

To Judge Between Dreams
by Duncan Germain

“A long year, a fine business, a good day’s work, and a warm hearth. To dinner!”

Adrien Delacour raised his cup, his voice mixing with a dozen others as he echoed the toast. At the apprentices’ table, several of the younger boys began laughing and throwing crumbs at each other while the older boys rolled their eyes and tried to seem as though they weren’t itching to join in. Jean-Esmond Everard reached forward to carve a slice from the roasted bird with a knife bearing the crossed hammer and torch of the Blacksmiths’ Guild, nudging aside a bowl of oranges as he did so. Both tables – the master’s and the apprentices’ – were weighed down with food: herring, pheasant, corn, potatoes, lettuce, eggs, three kinds of bread, ale, water, and wine, all on simple wooden plates or in bowls of modest, unadorned metal. Two candles burned for the ten boys at the long table, while only one stood for the three elders at the round one.

“This is quite a feast, Master,” said Adrien as he lowered his cup.

Master Everard smiled as he passed the steaming slice to his wife. “It’s a new year, Adrien. Nothing like a feast to welcome January.” Cutting off another slice for himself, he settled back into his wooden chair with a sigh and began chatting with his wife about their plans for the year. Adrien contented himself with an orange, bought at market the day before from a trader who claimed to come from the far south of Italy. While not rich, Master Everard could certainly afford such a meal once a year – as the only blacksmith outside of the city in all the surrounding countryside, he took in the business of nearly every farmer and all of the townsfolk. King’s Forge, his business and home, was the largest building in the small town of Luce, a day’s light travel from the city of Vézelay. Built near the town walls, away from the hustle and crowd of the marketplace, it was ideally placed to catch the eye of farmers on their way to market from the outlying fields. The forge occupied nearly all of the ground floor, with the apprentices lodged two to a bed in the five spacious stalls at the back. Jean-Esmond Everard himself lived upstairs with his

wife, Monique, and Adrien lived in a small shack in the yard behind the building, where the raw metals were kept under oiled cloths.

Adrien had been apprenticed to Master Everard unusually early, at the age of eight. Too slight at first to haul and hammer, he had started out working the bellows and sweeping the shop after closing. A quick learner, he had rapidly mastered his trade, and when his parents perished in a fire during his twelfth year, Master Everard agreed to be his guardian. Upon becoming a journeyman at fifteen – too young to begin his own business – he had entered into partnership with Master Everard, whose former partner had recently died of sickness, leaving a hole in the business. For teaching all of the apprentices and doing a third of the forge work, Adrien was given room and board, further training in the finest techniques of smithing, and the fifth part of the King's Forge earnings, £6 a year. It was an unusual and generous arrangement, as journeymen were usually not given board by the master, made possible only by the close relationship between the youth and the blacksmith, more like that of father to son than of apprentice to master or even lesser partner to greater. Now, eight years later – twenty-three and an accomplished journeyman when most people his age were just out of their apprenticeships – he was second in skill only to Everard himself.

"Sir Rainier came by this morning while you were out with the apprentices, Adrien," said Master Everard, breaking the young man out of his reverie. He took a swig of ale and wiped his bearded face with a coarse wool napkin. "Apparently, he needs his new set of armor done sooner than we thought."

Adrien looked up from his orange, which now lay peeled and separated on his wooden plate. The armor, which he had been working on for nearly two months, was almost complete. Master Everard had delegated the entire project to him, busy as he was with door locks, candleholders, and a new set of kitchenware for a rich merchant in Vézelay. He had crafted the breastplate to match the knight's chest perfectly, allowing several of the older apprentices work on the leg and arm plating. All that remained to be done was the helmet, which Adrien had planned to work into the face of a lion.

"How soon, Master?"

“By noon two days from now. None of my other work is urgent, so you may use the best tools if you like. Can you finish it?”

Adrien smiled. “Yes, if you don’t mind my working at the forge today and tomorrow both, until well past midnight.”

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Adrien worked the bellows steadily, pumping them in and out, in and out, raising the heat of the forge fire until his hair curled and his eyes watered. Grasping a set of tongs, he reached into the flames and pulled out the glowing white sheet of metal. Very carefully he carried it over to the anvil – the forge floor was smooth swept dirt, and the sheet was not likely to break, but loose fire was the nightmare of every man in a town made almost entirely of wood. Returning the prongs to their proper place, he found a hammer and chisel and stepped over to the foil.

