

# The Consequential Yet Confusing Council of Constance

A Trilogy of Short Historical Fiction Pieces

by

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Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

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## Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my thesis advisor Peter Frenzel. He has guided me through this thesis for over a year now, and he continues to surprise me with his extensive knowledge of every aspect of medieval life about which I could ask. Especially because he is retired, I deeply appreciate the amount of time he dedicated to helping me complete this ambitious project.

I would like to thank my writing professors Paula Sharp and Anne Greene for giving me invaluable writing tools and encouraged me to keep using them.

I would like to thank all of my professors in the College of Letters and the German Studies Department who have taught me in my four years at Wesleyan. They have broadened my view of the world and inspired me to challenge my own conceptions.

I would like to thank my brother, Erhard Konerding, for his helpful editing, his knowledge, and his nearly infinite collection of humorous hats.

I would like to thank my peers in the College of Letters whose unique perspectives changed and enhanced my own.

And finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who celebrated with me during my best times and supported me during my worst as I wrote this thesis.

Foreword

*“History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.”*

*~Winston Churchill*

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) played a significant role in the development of modern thought. It represented the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages. It was difficult to invest great faith in the Holy Roman Empire when there were three popes and, for a short time, three Holy Roman emperors, none of whom had any real claim to wealth or power. The church had reached a level of corruption that theologians like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus could no longer ignore. The Roman kings/emperors had become thinly spread and poorly funded. The Council of Constance was an attempt to reorganize the empire in an effort to save it. The council brought about a single, new pope, gave the secular rulers more power, and burned the man who had most openly exposed the church's corruption. However, the council failed. By 1419, there was only one pope and one Roman king, but several conflicts followed.

The Great Schism of 1378 had resulted in two popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome. In 1409, the Council of Pisa sought to remedy this situation. The two current popes, Benedict XIII and Gregory XII, agreed to resign and recognize the pope elected at the council, Alexander V. This had been largely orchestrated by Cardinal Baldassare Cossa. The following year, Alexander V died, and Cossa took

his place as Pope John XXIII<sup>1</sup>. Both Benedict and Gregory opposed this and withdrew their resignations. The result was three popes who continuously warred among themselves and tried to raise money in ways many deemed sinful. John Wycliffe and Jan Hus were both against this. In short, they proposed that the Church have a less focal position in Christianity. Jan Hus in particular spoke out about ecclesiology, the Eucharist, and the sale of indulgences. He was burned at the stake for heresy in Constance in 1415. This was a major cause of the following Hussite Wars in Bohemia (1419-1434).

The Holy Roman emperors were first elected Roman king by the seven German electors, and later crowned emperor in (typically) Aachen and crowned by the pope in Rome. In 1400, the electors deposed the Roman emperor, Wenceslas IV. They elected in his place the Pfalzgraf<sup>2</sup> Ruprecht III. Wenceslas refused to recognize his deposition. In 1402, he was imprisoned by his younger brother, Sigmund. In 1410, Ruprecht died, leaving the question of who should replace him. Wenceslas was one of the seven electors, but he refused to vote, maintaining the deposition had been unlawful. On September 20 of that year, Sigmund was elected, but some electors contested this. Thus a second election occurred on October 1, in which Jobst of Moravia, Wenceslas' and Sigmund's cousin, was elected. Early in the following year, Jobst of Moravia died. As Wenceslas grew ill, this left Sigmund relatively uncontested.

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Pope John XXIII who was pope 1958-1963. This Pope John XXIII was later declared an anti-pope.

<sup>2</sup> Count Palatine, one of the seven electors who held great power and land.

In writing these stories, I strove to maintain as much historical accuracy as possible. I researched various aspects of late medieval daily life such as housing, food, family dynamics, and clothing. I visited historical sites in Heidelberg and Constance and studied the old streets. I went to several major art museums and examined art books to see depictions of clothing, landscapes, and homes. I read works written by and biographies about Jan Hus, Oswald von Wolkenstein, and Ludwig III. I read genealogy records and eyewitness reports. To the very best of my knowledge, every scene is historically accurate and reflects the general atmosphere of the time. While some scenes may not have documentary evidence, they could have quite conceivably happened.

Chapter 1:

Corruption



Monday, 1. October, 1414

In the castle of Krakovec, Master Jan Hus slept at a table, head on his writings. He had told himself he would lie down for but a few minutes, but his restless mind would hear of no such nonsense. Lord Jindrich Lefl of Lazan, the lord of Krakovec castle, had been kind enough to allow Jan to stay there following his exile from Prague in 1412. Not that the priest felt he deserved to be in exile. He had only agreed to go when the interdict in Prague had become so strict it hurt those around him. He had been spending his days writing about his religious views, an impressive feat considering how often he had been afflicted with headaches so severe he could not fully move. That day was particularly bad. His head felt as though it were being stabbed with a thousand knives. He rolled his head back and forth, attempting to push out the pain with the pressure of the table.

A knock on the door freed Jan of the last bit of delusion he had that he could will his mind to rest even for a moment. "Yes?" Jan called out, patting down his hair.

Peter of Mladonovice entered the room, and as always, Jan's eyes were drawn immediately to Peter's chin. He had a cleft so large it made his attempts at beards sink and look comical, which was why he so often shaved his face. He was not yet thirty, yet his hair was already receding. Perhaps it was his nerves. Peter was one of Jan's closer friends. Two years before, he had followed the Czech priest into exile, to Jan's protest. He wished to chronicle his friend's life. He said Jan would be important one day because of his daring. Jan doubted this but knew Peter needed something positive to do while in exile. Jan himself often felt compelled to write in

order to distract himself. He missed the beautiful Bethlehem Chapel back in Prague, where crowds squeezed under the vaulted ceilings to hear him preach.

“Master Hus?” Peter said, “Two men are here to see you. They say the Roman King Sigmund<sup>3</sup> personally sent them to bring you to the Council of Constance.”

Jan rose with a start. He wiped at the dust in his robes. He was suddenly quite aware of his unusually large, brown eyes. Every time he gazed into a pond or out a glass window, all he could see was his own, disproportionate appearance. In Prague, his eyes had been a recognizable feature that would point out the great Master Hus. But here, in exile, they were a sign of how out of place he was. He had long since given up tending to his beard. It had come to form an uncontrollable square around his aging face.

The two men entered, tightly holding their hats. They were well-dressed and tall. They briskly uttered the usual formalities. His most excellent etc., etc., kindly requests etc., etc., that you, Master Hus, attend etc., etc., the Council of Constance. Jan scarcely listened to the men. They seemed inviting enough. Then again, that was how they were supposed to seem. Sigmund had little reason to take a personal interest in this matter. Hus’ followers were not causing a *large* stir. No, Jan was not one to involve himself in politics, but from the little he knew, he could surmise this was most likely related to Sigmund’s battles with his brother, Wenceslas I. Wenceslas still claimed the title of Roman king despite the electors having selected Sigmund in 1411. Also, Sigmund wanted Bohemia, which Wenceslas had. But

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<sup>3</sup> Sigmund was not crowned Holy Roman emperor until May 31, 1433.

where did Jan fit into this? Would Sigmund protect him to gain support in Prague or hurt him to get at Wenceslas? Did Sigmund know how much Wenceslas and his wife, Sophia, supported Jan? Would it be wise to attend the council?

And then one of Sigmund's emissaries, John of Chlum, said the convincing words: safe conduct. The Holy Roman king (or, at least, the only man who claimed the title and was not too ill to defend his right to it) did not offer safe conduct lightly. But how far would his protection extend? Jan needed to think, but his head was in far too much pain to allow such a luxury. He thanked the gentlemen and said he felt ill but would gladly speak with them the following day. They reluctantly left, and Jan returned to his restless state, remembering how he came to be where he was.

#### Thursday, 24. June, 1412

Jan sat in his room, writing a letter to Queen Sophia on the disgraceful sale of indulgences in Prague. He could hear a vague noise outside his window, but he paid it no heed. He asked Queen Sophia to influence her husband to do something about these indulgences before a large-scale riot occurred. Jan was unsure how to phrase a sentence. He did not wish to alarm her unnecessarily, but he wanted to emphasize how serious the situation in Prague was. All were furious with the recent sale of indulgences. Pope John XXIII desperately needed funding for his increasingly violent conflict with Ladislav, the King of Naples, who had invaded Rome the previous December to put Pope-claimant Gregory XII, in power. Jan had been quite divided on this matter. He recognized John XXIII's need for defending his papal rights, and, as a supporter of King Wenceslas, he did not wish Pope Gregory XII in

power as he supported Wenceslas' brother Sigmund. And yet, Jan was horrified at how certain priests were pushing the citizens of Prague to buy indulgences. Some even had the boldness to charge for confessions. And the Germans, ever eager for an excuse to fight with the Czechs, had threatened to burn the Bethlehem Chapel...again. Jan sighed. He no longer knew what he supported, which was why he was so thankful for Queen Sophia.

The pressure in his head was mounting. He paused from his writing and lay in bed. He gazed up at the patterns of wood in the ceiling, reflecting on how wondrous God was for such intricate work. He focused on a single spot, where the wood formed a knot. It twisted into such an interesting shape. As he mindlessly gazed, Jan heard a large crowd cheering and laughing. Oh no! The Germans were once more drunk and hungry for fire. The crowd grew closer. No, that was not German. It was Czech. What was happening? Jan rose and peered out his window. There, led by his friend, Jerome, was a procession of drunken Bohemians. They were cheering as they followed an open carriage bearing a student named Daniel, who was dressed as a prostitute. The boys at the University perpetually teased Daniel about his scrawny, feminine appearance. Had he volunteered? He certainly seemed to be enjoying himself wearing a sheet dyed red with...no, surely that was not blood. Surely, Jerome had better taste! The sheet was wrapped around Daniel off his shoulders to reveal a well-stuffed bosom. He danced and waved at the crowd as silver bells on his arms and legs rang out.

Whoever had funded this parade had spared no expense! It was difficult to make out from so far away, but it appeared as though there was a giant mock papal bull in front of Daniel, the seal dragging along on the ground. The carriage was

pulled by several other, clearly drunk students. Countless townsfolk followed the carriage, singing a mixture of Czech drinking songs about the joys of prostitution and Latin church music. Some were carrying sticks and waving them in the air like flags or hitting the carriage if they were near enough. There were even a few people holding swords. Small children climbed atop their parents' shoulders, waving their arms recklessly and shouting.

Jan bit his hand until it left marks. No. No, he should not laugh. This was terrible. He must contain himself. This was not the proper way to protest the indulgences. And yet, for a moment, Jan did not care. With everything that had occurred in the last few years, the battles with Archbishop Zbyněk, the struggle to keep King Wenceslas on his side, the constant threats made to burn the Bethlehem Chapel, the fight to keep the Germans from taking over the university, and so on, this absurd parade of Jan's followers made it seem as though Jan's whole life had strayed out of the realm of reality. He allowed himself for a moment to imagine joining the procession, drinking and singing. It was such an appealing thought. Yet he knew it was his duty as a religious figure to stay where he was and finish his letter to Queen Sophia. He returned to his table and read his words. He tried to pay no heed to the parade outside. No, he could not endorse such behavior. Still, he missed the days when he could enjoy long nights of drinking and the occasional brawl in a tavern. He had so rarely capitalized on opportunities to do so in his youth, but he had always been able to when he wished. Now, it was his duty to remain an upstanding religious figure, something he enjoyed most days. This was not one of those days.

The screaming of the crowd grew louder as it proceeded down the street. Jan's headache throbbed with every note of every song. He could not think clearly.

It was no use. Jan returned to his window and watched. The parade reached the cattle market and stopped. With the large, arched door, the New Town Hall looked as though it was staring at the square in shock with mouth agape as all gathered around Daniel. He began to read the giant papal bull, but the crowd booed. Finally, Lord Vok of Waldstein (who, as Jan later discovered, was the leader and organizer of this...he knew not what to call it) tore the bull from Daniel's hands and lit it aflame, in much the same manner that Zbyněk had burned Wycliffe's books. The crowd cheered and clinked their mugs, paying no heed as they spilled their ale. Jan tried to feel his friends' joy vicariously as he watched what he would have to chastise the following day.

Saturday, 3. November, 1414

Jan Hus arrived in Constance with a handful of men, amongst whom were Lord John Kepka of Cthulm, Lord Wenceslas of Dubá, and Peter of Mladonovice. Jan mused to himself as their boat sailed across Lake Constance. Because of how they held themselves, the two lords always appeared to be regal, jolly twins. They were both corpulent, and neither ceased smiling for a moment. The only difference between them was that Lord John had blonde, flowing hair above his ever-smiling face and Lord Wenceslas had brown, flowing hair above his ever-smiling face. Compared to their rounded faces, Peter's chin seemed even more cleft than usual, especially as he shivered in the cold. He looked more nervous than Jan at the thought of the upcoming Council. It was early in the morning. The morning dew soaked into their clothing, making them shiver in the cold air. The walls towered above Jan,

blocking the sight of all else. If he stared hard enough, Jan could just make out the guards at the main gate. Jan and his friends approached the shore, announced their purpose, and entered. The wooden roofs of the houses seemed rough and uninviting. The mud of the cobblestones soaked into Jan's boots. He and his companions squished along the roads, posting and distributing proclamations, stating he had come to Constance freely and under the protection of King Sigmund to clear himself of the accusation of heresy. The paper had been expensive, but Lord John felt it would prevent attacks given the accusations made against Jan. They were to stay in the house of a widow named Fida on St. Paul's Street near the Schnetz Gate. It was near the lake, as the fearful half of Jan's mind noted whenever he wished to flee. It was also near Pope John XXIII's dwelling, as the courageous half of Jan's mind noted whenever he considered appealing to the pope in person.

