in order.

"Well then, Stevens! If, unlike me, you are in the comfortable position of having more than a single name at your disposal, you should make use of it."

"Sir?"

"Your full name..."

"Stevens, sir, Oliver Stevens."

Simian repeated his clerk's name enthusiastically, as if to establish a contract between them that now declared them both officially acquainted.

"You are a friend of literature, I presume, Oliver Stevens?" asked Simian.

The addressed man waved it off awkwardly.

"That would be quite inaccurate, sir. That is where my impertinent remark now takes me, and rightly so! I know nothing of literature. Numbers are my profession, that yes."

"Come!" objected Simian. "Don't trust in modesty, Stevens. At least not blindly. Modesty doesn't care about you either, it thinks about itself first. It either wants to be left alone or to hear from others what it is thinking itself."

Stevens grinned. He hadn't expected to get into a chat with the top boss that afternoon, let alone collegial advice.

"I couldn't tell Shakespeare from....," the accountant affirmed. " From... . There you go! I don't even know who I should be able to tell him from!"

Simian acknowledged this with an appreciative hum.

"But did you study? With your talent for linguistics..."

"Me? A talent for linguistics?"

"That's right, you, Stevens!"

"You're making fun of me, sir," it spluttered out of the accountant. He had by no means meant to let his facial expression derail in such an unprofessional manner, but the very idea of the insinuation was too comical.

"What makes you think that?" he asked for good measure, when Simian's expression in no way admitted he was joking.

Simian pointed to the banner.

"I've never had anyone here who could decipher that."

Now they both eyed the floor-length white surface and its characters. Out of the corner of his eye, however, Simian watched the accountant. Suddenly, the accountant's overwhelmed state was clearly visible to him. Something was going on inside him.

"I certainly have no sense of literature, sir. But even accountants have to be able to read English."

That was all Stevens had to say. From that moment on he gave the picture of a man who was at his wit's end: his gaze lowered, his eyes nervously searching. This person had great respect for his powerful boss, the thoroughly notorious stock market genius. That's why he didn't tell Simian to his face that he felt offended. They didn't dare, his employees. What remained for them was to physically retreat without moving from the spot. Simian saw through his accountant's attitude, which was as submissive as it was irritable. He had nothing left to counter.

"That's not English you're looking at," he said emphatically slowly.

"But, sir..."

"Look!" hissed Simian, immediately annoyed with himself beyond measure. Too late. The effect he had wanted to prevent occurred: Steven's

features disappeared. Everything about the man seemed to stop dead.

"Eng...", Stevens pushed out between his lips with what seemed to be a great effort. "May I go?"

Simian put a hand to his face, only to squint his eyes in anger behind it, briefly and unseen.

"May I go, sir?" repeated Stevens meekly, but more plaintively. He was begging. "The files are all here..."

"Go, Stevens."

Simian took a deep breath as the accountant stood up, bowed politely, and with trembling hands gathered his notes and utensils from the table.

"Thank you, sir, thank you!" he stammered with relief.

"Sure, sure..., good man, Stevens. Oliver."

In no time at all, Stevens had found the door. Simian was left alone in his gigantic office; the little mound of files before him on the table, behind him the forearm-sized letters that had nothing in common with the English language or any other on earth.

The next day, Simian had his chief accountant come in. McIntyre feared bad tidings when Simian asked him about the new hire. He hastened to say that he didn't have much to report about Oliver Stevens. The man arrived on time, and had not yet made a single miscalculation.

Simian listened to the report calmly. He didn't probe, nor did he confront McIntyre with awkward questions. He seemed simply curious to the chief accountant. That, in turn, was rather unusual because Simian didn't get involved in minor personnel matters if he could avoid it.

McIntyre was not much help beyond these brief observations. He did not know about the private affairs of the staff, nor was he interested in such things. He was not available for information of that sort. Simian saved himself the trouble of asking for it. Instead, he used some contacts that he kept secret

in his personal notebook. A detective who had an excellent reputation in Simian's circles was given the nod. In other words: No one ever heard of him. The man did his work discreetly.

They agreed on a three week assignment. At the end of each week, the detective reported to Simian, each time in a different location, far from the stock exchange. Simian was pleased with the work, less so with the results. The detective was thorough, and he never missed an opportunity to rub it in his client's face: Investigations during the first week had turned up nothing unusual. So from the second week on, the detective shadowed his target at every turn. As soon as Oliver Stevens left the stock exchange, the detective followed his every move. He made sketches, supplied addresses and names, even managed to get some photographs.

All the effort inevitably made the yield look even more meager. The accountant lived alone, as a subtenant, not far from the stock exchange. He never received visitors. Relatives could not be traced. The father deceased at the turn of the century, no records of the mother. That at least was peculiar, the detective allowed himself to remark.

No marriage, no loans, no memberships. A clean slate in every respect, for Stevens had no police record. Nor, by all accounts, a social life. In the three weeks under surveillance, the detective had seen Stevens slip into a pub only once. That was when half the office was celebrating a birthday and Stevens had been more or less grabbed by the scruff of the neck and dragged along by McIntyre. Only reluctantly had the accountant drunk then. And only a single pint, too, which the fellow seemed to hold on to all evening. The detective emphasized this detail, several times, for such thoroughness was rare in his line of work. So he told Simian too.

After the three weeks, Simian sat down at his desk with all the information and non-information he had now gathered. He wondered how to proceed. Could it have been coincidence after all? A whim of the fate that the heavenly language was legible for some runaway human being after all?

Impossible!

Simian asked himself questions like these nevertheless. Not to ask them would have been ignorant. He was not afraid of things not turning out as he expected. It was more dangerous to be too sure, too stubborn. Each time he ultimately came to no different conclusion, he nevertheless felt more mentally alert and more on guard against error.

Patience! He called upon his greatest virtue.

Simian devised a plan. Meanwhile, he kept his distance from Oliver Stevens. This was not difficult. Many hired hands went in and out of his rooms. Simian had ways of avoiding troublesome encounters with employees when he felt like it. Stevens, he thought, needed the distance more than he did. If Simian had had his way, that night in the office, he wouldn't have let the accountant leave before he remembered. Because that seemed to be the problem: Stevens hadn't crossed the threshold... yet.

That's what Simian called it. That step that he still couldn't explain, but which he had experienced firsthand. He had stepped over the threshold when the tsar's notorious advisor had been carelessly dumped in the Neva River. A threshold of truth, so to speak, beyond which everything was different. A return was impossible. Simian could not imagine who or what could ever again cram his eternal spirit into the human confines. To escape from it had cost him more than a life. He still shuddered to think back to those hours when he was defenseless and saw every law of the world suspended.