Ordinarily he would cast an object of such complexity, but for a battle helmet, he needed the strength that only hammering would bring. Working as quietly as he could, for it was well past nightfall and both the master and the apprentices were sleeping, he began to hammer out his pattern. His slow pace served him well for other reasons, too, as he was more careful and precise with his strokes.

Adrien enjoyed working at night, for many reasons. In the isolation of the empty forge, he felt truly one with his tools in a way that was not possible during the day, with the boys afoot and dozens of tasks pressing on him constantly. Alone with the fire and the anvil, working independently and following only his own orders, he could almost convince himself that it was *his* forge, and that he was the sole master and owner.

Steady, he reminded himself. Master Everard was the most generous and understanding of mentors, and their relationship had never failed to benefit Adrien. Still, it would be nice to finally be free of his training, to be a master blacksmith in his own right.

But you have to be approved by the Guild, first. Your masterwork must be accepted before you can join the Guild as a full member. Every journeyman was required to craft

some tool or ornament at the end of their training, as a final proof of their readiness and skill at the art of smithing. This masterpiece would be submitted to the Guild Council in Vézelay as a permanent gift, and they would judge whether or not it made a journeyman worthy of the title Master. Ordinarily, the masterpiece was a plow or a breastplate or a set of locks, some simple yet difficult item that a blacksmith would likely be called upon to make many times in the future, but Adrien had something special in mind, something he had been working on in secret for nearly four years ...

A sneeze between hammer blows made him whirl around. A blacksmith's shop, filled as it was with tools and products, was a prime target for daring thieves, and though the Watch patrolled at night, they were neither thorough nor above the occasional bribe.

A quick survey of the shop revealed the source of the sound. A young boy, perhaps ten years old, dressed in wet rags and shivering with cold, crouched beneath an open window. Snowflakes whirled in on the quiet night breeze, melting as they encountered the blast of hot air from the forge. The boy, a beggar or a peasant orphan by the looks of him, had probably been attracted by the noise and then entered the window to escape the cold. Fuel was scarce everywhere in the land, and even the rich could rarely afford fires at night; stocking the forge with enough wood to stay in business took nearly a fourth of Master Everard's earnings. The forge was probably the only place where such a poorly dressed boy could find warmth in the middle of a cold January night.

Adrien placed his hammer on the ground and crouched, beckoning the boy in, away from the window. Sniffing, he came forward slowly, his eyes watching Adrien's hands suspiciously.

A peasant orphan, or a runaway, definitely, Adrien thought. He had the hands and feet of a worker, not a beggar. How he had gotten in past the Gates and the Watch, Adrien didn't know, but that damage was certainly already done, and there was no point in forcing him back out into the cold.

Adrien reached out and grasped the boy's hand, smiling kindly. "Hello. I am Adrien Delacour. Whose acquaintance am I making?"

The young boy sniffed and rubbed his eyes, his face red from the cold. "Tristan," he said simply, his voice wavering.

Adrien smiled. "Well, Tristan, you seem to have interrupted my work." He gestured to the anvil, where the foil had already cooled to a deep brown. The boy looked worried for a moment, as though he thought Adrien was going to be angry, but he didn't speak. "Will you help me mend it, then?" he asked.

Pleased and willing to do anything to stay in the warmth of the forge, Tristan nodded. Adrien straightened and grasped the tongs again. Placing the foil back in the fire, he showed Tristan how to pump the bellows with slow, strong strokes. Four times he reheated the foil as he worked, Tristan's eyes following his every move. When he reached his stopping point for the night, he placed the half-made faceplate on another anvil and wiped his brow. The boy was strong and had learned quickly, and Adrien had finished nearly an hour earlier than expected.

Perhaps, he thought, I have time for a little more work before I leave.... He glanced at Tristan, then went to a chest in the back of the shop. Shifting aside piles of cloak pins, sewing tools, iron crosses, and candleholders that were waiting for sale, he withdrew a long, thin, wool-wrapped package. He laid it on the anvil and, catching Tristan's eye and giving him a wink, unwrapped it.