Jan inspected his room. It was small, but sufficient. There was enough straw on the ground to hide the dirt that had been there for at least a dozen years. It smelled of rotten eggs and burnt wood. Nevertheless, if the need were to arise, as it well might, Jan felt he could remain in this room for days without too much discomfort. Jan's friends were busy gathering information and seeking audiences with this person and that. Jan sat to lunch alone. The bread holding his stew was particularly hard, but the bits of beef and potatoes in the stew more than made up for this. Overall, this was not a terrible beginning to his time in Constance. All should be over by Easter, and Jan could soon return home to Prague, declared an innocent man. Perhaps if he repeated this statement enough, it would prove true. Perhaps.

Monday, 10. July, 1412

It was early-afternoon. Jan was eating lunch with masters of the university and a few students. They were discussing King Wenceslas' recent pardoning of Lord Vok of Waldstein for the procession in June and the following decree that anyone who began a riot in the streets would be beheaded. Daniel, as the chief "figure" of the parade, was afraid some Germans might try to provoke a fight with him and rarely left home without others. The Ultramontane Party<sup>4</sup> was in power in the old town's councils, and the members were eager to use this power before they lost it. The decree had clearly encouraged the vendors of indulgences as they preached ever more fervently for the support of Pope John XXIII's campaign in Italy. At his sermon in the Bethlehem Chapel the day before, Jan continued to discourage rioting while maintaining the sale of indulgences to be shameful. Still he knew how well his followers listened when he told them not to grow too rowdy.

Jan's conversation with another master at the university was interrupted by a loud rap at the door. Jan looked up at the weathered wood on the door and felt his stomach drop out of his body. "Come in!" he answered.

The door was thrown open to reveal Jerome, gasping for air and drenched. "Jan," he said. "You need to come with me...now. It's urgent."

"What happened?" Jan asked, knowing the answer to come.

Jerome placed his arms on the table to steady himself and struggled to regain his usual breathing pattern. Finally, he panted, "There were...riots...in the St. Jacob

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<sup>4</sup> Against church reform, primarily made up of Germans



church, Týn church, and...St. Vitus cathedral....The crowds started fights and...threw rotten cabbages at the...priests, shouting about...simony.” He grasped for a mug, gulped the remaining ale it contained, and continued, “Three men who supposedly started the riots have been arrested. They are at the New Town Hall. You must come with me. Perhaps you can convince the councilors not to execute them.”

Jan rose and followed Jerome, the others running after in a vain attempt to help. The rain poured down on their heads. They had to slow at times so as not to slip in the mud. Finally they reached the council. Jan straightened his hat so that it formed a neat triangle around his forehead, caught his breath, and rubbed at the countless wrinkles on his black robes. Perhaps if he could just act dignified enough, his oratorical skills would be enough to overcome *this* ordeal.

The New Town Hall was almost bare. The shutters had been closed tightly against the rain, leaving little light. The building was a mere thirty-five years old, yet the perfect white of the walls was already tinged with brown from dirt rising through the air. There was a long table, at which the councilors sat, and a handful of chairs. The councilors appeared to be great, looming figures with a faint light behind them. Jan’s colleagues and students sat in the chairs behind him and urged him on with confident smiles. He slowly stepped forward. As he grew nearer, he could see the councilors’ stern, German faces glare at him as though he were an ant that could not be crushed soon enough.

He looked each councilor in the eyes, cleared his throat, and said, “Masters, it has come to my attention that three young men have been arrested.” He leaned on the table in front of him to still his trembling body, but then, fearing the councilors would take notice of his nerves, backed away so as not to be too close to them. “While I do

not condone rioting in his majesty's streets, I fear this incident is my fault. I mistakenly instigated their actions in preaching against the sale of indulgences, which I find to be against the spirit of our lord and savior, Jesus Christ's teachings. These men, in their passion for Christ, were merely acting according to my words. I am at fault, not them. Please, I beg you, do not punish these men for my actions. If anyone must be punished, it should be me." He continued in this vein, pleaded for the men's lives, spoke of the excitability of youth, and other such things, all the while knowing there was little chance of saving these men. No, not men, boys.

The councilors thanked Jan and asked him to wait outside as they conferred among themselves. Jan and the others visited the men in the room where they were being held. The German guards suspiciously scowled at Jan and his followers as they entered, but there was no real reason to keep the men from seeing their priest before their execution. The roof was a few inches too short, and some of the taller men needed to bend over. Jan attempted to comfort the prisoners, saying they had done God's work and would be rewarded if not in this life, in the next. Jan could not help but remark how young they looked. They had scarcely grown their beards. There were so many things they would never do. And for what? Their course of action may have been inappropriate, but they had fought for something important. No, they were not necessarily going to be executed. Jan had spoken well. Perhaps, just this once, the councilors would decide they had grown tired of bloodshed. Two of the young prisoners thanked Jan for speaking on their behalf. They said it was an honor to meet him in person and they believed he was right to speak out against the corruption within the church. The third man sat in the corner of the room and remained silent.

His dirty blonde hair fell everywhere, particularly in front of his face, and yet his green eyes shined through and burned Jan to his core.

Jan approached him, but before he could open his mouth to speak, the man said, “Do not bother asking for my confession. I regret nothing. The Týn church should be yours to teach noble Christians about God, not a nest of filth for simony to reach the heavens. At least other churches have a roof to contain the vile words of men who hardly deserve the title of priest. I am happy to die for my Lord today if that is what he so chooses.”

“And what is your name?” Jan asked.

“Miklos.”

Jan frowned at the man’s foolishness, “To be sure, I am glad to hear your passion for God, Miklos, but you can better serve Him through peacefully showing others the truth.”

Miklos laughed. “No one wishes to be shown the truth. It is easier to live a sinful life and hand a dishonest man a few coins. People have had plenty of chances to see the truth, and they have chosen to buy indulgences anyway. It was time we showed those German bastards we do not fear them. God is on our side.”

Jan was about to reply when the guards entered to inform him the councilors had made a decision. Jan and his followers left the room, reminding the prisoners to stay strong, and reentered the hall. Jan could see there was something false in their eyes behind their seeming smiles yet he could not quite tell why. Perhaps, he desperately hoped, they had given up searching for an excuse to execute these men.

The chief councilor rose from the table and said, “Master Hus, your arguments were quite convincing. It has been determined that these men were misguided by

false ideology and are not to be held responsible. An execution would only bring about more bloodshed, and we have no desire for that. Therefore, nothing will be done to these men. We will release them within the hour. Now, we ask that you and your followers go home as we would like to prevent further disruptions in this town.”

Jan could not believe his own ears. He had saved the three men’s lives. At least this time, matters had not turned out horribly. He thanked the councilors and left. He was greeted by a crowd of people, waiting to hear the outcome of this matter. Jan smiled and informed them the men would be freed and everyone should go home at the request of the council. Most left. Jan returned to the Bethlehem Chapel with the others, beaming as he went. The clouds had broken, allowing the sun to shine through the rain. For once, Jan had been successful in averting a crisis.

Jan later discovered that the men were not set free as the deceitful councilors had promised. After the crowd in the marketplace had dispersed, the councilors had ordered that the men be beheaded. They were taken not to the proper place of execution but to the north corner of the marketplace, away from the general population that was still in the area. The German soldiers were upset to hear their orders, but they remained dutiful. The young men were made to kneel, rain beating on their heads, and, one by one, the executioner cut off each of their heads in a single blow. The last one to be killed was Miklos.

After the men were killed, a young woman with soft, brown eyes emerged from the other side of the marketplace, bearing white, linen cloths. She tearfully looked at each man’s bodiless head. She reached Miklos last and broke into full sobbing. She covered each body with the cloths. The blood immediately spread through the sheets, aided by the rain, so that the cloths were soon stained red. She

called out to others nearby, and soon enough, a crowd assembled and bore the bodies to the Bethlehem Chapel, led by Master Jan of Jičín as he solemnly sang *Isti Sunt Sancti*, a hymn about the holy martyrs.

The woman who covered the bodies, Ivana, spoke with Jan that day. She told him she had been in love with Miklos. He had promised to marry her as soon as he finished his apprenticeship as a blacksmith. She and Miklos had regularly attended Jan's sermons. They were passionately moved by Jan's teachings, but Miklos had always been too quick to action. She had begged him not to fight. As Jan discovered at her funeral later that year, she had done so out of fear that she was pregnant, a fear which had proved true.

Thursday, 20. December, 1414

Jan was having another bout of his dreaded illness. His head felt as though it were on fire from the inside and burning through his unusually large eyes. It was so painful that he could not think. He felt weak. He attempted to move his arms, but they only feebly responded to his commands. The state of his room did not help his situation. He was in a prison cell near the sewers in the Dominican Monastery of Constance. His nose was constantly attacked by the stench of excrement. The room was dank. The very air he breathed plagued him. It felt wet. He was barely being fed. If he remained in such a state much longer, there would be no need for an execution.

Jan heard shouting growing nearer. One of the voices was that of the jolly Lord Wenceslas of Dubá. The other was the evil Stephen Páleč, his furrowed brow

line slanted in a frown over his eyes. At first, Pálež had been Jan's friend. He had even invited Jan to speak at his chapel once upon a time. But now, Pálež, along with Michael de Causis, was leading the trial against Jan, going so far as to falsely translate his works so they appeared heretical. Jan heard the shouting and winced. Oh no, not that day. Jan could scarcely move, let alone cope with the ongoing sham that was his trial.

“How can you do this to Master Hus? Can you not see he is ill? How can you expect him to rationally respond? Have you any sense of justice? Have you any sense of *decency*?” He knew that voice! It was Peter of Mladonovice. Jan pictured Peter's chin bouncing around wildly as he shouted, and the humorous image provided some small comfort.

“Heretics do not deserve justice or decency. They deserve fire, and I intend to bring that upon him.”

“He is no heretic. As you well know, he is here with the safe conduct of King Sigmund, who will be here in a few days' time. Do you think he will be pleased to hear Master Hus is here, being unjustly tried in a time of illness?”

“Safe conduct? How laughable! Heretics may not be granted safe conduct. Master Hus will receive no protection. Mark my words.”

They approached Jan's cell. He helplessly looked up with pained eyes. Even if he had been in perfect health, he knew Stephen's words to be true. There was nothing he could do. He would not get any semblance of protection from the king even when he did arrive at the council. And in this weakened state, Jan could not even defend himself.

Páleč grinned when he saw his prisoner's state. He knew this would be easy. "Master Hus, I am here to bring before you witnesses to testify to your heresy."

Jan could think of nothing to say but, "Please, have mercy today. I beg of you. Just leave me be this day. I am ill."

Páleč's furrowed brows turned upwards as he exaggerated his laugh. "Mercy? Clearly, your body is plagued for a reason. Why should I grant what God does not?"

And with that, Jan was dragged to the hallway above. Jan's friends were not allowed in the room, but Jan could hear them crying out in protest from outside. The walls of the Dominican chapel had recently been washed, as though mocking Jan with the contrast from his own cell. Páleč brought forward witness after witness. Each made various false claims against Jan, saying he had preached against the trinity or that he claimed to be a fourth part of the Trinity. It was difficult to tell through the chaos of so many testimonies being rushed forward and then away before he could defend himself.

Whenever he opened his mouth to respond, he was told to answer only yes or no to each question. Not that it mattered. Each time Jan spoke, the crowd in the room shouted from every corner that he was a heretic who should not be given a chance to speak. He looked from one jeering face to the next, searching for a glimmer of sympathy, but there was none. Stephen Páleč had ensured that Jan's friends could not be present. Jan pictured Lord John of Cthulm's jovial face, but it was difficult to imagine his being jovial on this day. It was one of the worst days of the trial yet. Jan's head throbbed with every shout as fifteen witnesses in total were rushed before him. Finally, he was sent back to his cell, the familiar stench and moisture being a

welcome alternative to the sound of the chapel above. At least there, he would be left alone, for the moment.

Friday, 1. October, 1412

It was dawn. A few rays of light had begun to pour into Jan's room through the shutters he had failed to shut properly the night before. Jan was soundly asleep in his room, exhausted from the various court appearances he had been making in an attempt to lift the interdict on Prague. Couples waited to be married. Families waited to bury their dead. All waited to confess their sins and thereby halt their fear of going to Hell. At first, it had seemed a temporary scare tactic, but by October the interdict had been active for a few months. The town was growing ever more restless. The Bethlehem Chapel had already been attacked by a mob of German fanatics while Jan had been preaching in spite of the interdict, but, fortunately, his followers had been able to repel them peacefully. In a desperate attempt to show his faith as a Christian, Jan had written an Appeal to Jesus, but this had only angered the Romanists, who opposed any proposition Jan made for church reform. Fearing citizens blaming Jan and his followers for the interdict, Jerome had organized a constant watch of the Bethlehem Chapel. Thank God he had.