The accountant wasn't ready for that, Simian knew that now. He had to be gentle with Stevens. He was still only human. His ability to read the script seemed to Simian to be a sign, a glimmer of light that penetrated into the open as if through a fine crack through the human shell.

He had to break Stevens open.

By pointing his finger to the banner, he had overwhelmed Stevens. The man did not understand. Simian ruled out that the panic had been faked to him. If he hadn't let the accountant go, the latter would have burst into tears. Not that he felt sorry for him – not for the human being. But he had to get right through him, for Oliver Stevens was perhaps the door in which the

threshold for his brother was stuck. He mustn't break it before he had uncovered what he wanted to get. What he had to get.

So Simian took his time, as he often did. He brooded over his desk in the nights, watching the candles burn themselves into nothingness.

Patience. He could rely on its power.

And so he found his plan.

The stock exchange was an imposing building. Its countenance rivaled the importance of the business that was conducted here. It was no accident. Where power is negotiated, distributed and taken, the facade must look as serious and sublime as the faces of the stately-looking protagonists. That's why palaces look like palaces and not like back rooms, even if they contain more than enough of the latter – in hidden places.

Unlike most people, Simian had seen real palaces from the inside, that is, as part of the court. And he had had his own back rooms in secret. There was always space that was not used, or better, that was hardly known to anyone at all. This could be cellars, in grim surroundings also cells, hidden corridors behind invisible doors, small refuges between large halls and so on.

Simian was satisfied with the dusty auditorium. The forgotten room was in the same wing of the stock exchange as his office. The auditorium had a few windows, but they didn't look out onto the trading floor; instead, they looked out onto a library that was also no longer in use. Simian had meticulously checked that out.

The windows were a problem. They invited people to try to make themselves heard from the inside. That wouldn't work because on the other side there were only musty books moldering away on untouched shelves. There had to be a hole in the roof, maybe several, Simian guessed.

He didn't want to give Stevens false hope. That would certainly be detrimental to the plan. The road the accountant had to travel with Simian was arduous enough. No one knew that better than he did. Stevens would

have to follow him every step of the way. He was not to be distracted. Hope was a distraction.

The real problem with the windows was another. They were also a potential escape route. Simian therefore shored up most of them with long planks. He did it himself, using material he had shipped to the exchange's basement under a different name. Instead of lingering in his office until late at night, as was his custom, he used the time for several trips to the old lecture hall. Only he had a key to it, and not a soul was working in the adjacent wing. A tragedy, from the perspective of the eminent house. Simian was aware that this disgrace to the building would not be around forever. It had been damaged for far too long with no tenants around.

Now Simian was the tenant of the entire wing.

The auditorium became his construction site. After barricading all but one of the windows, he thoroughly removed any trace of his night work, especially the tools.

There was a knock on the heavy oak door.

"Come in!" shouted Simian at the top of his lungs. He stood at the teaching desk, across from the entrance. The auditorium was not for soft voices, if they wanted to be heard.

Oliver Stevens poked his head out from behind the mighty door panel and surveyed the large room with wide eyes before entering.

"Ah, Stevens," Simian greeted him, waving his arm for good measure, in addition to shouting out. "Over here!"

The accountant smiled, nodded, and felt compelled to wave as well, as if they were both passengers on traversing ships and couldn't hear each other over the distance.

Simian went to work on something on the lectern. What it was, Stevens couldn't make out from the distance. He took heart, tucked his papers a little tighter under his armpits and searched the aisle that ran through the middle of

the lecture hall seating. As he made his way to the lectern, the plates on the stage caught his eye. He saw bread, a bowl that probably contained soup, a few pieces of cheese, and even a fruit plate with grapes hanging from it.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your meal," the accountant said, nervousness making him forget his astonishment that the meal was spread out on the floor.

"Not at all!" said Simian melodiously. "After all, I did send for you, Stevens! And you are right on time, excellent! I commend you for that."

By now Simian had finished cleaning up the desk. As a final act, he retrieved some pencils from a leather bag, which he immediately made disappear again into a kind of duffel bag that rested beside the lectern.

"I hear you do flawless work..."

The accountant accepted the compliment wordlessly. He preferred to acknowledge it with a pleased nod of his head.

"Do you like it with us?" continued Simian.

"Beyond measure! It's an honor to be allowed to be part of such an accurate operation."

Simian thrust his chin forward, pushing his lower lip over his upper. In doing so, he signified to the accountant that he was seriously impressed by the latter's choice of words.

"That's good to hear, no doubt about it," he admitted after some more facial acrobatics. "And you know what, Stevens...?"

He didn't know. He waited in an elaborate art pause, which Simian had carefully created, for the answer to the rhetorical question.

"...That kind of attitude needs to be rewarded!"

"Sir?"

"Wait," Simian asked as he ran a hand into his jacket pocket. "I have a special project for you, sort of a sporting challenge, if you will."

Before the accountant could answer anything, Simian produced the stolen page from the manuscript from his pocket. He unfolded it carefully, then placed it gingerly on the desk.



"You know, Stevens, I remember you liked that aphorism in my office the other day..."

Stevens's face turned red. He had hoped that the peculiar details of their first meeting would not be brought up again today.

"Well, take a look at this then!" demanded Simian with a distinct sense of adventure in his voice. He made room for Steven at the lectern by stepping slightly to the side and directing the clerk with both hands into the proper position like an usher.

The accountant followed the instruction. He hung hunched over the page like a vulture that didn't know where to go. He fingered out a rather worn pair of temple glasses to read better.

Simian watched the man's every move intently. He examined him from top to bottom, mentally surveying the whole gaunt figure. Steven's cheeks appeared sunken. There was not an ounce of fat on his body, and so even the face looked older than it probably was by human standards. And when the glasses were slipped over his ears with shaky hands, doubts arose in Simian. He had a theory about who exactly was waiting for liberation in this deplorable form, but was he imagining it all in the end? There seemed to be too great a difference between the heavenly figure he remembered and this utterly substandard little human.

It was not too late to stop.

"What is that text, sir?" the accountant asked meekly.

"Have you read it?"

"Skimmed it, sir..."

If not for the far-too-serious thoughts that were consuming him at that moment, Simian would have found it amusing how much it pained the accountant to have to disappoint his employer. If only by the fact that he had merely skimmed something instead of reading it in depth.

"Your quote, ...you know," Simian lifted. "It came from this page. And I got this page from a very famous manuscript."

"I see," Stevens stated untruthfully.

"This one is the original."

"Then you found out who wrote it?" asked Stevens.

"Possibly..."

Simian indulged in mystery, smiling at his answer and prancing past Stevens to his other side.

"The name's not on this page, though."