Lying among the brown wool, shining brightly in the red light of the forge fire, was the sword of a warrior. The blade was nearly three feet long, edged along both sides and needle sharp at the tip. Its handle and guard formed a crucifix worked in alternating silver and black steel, with a single, thread-thick gold inlay spiraling around the grip. An image of the virgin was engraved, an inch tall, on the pommel, and a prayer was embossed around the guard in Latin. Tristan's eyes were as large as dinner plates as he stared, and Adrien laughed.

The £6 Adrien earned yearly as Master Everard's partner was a princely sum in such a small town, half again as much as a carpenter or mason and on the order of the wages of a professional stonecutter working for a rich lord. Yet, beyond the meager price of bread and ale for himself, shoes every few years and new clothes as old ones wore out, Adrien needed little. He did not provide the metal or tools that he used in his work; he did not pay to maintain the forge and the rent of land.

Instead, for the last four years, his saved pay had gone into purchases of the finest silver and steel: a grain here, a scrap there, unwanted jewelry and retrieved junk from ruined buildings and old kitchens. Secretly, in the night, he had smelted the metal and begun work on his masterpiece, a work of art more stunning than any he thought the Vézelay Blacksmiths' Guild had ever seen. His progress had been painstaking, but his vision sure and his technique excellent, and now, four years later, it was nearly ready for presentation. Finally, after fifteen years tied to the same Master, he was almost ready to become a true blacksmith, to start his own forge and earn his own way in the world.

He hefted the sword, switching from one-handed to two-handed grip, whirling it around his head. Tristan squealed, and Adrien laughed. He was no swordsman, but he could *feel* the rightness in the blade, the perfect balance, the sure grip. He had done his work well, and now his dream was ready to be realized. Master Everard would be surprised and pleased to see that Adrien had completed his masterwork without ever needing to interrupt his devotion to the work of King's Forge.

He held the blade aloft, examining it in the fire. Hundreds of hours had gone into its making; it was without flaw. All it needed now, in the tradition of all famous blades (he laughed), was a name.

Bringer de Rêves – Bringer of Dreams. His masterpiece, the final proof of his skill, that would deliver him to the life he had dreamed of since he first came to Master Everard as a boy. No one thing had ever held so much of his care and his love. He bent over the sword with his tiniest chisel, barely more than an awl, and began etching the words into the blade, just above the hilt.

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Tired and sore, weary to the bone but elated, he doused the forge fire and lit his lantern, wrapping his cloak around him to trudge across the snow-covered yard to his shack. Holding the sword in his right hand and the lantern in his left, he flipped the wrappings towards Tristan. They were just the right size for him to use as a

shield against the cold.

Walking back through the darkness, Adrien reflected on the quiet, ragged boy. He had been strong and patient, a quick learner. Just such a boy, he thought, would he like for his first true apprentice ...

He hid his sword in the snow against the wall of his shack and stepped inside. Lighting the lantern that hung from the ceiling, he turned to close the door and was startled to see his Master's wife, Monique, sitting on a stool in the corner.

"Ah ... pardon, Mistress, I did not know you were here."

Monique smiled, tugging her thick cloak tightly around her shoulders. "I couldn't sleep, Adrien, so I came down to watch your work on Sir Rainier's armor."

Adrien's face fell. The well-to-do townsfolk were harshly disapproving of the beggars and poor peasants "infesting" the town, and Master and Mistress Everard were no exception. It was more because of the poor than because of thieves or attackers that the Watch patrolled the city and the Gates were locked at night. He had let a vagrant boy into the forge at night ... surely she would be angry.

Wait ... *his sword!* She must have seen that, too! His secret was out! Would she scold him for that, as well? He had paid for the metal himself, but he had been using the forge fires at night, and the wear and tear on the Master's tools over four years was not negligible. As the wife of the artisan, Mistress Everard was in control of the costs of the business, and could rightly be incensed over the use he'd made of her husband's forge.

His head low, he waited for the tongue-lashing, but it never came. Slowly, he looked up. Her face, rather than angry, was compassionate and warm.

"Mistress, I ..."

"Don't worry, Adrien. I am not angry with you. I do wonder, though, why you have remained here with my husband so long, when your work is so obviously ... masterful."

Adrien was taken aback. "The sword is only just finished, Mistress ..."

"But you could have devoted all of your time to it and finished it years ago, no? Surely Jean-Esmond would not have stopped you, would not have held back his most-beloved apprentice."

