“Its angels for sure!” She cried.

Heads turned at the outcry and just for a moment, the busy comings and goings of the square quieted. The evening sun shone down red and low against the tops of the buildings.

Most of the villagers were clearly curious, but when they saw who had caused the disturbance, they just as quickly sighed and resumed whatever work they had previously been doing.

It was easy to tell who the foreigners were. A man in a white coat took a look at the woman and hesitantly took a step towards her.

“Excuse me? Did I hear you say angels?”

Her head swiveled towards him, revealing light blue eyes which stared past without focusing. The man's heart fell just a bit. She was clearly blind.

He further evaluated the woman. She was pale of complexion with tangled blond hair. She was medium height and wore neither the rags of the commoner nor the rich dress of the lady, but rather the well worn robes of the clergy.

He shook his head, he had been looking for something like this; for years it had seemed

“Yes. Angels!” She repeated, pausing a bit to hear, then, having satisfied some condition, advanced hesitantly towards him.

“What makes you so sure it is angels?” He asked, scratching his beard and looking around, now perhaps a bit embarrassed.

The other townspeople said nothing but a few gave expressions that made him think that this outbreak was not uncommon.

“It could be no other creature.” She said simply.

He was still hesitant, but there was a sudden and unexpected honesty to her words. Against his better judgment he approached her.

“What kind of man are you?” She asked, tilting her head slightly. “Are you a man of god?”

And yet there was still something about the woman, perhaps her condition, or the way in which the townspeople had ignored her which galled him; warned him that perhaps he was better off simply walking away.

But she had struck so quickly to the heart of things.

“Yes.” He said, “I would very much like to believe that I am a man of god.”

“And yourself? Are you a nun?” He asked. “I had thought that this region was firmly against the participation of women in the clergy?”

She did not respond, and despite never truly making eye contact with him, he felt her averting her eyes. He thought he detected some sort of sorrow in her face, which she pridefully tried to hide by turning swiftly the other way at a heavily laden cart bouncing against the stones.

When she turned back, there was something lost from the childish exuberance of her original cry, something more cynical or at least measured had taken its place.

“This region's laws are as you describe, despite what ills of the soul they might cause. It is as you had said. I was once a woman of the church. Now I try to help the poor in what other ways I can.”

“I apologize for my brashness. I have been for a time in less civilized territory, and my manners have not yet returned to what they should be. But I am interested truly in these angels. I would like very much to hear of them.”

“Then if I could could be so brash as to ask for your hand? I have gotten better at finding my way around this town, but here in the square there is much commotion. I admit I fear to be struck by a cart.”

She wore no rings or jewelry on her pale hand.

“Certainly. I believe I saw a bench not one block past. Perhaps you could relate to me your tale there.”

A thin smile ran its way across her face.

“But I forget myself again. I am Gregory Andropov.”

“And I am named Meredith Chellwell.”

The two continued down the street until they arrived at the bench.

“Are you a smith, Mr. Andropov?” She asked as they sat down.

“No, I am… a common soldier.” He admitted.

“Ah, I see. From the most recent campaign then. I'm sorry for asking. But I will say, despite what anyone says otherwise, every one of you are heroes, battle won or lost.”

“Thank you for the kind words. If only others could see it thusly. But in fact that is partially the reason I was interested in our exclamation earlier. I believe the happenstance on the field that day was no coincidence. It was surely His sign. We had somehow lost His favor. And now, if there truly are angels, even here, so far from that field, I would like very much to see them, even if they are naught but figments.”

“Mr. Andropov, they are not figments, I will be clear. I perceived them as clear at the sun in the sky and with no doubt in my mind. I was walking lonesome down by the river when I made a wrong turn. I thought I had been following the path by the old barn, but instead I wandered out into the fields.”

“You were walking alone, with your condition?”

Meredith sighed and agreed. “I will admit that at times I am too headstrong. My sister cautioned my walking by myself so, but I was eager to show her that I could navigate the city unaided. I was proven incorrect.”

“So what did you see?… Oh, I didn't mean...” He tripped over his words.

“It is a figure of speech, you meant no disrespect. Besides, it is proper that I can describe the experience as seeing despite my ailment. I had followed the path until it started to turn downward. At this point I thought I had erred, but was not sure. I decided to continue a little ways until I could be more confident.”