"Do you have the rest of the manuscript?" the accountant said hesitantly. He was less interested in the answer than in the gut instinct that dictated he had to be a good conversationalist to the company's owner.

"Not yet! That's why I sent for you, Stevens. This is where you come in!"

"Me?"

"That's right, you! If I may...?"

Simian pointed to the duffel bag, which was propped up against the lectern. Realizing he was in the way, Stevens took a step back. Simian then pulled the duffel bag toward him. He quickly pulled out a shallow box that contained a stack of papers.

"Here you go!"

Simian pushed aside his manuscript page with one hand, and with the other he placed the stack of paper next to it. Together, the two items had just enough room on the lectern.

"You can read this, can't you, Stevens?"

"English, sir?"

The accountant didn't want to believe that the abstruse conversation he had been trying to forget for the past few weeks seemed to be repeating itself in all seriousness.

"English! If you say so..." confirmed Simian, unlike last time without irritation. "Then please read this page carefully, Stevens. And I mean extremely carefully, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very well! This is important, extremely important! This is step one. Without a thorough reading, you won't succeed in this special assignment."

"What is to be done, sir?"

"Once you're sure you've understood everything, Stevens, you will continue to write where the page ends," Simian explained. As he did so, he pointed from the manuscript page over to the stack of immaculate paper.

"And when you've done that, you'll write the beginning of the manuscript until it also connects to the page from the beginning. In short, Stevens, you rewrite the whole manuscript, in your own words. I don't have it, as I said, but I need it. Therefore you will write it for me."

Simian might as well have ordered the accountant to flap his arms and fly. Greater incomprehension would not have been the result. Stevens stood expressionless before Simian. He, in turn, had anticipated such a reaction.

"Do you have a question about this assignment?" he said slowly and quietly, as if addressing an overwhelmed child.

"You want me to write this manuscript?" the accountant asked.

"Yes."

"But I don't even know it..."

"You have this page right here, Stevens. This is your starting point."

Stevens didn't know where to look. In desperation, he bent over the manuscript page once more. This time he read more carefully.

Simian let him read in peace. He didn't say a word until Stevens looked up at him again.

"How do you want it to continue, sir?"

"What kind of a question is that, my good man?" questioned Simian.

"I mean, what do you want me to write? What would you like to read?"

Simian banged his fist on the lectern impulsively, so loud that it echoed like thunder through the wooden wasteland of the auditorium.

"It's not about what I want to read!" shouted Simian.

The sudden change of mood gave the accountant such primal fear that he clung to the lectern. But Simian was not finished yet. He had calculated the outburst, and, in his opinion, performed it superbly. He was pleased with how easily Stevens was intimidated. It gave him confidence.

"You're supposed to write the truth, man!" he blustered. "The page will do. That's enough of a muse's kiss."

"...How long should I...," Stevens whimpered in reflex.

"Write what needs to be written! We'll take it from there. And I mean it, Stevens! Do you understand?"

Simian glanced briefly at the window, where some light still fell from the skylights of the deserted library into the lecture hall.

"You start right away. There's some daylight left," Simian continued.

Hearing this, for the first time in Simian's presence, the accountant got the feeling he understood something, and even before it was said. Only this premiere of realization was not a pleasant one.

He remembered the food on the floor. There it stood, still untouched, as Stevens made a hasty look around for it.

It was not Simian's food.

The accountant understood and panicked.

"I must...," he pressed out rashly, in order to flee from the lecture hall just as hastily afterwards. So the nerves ordered the muscles, but they did not really come into play.

Simian rushed into the back of the accountant as soon as the latter turned away from him precipitously. The smaller, slender man could neither hold nor shake off the weight of a second body. He went down under Simian, onto the planks of the stage.

Simian sprawled over Stevens like a blanket. He grabbed his head and turned it to the side so he could whisper in the ear of the shock-stricken something beneath him.

"Quiet!"

"Get off me!" the accountant pleaded. "Please!"

"Who are you really?" whispered Simian.

"What, what do you want?"

"See, that's our problem. Because you don't know, you now must take this detour. You will write me the manuscript, do you hear? You'll find a meal

enough for three over there. If you behave yourself and do as I say, I'll bring you a mattress tomorrow."

"You have no right!" protested Stevens. "You can't lock me up!"

Simian replied without words. His response was a demonstration. He rolled off the accountant's back, nimbly straightening up like a cat after a leap, pulling the accountant's body right up with him. But not only that. Simian grabbed the confused man with an iron grip. Stevens was out of air, then seemed to be catapulted through it. The blackboard at the end of the stage stopped his trajectory. The impact made it rattle shrilly.

"I can and I will," Simian commented on his feat of strength. He didn't even seem out of breath to the accountant. As for himself, everything was reeling before his eyes. Nausea rose in him and he sank to his knees, defeated.

Simian waited a few moments for backtalk or another attempt to escape. When neither occurred, he walked toward Stevens. The accountant didn't move, only raised his hands anxiously before his face.

Simian gently wiped them aside. Then he sighed and ran his fingers through the accountant's hair.

"You'll understand," he said. "Later."

Stevens didn't look up at him. He cried silently.

"Remember what I explained to you! Study the page, then listen to yourself and write what needs to be written. It is your only way out of here. Scream if you want to. No one will hear you, but you don't have to take my word for it. Look for an escape. I won't blame you. But I'm telling you, there isn't one. The door is locked and I'll barricade it from the outside. You only have that window there..."

Simian lifted the accountant's chin to turn it toward the window.

"You need it for daylight. I've cut off the electricity and I can't let you have candles, you'll understand that, won't you? Come on!"

With these words Simian propped himself under an arm of the squatting man and stood up with him. He dragged Stevens along like a lifeless human-sized doll. But the accountant was only physically absent. He could hear and

understand what his tormentor explained to him. Simian stood with him at the large window. He showed him every detail in the adjoining hall. He demonstrated that the heavy window was tightly closed, the levers for ventilation removed. And most importantly, he told him once and again the drop height to the floor of the library: 41 feet, 6½ inches, an imposing figure. Simian assured him that he had measured it several times.

"You don't want that. You don't want Stevens to die like that, but he would. You would! So remember that when it's pitch dark tonight and false daring creeps into your despair. I don't want to have to take a mercy killing in the morning, you hear?"

The accountant did not nod. Simian nevertheless assumed that Stevens agreed with him on all he had said.

When he finished, he let him go. The accountant slumped again. He dried his tears only after Simian had barred the oak door from the outside.

On the first morning Simian found empty paper. The food had not been touched, only some water was missing from the carafe. He almost expected that the accountant would attack him when he opened the door, but the latter did not even think about it. Simian found him in front of the blackboard. He squatted before it and only jumped up when Simian moved to the desk to inspect the progress of the work.