Adrien bit back his words, gathered his thoughts. "Mistress ... you and Master Everard have been kind to me, and the forge needed a youthful partner. I thought ... I thought I wouldn't leave until ... until I was sure I was ready."

Monique looked away for a moment, her lips pursed. She still did not look upset, but she was ... tense. Finally, she looked back. "Do you remember the new law that the Council passed regarding vagrants at night?"

Adrien searched his memory. Laws of that sort rarely made much impact upon him. "Was it the one about ... anyone found loose in the town without reason after nightfall is to be considered a thief?"

"That boy shouldn't have been here, Adrien. He is a beggar or a poor farmer's child. He doesn't need to be dirtying our house and clogging our streets. The law is set. Any vagrant found in the streets at night is a thief, and should be treated as such. Why didn't you call the Watch?"

"He's just a boy, Mistress. There are laws higher than those set by men. To turn him away in the cold like that ... it would be cruel, Mistress. You took me in when I was little older, though surely I was of no worth to you. Should I not return the favor?"

Monique looked at Adrien, the barest hint of a smile playing about her lips. "Then it was decency that led you to let the boy pump the bellows for you?"

Adrien considered his reply. "It cost me nothing, Mistress, and it meant a great deal to him."

"But if he had been discovered ... if the Watch had called, you would have been taken in as an accomplice to thievery, regardless of the truth. The law is harsh, but it is the law that the Watch follows."

"Sometimes, Mistress, a moment comes where one side of a choice can be found again, but the other opportunity may vanish if ignored. I will have every chance to be safe, warm, and alone behind the forge walls ... how many chances will I get to take in a stranger and be kind to him? It was the Christian thing to do."

Monique smiled again and stood, straightening her cloak. She walked out the door and paused as she turned to shut it. "I thought as much, Adrien. I will see you in the morning. Rest soundly. There is much work to be done."

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A single candle burned in Adrien's shack. Candle wax was expensive, and Adrien had put all of his money into either food or metal; therefore, he had only one candle, and it was very special to him. He knelt before the tiny flame, its light dancing in his eyes. Though there was a lantern nailed by the door, the candle was more than enough to fill his shack with light. Seven feet by five feet, there was room only for a cot and a small stool next to a tiny table atop which sat his valuables. The flickering light sat atop a clumsy iron-wrought candleholder, his first piece as an apprentice. Next to the candleholder were a loaf of bread and a small pitcher of ale, his food for the day, untouched because of the surprise meal given by Master Everard in honor of the New Year. Beside his food was his knife, a gift from the Master from when he became a journeyman, and a small statue of Mary, the last remaining possession from his parents.

He bowed his head in prayer, his face close to the candle so that its heat on his face was like the breath of an infant, fragile and yet powerful. He lit the candle only when he offered up special prayers, and today's was certainly an unusual one. He began, as always, with a formalized prayer to Mary.

In nominae Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

Ave Maria, Dominus tecum, benedictus tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui Jesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.

Amen.

Per Ipsum, et Cum Ipso, et In Ipso, Deo gratias.

Lord, help me pass the trials of the next few days with strength.
Let my work be a tool for the knights who will use it to defend the land,
Let my word and deed be filled with goodness, so that I may be saved.
Let my father and mother hear my voice in heaven,
That they may see what I have done and be pleased.
Let my masterwork be a worthy addition to the Guild

That I may finally be a blacksmith, a master, as I have worked so hard for years.

Let the boy who came to me come again, that I may help him

As Jesus was helped, by strangers,

And give me the strength to find the right path in my future.

In nominae Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.

He lifted his head and was silent for a moment, then he kissed his fingers, placed them on his statue's lips, and extinguished the candle with his fingertips. *Two more days*, he thought. Two more days, and the knight's armor would be done. *That's the right moment to give my sword to Master Everard to take to the Guild.*

My Bringer of Dreams.

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In the cold of night, the warmth of the forge fire was comforting, but even in the winter its daytime heat was oppressive. Adrien wiped the sweat from his brow and straightened from his work. Across the shop, Master Everard was supervising three of the apprentices hard at work on a cauldron, while on the second anvil, two other boys were bent over the left leg plate of Sir Rainier's suit. The other five apprentices were out, making deliveries, buying food and slag, and advertising.

Adrien had only just bent over the faceplate again when he heard soft footsteps behind him. He was about to straighten when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and Sir Rainier's face appeared beside his own.