“All at once I started to hear a sound; a melody lovely and pleasant to the ear. I have never heard anything like it, and the closest thing could only be a choir of the most beautiful voices. But even such a thing would be of no comparison to it.”

“I did not understand what I was hearing so I ventured further. Then I smelt the freshest odor upon my nose. The ground became soft beneath my feet and voices called me further. Finally, I came upon them. Their shape was impossible to describe and I stood there for a long period of time, simply watching them. It was indescribable. When they had gone. I was able to find my way back to the town. I have been trying to get someone to accompany me ever since.”

“Did you hear them say anything?” he asked, “did you… hear any voice you recognized?”

“I believe I did. My youngest sister. Lost to us from the plague that came a year ago; the same one which took my sight.”

He nodded, and a smile threatened to break out on his grim face.

“It is very good to hear that such things are possible under the grace of God. I… cannot explain, or rather should not grace ears such as yours with my tales. But I will admit there are times that my faith wavered out there on the battlefield. I believe I must attempt to see these things if you will take me to them.”

She was silent for a moment.

“Do you really wish to see them? Honestly? Truly?”

She suddenly looked worried.

“Of course! Why would I take back my words?”

The smile mostly returned to her face.

“Since my sight has left me, there are a number in the village who have taken advantage of my ailment and who poke fun of me. I believe that they are told to do so by the new preacher. He is newly ordained and fresh from the capitol. I don't believe he likes my presence in the area at all.”

“Once or twice he has sent boys to play tricks at me, and I just couldn't go, knowing that at any second I could be tripped or left alone.”

“There are those who did such things to you?” he asked, his voice rising in anger.

“Yes. Many times.”

“How dare such people call themselves faithful to the written words! I can't believe this!”

“But it is fine. I can tell that you are not such a person. Are you ready to go?”

“Oh, right now?” He asked, taken aback. The sun was setting against the sky. “It is quite late. Can we perhaps go tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” She said suddenly. She rose sharply, breaking his grasp from hers. “You would take the divine presence for granted for a day? No. It must be tonight! I… Oh. I apologize. I for some reason feel like it must be tonight, and that they will have departed if we tarry. And also… like I said there are many who teased me, saying, oh, I will come walking with you one day, or the next week, but never truly doing so.”

“No. I promise on my honor that my intentions are true.” He said, rising as well to his feet. “Yet, it is also true that it is becoming quite late. The sun will be setting shortly, and I would not want you catching a cold.”

She smiled again, this time with sadness in her eyes.

“Ah, but you are probably right. I find it hard to track such things, in my world of darkness.”

He hesitated. She clearly meant to still go tonight. She tugged gently on his hand.

“How about a question a soldier would be able to answer? How long could it take for a man and a woman such as ourselves to travel a half mile of distance?”

“A half mile? Through the woods or on level terrain?” he entertained her.

“Flat terrain. Just past the white bridge and down a quarter mile. I have become good at tracking my steps so that I can know here I am without hearing.”

“And that is where these angels are?”

“Indeed.”

“Then we can go and come back before it becomes truly dark. No more than twenty minutes, even perhaps with your ailment.”

“Mr. Andropov, I am very glad to hear that. It was so inspiring observing them. You will see as well. And as you said, we can go and come back quickly.”

She grasped his hand tightly and he lead them down the street towards the white bridge.

The commotion of the city lessened more and more as they left the concentrated merchant district behind them. The gurgle of the clear running stream and the shout of the river boat runners soon faded into nothing.

The fields ran before them, and amidst the fields, on each rise where the earth rose sharply, several exposed rocks or stands of trees.

Meredith smiled brightly. “Its just over that way. I believe there is a copse of trees? I thought I heard birds when I went there the first time.”

“Indeed. The area is heavily wooded past a point.” There was a hint of worry in his voice.

“Oh, you neednt worry.” She said, smiling past him. “It is just inside, a small clearing. Besides, it is not like we are going off into the wild. I have been here before after all.”

“You are right.” He admitted.

As they went, and still holding onto her hand, he found himself thinking more and more of that day when the battle was still fresh and men groaned from the ground. His other hand went to a necklace and he rubbed the symbol on its chain.

The forest path twisted its way down a well rutted road. Above them was a canopy of trees, the leaves just barely blocking the sun, so that in the light breeze the silhouettes shook amid red stained light.