Simian did not comment on the unused materials. He only checked to see if there was at least a crumpled piece of paper here and there on the floor or if any of the pens showed signs of use.

Apparently, the accountant had not touched anything.

Only when Simian wanted to leave again without a word did Stevens come to life. He begged the departing man, appealed to his conscience. It did not help. Even questions shouted after him about what the accountant had done wrong went unanswered by Simian. He left the room again, not two

minutes after he had entered it. The food he had brought with him was left outside the door, where he had stored it as a precaution before entering.

Then, on the second morning, the fight which Simian had expected earlier. This time Stevens jumped at him from the side as the door opened. As a weapon he had chosen the carafe.

Afterwards, Simian gave him the mocking advice that he would have been better off throwing the heavy container instead of hitting him with it. Or to have smashed it beforehand in order to attack with a shard. As it was, it had been easy for Simian to simply take the carafe from the hands of the weakened accountant, who in any case had been all but abandoned by muscle.

He expressed his disappointment as he grabbed Stevens by the arm and pushed him back across the auditorium to the lectern. Disappointed not in the attack, but in the sloppiness of it. Simian announced that from now on there would be water only in tubes. He had brought one of those with him. That he had placed the carafe in the lecture hall in the first place only to provoke his prisoner's desire to attack, he did not tell him.

Again nothing was found on the paper, and again Simian said not a word about it. He only looked through the pile, while in his back the accountant, discouraged by his pathetic assault, would not dare to try another one. With his bare hands at that.

On the third morning, Simian found a corner of the large window shattered. The damage was no bigger than a fist. When he inspected the hole in the glass more closely, he saw some dried blood. Matching it was a battered sleeve of Steven's shirt. He had torn fabric from it and knotted it around his index finger as a bandage. Simian surveyed the makeshift solution and praised the accountant for it. He then picked up the shards of the soup plate that Stevens had apparently used as a striking tool, and to be on the safe side, did an inspective patrol. There were scratch marks on the oak door, no doubt from the spoon. Simian was unable to determine whether the desk or the seats had been tampered with. In any case, nothing wobbled. After all, the desk was also made of bolted metal. There was nothing like a pair of pliers or even a

substitute for a wrench in the entire room.

As a final act of his inspection, Simian approached the accountant to ask him to talk. He threatened to beat him when the latter didn't respond. This worked and Simian got to hear what he had suspected. However, it was not the words he was after, but the sound of his prisoner's voice: It sounded raspy, a little hoarse. For sure Stevens had been screaming for help half the night.

Once again, Simian found nothing on the paper. He wouldn't on the next two days, either.

As the week drew to a close, the accountant began to write. Simian rewarded that, as promised, with a mattress, which he pushed through the door later in the day. He accepted that the attempts failed utterly. The accountant handed him two pages of paper the first time he had anything to show. Simian looked at the lines in English and held silent counsel with himself about whether he should tell Stevens what was wrong with his approach. He decided against it.

Of course, Stevens noticed that his tormentor was not pleased. That the latter said nothing was judgment enough. Now that the accountant had taken the step and complied with the bizarre demand, it hit him all the harder that on top of everything else, the extorted work didn't seem right. He pelted Simian with all sorts of angry, complaining and pleading questions. But they went unanswered. Simian remained unperturbed. He left Stevens standing there and walked away.

Successful or not, the accountant noticed rewards. The mattress was not taken from him again. When he produced twice as much text the next day, the food ration Simian brought him grew. Even though the crude rewards made him feel as if Simian regarded him as an animal to be trained, all this gave the accountant hope. He understood more and more that this was not a sadistic game of the other, which he played for base reasons with him as a victim. Apparently Simian really wanted what he had said he wanted: a manuscript. And evidence was now accumulating that the ordeal would continue to be alleviated for Stevens as long as he made an effort with the task.



He racked his brain hour after hour about what he could do differently, what exactly Simian was looking for.

Simian too noticed that the accountant was giving up resistance, trying his best. This frustrated him because it meant that his theory was hanging by a thread. What if this person was not capable of searching deep enough within himself for the truth? What if he was wasting his time on a hopelessly mortal bundle of flesh and bones in which only that one brief spark of the immortal soul had flared up – and everything else had long since expired?

On the other hand, what if only he could save him?

Simian extended his visiting hours further and further, having decided to help the accountant. Stevens had to write himself, that was the whole point of the exercise. But Simian urged him to read the sample text over and over. He went over whole passages with him, not knowing what good it would do. The accountant, in turn, didn't know why Simian went to such lengths, but on the other hand, wouldn't simply tell him concrete sentences.

Another week went by. Stevens had written himself empty without using much ink. His head was blank, his mind lapsed into paralysis. He longed for freedom, for a breath of fresh air somewhere he could just walk down a street and then another as he turned where he wanted. Instead, in the meantime, he trudged the same old route through the lecture hall. Like an animal in a cage, he soon forgot he was doing it. His body followed the set pattern while his mind tried to remember what it was supposed to be doing.

The periods when Stevens would actually stand at the lectern with the paper to put something down on it became shorter and shorter. And they stopped altogether once Simian ceased coming in the morning. On the third morning after the last visit, Stevens still had enough food that he didn't go hungry, but he panicked nonetheless. Simian hadn't said anything. He was simply missing. Had the police arrested him? Stevens wanted to cling to that wonderful notion because, after all, it had to mean freedom for him. The police had means to make even tight-lipped criminals talk. Besides, they would be looking for him at work even without Simian's assistance.

Only, where were they?

Another day later, fear outweighed hope. No one came. The authorities would have found him long ago if Simian had actually fallen into their trap. The fear that now took complete possession of the accountant lay in another scenario: that no one had any idea what Simian was doing with him. For in that case there were not many other reasons for his absence. He could have given up on him, but Stevens didn't think so. Not after his last attempt to help him with the manuscript. It seemed more likely that something had happened to Simian. The accountant wished him no good, there was no mistaking that. But his own fate was now tied to Simian's well-being. If he had been mugged out there, and was in a hospital, or worse, if he was dead, Stevens would die of thirst here. The water hose contained only drops.

He didn't want to die. It baffled him that up to this point he had not seriously considered this very darkest of possible endings to this situation. Sure, he had feared for his life when Simian had assaulted him. He had been terrified when the bleeding on his hand wouldn't stop for a while. He had been even more afraid when looking down through the cracked corner in the window. It went down so deep. How could he not break all his bones in a fall that might not even deliver him from this fate immediately?

Thoughts like these, visions of pain, yes, the accountant had had them in abundance. Still, Simian had stepped through the door every day, like a physical reminder that this injustice here was subject to certain rules. Rules of negotiation, to be precise. Stevens, after the first few days of sheer desperation and resistance, had taken refuge in the belief that his opponent was coming to negotiate the terms of the resolution of this misery. Whether that had been a realistic assumption, however, did not matter now one way or the other. Simian was no longer there. And without him, Stevens would die miserably in that musty hall.