Sir Rainier was the only knight in the town of Luce, a warrior under the lord of Vézelay. He was Keeper of the Keys and the holder of the Gate; his squires were lookouts, messenger boys, scouts, and defenders of the town. He also organized the Watch, though he did not control it; that responsibility was left to the Council. Adrien had a friend who was a squire under Rainier, Corin Cozoniere, and the things he had said had led Adrien to hold an almost mystical respect for the knight, whose strength and speed were said to be superhuman, and whose discipline and spirit were legendary.

"The work is good, Journeyman," said the knight. Adrien nodded tersely, and Rainier moved to the side, giving room for the hammer to rise and fall again. The lion had taken shape beneath Adrien's capable hands, and he was now adding fine hairlines to the mane. The lines would make the plate both more fearsome and more sturdy, as he corrugated the layers of metal and created slopes and planes to deflect the fall of an enemy blade. Sir Rainier leaned back against the wall, watching silently for several moments before speaking.

"It is a sad affair, this, do you not think?"

Adrien looked up in surprise. "What, sir? I don't understand."

The knight sighed. "The crusade. Surely you have heard? The barbarian Muslims have taken Edessa, in northern Syria. Imad ad-Din Zengi rules in a Christian city. Bernard of Clairvaux has been fanning the heartfires of our king, Louis VII, and he has succumbed."

Adrien was shocked. While no universal custom forbid it, it was becoming rarer and rarer for a knight to speak directly to any person not of noble rank. Yet here was this man, the greatest fighter in the countryside, talking to a journeyman smith on matters of war and religion.

"Of course, we have heard of his clamorings, sir, but what of them? Is there news?"

"News there is, Journeyman, and none of it good. Our king has made a call, to every good Christian man who has a sword and can heft it, to join him and Bernard in a holy crusade against the Muslims. The caravan from Luce leaves before first light – which is why I needed my armor – taking with it every man who has a sword and can heft it." The knight glared darkly at nothing in particular. "Black business, this. Nothing good will come of it, mark my words."

Adrien looked down at the faceplate he was hammering. It was nearly finished, but it had cooled once more. He placed it in the fire again, leaning on the bellows, until it glowed white-hot. "But sir," he said carefully, not wishing to offend such a powerful man, "isn't it a war for God?"

The knight looked down and spat. "A war on savages, it is, punishing ignorant peoples who have no knowledge of the truth, and then feeding them the word of

God with a sword so that the truth is always tainted in their minds by memories of men who killed their wives and burned their villages. There is little honor in this, boy.” He sighed. “Oh, how times are changing. I remember the day when knighthood stood for something, when it meant you were strong, and valiant, and brave, when it meant you would give your life in service to your lord and your people. Now, we are becoming tools, pawns in a game of nations, to be placed where great kings and pontiffs see fit.”

Adrien removed the faceplate and picked up his hammer again. “Does knighthood not still mean those things, then? Are you not still valiant and loyal?”

“The knights are changing, Journeyman. Recently it has been commanded that only the sons of knights may become knights, and that no one else may be raised to the fold. Mark my words, this is the end of the golden days. Soon, all those good men who would have earned the sword will turn to other, lesser pursuits, and fat lazy boys who have no honor to their name save their fathers’ will be granted the title on blood alone. If our only honor comes from holy conquest, then holy conquest will become the purpose of the knight, and the protection of honor and our people will become second to the politics of church and state.”

Adrien was stunned into speechlessness. He had never heard such words spoken before; they just weren’t *said* by men such as this! To hear a noble fighter speak so plainly to a commoner, and to hear him slander the church and state, was almost more than he could bear. Breathless, he bent again to his work as the knight made to move away, but as the hulking man turned, he gave one final remark over his shoulder in passing.

“Look well, young man, on the last of the old knights. I remember what it was to place my hands between those of my lord ... can any who come after me say the same? The times are changing, the times have changed.”

By the time Adrien dared look up again, Sir Rainier was deep in conversation with Master Everard on the other side of the shop. Adrien shook his head and raised the faceplate, finally completed, to the light. The lion’s face roared from the metal, its teeth shining with the red glow of the fire, but now to his eyes it appeared less like a lion and more like a jackal, a hunter preying on the weak and injured.