Jan awoke from a haunting nightmare by a loud smashing sound. He opened his eyes and was greeted with the remains of a rotten cabbage that had exploded across the straw on the ground moments before. The stench of it filled his nostrils. He felt confused. Had someone accidentally tossed it through his window? He was soon answered by two more rotten cabbages, the squishy insides splattering over his



tired face, into his large eyes, and dripping down into his beard. Jan cautiously strode to his window and peered out. He was greeted by a crowd of three score Romanists, many of whom bore torches. A few stopped upon seeing his cabbage-covered figure. They pointed and shouted at him incomprehensibly.

After a while, their leader, a parish priest by the name of Bernard Chotek, calmed them and shouted to Jan, "Leave Prague! You and your heresies are unwanted here!"

Jan stared in shock. What could he do? He had feared a confrontation, but he had not anticipated an attack at his home. "I am no heretic. The interdict has been falsely placed on our city."

Chotek exaggeratedly laughed, "You preach against indulgences and for Wycliffe, a declared heretic. If you are no heretic, I am the King of Moravia!"

"Then good day, Your Highness!" Jan retorted before continuing with the same, tired sentence he had been saying for years, "I preach some of the reforms for which Wycliffe stood. I do not preach his every word."

Chotek, "Wycliffe is a heretic, and so are you. Leave Prague or suffer the fire due all heretics."

There was no reasoning with these Romanists. Jan noted the torches and grew weary. What could he do? "Please, just go home. The interdict will soon be lifted. I will gladly discuss the church with you, but setting my home on fire will not..."

"We are not setting your home aflame. That would not be enough to halt you and your followers," Chotek interrupted. With that, he turned to the mob and called out, "To the Bethlehem Chapel!"

The crowd cheered and marched on toward the Chapel. Jan watched in horror. He was not yet decently dressed. He ran back into his room and searched through the cabbage-covered straw, the rotten smell invading his nostrils. He found his robes on the floor, covered in dirt and cabbage, but he did not have the time to deal with the state of his clothing. He threw them on and dashed outside, wiping the cabbage off as he ran.

The mob reached Bethlehem Chapel. The two triangles atop the building appeared to be spears, poised in the air, prepared for a fight. The windows had been safely barred for just such an occasion. In front stood a small yet well-armed group of Jan's followers. The mob slowed, unsure how to proceed. They had not expected an armed guard guarding the chapel. All they had were torches and a handful of rotten vegetables.

Chotek yelled, "Charge!"

The mob looked at him, confused. Ten men ran forward, holding their torches before them as weapons. Kazimir, a towering man with large, carpenter arms, swung his fist at the nearest man, who promptly hit the ground with a thud, blood pouring from his head. Of the nine men left charging at the Chapel, four stopped. It had not occurred to them until that moment they would risk a true conflict. Five continued to charge. Kazimir turned on the man nearest himself while Jerome and a few others fought off the remaining members of the mob. More ran forward. Some ran away. Soon, there was a full fight of two dozen armed men against two score men with torches.

As Jan ran, he saw several Germans fleeing the Chapel. It seemed Jerome's guard had at least intimidated some of the mob. But what next? Jan knew the

interdict to be wrong and that the church had grown corrupt, but he did not wish for fighting amongst Christians over this. He needed to think quickly. He arrived at the Bethlehem Chapel amidst a full brawl. Men from both sides lay unconscious on the ground. Dark, red blood had been splattered across the white walls of the chapel. A few of Jan's followers had burn marks across their torn tunics. He called out for an end to the fighting, but he was knocked down by someone falling behind him. Slowly, the Romanists were running away as they realized Jan's followers were quite capable with their weapons. Jan regained his footing only to discover there was little left of the brawl he had come to stop. He stormed to Jerome in a fury.

“What have you done?”

Jerome strode forward without a trace of shame. He was not going to accept Jan's passivity that day, especially not after keeping the Bethlehem Chapel from being burnt to the ground. “I defended the chapel.”

“I told you to *passively* defend the chapel.”

Jerome spat out blood and shouted back, “And I told you we would be passive *if possible*. We can not allow the chapel to be burnt down. You're quite welcome.”

Jan was unsure how to respond. He was well aware Jerome was correct, but Jan could not openly say so. He had to maintain his image as a passive preacher of reform. Deep down, he missed the old drinking bouts with his friends that often resulted in a fight. He missed the thrill of throwing a punch. He even missed the resultant punch he would receive. He dearly wished he could have joined that day's brawl, but he had to represent a cause through passivity. He had to watch as others fought while he gave sermons, wrote letters, and made court appearances. He sighed.

“Thank you, Jerome,” he said. To some extent, he was relieved. At least he knew there would be someone to put out the fires after he was gone.

#### The Morning of Saturday, 6. July, 1415

Jan was wakened early. He was confused for a minute, but then he remembered why: the final day of his trial. The day before, he had spoken with his friends and read a kind, sincere letter from King Wenceslas.

Lord John of Cthulm had looked at Jan with a serious face that appeared out of place on his jolly body and said, “Master Jan, we are but laymen and know not how to advise you; therefore see if you yourself feel guilty in anything of which is charged against you, do not fear to be instructed therein and to recant. But if, indeed, you do not feel guilty of those things that are charged against you, follow the dictates of your conscience. Under no circumstances do anything against your conscience or lie in the sight of God: but rather be steadfast until death in what you know to be the truth.”

It was good advice. Jan would not lie even if it meant becoming a martyr today, as it almost certainly did. Indeed, he was unsure lying would save his life regardless. He had prepared his final words. He put on his black magisterial robes with the handsome silver girdle his friends had given him to wear that day. As soon as he left his room, he heard the guards behind him say to burn the couch and scatter the ashes into the Rhine. Many feared his becoming a martyr and did not wish to leave objects to which followers could flock.

He was led by Archbishop Wallenrod to the Cathedral of Constance. The sun beat down on his back. His robes made matters worse. As he marched through the street in chains to the fateful cathedral, he was greeted by a sea of faces. Some were bowed in sorrow. More cheered. Jan wished he could increase his pace, to hurry and hear the words he knew would come, but he had to follow the soldiers marching at his side. After some time, Jan ceased to notice the countless faces. All he could think was that this was the end, slowly drawing near, and he was unprepared. He felt he was making the correct choice. The church had grown absurdly corrupt. It had been necessary to speak out. And yet, Jan could not help but feel fear. He would soon be burned to death. He had seen men burn at the stake before. He had heard their bones crack. He had smelled their skin and hair sear. And, of course, he had heard their screams. They would always appear resolute not to give others the pleasure of watching them die, but the pain would ultimately overwhelm them, and they would cry out in agony. Being right in what he had done was small consolation for the pain Jan was facing. And waiting, knowing what was to come made matters so much worse.

At last, Jan reached the Cathedral of Constance, where he was made to wait until the end of the high mass. Heretics were not allowed to attend mass. The richly decorated walls towered high. The colossal door was guarded by a dozen Hungarian mercenaries. But of course, King Sigmund had hired enemies of Bohemia for such a task, in case Jan held on to any illusions that the king was on his side. The hot sun continued to beat down on him and burn his back. No, he should not think the word “burn.” Jan gazed up at the cathedral before him. He tried to focus on the groups of circles in the windows and the lines in the columns that held the highest tower. He

gazed at the wooden partition that had been erected at the gate to keep him from so much as seeing any part of the high mass.

Finally, Jan was allowed to enter the cathedral. King Sigmund sat on a throne in full state. The hall was so crowded that dozens had to stand in the back, amongst whom were many Bohemians wishing to see their Master Hus at the end. He slowly paced forward until he reached the sixth column in the nave. He paused and knelt down. He had been unable to attend high mass so he silently prayed. He did not care who watched or what they thought. He was about to die, and he wished to have a final conversation with God. He prayed for his soul, for his friends' safety, for the university, for the future of Christianity, for mercy and justice, for everything. It gave him clarity. He knew this would be his last prayer.

As he prayed, the bishop of Lodi ascended the golden pulpit, his white robes flowing behind him as he towered high above Jan in his black clothing. Jan hardly paid heed to the bishop's words. He said something about Romans in the New Testament and destroying the body of sin. He especially mentioned simony. Jan found this ironic given how many members of the assembly of Constance could be accused of such.

Finally, Henri de Piro made a motion that Jan's judges come to a definite decision and he be handed to the secular authorities. The charges were read. Whenever Jan tried to reply to them, the bishop called out, "Be silent now. For we have already heard enough." Jan attempted to indicate he could not answer all charges at once, but no one listened. No one was interested in keeping the appearance of justice. Jan had done enough damage in pointing to the church's flaws, and the council wished to execute him so they could continue their corruption in

peace. There was not even a pope present since John XXIII had fled earlier that year before King Sigmund could depose him.

Jan continued to pray. He knew whatever was being said around him would make little difference. It was better to dedicate his final few hours to God than to this wretched trial. He just needed to focus. They then read Jan written statement:

“I, Jan Hus, in hope a priest of Jesus Christ, fearing to offend God, and fearing to fall into perjury, do hereby profess my unwillingness to abjure all or any of the articles produced against me by false witnesses. For God is my witness that I neither preached, affirmed, nor defended them, though they say that I did. Moreover, concerning the articles that they have extracted from my books, I say that I detest any false interpretation which any of them bears. But inasmuch as I fear to offend against the truth, or to gainsay the opinion of the doctors of the Church, I cannot abjure any one of them. And if it were possible that my voice could now reach the whole world, as at the Day of Judgment every lie and every sin that I have committed will be made manifest, then would I gladly abjure before all the world every falsehood and error which I either had thought of saying or actually said! I say I write this of my own free will and choice. Written with my own hand, on the first day of July.”

They asked if Jan had indeed written those words. He answered in the affirmative. Then, it was time. At last, Jan was to be officially sentenced.

#### Friday, 24. December, 1412

It was night when Jan approached his old house in Husinec. He had not been home in thirty-four years. His robes were soaked above his knees from trudging

through the snow. The wind blew in his ears and made his face ache. The trees looked particularly lifeless with their utter absence of decorative leaves. Against the miserable winter, there was his family's house. Jan could see smoke rising from the chimney. He wondered who would be there to greet him. It felt so strange being back. He had grown and learned so much since he had last seen that house. He had experienced so many things. He had left this small village on the Bohemian frontier to study, and he had returned in exile. He had left as a young boy; he had returned an old man. For a brief moment, he imagined he saw himself as a child throwing snowballs at his mother and ducking behind the house, giggling.

Then, that image disappeared as his sister called out, "Jan? My God, is that you?"

Jan jumped. He had not even noticed the door open. "Marjeta? The last time I saw you, you were half my height. It is so good to see you. How are you? How are Mama and Tata? Tell me all...what has happened?"

Marjeta looked at the floor and began to cry. The straw on the floor was mixed with blood. The whole room reeked of vomit and smoke. "Mama died two months ago."

Jan's heart missed a beat. "She died? How? I mean, what happened?"

"The White Disease<sup>5</sup>," Marjeta replied. "It happened so quickly. We knew not what to do."

Jan was unsure how to feel. It seemed as though his whole life were falling apart. His ideology and followers were under constant attack. He could return to

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<sup>5</sup> Medieval term for tuberculosis



Prague in hiding. The king who supported him had long lost the claim to the title of Holy Roman emperor and, with it, the power to protect Jan. His most loyal followers were bent on fighting. And his mother had died without his knowing. Was all of this really happening? Jan could not think on everything at once. He focused on the logistics. They were easier to cope with at the moment than emotions. He said, “Why didn’t anyone tell me? I should have said good-bye.”

“We tried. Damek, whom I married, went to Prague to find you, but he was told you were ill, and he thought it best to not to worry you in such a state.”

Jan thought of his headaches the last few months. So much had happened while he was gone. There was one time when his whole life had centered on his family and he had felt like an essential part of it. But since leaving for university, they had gone on with the normal life of a peasant family living on the Bohemian frontier, right next door to German-speaking countries. Had he ever been needed? His mother had once seen him as the center of her world. And she had completed her life without ever seeing him again. He tried to hold back his tears. He had not seen his sister in so long. He wanted to appear as though he had become older and better able to handle life. “You...you are married to Damek?”

“Well, I *was* married to Damek. He died shortly after Mama from the White Disease.”

“I am so sorry. I...I...” Jan blubbered. Back in Prague, it was part of his duty as priest to console people dealing with dead family members. He did it frequently, and quite well he would like to think. But somehow, he felt insincere saying to his sister what he said to people in his church. “I wish I could have been here with you. I could have...wait, what about Tata?”