This sinister conclusion gained supremacy over any other in the accountant's mind. He could no longer resist it by the end of the fourth day. Thirst was giving him an ever-increasing headache, he could no longer see

clearly, and it began to strain him beyond measure when he wanted to stretch his legs on his rounds.

He stopped doing it. Soon he didn't stand up at all, but stretched out on his back on the stage. This was the best way to endure the stupor to which he became more accustomed hour by hour.

At some point he was awakened by water, water on his lips. He had been dreaming and was having a hard time making the abrupt change from the sleeping to the waking state. It was slow going, but the freshness of the water gained the upper hand in this tug of war. The accountant felt it in his throat and wanted more. For that, he gladly gave up the clear lines and colors of his last dream. He saw the outline of his hand disappear. It only dimly flitted across the stack of papers on the desk in his dream. Then he had to swallow, and as he did so he opened his eyes. Above him he saw Simian crouching.

"Good," Simian said. "Another sip!"

He lifted the accountant's head up a bit, carefully supporting it with one hand on the back of his neck. Simian put the full tube he had brought with him to the nearly dead of thirst's mouth one more time.

After a while, the accountant managed to drink on his own. Simian helped him lean his back against the wall below the blackboard. He left the tube to Stevens so he could attend to the stack of papers on the desk. Stevens wasn't sure if he was imagining it, but he thought he saw a satisfied smile flit across Simian's face as he read.

"I'll come back later," Simian murmured, without turning to the accountant. "Today, you hear! I have to get something and it's going to take some time..."

He walked over to Stevens, took the tube from him briefly, and held him firmly by the shoulder with one hand.

"...But you did a good job. I knew you could do it!"

The accountant didn't understand. Nor did he care what Simian said. The sensation of quenching his thirst occupied him completely. And so he mindlessly followed Simian with his eyes while the latter left the auditorium.

As promised, Simian returned later in the day. Enough time had passed that Stevens had recovered sufficiently to think straight again. He had even eaten some of the fresh food that Simian must have brought that morning.

Simian was carrying a backpack. He wasted no time in explaining, just tapped the bag mysteriously a few times and then set it down between his legs.

"Come here!" he ordered from the lectern.

The accountant stood at the window. He had not taken a step since Simian had come into the auditorium. He was not comfortable with the command. There was something in the air. Stevens couldn't tell what it was, only that Simian seemed in a better mood than usual and at the same time even colder than on the days when he had been unhappy with his hostage.

"Come!" repeated Simian patiently. "Look at what you've made..."

The accountant walked hesitantly over to the lectern. Simian directed him into position with his hands, as he liked to do. He motioned Stevens to look at the paper pages.

They were written on. They were full and there were many of them. The accountant didn't need to count them to see that, for of the whole stack, originally empty, only three or four white sheets lay at the bottom, pulled out quite a bit to the side.

"I...", Stevens started, but didn't really know what he wanted to say. He just had a vague feeling that something wasn't right.

"You! That's right! You wrote all this. This is the manuscript I asked you to write."

"I don't remember," whispered the accountant, unsure if he should even allow this confession to leave his mouth. "When did I write this?"

"What are you asking me for?" retorted Simian impassively. "I wasn't here. And it was probably just what you needed."

"Am I done?"

"You tell me!" asked Simian in return.

With only a glance, he encouraged the accountant to take a closer look at the pages. Stevens did, recognizing his handwriting. He read through a

passage, and as he did so, Simian silently approached him from the side.

"Read," he purred in his ear.

The accountant immersed himself in the text. He turned his attention to the next paragraph. Reading the words soothed him in an unknown way.

"I stole the original, from an antiquarian bookstore," Simian said, reaching into the backpack he had brought with him. "It's known as the *Voynich Manuscript*. Have you heard of it?"

The accountant shook his head in silence. He listened, but couldn't stop reading as he did so.

"You've never seen it?" echoed Simian.

A shake of the head.

"Here it is!"

Simian dropped the book on the lectern with a thud, partially covering the handwritten pages.

The accountant was startled.

"It took some persuasion for me to borrow it for a night," Simian explained. "And an outrageous amount of money!"

He reached his hand around the accountant to flip open the cover and skim the first few pages of the Voynich manuscript.

"But it will be worth it, I'm sure. For now I have my own copy."

And then, in a sudden change of tone that made the accountant's blood run cold with anticipation:

"Look! What do you see?"

Stevens read a passage in the old manuscript. He stumbled over the phrasing, which looked familiar. By reflex, his hands searched the stack of papers he had filled in the night. They found a particular page and Stevens placed it on top of the stack, right next to the manuscript, for comparison.

The two paragraphs were exactly alike. The same was written on both pages. Every single sentence consisted of exactly the same words, and each identical sentence was followed by the next one, which was exactly the same on the other page.

"You see it!" exclaimed Simian.

"How can that be?" the accountant asked, mostly to himself.

Simian flipped four pages further in the manuscript. This time, he didn't have to prompt Stevens to examine the page. The accountant reached for his stack of his own accord. He quickly found the relevant page and, after a long moment of shock, realized that these two passages were identical, too. Even an unfortunate ink stain, which had not been removed in the old manuscript, was found in the same place on the new paper. Every single letter, every character slanted like its counterpart in the other document, was just as compressed, here and there not as artfully curved as intended.

"It's a deception!" the accountant stammered, stunned. "It can't be! I've never seen this manuscript before, I..."

"It's 500 years old!" interrupted Simian, hissing. "And you've seen it before! Because you wrote it..."

"No!" the accountant shouted, and he had so much desperate power in his voice that Simian almost put some distance between himself and the man. But he held his ground, for he felt that he was on the right path.

"This is coincidence! No one can..."

Stevens interrupted his sentence to frantically place one sheet after another next to the manuscript, reading the same sentences every single time he sampled it.

"...memorize all of this! And I haven't even seen it before. I can't explain it, but it's not mine. It's a coincidence or a wicked hoax!"

Simian was not swayed by the new confidence in the man. Even though the accountant seemed to have suddenly outgrown his own lanky stature quite literally, it only accelerated what Simian was trying to accomplish.

"500 years!" he repeated. "It is possible! Not for the fairy tales and fantasies of men, most certainly not. Not even for most celestial creatures. And that has been the key to my quest! What is the only thing that can be written down again and again in the same way?"

The accountant tried to follow, but failed miserably.