Adrien blinked, and the feeling and the faceplate were gone. In their place was Corin Cozoniere, who had snatched the plate from Adrien's hand and was looking at it with an expression of despair as deep as Rainier's.

"What's wrong, friend?" asked Adrien, as Corin placed the work back on the anvil.

"What's wrong? Have you not heard?"

"About the crusade?"

"No, you fool! About the law! The law that has been passed!"

Adrien blinked again, taken aback. "The law?"

"The law on knighthood! The parentage law!"

Something clicked in Adrien's memory. Rainier had just said something about knighthood and parentage ... "Only the children of knights may be knighted?"

"Exactly!" Corin spat, bitterly, and he sagged against the anvil and slid to the floor. Adrien crouched beside him, concerned. "All my life I've spent with Sir Rainier, and now I'm to be denied because my father was a carpenter, not a knight! As if it even matters what my father was! I will not be granted the title for my blood, and others less worthy than me will live the life that was meant for me. My dream is ruined, and all in a day."

Adrien's eyes goggled. He had known Corin since childhood; they had been educated in the same church and had played together for years; they had both gone off to their apprenticeships at the same age. Corin had always known that knighthood was a long shot; his father was well-off but not a noble and his success was utterly dependent on his dedication, his strength, his honor, and his distinction as a squire. Because of that, he had always worked the hardest and the longest, clung most strictly to the rules of his master, and become the favorite, over time, through his hard work. Adrien had always taken it as a given that Corin would become a knight, just as he had taken it as a given that he himself was destined to be a master blacksmith ... it was just the way of things, as obvious as night and day. But now ... if what Corin was saying was true, it could all be over ...

"Corin, wait! It can't be true, not really. If that were true, then all the knights who never marry, they'd never have children, and the knights would die off. The

king will *have* to admit at least a few people to knighthood! He'll have no choice – and you, the best squire, you'll be first in line, won't you?"

Corin looked at Adrien, his eyes, empty of hope and devoid of spirit, boring into the other man's. "There is only one way around the law," he said miserably. "The crusade. Men who distinguish themselves in service of God and their country will surely still be knighted."

Adrien let go a breath of relief. "Then your dream is secure, Corin! The crusade leaves in the morning ... you can go with them and earn your way."

Corin slumped, his head drooping and his eyes downcast. "I can't go, Adrien."

"Can't go? But Sir Rainier said that they were calling for every man – "

" – every man who has a sword and can heft it. I have no sword, Adrien. No sword, and no money. They won't have me without it; I'd be another mouth to feed, and to none of their benefit, as they see it."

Adrien looked away, so that his friend would not see how quickly the blood drained away from his face.

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Again Adrien kneeled in the darkness before a single candle of light. Again he prayed to the holy mother, Mary, and to his parents, and to God, for guidance.

No one knows I have the sword. If I produce it, and give it to him, no one can object. But by the same token, if I withhold it from him, and wait until the crusade has left, I can pretend that I forged it after the call to arms. Only the lady knows; she will respect my decision.

Or will she?

I broke her rules and the town law for the boy, and she approved. I let a filthy, beggardly child under her roof for sake of warmth, and she saw compassion in it and was pleased where she might have been angry. I told her it was the Christian thing to do.

O God, show me the way.

This war is a holy war ... or is it? Sir Rainier seems to think it is not, and who is more honorable than he? Yet the bishops and the king have decreed it is good, and are going to lead the men with their own swords. How can such men be wrong?

What is this to me? I am a blacksmith!

Father ... Mother ... Master and Mistress ... what would you do?

It is my dream, to become a master blacksmith, to join the Guild and be considered a man, to be known as an artisan of the craft, a worker of metal. All my life I have toiled and trained, waiting for the day when I would be granted the title of Master. All my life I have dreamed of the day when I would own my own forge, have my own apprentice, work the metal I choose to work and reap the benefits of my own sweet labor. For years I have strained towards my goal.

But is that as it is meant to be?

Corin, too, has strained towards his goal. For every excellence I have made in smithing, he has matched me in squirehood. He is determined, and skilled, and good. It is his dream, as smithing is mine.

Who, God, is to judge between dreams? Is it mine, this terrible task?

If I give up the sword, I will become a master some other day. It will not be the end. But if I do not give it up, Corin will become a knight some other day, perhaps even on this crusade. There is nothing to stop him from following the caravan, finding a blade, and joining the holy army.