“He...” Marjeta’s voice trailed off. Clearly, this was the question she had been dreading most since she saw Jan. “He has the White Disease right now.” She collapsed into Jan’s arms and began sobbing uncontrollably. “Oh Jan! I haven’t seen you since we were children, and I only have bad news for you. Tell me about your exciting life in Prague. I could do with a little happiness.”

This was too much. No, no he could not lie to her, not his own sister. He could not deal with this too. He hugged his sister back and began to cry himself. This made her cry more. He gasped for breath in between sobs. He held his sister as tightly as he could, as though she would fall apart if he did not hold her frail body together. The snow fell in their hair and soaked their clothes, but neither cared. As long as they held on to each other, they did not have to face the world. Finally, Jan let go. He wiped away his sister’s tears and said, “Here, let us feed the fire.”

#### The Afternoon of Saturday, 6. July, 1415

It was declared. Jan Hus was a heretic who was to be delivered to the secular authorities. He knelt down and prayed aloud that Jesus might forgive his enemies, as a final gesture. He barely took in what followed. It did not feel real. He was derided for his prayer. The chalice and paten in his hands were taken as the Archbishop of Milan cursed Jan, saying, “Oh, cursed Judas, because you have abandoned the counsel of peace and have counseled with the Jews, we take away from you this cup of redemption.”

Jan’s stomach felt as though it were full of birds, struggling to fly out. This would be his last hour of life, and it was sure to be humiliating and painful. Still, he

had decided he would fight until the very end. “I trust in the Lord God Almighty, for whose name I patiently bear this vilification, that He will not take away from me the cup of redemption; but I firmly hope to drink from it today in His kingdom.”

The bishops then tore away his ecclesiastical vestments, each time cursing him. Jan responded to every curse that he humbly and gladly accepted it in the name of Jesus Christ. The bishops debated about how best to obliterate his tonsure. Some wanted to shave his head with a razor. Others wanted to use scissors. The birds in Jan’s stomach desperately tried to escape. Jan tried to be strong as he mocked the bishops. He was resolved not to play their games.

Finally, they agreed upon scissors. They removed his hair and replaced it with a paper crown. Three devils were drawn so that they appeared to be atop the crown, about to seize a soul and tear it among their claws. The bishops said, “We commit your soul to the devil.”

Jan attempted a smile as the birds in his stomach began pecking at his insides to escape. He raised his eyes to heaven and replied, “And I commit it to the most merciful Lord Jesus Christ, who, on account of me, a miserable wretch, bore a much heavier and harsher crown of thorns. Being innocent, he was deemed deserving of the most shameful death. Therefore I, a miserable wretch and sinner, will humbly bear this much lighter, even though vilifying crown for His name and truth.”

Then the Bishops said, “The Church has already deprived him of all ecclesiastical rights, and has nothing more to do with him. Therefore, we turn him over to the secular court.”

Jan was led out of the cathedral. His friends followed, walking with him to his death. He looked up to the heavens, keenly aware it was the last time he would

need to look up to see them. He walked through the streets of Constance in shame. He saw his books burning in the church cemetery.

Jan was placed in a meadow. The fortress of Gottlieben towered over him. The birds in his stomach had finally escaped, leaving him weightless. Jan prayed fervently, desperately trying to smile for his friends. As he did so, the crown fell from his head. Jan took it as a sign that he was worthy of forgiveness. The soldiers took it as a sign that the wind was blowing too hard and placed it back on his head.

Jan tried to reach out to the bystanders watching. He told them he was not a heretic. Some believed him. Others were excited to watch a good burning. His clothes were removed. The sun beat down on his naked body. He felt lightheaded. It would be over soon. His hands were tied behind his back. He was tied to a stake. There was a debate about which way to turn him. The ropes cut into his burning wrists. He wished they would just end his life. With each moment, it became more difficult to convince himself he was not terrified of the death he faced. Finally, he was turned toward the west as heretics can not face the east and the salvation of Jerusalem when executed. A sooty chain was placed around his neck. It weighed heavily on Jan's frail body. He tried to hide his trembling.

Jan forced a smile and said to his executioners, "The Lord Jesus Christ, my Redeemer and Savior, was bound by a harder and heavier chain. And I, a miserable wretch, am not ashamed to bear being bound for His name by this one."

The foot-thick stake was placed into the ground. Faggots of wood were piled around his feet. The splinters scratched his legs. It would soon be over. He would soon meet God in heaven. He would soon see his family again. The executioner

continued piling more and more wood and straw around him. It must have been at least two wagonloads. Altogether, the kindling piled to his neck.

One last time, he was asked to recant. One last time, he declared he had been falsely accused. Jan inhaled as the wood was lit. Flames licked at his feet. He had resolved to sing hours before. That decision seemed so absurd. Still, he could not think of what else to do. He would sing. He sang to God, to Jesus, to the Virgin. The wind blew fire into his face. It burned him so. It was a thousand times worse than any headache he had ever experienced. Still, he continued singing. The fire reached his knees. He began to lose track of the tune. The fire climbed higher. He was in so much pain. He gave up singing aloud. His bones began to crack. He could not think. It would be over soon. It would be over soon. He moved his lips to say “Pater Noster.” And then he was gone.

Chapter 2:

Shrieks

Oswald von Wolkenstein hated his head. His brown, curly hair expanded uncontrollably around his circular face just enough to point to the hole where his right eye should have been. The missing eye would not have been as troublesome save for the snout of a nose below it. Indeed, there was nothing on Oswald's face worth looking at besides his eye so that is precisely what everyone did. They stared at his eye a second more than they should and, when speaking with Oswald, waited to ask something that kindly meant, "What happened?" Knowing of Oswald's travels around the world as a soldier and his skills as a storyteller, they always expected an exciting tale of bravery and adventure. Occasionally, Oswald made these up just for the fun. But more often than not he merely told the truth. On Karneval of 1385, when he was but eight years old, a drunken knight had attempted to tend to a dying fire and had instead tended to young Oswald's eye.

Oswald tried to hide his face with his beard. He grew it as large and bushy as he could. His friends joked that he hid more than his face in his beard. His closer friends said he used it as a shield against women who might trick him into marriage. Oswald liked this image of himself and encouraged it. Oswald was good at jokes, drinking, singing, jousting, speaking languages, and diplomacy (at least when he was sober enough to speak without slurs). He was not good with women. It was not that he could not speak to them well. No, he was too ugly for them to approach him at all. He could occasionally use his eye to get drunken, sympathetic women of little consequence in local taverns to lie with him. But with the exception of Sabina, he had never managed to make a woman genuinely interested in him. That is, until he met Margareta von Schwangau or, as he came to call her, Greta.

It occurred on one of his first nights at the Council of Constance in February of 1415. They sat near each other at a feast. King Sigmund had invited Oswald, saying he wished to discuss some business that evening. As a lesser noble, Oswald was sharing his meal with Hugo von Montfort, a count from Steiermark and singer with whom Oswald had a friendly competition. Margareta von Schwangau sat across the table. She was wearing a light green dress with brown fur trim fastened over her shoulders with a simple, silver brooch that matched the dazzling belt along her hips, which, Oswald immediately noticed, were the perfect width. A brown necklace made of leather X's circled her neck. At the center lay a cross accented with tiny emeralds that matched her dazzling eyes. She was not wearing one of those fashionable yet stupid hats that looked like a pair of breasts on a woman's head. No, she had the good sense to wear a hat that looked like a cone that was rounded at the top with streams of material cascading out of the top over her beautiful black hair.

It was a splendid evening. The stone floors had been swept. The fire was being particularly well cared for and was far enough away from Oswald to keep from stirring old memories but close enough to keep him warm. The entertainment between courses was impressive. There were acrobats, jugglers, and even a recently captured bear. The meat was well-seasoned and was mixed with a few vegetables that had been stored for feasts in winter. The only ones who did not enjoy the feast were the poor dogs who did not get many scraps because the food was so well-prepared. They hungrily pawed at guests with wide eyes and whimpers only to get a couple of bites of stale bread they could barely chew.



After the cheeses and fish course with its succulent almond-cream sauce had been served and the basic introductions had been said, Margareta turned to Oswald and said, "You have a magnificent beard!"

Oswald was unsure how to respond. He always had a story prepared for his eye, but no one commented on his beard other than his close friends who brought it up to make jokes. "Thank you," he said. *Think of something witty to say. Think of something witty to say.*

Hugo stepped in. "They say he wears it as a shield against women who might want to marry him. Right, Oswald?"

Oswald attempted a chuckle. "Yes."

"Why would you not wish to be married?"

Oh, that question. Oswald had a quick response to this, a response that kept the conversation away from him and the real reason he would never marry: Sabina. "Because I have yet to meet a woman who does not shriek!"

Normally, this made women just upset enough not to pursue the matter and instead focus on how they, personally, did not shriek. Margareta was not normal. She smirked and said, "Are you not a singer? Surely someone with your appreciation for music can understand the beauty of a good shriek."

"A shriek is not music. It is the wrong pitch to be anything beautiful." Hugo said in anger.

"Well then, perhaps Lord Oswald's problem is he has yet to meet a woman who shrieks at a pitch that suits him."

Oswald laughed. "If you meet a woman with a well-pitched shriek who does not mind my beard, let me know."

The conversation was briefly interrupted by the next course, peacock, being brought out, feathers and all. Margareta leaned forward to grasp her wine, her chest resting at just the right angle for her breasts to be pushed up by the table. Still in this position, she leaned sideways and whispered in Oswald's ear, "If you would like to find out what pitch I am, you should come visit me some time."

The stairs to the king's private chambers were richly decorated with blue carpets with silver threads that looked like tiny dragons running alongside Oswald. He tried to remove the picture of Greta's wide hips from his mind. He needed to be serious. It was important that he impress the king. Back in Oswald's home of Tyrol, his fellow members of the Falkenbund (Falcon League) were counting on him to gain support in their struggle with Duke Friedrich IV who was trying to exert his power over the free lords. It was time for Oswald to prove his skills as a diplomat. He reached the door where he was greeted by a burly guard. In such times, the king needed to be careful.

Oswald entered the room cautiously. There were few men in the room save for the guards. Whatever King Sigmund wanted to discuss, he did not want it to reach the wrong ears. "You asked for me, Your Highness?"

"Yes, Lord Oswald. We have heard many stories about your successes as a diplomat and would like to employ your services."

"I would be honored, Your Highness," Oswald said. "What exactly am I to do?"

"All in good time, Lord Oswald. Duke Friedrich has gone too far in Tyrol, as you well know. We would like to offer our support to the Falkenbund in any way

possible. You are to act as intermediary between ourselves and the nobles fighting against the duke.”

Oswald could hardly believe his ears. Without saying a word about the matter, he had gained a powerful ally. But of course, Oswald knew this would come at a price. “Thank you. Your Highness is most kind to take such interest in our small land.”

King Sigmund waved his hand. He was impatient to get to the other half of the deal, the part about which he truly cared. “In exchange, we were hoping you would join us in a series of diplomatic--shall we call them missions? We will be traveling soon in an effort to gain support in the west. The schism in the church is too great. It is time we have only one pope again. Mind you, I only say this because we are in private, but none of the men now in power deserves the title of pope. Our plan is to bring about a new pope to replace all three. Gregory supports us. John is within our grasp. We now need Benedict’s followers, which is why we have called upon you.”

The following months felt like years in Oswald’s life. A few days after that fateful meeting in February, Oswald entered the service of King Sigmund. A month later, he was in Spain, fighting in the campaign of King John of Portugal against the Moors. So many days blended together. Every day, Oswald awoke in his tent to the killing he knew he was to join shortly thereafter. There was so much blood. There were so few opportunities to rid himself of it. At least the weather in Spain was better than the weather in Constance would have been. Of course, had he been in Constance, Oswald could have been warming his body beside Greta. Or would he?

He had left but a month after meeting her. He barely knew anything about her. And yet, there was something about her. He could not quite name what it was, but he liked her a great deal. When he went to sleep in utter misery from another day at battle, he imagined himself seeing her again as a triumphant diplomat and warrior, and this made him smile through all the blood caked onto his face. She was the first woman who had made him feel this way since Sabina. Sabina had been his first and only love. He had met her when he was but nine years old. Her family owned two-thirds of castle Hauenstein. He owned the other third. She had been so beautiful, Oswald could not comprehend why she could love him, until he realized she did not.

That August, the campaign went so far as to capture Ceuta in northern Africa. This greatly pleased King Sigmund. It meant Spain was rid of pagans, and under his rule. He traveled to Perpignan to celebrate the good news and reward, among others, Oswald. It was a warm August night. There was a celebration in the royal courtyard with music and costumes. Some went so far as to dress as Moors to mock those they had just conquered. Oswald was hesitant to attend as he had no costume. His purse was rather light at that time, and he had brought little clothing as he had been on a military campaign. But King Sigmund insisted Oswald attend. He gave his prized diplomat the title of Viscount of Turkey and had a costume made for him as a gift, a nice costume. Oswald wore it with pride. There he was in a black vest with gold embroidery that draped to the floor over a blue tunic. The pantaloons felt so large on him, but they were splendid for singing and dancing, which King Sigmund instructed him to do “like a pagan.”