"The truth!" spat Simian straight in his face. "I might not be able to. Most of us would take too much pleasure in using other words. Telling our own stories, building a linguistic garden for truth in which there are seasons – room to breathe, for new praise and old deeds! Oh, no..."

He shook himself with mock disgust.

"...No, reciting truth in its purest form, in its rigidity, its holiness, I would depart from it..."

Simian grabbed the accountant by the collar.

"I, Belial! From my pen flows more than the one, your truth."

With a jerk, Simian forced the accountant's head down so that he was pinned directly above the identical manuscripts.

"But from you it always gushes out the same...", Simian breathed above the writhing head.

"Abdiel!"

The accountant felt that word more than he heard it. Its sound penetrated him through marrow and bone. At the same moment, the letters in both manuscripts seemed to begin a dance. The English letters he had hitherto thought he saw distorted into the strangest shapes, pushed apart, merged with others. It took only the blink of an eye before the dance stopped and he finally recognized the same unmistakable characters that Simian had been seeing since he first glanced at the manuscript.

"What...?" the accountant bellowed.

He became sick to his stomach, from one second to the next. All the muscles tensed, as if to gather all their strength. The accountant didn't know what was happening to him, but he reared up and jumped backwards away from the lectern.

Simian in his back involuntarily joined in the leap. Both of them stumbled backward so that they came to rest side by side on the stage.

Since he was the one who had seen the events of the last few moments coming, Simian did not share his prisoner's consternation. He was able to quickly pick himself up, while the accountant remained motionless on the

floor in a tremendous storm of emotions. Simian, meanwhile, grabbed the manuscript. He sat down on top of the accountant so that he could hold the open page in front of his face.

"Do you recognize it now, our tongue? The only thing we have left here on earth from our homeland? At last!"

Simian did not wait for an answer. He could read in the chalky grimace beneath him what was going on behind that brow. Instead, he jumped back up and retrieved the newly written manuscript as well. He held both works triumphantly in the air.

"Abdiel," the accountant whispered to himself, syllable by syllable. Then again, and again. No word had passed his lips more laboriously in all his life, and yet it pained him physically now not to try again and again, slowly, sometimes slurred, then with all the energy he could muster.

Simian listened. He looked at the muttering figure the longest he could stand it without comment. Then he kicked the sole of its shoe, drowning out the monotonous repetition with a roaring war howl.

"That's your name!" he followed up in a normal tone of voice. "Practice it when I'm gone, because it's the name of a traitor! I don't want to hear it any more than I have to."

The accountant's eyes grew wide.

"Oh, did you think that was the end of it?" asked Simian mockingly. "That all you'd have to do is parrot your own name back to me? No, brother, no! We are far from finished here!"

With these words, Simian tossed the accountant's loose stack swirlingly in his face. The pages scattered like a startled flock of birds. They spread all over the stage. Simian treated the original manuscript with more care. He put it back in the backpack.

And left the accountant in the lecture hall once more, while the last brightness of the day disappeared over the highest point of the window.



He had anticipated everything. He had made no mistake. He had been master of the situation at all times. Now it was only up to him, and that should have filled him with pride. But there was one thing Simian had not counted on.

"Help me, brother!" the bundle of humanity that had once been his accountant implored him.

These were the first words Stevens called out to Simian at the next creak of the oak door. A stab went through Simian's heart, and he instantly loathed the love that was about to flood him because of this call for help. Against his determination, compassion had to lose out.

"Are we?" asked Simian as he squatted down by the accountant. "Are we brothers?"

"I don't know. I feel something. I feel way too much! What is wrong with me?"

Simian nodded satisfied. He enjoyed the helplessness in the other's eyes.

"You're on your way, brother!"

Stevens looked up at Simian expectantly.

"The beginning is made, but if you really knew who you were..."

Simian paused.

"...And what you've done, you wouldn't be asking me for help. You would fight me – if you were foolish. You'd ask me for forgiveness if you were smart. But you obviously haven't come far enough. You're not a whole human anymore. I've torn a hole in the curtain through which I can see your soul. You're not like me again yet, however."

Stevens shook his head. Not as a rebuttal, but because he was getting spooked by the language Simian was getting into.

"And, on this I give you my word, I will take you by the hand so that you will no longer have to remain in this miserable discord. But I will not lead you to the end. You will not become a god. You will not look me in the eye as an equal, you will not!"

"I am not a..."

"Silence!" commanded Simian.

He stood up and walked to the blackboard. As befitted an auditorium, it was huge, stretching from one end of the far wall almost to the other. On the sides was a mechanism by which the panel could be pulled up or lowered. There were two slates mounted one behind the other for this purpose. When the front one was full or the space for complex equations or graphs became too small towards the top, the rear part could be lifted up. In this state, the board would then be twice as tall as a man and as wide as a locomotive.

Simian took out several pieces of chalk from a bag. These were not collections of scraps he had gathered from somewhere. Each chalk stick was brand new, unused. Simian placed all but one on the floor in front of the blackboard. With the chalk stick he held in his hands, he drew a horizontal line on the board. It was as wide as his shoulders. Apparently satisfied with this achievement, Simian immediately drew a second line under the first. And then another one above it. Thus he put a handful of chalk lines on the board, all in one column.

He took a few steps back, examined the lines and then showed them with a proud gesture to the accountant, who was still squatting.

"I can explain why you feel this way. I have been there," Simian said. "But not now. First you must complete your work, so that you can learn the truth yourself."

"It's all written down, isn't it?" the accountant objected. "What more do you want me to do?"

Simian held out his chalk stick. He grinned maliciously.

"Use your gift!"

"Please, help me! Don't speak in riddles!"

Simian circled the chalk stick between his fingers as he considered this.

"It's true," he finally admitted. "There was a time when I called you brother. And you me. But that was longer ago than you can understand. So how can I talk to you about it, about our memories, when every fiber in your body resists the idea that you are older than this sorry shell?"

The accountant looked down at himself.

"Much older you are. You've had many faces, and so have I. You wouldn't believe me, no matter how far I might go. Your mouth calls me brother. But your soul hides behind the supposed truths your little head has learned in this life."

Simian tapped one end of the chalk against the accountant's forehead.

"No, this last step is yours alone. Luckily for you, you can rely on this one thing that not even I can pull off."

"I don't know what you mean!"

"Abdiel!" boomed Simian at the top of his lungs. "The one among us from whose mouth everything becomes truth when he speaks. That is your gift! You cannot lie, but better yet, what you say comes to pass!"

Again Simian assumed the pose before the blackboard in which he had first offered the chalk stick to the accountant.

"I had suspected that this talent hadn't just clung to your tongue all these years. And over there is my proof!"

He pointed to the large pile of paper, scattered remnants of his last exit.

"Let's see if I continue to be right, and if the truth is bound to drip from your fingers!"