But what blade is as true as mine? What if he dies in battle because his blade turns in his hands, or comes apart from the strike of a barbarian weapon?

My sword is good.

My masterpiece.

But for whom? The Guild keeps the masterworks given to them for judging; I will never see it again, and it will never be used as it was meant, as a weapon finer than any other. If I give it to the Guild, it will sit on a rack and look pretty.

But if I give it to Corin, it will bring death and destruction, in a war that may be murder plain. If Sir Rainier is to be believed ... can I give such a weapon to an evil cause?

It is on Corin that that responsibility falls. Only he can see to it that his might is used justly. And he will have Sir Rainier to guide him, as I have Master Everard to guide me.

But who gets the blade? Is my success more important than Corin's? Is my dream greater than his? Is my sword more beautiful than my service? Where can I turn, God?

Adrien hung his head, his eyes streaming with tears that hissed as they froze on

the cold floor. He looked up at the tiny flame, felt once more the warmth on his face like a baby's breath.

"Then it was decency that led you to let the boy pump the bellows for you?"

"It cost me nothing, Mistress, and it meant a great deal to him ... Sometimes, Mistress, a moment comes where one side of a choice can be found again, but the other opportunity may vanish if ignored. I will have every chance to be safe, warm, and alone behind the forge walls ... how many chances will I get to take in a stranger and be kind to him? It was the Christian thing to do."

The Christian thing to do. What is the price of a sword? It is in pounds and years, only. What is that next to honor, what is that next to dreams that may never come again?

Who is to judge between dreams? Why, the dreamers.

* * *

Corin awoke with the first gray of the coming dawn, but did not open his eyes. Around him, he could hear sounds of bustle and haste as the other squires rose to go about their daily tasks. He could hear the clink of metal on metal and the thud of metal on leather as Sir Rainier donned his freshly forged armor—for once without Corin's helping hands—hear the snorting of his war horse as it was saddled.

It was over. Years would pass before Sir Rainier would return, and by then it would be too late ... Corin would be too old, too unskilled, too ungainly, to begin learning again. When the next crusade was launched, he would be a feeble old man, unable to mount a horse, much less wield a sword. Sir Rainier knew this—that was why he had let Corin sleep. Neither wanted to see the look in the other's eyes.

Yet those days had not come yet. If all else was lost, what did he have? Why, only what he had always had. He had his discipline, and his body, and his mind. He had his strength, the strength that had driven him, of all the squires, to be the best. And here he was, lying asleep in bed while others worked.

He moved, and stopped. His eyes opened.

There was something heavy in bed with him, something long and thin, wrapped many times in wool. He rose to his elbows and tugged on one end; the parcel rolled

away from him and off of his cot onto the floor, unraveling as it went. When it came to rest a few feet away, Corin's eyes beheld a great, shining sword, the finest he had ever seen—the sword of a warrior. The blade was nearly three feet long, edged along both sides and needle sharp at the tip. Its handle and guard formed a crucifix worked in alternating silver and black steel, with a single, thread-thick gold inlay spiraling around the grip. An image of the virgin was engraved, an inch tall, on the pommel, and a prayer was embossed around the guard in Latin. Corin read aloud, for it was one he knew well from his boyhood days in the town church.

*Ave Maria, Dominus tecum, benedictus tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui Jesus.
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae, amen.*

He looked around. All throughout the room, the other squires had frozen in their work, their eyes locked on his. Slowly, he stood, with shaking knees.

"Whose is this?"

No one answered. All simply stared at him, their mouths agape. Corin looked around at them.

"Whose sword is this?" he called out again. "Who has left this here?"

There came the creak of hinges, and Sir Rainier stepped into the room, his eyes seeming to take in every detail at a glance. They turned to meet Corin's and narrowed, giving little away. "The note, boy," Sir Rainier said.

Corin looked down at his blankets, saw the scrap of paper that had been hidden beneath the blade. He bent over, picked it up, and read it, this time silently.

To the Dreamer, it read, from the Judge.

Corin's eyes fell again to the beautiful blade, the words of the call to arms echoing through his head.

"Every good Christian man who has a sword and can heft it."

There was a name inscribed on the blade, in fine French characters that traced their way up the cold steel from the hilt. He bent further, ran his fingers along the steady etching. The blade had a name.

Bringer of Dreams.