Between songs, Queen Margareta of Aragon offered to pierce his ears and attach rings to them and to his vest as a customary honor. Oswald replied, “Your

Majesty, I humbly thank you. However, if it pleases Your Majesty, may I ask that you instead place the ring for my vest somewhere else.”

The queen was taken aback. No one had ever responded so boldly. “Very well,” she said. “Where would you like that ring?”

Oswald smiled. “My beard.”

Everyone in the court laughed. “And why, Lord Oswald, would you rather we place it in your beard?”

“I can only wear this vest on special occasions. But a beard! A beard is always in style. I can wear it any occasion and show everyone the magnificent ring I received from Your Majesty.”

King Sigmund was impressed, albeit annoyed. Oswald von Wolkenstein was indeed the diplomat he was reputed to be. Ever the light-hearted singer, he knew to use witty humor to flatter those who needed to be flattered without insulting others. He watched with a smile as his diplomat’s beard was adorned with a gold ring and a diamond and laughed as Oswald tried not to wince with pain when his ears were pierced with a brass needle. Yes, these travels would go well.

The next several months were a pleasant haze to counter the unpleasant haze of the previous months. Oswald followed King Sigmund throughout the west of France to all kinds of festivities. The various lords played pranks on each other along the way, throwing boots and setting chickens at each other. Wherever they went were richly dressed ladies and deep goblets of mulled wine. There was an assassination attempt on King Sigmund, but he bravely fought the attacker off and thus gained even more support. By the time they reached Paris, few remained who felt Pope Benedict

should stay in power. All had tired of the schism. Many felt King Sigmund was the right man to lead them out of it.

Paris brought with it a pleasant surprise: Greta. She and her family had come along with many others to celebrate King Sigmund's success in the west. As soon as Oswald he saw her enter the king's court in the handsomely decorated Palais de la Cité, he wanted to run to her and tell her how much he had been thinking of her in between passionate kisses all along her wide hips. He settled for the thought of greeting her and hearing her beautiful voice. He walked towards her, but before he reached that soft, brown hair, Hugo von Montfort stepped in.

“Oswald, my dear friend! How did Spain treat you?”

*So close and yet so very far*, Oswald thought to himself. “Spain was marvelous, other than the war of course. But then again, one cannot complain too much about a victorious battle no matter how gruesome it may be.”

“No, especially when one has just been paid richly for services to the Roman king.”

“Well, given Duke Friedrich of Tyrol's duplicity in assisting the escape of the so-called Pope John XXIII, I would say such services have been of great use to his majesty.”

“But of course,” Hugo replied. A woman approached with black hair framed by a hideous blue hat that looked like breasts on a cold day. Without a word, she gave Oswald a distinct sense of dread. She looked up at Hugo and motioned towards his friend impatiently. “Sorry, my dear. Oswald, you remember Anna?”

“Of course. It is a pleasure to see you again.” Oswald had met Hugo's third wife a few times, but he was puzzled that Hugo would bring this monster with him

anywhere. His last two wives had been warm women who immediately took to Oswald as a friend of their husband. They laughed with him and seemed genuinely pleased at his presence. Anna, on the other hand, always seemed unhappy to discover other human beings in her presence. There was something about her face that particularly added to this. She had icy blue eyes under unusually thin eyebrows. This served to accent the perpetual look that there was a particularly nasty bug crawling up her leg. She was one of the many reasons he did not want to marry.

He was saved from speaking to this beast by Greta. “How have you been, Lord Oswald?” Her pale green eyes looked all the more warm in contrast to Hugo’s Anna. That day, she wore a black gown with white fur trim along the collar, sleeves, and hem of the dress. There was little pattern but for the belt around her voluptuous hips. She smelled of lilacs. Was that perfume? Ah, the French!

“I was well, but now that you are here, I am magnificent, my Lady Margareta. How have you been?”

Through her blush, she replied with a perfectly Greta response, “Dreadful. With everyone traveling about, Constance and my home in Bavaria have been boring. Please tell me everything funny and exciting that has happened to you in the last year and quickly, too, else I may die of boredom!”

Oswald smiled. Under normal circumstances, he could predict his audience’s reactions and thus found it tedious to tell more than one or two stories. But he knew well that Greta was not normal. Telling her everything would be a joy. “Only if you accompany me for a walk through the courtyard as I do so.”

She winked and said, “Of course.”

Duke Friedrich had fallen out of the graces of King Sigmund in aiding John XXIII's escape from Constance in 1415. The king had declared Tyrolean lords free and eventually had ordered that Friedrich be held in Constance. That March, he escaped, which meant Oswald had to leave for Tyrol as Sigmund's emissary to the Falkenbund. Every day was a tireless combination of diplomacy and battles. He could think of nothing but fighting. Well, that and Greta. He took great consolation in the thought that upon his return to Constance, she would be there, waiting for him. He had a great affection for the woman and spent many hours thinking of her. He did not get a chance to see her again until that summer when he finally returned to Constance.

With the help of her maid, he secured a tryst one evening with his dear Greta in her chambers. On seeing him, her smile grew so wide it seemed to join with her sparkling green eyes. She was even more beautiful than Oswald remembered. Her black hair freely fell to her wide hips. He could not understand why a woman like this could love a man as ugly as he. Yet, stunningly, here was this woman, running into his arms and passionately kissing him.

“Oh, Öslein! I missed you so. Tell me everything.”

“There is little to tell. I have done nothing but involve myself in the squabbles of nobles against a duke who thinks himself above us. It is hardly something about which you would care to hear.”

“Do not be so presumptuous. I care about whatever matters to you, especially when it is important enough to tear you away from me.”

Oswald was stunned. He had given her an easy way out of listening to politics, something about which few ladies cared to hear. But Greta was not like



other ladies. She wanted to follow what was occurring around her even if she could not participate herself. He admired her even more. “Very well. I will tell you all...in good time.” He had a more pressing matter to attend to first.

The first snow of the year of 1416 came early in Constance. It was only the middle of November, but the ground was already covered with a layer of muddy sludge. The town was still buzzing about the execution of Jerome of Prague in May. Some wondered whether it had been the right decision. His views were not, after all, particularly heretical and he had recanted his statements. Others pointed out that he had still been a threat to the church and had retracted his recantation. Oswald cared little about this as he had been in Tyrol during the trial. For him, it was a reminder to be careful. His political (not to mention personal) dealings of late had been bold, and, in such a time, that often meant dangerous. It made him wonder whether it was time he settled down.

One evening, a local lord invited a few dozen nobles to his townhouse in the center of Constance for some entertainment. Many of the guests one would expect to be at such events were present. The Schwangau family was unable to attend, but Oswald had an enjoyable evening nonetheless. Anna von Montfort was too busy being cross with the world to dance, leaving Hugo free to speak with his friend. Oswald almost wished he could ask Hugo if he so much as liked Anna in the least, but, propriety aside, she kept glaring at him as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. When she stepped out, Hugo answered this question for Oswald. Unfortunately, she had not stepped out as long as Hugo had thought.

“I know you fear women, my good Oswald, but if you ever do marry, find one who dances. It makes evenings like these far more enjoyable.”

It was just at that moment that Anna had decided to lower herself to speaking with her husband. Poor Hugo. Oswald could almost hear the shrieking Hugo would have to endure later. She said, “I dance when the music is worthy. The singer performing this evening knows nothing of melody.”

“Neither does Hugo,” Oswald laughed. The two of them had always had a friendly rivalry about music.

Anna looked confused. Apparently, she did not know that, unlike Hugo, Oswald wrote his own melodies, something in which he took great pride. Hugo attempted an explanatory jab at Oswald. “Oswald here fails to see the importance of truly great lyrics. He would rather write silly words and hide behind a good melody.”

Oswald took on a mock-pompous stature and said, “Good words can reach the ears. Good melodies can reach the soul. Truly great songs often do not even need words. But what is a song without a melody?”

“A poem,” Hugo responded with no hesitation. They had done this dance many times before.

Oswald laughed. “What good is poetry? It is but a poor imitation of a melody. It is words seeking a tune with none to be found.”

Hugo’s face suddenly lit up. “Oswald, I have always wanted to put our differing, er, ideologies to the test. What say you to an old-fashioned Sangerkrieg<sup>6</sup>?”

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<sup>6</sup> German for singers war. The Sangerkriege were singers competitions that primarily took place in the thirteenth century.

Oswald paused. Was this another joke? Of course it was. Hugo knew he and Oswald were utterly different in their musical styles. He did not even write polyphonic songs. “Ha! You know you would lose!”

“If you are so sure, let us bet on the matter.”

Hugo was taking this a little far now, but Oswald decided to play along.

“Certainly, I bet three hundred florins.”

“Ever overly confident!” Hugo replied. “Very well. Who shall be the judge?”

Anna looked outraged. Like Oswald, she had just realized Hugo was serious.

“My lord, come now! You can not bet so much money on something so trivial!”

“Pride is never a trivial matter, my lady. What say you, Oswald?”

It was too late to back out now. He would probably win, and if not, he would find a way to make ends meet. After all, he had no family to raise. “Perhaps my Lord Ludwig” Oswald proposed. Yes, he knew them both well and had invited both to sing for him in his castle in Heidelberg. He would make an excellent judge.

“Agreed. What say you, my Lord Ludwig?”

The Pfalzgraf looked up, confusion permeating his beady eyes, but he nodded.

“We will each take two months to write a song and perform it before Lord Ludwig in January at the banquet that he has been planning. Are we all in accord?”

Oswald sat in the inn in Überlingen, the town across the lake from Constance where he was staying, trying to compose a song but too distracted by the awful town. He found it ironic that those who were not important enough to stay in Constance and therefore were unlikely to have much money were forced to stay somewhere with such obscene prices. Then the brilliant idea dawned on him: write a song about how

awful it was in Überlingen. Such a song would appeal to many at the banquet and could be hilarious if sung correctly. How to begin? Hm. He took a bite of his thin slice of ham. It was almost nothing but fat. Yes, he would definitely start with the food.

The portly wife of the innkeeper approached. She leaned, or rather heaved, forward such that her monstrous breasts practically fell out of her dress, which she had undoubtedly cut herself for that purpose. Her breath poured into Oswald's nostrils as she squeaked, "More ale, m'lord?"

"Yes, please." *Pour and walk away. Pour and walk away.*

"What're ya writin'?" she asked.

Damn. He would have to talk to that bulbous beast of a woman. She would not have been so repulsive if she acted as was expected of women in her station. But of course this beast could never control herself so well. Whenever her husband left the room, she proceeded to flirt with every man in the room, pushing herself on them like a dog in heat. And when, as always, she was rejected, she soon found an excuse to give the man a good smack. "A song." *Please just leave it at that.*

"What about?"

Should he be honest? She might look over his shoulder. "About the town of Überlingen."

"How nice!" she replied. "You should put me in it" She laughed at her own joke and stomped off.

*What a marvelous idea,* Oswald thought to himself. "Her feet are as narrow as a shield. Her legs are as slender as...beech logs."

December came with more snow, which meant more festivities in the warmth of indoors rather than jousts and sports. Winter at court was more often than not tedious for Oswald, who preferred the exhilaration that came with outdoor events, but dancing with Greta and speaking with Hugo made the evenings far more tolerable. At one of these occasions, Oswald met Lord von Schwangau, who seemed quite happy he was courting Greta. After all, she was already twenty-four and unmarried. Oswald had a decent amount of property to his name and was currently in the Roman king's favor. As long as they did not find out about his trysts with Greta, all would be well.

One late afternoon, following supper, Oswald was at a courtly celebration of a victory of some kind (there were too many to remember which celebration was for which victory). Oswald was speaking with a few nobles he barely knew about the usual topics, politics and the weather, when Greta entered the room. Oswald peered at the door. Her eyes were wide with, was that fear? Something was wrong. She found him in the crowd and subtly tilted her head, their secret signal to meet. He had a feeling she did not want to meet for the usual reason. Oswald excused himself as soon as he felt would be prudent. He stepped outside and waited for her to do the same.

It was cold that afternoon, painfully cold. Oswald could feel the snow seep into his clothes down to his undergarments. He tried to hide among the trees to keep from prying eyes, but the trees were long dead so he had to go far to stay hidden. When Greta finally appeared, she was shivering uncontrollably despite a thick, fur coat. Or was she trembling with fear? She advanced towards Oswald, the snow squishing beneath every step. The ground was muddy and brown, which made Greta

look even more like an angel, with her snow-covered hair and clothing. She brushed some snow out of his hair and kissed him tenderly. Her lips were trembling, but this made her all the more endearing. Whatever was bothering her, Oswald wanted to make it better. Anything for the woman before him.

“My dear Öslein,” she said. “I have some...news.” She paused and bit her lip. What was it? No, it could not be that. “I fear I may be pregnant.”

Yes, it was that. “Are, are you sure?” Oswald replied. Of course she was.

“It has been seven weeks since I began my last course.” She looked as if she were about to cry. “What will my family say?”