Now Simian no longer waited for the accountant to take the chalk from his hand. He knelt and pressed the utensil between both hands of the perplexed, crouching man.

"Here! You can write yourself free, here at the blackboard!"

"What should I write?"

"Names!"

"Names?"

"All of them!" elaborated Simian. "I want you to write the name of every single human you were before Oliver Stevens, right there on those lines!"

The accountant was visibly struggling to digest everything he had just heard. If he had not felt so miserable, and no longer himself at all, Simian's words would have been nothing more to him than the sick fantasy of a sick man. But as it was, one absurdity amplified the next. It literally pulled him

away from his knees to his feet, toward the blackboard.

Simian helped him stand up. They walked together to the wall.

"Start with your name," Simian suggested. "Here, at the bottom."

The accountant placed the chalk on the board. He trembled, so that the sweep of white chalk became a wild line under his fingers. Yet he wrote.

"*Oliver Stevens*," Simian read aloud.

"But..."

"No but!", Simian nipped in the bud whatever protest the accountant was about to make. "The next name!"

"I don't know any!"

"Stop clinging to what you know," Simian scolded. "It only matters what you want to write, not what you can write..."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"Don't think about writing down names. You must want to read the truth! The truth about everything and everyone whose body you were in before this one!"

"There are thousands of names. I can't just write any one."

"Try it!" Simian challenged the accountant. "Write any name..."

He wanted to do it. He wanted to take out all his anxiety and frustration on the chalk and on this insane game. He wanted to just scribble a random name on the board.

But he couldn't. The accountant's hand would not touch the chalk, no matter how hard he tried. It seemed to be held off as if by an invisible wall.

"My hand!"

"I knew it!" triumphed Simian. "Write your father's name!"

Beads of sweat broke out on the accountant's forehead. His hands had been shaking before; now his whole body trembled as he tried to write on the blackboard in spite of the resistance.

"Good! You see? What you write will be the truth. Otherwise, it won't go on the blackboard in the first place."

The accountant lost the chalk from his hand. It jingled hollowly across

the floor as he leaned in exhaustion against the blackboard. He was startled at how easy this was. How easily he could touch it now. Nothing stopped him since he wasn't trying to use the chalk this time.

"You cursed me!" he cried out.

Simian threw his head back in laughter.

"Fight back, yell at me, it doesn't change a thing!"

He lunged at the accountant and covered his eyes before the latter understood what was happening.

"If you must think, trust what comes to your mind first," he said as the accountant squirmed less and less under his hands. "Remember!"

The accountant froze. He stood as if all life would drain out of him. Simian disengaged his hands from the man's eyes and found them now voluntarily closed. He stooped for the chalk, only to quickly wedge it back between the motionless man's fingers.

"And then write..."

A few seconds passed in which there was no movement, in which no breath was heard. Even Simian stopped breathing. Then the accountant's hand moved up to the blackboard. The chalk squeaked as he wrote.

"John Milton," Simian read aloud after the squeaking stopped.

The accountant's eyes snapped open. He gawked at the letters as if each one were an evil spirit. He grabbed his head and began to groan. His eyes grew wider and wider.

Simian stepped back, keeping his distance. The accountant's facial expression and body language suddenly made him uncomfortable. He looked more like a wild animal in shoes than a human being. An animal that was fighting for survival.

"Abdiel!" he shouted.

The one addressed went down with groans and whimpers. The wild animal did not seek to vent its panic on anyone other than itself. The accountant turned on his side and pulled in his arms and legs. If he wanted to make himself so small that he would disappear from the world, he failed.

Simian recovered from the surprise of the ugly spectacle. He watched from a safe distance as the crouching figure's chest rose and fell less violently after a few minutes. The breathing became calmer, the eyes less glazed.

Had he looked like that himself, back on the floe in the river? So defenseless and removed from anything worldly?

"A whole life, laid bare in seconds," he mused softly, pointing to the new name. "You've been this person, this shell whose sole purpose was to keep your soul locked away and pass it on to the next shell."

The accountant sought eye contact with Simian. He could not move.

"It will stop soon. And then you'll continue, with the next name, you hear? Until every single one is here."

Simian tapped the board.

"Please don't..." it came whimpering from the floor.

Simian leaned down and emphasized each of the three words as if it were an irrevocable decision:

"Each. Single. Name."

From now on, Simian visited the lecture hall several times a day. Gone were the weeks when he had been able to see the next steps coming. He did not know exactly what would happen now. Above all, he had no idea how many names there were. He remembered the moment when he himself had stepped out of the fog of human derangement. At least, he called it a moment. He had no conception of how long the gush of all the collected memories had poured over him. With his captive, it was going differently anyway. Simian had not had to do anything. Everything had happened at once. This one, his former brother, did not experience his revival in the same way. To some extent, he even seemed to have control over it, either going to the board for the next name or not.

Still, Simian would not have wanted to trade places with him. He would rather feast on the agony he saw flash through the intimidated body with each

new name. That quieted his vengeful thoughts for the moment, even if he continued to be unable to wait until all memories had returned to the accountant's shell.

When that would be was the crux of the matter, which necessitated Simian's regular presence. It would take his opponent weeks if he took as much time as he did after the first name. It wasn't until many hours later that the second name appeared on the blackboard. Simian didn't want to risk a sudden dramatic increase in pace in his absence. He figured that after two or three days, the seizures looked less violent. Or the accountant had become more comfortable with the recurring shock. In any case, it was no longer just one or two names a day that ended up on the wall, but a handful.

Soon there was no denying it. The process became faster and faster, the prisoner more and more composed. By the time the chalk was putting words on the board every minute, interrupted only by pained expressions on the scribe's face, Simian would not leave the room anymore.

It ended in a morning. Both parts of the blackboard were littered with underlined names. There was virtually no blank space left. Some names were squeezed between others that had been written down long before. Simian knew some of them. Not personally, that is, he had not met these people in their time. No, they were famous names.

All famous for the same thing, just through the centuries. Famous for their writings.

Powerful rays of sunlight filtered through the window, much more powerful than on most days. The scribe eased away from the blackboard and turned his face to the light.

A short stub of chalk fell to the floor.

"Belial..." said the accountant, who under the sun's rays had little in common with the timid figure Simian had found at his desk many weeks ago.

"Abdiel!" responded Simian.

He waited for more, for a salutation. Or for an accusation. But he found himself disappointed. Silence returned to the auditorium.

"Are you finished, Abdiel?" asked Simian.

"Yes."

There was stillness in that short answer. And Simian didn't want to acknowledge it. All the work he had put in so he could bend the rules of this heavenly punishment and expose the enemy. He was afraid that suddenly the roles would change. He didn't want to grant Abdiel the love he once had for him. He did not want him to get better. Above all, he did not want him to gain the self-confidence that had once made him the only one to dare to defy Lucifer in person.