She urged him towards a path which veered off to the side and down a small ravine.

“They're just down there!”

Eager, but apprehensive, he took her hand again and carefully traversed the slope.

Around them was a tunnel of green leaves shaking, turned brown in the light. Although he could feel no wind, the forest sighed around them, a long and slow exhale. He felt oddly detached as they came to the end of the ravine and looked outward into the clearing.

A shudder suddenly ran through Meredith's body as she righted and looked forward. Mr. Andropov, who had been helping her down, noticed and turned his eyes upward.

She let out a small cry. “I remember!” And collapsed to the ground unmoving.

The wind ran among them. The air was still and tinged with an earthy smell. The clearing hung before him, not quite real and yet not quite imaginary, the edges running away into impossibility.

Shapes moved along the ground, some upright and some hunched over. Some with many legs and others with none, propelled only by the extrusions of their own bodies. And their bodies… Their substance was shaped yet twisted from form, arrested in the midst of generation. As if they had originally intended to be made by the pouring of liquid flesh molds but only half of the process had completed, only to have it freeze and finalize in horrible aborted creation.

Even more, in the shifting crimson twilight of the clearing, and as the dark shadows raced and swung with the invisible wind, the shapes of the things shifted and moved as well, never holding still to one form. Eyes ran across the flesh, across their bodies; feathers and beaks pierced the skin, exuding out to terminal length, then folding back inwards to be swallowed; tusks and fangs, mouths and arms, ears and hair, sprouting in odd clumps, always shifting.

A wordless scream rose in his mouth, arrested in time by the same still wind which ran through them all.

In the same moment, horror was mixed instantly with another emotion: awe.

The beings had noticed them. The features merging, forming and emerging, disappearing, all amid the dancing twilight. And the eyes turned on them. Numerous forms. Slits and pupils, ovals and circles; beady yellow gazes and cold blue stares. Within every one was an infinity into which he found himself slipping.

Despite their tortured form, each one held terrible presence which only increased as he stared at them. Held captive, he began to see that within the eyes was a purpose, the same kind that one might see if they stared into the eyes of any other man. Yet multiplied beyond recognition. They were the eyes of a being that has seen humanity take its first tottering steps from the trees, that had seen mountains form, forest sprout from seed into massive trunks, oceans rise and fall, all as they watched wordlessly.

His eyes filled with tears which he could not hope to stop, and his breath came in ragged short gasps, then stopping completely, mouth open to catch the still wind.

One hand still gripped Meredith's, not caring that the flesh had long since gone, and that it merely held the remains of bone, the other clenched around the amulet around his neck, his knuckles turning white with force.

Before him, the bodies of his fellow soldiers lay, on the field, beaten and destroyed. He could see every one of them in terrible clarity. The one nearest to him reached out his hand. In it was a necklace. Everything was too clear. They shuddered on the ground writhing until their bodies split from their souls, spilling out into the blood soaked dying day. They emerged, still wet with amniotic fluid, glistening slick in the last rays. They turned on the grass, and wailed in their first breaths, staining the green into red. Everything was too clear. He could see every detail. It was too much; far too much for one man to see!

His body shook with a terrible force and he could not look away. Within the angels, the inner presence emerged, the ideology behind the action, the puppeteer behind the marionettes.

The cry onto which he had been holding spewed out forcibly as if wrenched out, and immediately became lost within the turmoil, lost amid the cries of the other soldiers. His back wrenched, his joints moved him forward, horribly towards the thing reaching out to him. He was caught up in the wind himself now, and flung through with terrible force. His body touched the edge of his understanding.

The clearing was empty now, and the wind had gone. Darkness had fallen. Everything was still. There were only two figures which still lingered: the remains of Meredith and the former Mr. Andropov.

He reached out a hand slowly and pushed himself upward, crawling into a prone position. A grunt sounded from his lips. His clothing was scorched and burned. His skin was flaked and peeling, but he was alive. A hand touched ground and pressed against it, his shoulder transmitting the action into his body which heaved himself upwards.

He gasped, faltered, and fell backwards, landing beside what used to be Meredith.

He collected himself, and now, in a modicum of control, fell to ceaseless laughter as he passed his hand before his eyes, which stared upwards, unseeing.

“Oh angels you said. And you did not disappoint. But angels of what god?”