Oswald held Greta close but remained silent. If he had not so frivolously bet a year’s payment for services to the king, he could easily support a wife and child and make all the problems go. But, of course, Oswald was not wise enough to be prudent with his earnings. It was so cold. He needed to get away from this situation. He could not handle such news. He needed some time to think. “Let us speak on this tomorrow. I ne-need some...rest.” He left the event and went to his room in Überlingen, leaving Greta and his unborn child in the snow. He had a song to compose.

The following day, Oswald wrote a letter to Greta apologizing for leaving her at such a time, explaining the bet, and proposing they meet in the woods under the guard of her maid. At such a time, it was too risky to see her in person any other way. Besides, it would ease her anger at his immediate reaction before she could yell at him. Oswald paid a small boy a penny to run the letter to Greta, sat down in the inn where he was staying and asked for an ale, cost be damned. Then he thought to

himself he would soon be unable to say cost be damned. The only way this could work out would be for him to marry Greta.

This was not an entirely bad thought for Oswald. Of all women to marry, Greta was the most appealing to Oswald. She was the only woman for whom he had felt anything since Sabina, and, as he frequently had to remind himself, Sabina did not love him. They had just been young, and she had enjoyed the attention. Perhaps she had even believed she loved Oswald for a while. But a woman who is truly in love does not insist her lover go on a crusade to prove himself worthy of marriage, especially when that woman is being pushed to marry another. No, Oswald was clearly aware of how horribly Sabina had treated him. And yet, he still loved her. That was the real reason he had never married, much as he did not wish to admit it even to himself. Sabina was perfect in every way. Her soft, blond hair, her pale, blue eyes, her pink lips that formed a cute pout when she wanted something (which was always). No matter how manipulative she was, she was Oswald's first love, and he would never forget her.

And yet, Greta truly loved Oswald, and she suited him. He could imagine spending years with her and still being happy. No, the thing that was worrying Oswald now was not marrying her or even having a child with her. He imagined it could be nice to have a son or daughter to care for and teach about the world. No, he thought it would be hard to have to give up his life as a bachelor. He enjoyed going to war, participating in dangerous jousting tournaments, and starting brawls in local taverns. Miserable as he might be at battle, it made him feel alive to kill, to risk his life. It even made him feel alive to sleep in a muddy tent. He loved traveling. He loved meeting all types of nobles, eating new foods, and learning new languages and

customs. He loved being able to bet a year's earnings and know that if he lost he would be the only one hurt. He knew he would still be able to do these things to some extent once married, but being responsible for a family would change the sense of freedom they held for him.

But he also knew he was thirty-eight and he should have gotten married long ago. His father had died nearly two decades before. It was time to start a family. It was time to be responsible. Oswald sighed. It would have been easier to cope with this change if it had not been thrust upon him. *But*, he thought, *that is what I deserve for thrusting upon Greta. Haha!* Oh, if only he had not made that bet with Hugo! But what could he do now? Hugo would never understand if Oswald told him Greta was pregnant. No, Hugo believed in the sanctity of Christianity, marriage, and other nonsense. And it was too late to back out of such a bet. No, he was stuck. He would have to write an infallible song. But about what?

Oswald arrived in the woods shortly before Greta. It was a beautiful night. There was almost a full moon and few clouds. The trees were covered with fresh, powdery snow. The stars were shining so brightly. A deer strode nearby and gazed at Oswald with its soft, innocent eyes. Despite the circumstances, Oswald had a feeling this evening would go well. Through the trees, he could see Greta's lovely figure walking through the snow. Even with a large figure like hers, she never failed to appear graceful. Through her brown hood, Oswald could tell she was unhappy. He wanted nothing more than to change that as quickly as possible. He hugged her and said, "Oh my Greta, I am so sorry I ran off yesterday, I..." but before he could continue, she cut him off.



“How much did you bet?” She saw straight through Oswald’s carefully-worded letter, and she was not going to tolerate his buffoonery.

“My darling, you must remember...”

“Do not give me ‘my darling’! How much?”

Oswald looked down at the ground and mumbled as quietly as he could, “Three hundred.”

“What?!” she shouted so loudly, it scared the deer. “My God, Öslein, even before my pregnancy that is ridiculous!”

“But...” he began, unsure how to continue.

“But nothing. What are you going to do now?” She saw through him too well.

“I will win the bet and marry you.”

Greta laughed. “Do not be so presumptuous! What if I do not want to be married to such a fool?”

Oswald laughed. If she was going to play this game, he would too. “Then I guess it does not matter if I win the bet. Enjoy raising our child alone in a convent somewhere.”

Greta smirked. “There are ways of ending unwanted pregnancies.”

This stopped his laughing. He had heard rumors of witches who made concoctions that rid women of unborn children, but they often rid the women of their own lives as well. “You would not dare! Greta, please stop this nonsense.”

Greta sighed. He was being too touching to keep this going. “Very well. I suppose I can marry you, but only if you promise me two things.”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you will never make a stupid bet again.”

“Of course.”

She smiled with the punch line she had been preparing all day. “And promise me you will utterly wipe Hugo’s smirk away with this song.” With that, she kissed Oswald’s cheek, winked, and walked off.

The following day, Oswald asked Greta’s father for her hand in marriage. Lord von Schwangau was pleased. Oswald was financially able to support his daughter, of a decent family, and she seemed to like him well enough. He offered Oswald a fairly generous amount for the partnership. All that was left was for Oswald to write his song. Ironically, the concept of marrying Greta distracted him and made it difficult to write. He would begin to work on his song about Überlingen, but then he would contemplate having a child. God, he was going to have a child. This was supposed to be a happy time, but all Oswald could think of was how it would cry and wet itself, and Greta would yell if he asked to travel away too much. He liked children, but he would miss being a bachelor.

One day, he asked Greta to read his song. She looked it over with a frown. Oswald tried to ask her what she thought, but she put her finger to his mouth and insisted on finishing first. Finally, she said, “This is witty enough, but, Öslein, you can write better than this.”

Oswald sighed. “I know. I have been so distracted that I can not find the right words.”

“Why not start something new?”

“About what? I can barely think about anything aside from the child.” He tried not to say this in a tone that would imply he was unhappy, but this was unnecessary. She was no normal woman. She understood how he felt without his ever hinting at it, and she was not angry.

“I know. It will be a very different life for you. I admit I occasionally imagined us marrying, but I had envisioned going with you on diplomatic trips and seeing the world, not caring for children.”

“Me too,” Oswald replied. “But I suppose it is time I have children, and I am happy you will be their mother, Greta.”

Suddenly, Greta’s face changed. “Öslein, write about this!”

“About what?”

“Settling down. If this is all you can think of, it will be easy to write.”

Oswald’s face lit up. “Greta, you are a brilliant woman.” He kissed her and ran off.

It was the night of the Sängerkrieg between Oswald and Hugo. Everyone was in attendance. Many had placed their own bets on the contest. (Of course no one knew quite how much Oswald and Hugo had bet). Even King Sigmund had come. Embroidered tapestries of the Sängerkriege of the past circled a large, open space in the center of the room greeting the singers. Hugo had even agreed to sing himself for this special occasion. Whoever won would not only get to mock the other for all eternity but would be joined by anyone who could claim importance in any nearby country. Of course, what most terrified Oswald was how Greta would react to his song for he had included a small verse about Sabina. She knew the story, but would

she be upset to hear Oswald still loved her? And that matter aside, how would she react if Oswald made a mistake and lost the bet? What would they do? No, he needed to focus. He would win.

Oswald was to perform first. He slowly stepped into the center of the room, clenching his fiddle. He could feel the eyes of the room on himself. He tried to remind himself he had sung before audiences like this countless times before, but there was no forgetting how consequential this song was. He took a deep breath. He had worked on this song for a month, and it was a good song. He could win. No, he *would* win. He looked at Greta in the crowd of faces. She gave him an encouraging wink. He tried to picture her smile if he won. Of course the face she would have if he lost was much easier to picture at such a time.

Somehow he arrived at the center of the room. He kept reminding himself to breathe. How should he start? Oh no! He had not thought of that. *Think of something clever. Think of something clever.* He could think of nothing. When unsure, self-deprecation was always a good start.

“Some of you may have heard about the woman amongst you who is unfortunate enough to be marrying me.” Some chuckled. *Now think of something brilliant.* “Well, I began to think on my life so far and what will be my new responsibilities. She thinks this will make me drink *less!*” A few more chuckles. Then he thought, *why am I trying so hard to be funny right now? The song itself is funny enough. Just start.* “So I thought that is the topic on which I should write. I hope you find it pleasing.”

He began the same way his life did, with childhood<sup>7</sup>:

It occurred when I was but ten years old  
I wished to look at how the world was shaped.  
With misery, poverty many a corner, hot and cold,  
I dwelt with Christians, Greeks, and heathens.  
Three pfennings in my pocket and a piece of bread  
That was from home my nourishment, when I ran away in need  
From strangers, friends so I have many a drop of red  
spilled alas, that I believed I would pass away.  
I ran by foot, a hard penance, until the death  
of my father came, I was fourteen, never had I acquired a horse,  
save for one I robbed, I stole one time with pale color  
and that one, I parted from it with pain.  
I was a courier, cook, so was I also a horse groom,  
also on the rudder did I pull myself, that was difficult,  
in Candia<sup>8</sup> and other lands, also back again  
many a dirty tunic was my best clothing.

The crowd seemed to like his song so far. The sighs and laughs were occurring when they should. Oswald grew braver. He danced a little and gave the

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<sup>7</sup> Translation of “Es fügt sich” by Jesse Friedman

<sup>8</sup> Crete

song a little more energy. It should build up anyway. He continued with the second stanza about his travels:

To Prussia, Lithuania, Tartary, Turkey across the seas  
to France, Italy, Spain with two kings' armies.  
Love drove me at my very own expense  
Ruprecht, Sigmund both with their eagle striped.  
French, Moorish, Catalan and Castilian  
German, Latin, Wendish, Italian, Russian and Greek,  
these ten languages have I used, when I ran off,  
also I could fiddle, drum, trumpet, and flute.  
I have sailed islands and arms of land, many a land  
on great ships on which I survived the bands of storms  
From the heights and depths of the sea I got away  
The Black Sea taught me to grasp a keg,  
when to me my brigantine broke up with pain.  
I was a merchant, yet I survived and came there,  
I and a Russian; In the tumult wealth and profit,  
sank to the bottom and I swam to the wheel.

As he finished his second stanza, the crowd cheered. Oswald became more courageous. He sang his third stanza wildly with a sense of abandon. He told the tale of how the queen of Aragon placed a ring in his beard. He looked carefully at King

Sigmund as he described the king's reaction and made it seem as though the whole scene were even more ridiculous than it had been.

The crowd applauded him even more as he completed the tale. All was going well. He had made it to the fourth stanza. He told the story of how he began to court Sabina, how he had begun to seek religion but then abandoned it to be in her loving arms. Greta was laughing with the others when he sang the line he had spent an hour thinking of about how his devotion went through the chimney. She already knew this story of course, but he had not let her listen to his song before he performed it. He had wanted to surprise her. He wondered if this was a mistake when he realized he was genuinely nervous about how she would react to hearing him sing about Sabina so publicly (though she was one of the few who knew of the woman to whom he was alluding). However, her smile when he said Sabina's love had bitten him like frost assuaged this fear. He continued with the fifth and sixth stanzas, about the romance with Sabina, concluding with how much he had braved for her and how she did not care. It felt oddly pleasant to sing this song with Greta present. Sabina was firmly a part of his nostalgic past about which he could sing. Nothing more. And Greta appreciated this.

The sixth stanza ended with the usual polite applause. The time had come for the grand conclusion.

I have lived a good forty years minus two  
with folly, rowdiness, composing, singing, many a thing.  
It is well time that my own children's cry  
I, married, heard from a cradle so shrill.

Still I can never forget for all eternity  
the one who gave me spirit on this earth;  
in all the world I could not find her likeness  
also I dread sorely the wifely nagging bark.  
In judgment and advice, many a wise man has valued me  
who I have pleased with my sounds of songs.  
I, Wolkenstein, surely live with little reason  
that this world has long since begun to bore me.  
And well I confess, I know not when, I shall die  
thus for me nothing will ostensibly follow except the extent of my  
works.  
Had I God according to his commandments served well  
then I would little fear that place of hot, surging flames.

Everyone in the room stood and cheered loudly. Many shouted. Oswald slowly bowed and strode away. He had finished. All that was left was to listen to Hugo's song and Ludwig's judgment. Oswald was nervous, but at least he had done his part. Hugo passed by Oswald looking more terrified than he had shortly before. Oswald had a good feeling about that evening.

Oswald awoke with a smile. His silken, red robes embroidered with gold greeted him from the end of his bed. Outside, the sun gleamed on the soft, white roofs of the houses. From the shops below, the smell of fresh bread and pastries filled Oswald's nostrils. Small children darted through the snow, flinging snowballs as the



silhouettes of their parents gazed through the smoky windows. He pictured watching his own children do the same as Greta fretted about their getting cold. He threw on his robes and nearly frolicked down the inn stairs. Hugo was waiting for him with a pint of ale by the fireplace.

He toasted and yelled to the room at large, "The groom has arrived!"