Before Simian could delve deeper into this unpleasant maelstrom of thoughts, something happened that instantly relieved him. Before him, Abdiel still stood calmly, facing the window. But from the corners of his eyes tears began to run down his cheeks.

"Do you feel sorry for yourself?" quipped Simian contemptuously. His brief insecurity from a moment ago now took the opportunity to slip away along with the expelled words. He would not have to compete with the proud angel of old.

"Why am I here?" asked Abdiel. "Why are we in the same place, Belial?"

It took Simian a great deal of discipline and a good deal of his unparalleled experience in hiding true intentions for him to keep his temper at that moment. He pretended to be angry on the outside, though grateful on the inside. He would keep the upper hand because he now knew that Abdiel did not have the answers to his questions either. His counterpart was not privy to them. He had not been sent. He had suffered the same punishment.

Abdiel was in doubt. That was all Simian needed.

"Don't you remember how the battle ended?" he asked.

"I do!"

"Then what are you asking for? We fell down. My whole army, cast out and driven over the edge like cattle!"

"You wanted to overthrow God!" protested Abdiel, still crying.

"And you?"



Simian struck the decisive blow in his plan. Abdiel had no answer.

"You thought you were fighting for your god, didn't you? You and all the other blindly obedient ones. Why do you ask me why you are here, here on earth? He drove you into Chaos with us. This is your god! Rebels or worshippers, he didn't care. That's what you get for being loyal. Your soul has been condemned to be reborn in humans just like mine. Again and again! Crammed into impermanence, far from home..."

"No..."

"No?" mimicked Simian. He observed the deep uncertainty in Abdiel's eyes. "Is this what you dreamed of when you went to battle against us?"

"He couldn't have done that!" countered Abdiel. "He has not cast his faithful out of Heaven. You want to deceive me!"

"Very well! In fact, you are probably right and your ranks are not down here. They are bathing in triumph instead, there in immortality, where you and I belong. But what does it mean for you, if that's true? Why has not only your God forsaken you, but the likes of you as well? Where has your piety gotten you? Are you an example?

"For what?" whimpered Abdiel, struck by every single poisoned word Simian spewed at him.

"For the fact that none of us is protected from his hunger for power!"

"He is all!"

"And he tolerates no equals beside him. He is drunk with himself, your god. He was afraid of Lucifer. That is the truth! That's why he had us cast out, lock, stock and barrel. No forgiveness, no judgment, ...and you are the example, the warning that his faithful are not safe from his whims even in the hour of greatest victory.

"Lie!"

"You have been nothing but an expendable pawn in his rigged game. Face it, Abdiel! You know that I am right. I have nothing to gain by withholding the truth from you. You see it for yourself!"

"I believe! I believe in him!"

"Then do that. Today and for the rest of the time you will spend alone with me among all those humans. Two sinners doomed on this forgotten shore to know the true light and never see it again. Never again, Abdiel!

"He wouldn't do that to me..."

"He did it to you. Thousands of years ago. You are forgotten."

"Your words are false!"

"Did I lie to you, then?" countered Simian. "Did it not come to pass as I told you, when you were no more than an accountant?"

Simian straightened up menacingly before Abdiel.

"Belial does what is good for Belial. I know you!"

"Judge me all you want," Simian dismissed the remark impassively. "But you are alone with me. I found you, I didn't give you the punishment. Don't blame me for your maker's abandonment of you. You, his most loyal warrior!"

"No, I..., that's not..."

"You? You will do as I say, because unlike your god, I am here with you. I recognized you and didn't leave you in the fog like he did."

Abdiel shook his head vehemently.

"Stop talking! Stop poisoning me!"

"The poison I sucked out of you, over there. Word by word, name by name rid you of a masquerade unworthy of any angel, rebel or not."

"Be quiet!"

Abdiel tried to cover his ears. He began to circle around Simian. Simian did not take his eyes off him. He didn't dream of leaving Abdiel alone and continued to talk at him nonstop.

"Never! Now that I have you? Even in your clueless human guises, you couldn't stop justifying the war. Look, all those names! All those destinies that had to express themselves, through song, speeches, poems. From now on I will tell you what your destiny is, because without me you wouldn't have awakened: you'll stay by my side. I'm all you have left of Heaven."

Abdiel turned away in the middle of his circling run and charged past Simian, who braced himself for an attack. Instead, Abdiel sped into a full run,

leaped over the corner of a row of seats, and dashed toward the window with the hole in it.

"Stop!" yelled Simian, as soon as he understood.

But it was too late. Abdiel contracted into a ball as he jumped and crashed into the window, just above the ledge. Glass shattered with a screeching crack, from the top to the bottom of the frame. Countless shards rained down into the abandoned library on the other side, including a wooden strut torn from the window by the impact.

Only the body did not follow. Not immediately. All the strength of his thin legs had not been enough to make the accountant's gaunt stature chase through the glass. He was too light. And so, in the middle of the frame, he impaled himself on the remaining prongs of the pane, as if inertia had yet to figure out which direction to give the nod to.

Abdiel's twisted form howled in its fragile prison. Simian looked at the sight, fascinated, and did nothing. There was a loud crack in the woodwork of the maltreated window. Then a remnant of the glass broke under the weight bearing down on it. The body tilted so far toward the library that there was no turning back. Abdiel slid off the prongs with a groan. Silently he fell towards the marble floor of the library.

Simian listened for a while without moving from the spot. His heart was racing. Again and again the fall replayed in his mind. He felt nothing, he finally realized. Why? He checked himself. Because everything was different now. For him and all who were like him, there was no such thing as easy ways out. Not anymore. They had crossed the threshold, not only to their memories and to their true selves, but also to the great plan. The one that he had not conceived and that he had not yet figured out either.

He did not believe in coincidences. He believed in roles to be played. Roles that were assigned and that one could not refuse to play, just by invoking blood and fractures.

Simian stepped to the shattered window. Far below him, he saw Abdiel lying on his back in a sea of shards and pieces of wood. The latter belonged to

a desk that had splintered under the impact. The things that the desk had been supporting were found here and there among the debris.

"How fitting..." said Simian to himself.

He saw a broken little inkwell next to Abdiel's head. If it had held any ink, it had dried up long ago. An old-fashioned quill completed the cask. It had landed on Abdiel's thigh.

"Wherever you go, brother, the words always travel with you. You are their poor king, as I am the poor king of patience."

Simian pondered, while soft moans could be heard from below.

"Rex Goosequill!" he called down into the library. "You will receive this last name from me. You will need it, for there is much for you and me to do..."