The room burst into shouting and cheers. Everyone fought to reach Oswald first. Had this day really arrived? He reached Hugo and sat in the inviting chair beside him, the cushions absorbing his heavy body with their softness. He sipped on the ale and gazed at the fireplace as Hugo spoke of what to "expect." Oswald inwardly chuckled.

The day rushed by in a haze of pats on the back and congratulations. In what felt like minutes, it was time. The guests paraded with Oswald through the streets of Constance, their smiles widened with ale. They passed two boys barely five years of age battling with wooden swords. Oswald's son would have the best practice sword in Tyrol. Oswald would carve it himself for his little boy. And Greta would sew him a red velvet cape so he could fight with the best wooden sword even in the snow.

The parade arrived at the home where the Schwangau family was staying, where Greta awaited them, her new jewelry elegantly accenting her green eyes, which sparkled even more that day than ever before. Her blue gown had been carefully draped to hide her widening hips. As Oswald noticed this, an icicle of doubt crashed on his head. Oh God, he was getting married. If she had never become pregnant, would this day have come? Would he ever again be able to act with such abandon as on this day?

Greta approached Oswald, knowing what he was thinking. She handed him a pint of ale, winked, and proceeded to greet the guests, swinging her hips as she did so. Oswald imagined waking beside those voluptuous hips.

*Yes, Oswald thought. I made the right decision*

Chapter 3:

Going Away

## Part I: Heidelberg, Palatinate, 1410

Pfalzgräfin Margareta ran her fingers through her long, blonde hair. The blue water pattern on her rugs, with its calming imagery, mocked her. The stone walls pressed in on her throbbing head. Ludwig had been home for nearly a week and had not yet spoken with her. Of course, this meant he had failed to be elected as Roman king and was too cowardly to face her. Oh, if only she had been born a man! She would have had no trouble succeeding their father as king. But of course, she had to let her useless brother attend meeting after meeting. And at each one, there were other men with more cunning and bravery who had no doubt pushed him to support someone who would soon forget their family. The question was which one? Regardless, Margareta could wait no longer. Her husband, Charles, had been pushing her for some time to return to Lorraine. She would have to confront Ludwig.

She strode through the castle, recalling childhood memories of the oppressive walls that followed her wherever she went. Once, she had told her younger sisters, Agnes and Elisabeth, the walls held ghosts that tinted the walls gray and would come out and attack them if they did not look behind themselves. She grinned, remembering those two stepping hesitatingly throughout the castle in pure terror. Of course, Friedrich had spoiled the fun and told them Margareta was lying. He had always held a weak spot for Agnes. Indeed, when she grew sick nine years before, he spent too much time in her room and died shortly after her.

Before she even grew near his chambers, Margareta passed a drunken Ludwig flirting with the cook's daughter. His black, beady eyes drunkenly gazed at her obtrusive chest. Why did men find it so hard to keep their hose up? Margareta

grabbed her brother by the ear and pulled him to a cellar near the kitchen. They were surrounded by vegetables and aging cheeses in the tiny room. Ludwig shuddered from the smell, his unkempt mane of red hair shaking around his egg-shaped head. Good. Ludwig tried to glare at Margareta with fury, but from the corner of a cellar, he just looked like the pathetic child Margareta had helped raise so long ago. How would he manage the castle once she returned to Lorraine?

Ludwig pushed out his chest and struggled to keep from slurring his words as he almost shouted, “Sister, how dare you? I am the man in the family now. It is important that I maintain my image in this household.”

Margareta cackled. “Some man you are! Tell me, dear brother, who was elected Roman king?”

Ludwig looked as though the air in his lungs had been thrust out of his body. He half-whispered, half-mumbled, “Jobst of Moravia.”

Margareta pretended not to hear him. If he was going to play lord of the castle, he would have to speak up. “Who?”

“Jobst of Moravia.”

Margareta exaggeratedly sighed. “And how, exactly, did that happen?”

Ludwig attempted to regain control. He straightened his back and replied, “Margareta, I am not discussing this matter with you, right now. This does not concern you.”

Margareta glared at Ludwig. He cowered. “Of course this concerns me. This is our family’s legacy. Our father fought hard to gain the power he had, and I do not want to see his hard work lost because you were too drunk to maintain it.”

“I was not drunk,” he slurred. “There was little I could do. The electors wanted a member of the Luxemburg family.” He backed further into the dank corner.

Margareta stepped toward him threateningly, “And you could not convince them you would be able to fight Wenceslas?”

Ludwig appeared to be on the verge of tears. “Sister, my father has just died. My wife died last year. And Elisabeth died the year before that. I am not strong enough to fight Wenceslas right now. It was better to support another who would keep our family in power than constantly fight for it myself.”

Did he know her at all? Of course she would consider such an excuse pathetic. Everyone lost family members in their lives. She herself had lost two sons while they were infants. Had she mourned them? Yes, but then she carried on. The key to gaining and, more importantly, keeping power was never to show weakness. Nobility did not have the luxury of openly grieving. If only Ludwig could be made to understand this! “Very well. Since you made such an absurd choice, please tell me you were at least smart enough to support the right man.”

Ludwig hesitated. “Um...”

Margareta patiently waited until the next morning. In the meantime, she carefully avoided Charles. She did not care to hear what he would have to say. She rose with the sun and stormed through the castle to Ludwig’s chambers, the fiery red carpets following her as she went. She opened her brother’s door with a slam. He awoke with a start. The cook’s daughter did as well.

His black, beady eyes squinted at her as he murmured, “Sister? What are you doing in here?”

Margareta glared at the cook's daughter (what was her name?) and snapped, "You, get out!"

The woman searched for her clothes frantically and fled Margareta's raging glare. Ludwig looked at her helplessly. Even if he had been at his best, he would not have dared bid her stay, with the poison in Margareta's eyes. And he was certainly not at his best! He peeked at the sunlight pouring through his windows. He called out to a nearby servant, "Fetch me an apothecary, would you? My head is pounding."

"Do not bother," Margareta called after the boy. "He does not deserve it."

"Please, sister, I am in such pain," he almost pleaded.

Margareta let a tiny grin slip. It was almost too easy. Almost. "You can have a remedy when you satisfactorily tell me what happened at the elections."

In this state, there was no use fighting her. He replied, "What do you wish to know?"

"Begin with who voted how."

"It is rather complicated," Ludwig said, feebly attempting to delay the long explanation he would have to give.

"Then explain carefully," Margareta replied coldly.

"On September 20, I voted for Sigmund along with Werner von Falkenstein and Friedrich von Hohenzollern, the Burgrave of Nuremberg"

"Yes, I know who he is," Margareta snapped.

"Please speak more quietly," Ludwig begged.

"Brother, if you fail to keep this family in order, and drink to excess, you must accept the consequences."

Ludwig did not bother fighting this point. He wanted nothing more than the remedy to his hangover. “Friedrich claimed to represent the electorates of both Brandenburg and Cologne. As Wenceslas was obviously not present, that made four out of six votes in Sigmund’s favor.”

Margareta interrupted, “But Sigmund is the elector of Brandenburg. How did Friedrich claim it?”

“Actually, Jobst is the elector of Brandenburg now, which is why the election was contested.” The servant returned with the remedy. Margareta grabbed it from the boy’s hands and shooed him away. Ludwig gazed at it longingly. “The second election occurred October 1, when Jobst of Moravia was elected. Now, if you please...”

“And there is nothing that can be done to reverse this?” Margareta interrupted.

“No, sister, so let us just accept defeat gracefully. Now may I please see the apothecary? I can not stand to go a moment longer like this.”

“Perhaps you should drink less!” Margareta shouted. She threw the bottle in her hands at him and stormed out, slamming the door as loudly as possible behind her. What was she to do with such a fool!

Margareta wandered through the gardens surrounding the castle. Whenever she had been frustrated as a child, they had been a great calming force. From the edge of the gardens, she could look on the entire town of Heidelberg. The view was breathtaking: The red roofs covering the half-timbered houses, the sunshine reflecting on the Rhine, the fields of wheat waiting to be turned into good, strong beer.

Margareta could see the Heiliggeistkirche was almost done. The roof was still



incomplete, and she could almost peer into the towering, vaulted halls. Elisabeth had written to Margareta about its progress. That is, until Elisabeth was married off to Duke Friedrich IV of Austria who let her die during childbirth. Of Margareta's eight siblings (four still living), Elisabeth was the only one for whom she had significantly cared. Elisabeth had looked to her older sister as a guide and comfort. She was kind and knew what to say to her older sister when she was in a rage. Especially after Agnes died and they were the only women in the family, the two had grown quite close. Margareta had been at Elisabeth's side to help her through childbirth and meet her new niece, and she had watched as both slowly died within days. Margareta could never openly show it for fear of displaying weakness, but she dearly missed her younger sister. Now, all she had left was an ass of a husband and a cretin of a brother.

Margareta remembered Elisabeth's smiling face when she married Charles. Margareta had been but seventeen then, half her present age and twice her present beauty, as Charles so often reminded her. As that time progressed, it had felt so slow, especially in recent years with Charles losing interest in her, but, looking back, it seemed as if it had been no time at all. Margareta recalled how grand her father had appeared when she was a child. When she was seven, she had sat beside her father, the king, and listened to all the plans he had for Heidelberg.

"One day," he said, "Heidelberg is going to be a major city. We will have a university and people from all over Europe will come to study here, and some of those scholars will help leaders rule the lands justly."

She frowned and said, "Papa, what is a university?"

She was amidst these wandering thoughts when Charles caught her by surprise. He always waited until he knew her guard would be down, pig that he was.

“Wife, have you terrified your brother to your satisfaction?” As always, he twisted his moustache around his finger as though the rounder it grew, the more it would distract from his absurdly pointed chin. He was far too skinny. Every time they had lain together, it felt as though his bones were poking at her body. Fortunately, neither wished to share a bed any longer.

“Charles, if it matters so much to you, go back to Lorraine without me. My brother’s men can escort me later.”

“Do not be absurd. It is time you return to Lorraine.”

“You are always off on some war or diplomatic ‘mission.’ I stay in Heidelberg for a few months while my family needs me, and you call *me* absurd?”

Charles twisted his moustache again. “Your brother does not need your help. A king has been elected. Your family’s estate has been settled. The university is doing well. There is nothing more for you to do, not that there ever was. And aside from that, what of your daughters?”

Margareta looked away from him at the gardens. She focused on a tree that had a single, yellow leaf, waiting to fall and join its comrades. “Isabelle and Catherine have servants to care for them.”

“Still, they so rarely see you. Catherine is nearly eleven now. Surely, there is something you have to teach her that a servant can not.”

Margareta tired of this argument. Why did Charles insist on fighting with her about every tiny matter? This was not even a good excuse to push her to return home. Children did not need constant attention from their parents. Before she could leave,

she would need to figure out how to take care of the situation with Jobst of Moravia. The only thing she could think of...no, that was too much. Surely, there was another way. But what? The elections had taken place, and with Jobst in power, the family was in trouble. Still, the only apparent option would be morally...unpleasant. Regardless, she knew it was time to leave her childhood home once more. She looked into her husband's stone-grey eyes and said, "We can leave when you wish."

Charles was taken aback at how little resistance she presented. Was Margareta being considerate for once? A warm breeze crossed his face. He looked at her with something that nearly resembled pity. In such a weakened state, he saw in her the young, seemingly innocent girl he had married seventeen years before in that very castle. Her blonde hair had been so thick and flowing as it surrounded her fair face. Now, she was so old, and age had only worsened her vindictive spirit. "Thank you," he said. For the first time in many years, he felt the urge to approach her kindly. He put his hand on her back and said, "My dear, perhaps when we return home, we could..."

Margareta was annoyed. She had given him what he wanted. Why would he not leave her be? "Charles, please, I do not have time right now. Before we go, I would like to speak with my brother." With that, she marched towards the castle.

Charles watched his wife walk off. How absurd he had been to think he could rekindle what he had once considered romance between them. He was married to a snake who would only bite if he approached.

Margareta knocked on the door to her brother's room. She knew what needed to be done, and she knew Ludwig would hate the idea. She did not like it much herself, but in such chaotic times in which three men contested for pope and three men claimed the title of Roman king, one could lose power too quickly. It was better to take someone else's power first. It was hard enough keeping the family safe while others feared them.

Ludwig answered the door himself. He was alone. Good. She did not wish others to hear what she had to say. "Brother, I would like to apologize for how I treated you this morning." She would need to be careful in how she approached such a delicate subject.

Ludwig looked touched that she was sorry, fool that he was in believing her. "All is forgotten, sister."

"I, too, miss our father. He was such a good leader, and I fear what our family will become without him, not that you will be a bad Pfalzgraf, mind you," she said cautiously.

"I know. I am not our father, and I will never be able to lead as he did. Indeed, I have valued your guidance. I know you mean well."

"Well, I will soon leave for Lorraine so you will have to do without me. You will write, will you not?"

Ludwig smiled. "But of course."

This was the moment. "Before I leave, dear brother, I have one last piece of guidance, but I know not how to say it." She placed a careful emphasis on 'dear.'

Curiosity burned in Ludwig's eyes. "Go on, sister, you can say anything to me. I am your brother."

Margareta made a frown. “No, it is too awful to speak of. Forget I said anything. Farewell!” She turned for the door, but he stopped her.

“No, please. Whatever it is, I must hear it. I know not what to do. I was wrong to vote for Sigmund.

“No, you were right to elect Sigmund. He will prove a powerful ally. The problem is Jobst.”

“But there is nothing we can do to change that,” he said as though it were a question.

Margareta made her face look as sorrowful at what she had to say as possible. “It seems we have no choice but to make Jobst, er, go away.”

Ludwig’s eyes widened in horror. “You are not suggesting I...”

“Do not openly speak of it. It is difficult enough to think of it.”

Ludwig looked down at the floor as though he did not want to face anyone in his reply. “I admit, the thought had occurred to me, but surely there must be another way.”

Margareta sat beside Ludwig and patted his back. “I wish there were. I have been thinking of nothing else for hours. But you know as well as I how common these things are. It is something not to be taken lightly, to be sure, but if nothing is done, there will be civil war throughout the Roman Empire. You will be doing everyone a great service.”

Ludwig looked at her helplessly. “Are you sure? What if Sigmund were to yield to Jobst?”

Margareta struggled not to smack her brother for his naivety. “Do you honestly think Sigmund will do so?”

Ludwig sat on the bed with hands over his face for a long time. Was he hiding tears? It would not be surprising to Margareta, child that he was. Finally, he looked up and said softly, "I dislike this business, but it will be done."

"And make sure Sigmund knows what you are willing to do for him when he becomes king," Margareta added. And with that, she left the troubled Ludwig before he could protest.

## Part II: The Council of Constance, 1415

The next few years passed with little incident. Within a few months, Margareta heard that Jobst had died the following February under unclear circumstances, leaving Sigmund uncontested for Roman king (but for Wenceslas who still refused to recognize his deposition). Charles strayed further and further from Margareta as she aged, but this suited her. She spent her days sewing, reading, dancing, hosting the occasional banquet, and so on. She corresponded with Ludwig from time to time. All seemed to be well. The family had good relations with Sigmund, which meant there was little about which Margareta needed to worry. The three claimants for pope continued to battle, but Margareta cared little of such tiresome matters. That is, until she heard of the Council of Constance early in 1414, where the Church was to be reorganized and where her brother would be given the opportunity to exert his powers. Important people from far and wide would be in attendance, which meant Margareta needed to go. Charles was reluctant to bring her with him, but she hardly kept the illusion he had a choice in the matter. And so, they arrived in Constance by April of 1415.

As soon as they had settled in, Margareta called upon Ludwig. Charles, of course, did not come with her as he was far too busy inspecting Constance's brothels. Ludwig was staying in a townhouse near Sigmund. The home was richly decorated with embroidered rugs, vast paintings, and golden objects everywhere one looked. It was perfect for hosting countless banquets. Ludwig was quite busy, but he was eager to see his sister. After all, it had been five years since they had last seen one another. Upon seeing her, his black, beady eyes lit up. They firmly embraced and asked after each other's health, how their travels had been, their families, etc. Margareta waited the appropriate amount of time to ask him about the political situation. When she finally did, Ludwig looked as though he would fall apart. He gazed outside at the cloudy sky and said better not to speak of such things. Margareta was not deterred by this.

"Brother, what is the matter? Is our family in danger of some kind?"

"No," replied Ludwig. "It is nothing of that sort. It is just. . . I have grown tired of keeping our family in this position. Sigmund has demanded many things from me, some of which I would rather not do. I am constantly traveling. And now..." He trailed off.

"Now what?" said Margareta impatiently.

"Have you heard of Jan Hus' arrest?" he asked.

"Of course. What of him?" Who had not heard of it? He had written works related to John Wycliffe and was imprisoned for heresy despite having safe conduct from King Sigmund.

Ludwig spoke quickly as though he hoped Margareta would miss the dreaded details. She did not. "I am to take part in his trial and ensure he is found guilty and executed."

"So?" Margareta replied without hesitation. "He is a heretic who has been speaking out against the church for some time in Prague."

"I am not so sure of this," Ludwig said. "Many Czechs have appealed to me, saying he is not against the church but rather the corruption within it such as the charging for confessions and sale of indulgences."

"If there is such doubt, why would the king care to take such a firm stand?" Margareta asked, trying to reason her brother out of his moral qualms.

"Because, among other reasons, Jan Hus is supported by Wenceslas and his wife, Sophia. If they can be linked to him, it weakens Wenceslas' claim to the throne and leaves Sigmund indisputably the Roman king."

"Is that not a good thing?" Margareta asked. "Wenceslas defied our father for ten years and has caused nothing but trouble for all. Would it not be in our interest as well that he be linked to a convicted heretic?"

"Yes, if the man to whom he were linked truly was a heretic, but I am not sure Jan Hus is one."

Margareta laughed. "What does that matter? He has written many works containing heretical information and has openly spoken out against the church. People have been executed for far less."

Ludwig was taken aback. "You mean I should arrange for a man to be executed for a crime he has not committed."



“A crime you are not *sure* he has committed,” Margareta said, realizing prudence would not convince her brother. “You can not read Czech. In fact, writing religious essays in Czech rather than Latin alone is rather absurd. It is almost as though he is hiding something from the general public.”

Ludwig shifted in his seat and said, “Please, let us speak of other, more pleasant matters. How are your daughters?”

Margareta let the matter pass for the time being. She had some months before she would need to convince her brother of the prudence of doing as the king wished.

On the twenty-ninth of May in the year 1415, Baldassarre Cossa, the man who had claimed the title of Pope John XXIII was officially tried, deposed, and handed over to Ludwig. Margareta was ecstatic. This was a sign her brother had gained the trust of the Roman king. Not only that, her brother had done so at the expense of Duke Friedrich IV, the man who had allowed her beloved sister, Elisabeth, to be butchered in childbirth and then proceeded to remarry within a few years. For it was Friedrich who had aided Cossa’s escape from Constance and King Sigmund. On that day, the duke had lost everything as a result. Yes, this day had been quite satisfactory. True, Charles had grown bolder in his pursuit of other women in Constance, but at least he had the courtesy merely to frequent brothels in the night. The situation almost suited Margareta. As long as it was not general knowledge, it meant he left her to her own devices.

That night, Margareta arrived home, belly full of mead, with her accompanying entourage. The sun had already begun to set. Margareta could scarcely make out the carpeting. She knew she had arrived home too late, but that

day had been one worth celebrating. She peered around the room, searching for the staircase to her chambers. She wanted nothing more than to throw off her tight dress and lie down in her warm bed. Then, she noticed a tall, thin figure sitting by the door, twisting his moustache around his pointed chin.

“Charles!” she shouted, startled by his presence. Why was he in the house, waiting for her?

“Yes, wife, it is I. Did I startle you?” The moon shined on her husband’s sneering face.

Margareta regained her composure. He always aimed to catch her in a weakened state, especially when he wanted something from her. Well, mead or not, she would not make this conversation so easy for him. “No, I was merely surprised to find you in the house. Did you scare off your whores tonight? Or is there something you want from me?”

“No.” Charles attempted to soften his face. Margareta inwardly thought how ugly it made him appear. “My dear wife, I came to reconcile with you. I have treated you with such disdain, and I sincerely apologize.” He took her hand and kissed it.

Margareta removed her hand from Charles’ dry lips as though they were worms. Did he think her an idiot? With her family in such a powerful position once more, of course he wished to reconcile. He wanted to meet King Sigmund and gain his favor. And once he had used Margareta to establish this connection, he would return to his whores. “Do not waste your time, husband. I do not care to hear your insincere words. It would be best if you returned to your whores.”

The candle flickered. Margareta could just make out Charles' eyes burning with anger, but he quickly calmed himself. "Please, sit with me. Let us drink wine and speak."

Margareta sensed danger in his words. She was unsure how far he would dare go. She felt it best not to find out. "Of course, but not tonight."

Charles pulled out a chair and grabbed his wife firmly. "I said," he growled. "Sit." And with that, he pushed her into a nearby chair.

Margareta was shocked by this new strength. She tried to take deep breaths to calm herself, but her dress was too tight. She could barely expand her lungs. "How dare you..."

"It must kill you to be a woman," Charles interrupted. He looked into Margareta's confused, green eyes and continued, "You like attention and power. Yet all you can do is manipulate your brother and live through his gains."

Margareta glared at Charles with burning anger. What did he know? Of course she did what she needed to do to keep the family in power. Among many other things, he would not be there speaking to her if her family were insignificant. "You would have done well to stay with your whores, husband. You may speak to them in this manner, but I will not tolerate it."

Charles stroked his pointed chin and spat at Margareta. She leaned back. The sudden movement pained her. If only she could remove that dress! He continued, "But whores do not merit such boldness. Their words are not filled with poison."

Margareta was unsure how to respond. She and Charles had always been at odds with one another, but he had never been so openly hostile. Was he drunk? Was she? She grew aware that the room was spinning around her. It was best to put off a

proper response until she was in a better state. “You are not yourself tonight, Charles. I am off to bed. I suggest you do the same.”

She rose and walked towards the stairs, but Charles grabbed her wrist and shouted, “I am myself more than I ever have been. Now sit down!”

Margareta was terrified. Would he hit her? At least, he had always been kind to her in that respect. Margareta decided it would be best not to challenge him but to get away as soon as she could. “Charles, I am tired. We will speak in the morning.”

Charles tightened his grip on her wrist. His voice grew more threatening as he spoke. “We will speak now. I am your husband, and you will do as I say.”

This was intolerable. Margareta was not going to yield to him even if it meant being beaten. She was too proud for that. “Let go, you fiend!”

She made an effort to free herself, but Charles pulled on her wrist and threw her to the floor. She fell down the stairs, one step at a time. Her frail body was overwhelmed in pain. She struggled to breathe. He shouted, “I said, you will do as I say, you witch!”

Margareta would not take this. She had more powerful friends than he. She tried to sound brave, but her voice was softer than she intended. “Or what, husband? I only have so many bones for you to break.”

“Or I will openly recognize my mistress!”

Margareta felt as though the wind in her lungs had been sucked out in an instant. Each time she had been unable to find him flashed through her mind. Would he dare? She tried to gasp another breath. Her dress was too tight. She could not afford to faint. No, she needed to stay strong. She...she...

## Part III: Nancy, Lorraine

It was August of 1422. Margareta scurried through the house with impatience. There was to be a small banquet in Nancy that afternoon, and the servants were not preparing at a suitable rate. Then again, when were the servants ever satisfactory? The lord of the castle was rarely there so they had little to fear. After hours of yelling and threatening the servants, Margareta stepped away from the main gardens where the banquet was to be held and walked along a path at the side of the castle. She needed a moment to think. It was beautiful that day. The warm summer sun shone brightly on the yellow flowers decorating the grounds. Margareta looked over the cliff and was greeted with a view of the whole town with its quaint French houses. None of this was enough to cheer her from her troubles. How had her life come to such a place? Everything had been going so well at the Council of Constance for the family. But there had been so many conflicts following it that the Roman king had less need for noble friends and more need for wealthy friends. With the new pope, Martin V, elected, Sigmund had no use for John XXIII's continued imprisonment. And with his brother, Wenceslas, dead, Sigmund was the sole claimant to the Roman throne. And so, her family had become less important. Meanwhile Charles had grown more bold, walking with his mistress, Alison du May in broad daylight. He had not laid a hand on Margareta, but that was only because he rarely saw her.

That evening, Charles did not attend the banquet. Margareta checked with the servants loyal to her. None could find him. First, she was infuriated. Then, she grew worried. Much as he would stray, he had always maintained the dignified role of lord

of the castle with her as his wife. What would her guests think? Would they take this as a sign of weakness? Would she be hurt along with him for this? And what of the peasantry? Would they take this as a sign of weakness? Surely, some servant would say something. No, she must not show concern. Margareta took a couple of breaths. She could distract everyone with her daughter's recent marriage. Yes, look how wonderful it was. At fifteen, Catherine had grown into quite the beauty. She had married Jakob von Baden that July. She and the duke were so happy with their daughters' marriages. What of the duke? Oh, he was indisposed and sent his apologies. She kindly thanked various guests for their well-wishes, secretly hoping the very worst were occurring to him at that moment. Perhaps he was dead somewhere. Then she would be free.

That evening, after all had settled into their lodgings, Margareta reached her chambers and began to remove her shoes. She felt dreadful. It had been so difficult to play hostess with her duke gone. Much as she hated him, she still needed him for public appearances. Although the summer days drew long, the sun was already beginning to set. She lit a candle. She could not begin to think of sleeping. She gazed at the tapestries on her wall. There was one that had always been her favorite though she could never quite say why. It depicted a group of men hunting a boar. The boar hid in the bushes, but she knew it was about to be caught. The dogs could smell it, and the hunters were patient. Eventually, it would have to move, and once it did, it would be dead. Sometimes, Margareta dreamed she was the lead dog.

Charles had grown too daring. She began to write a letter to her brother. He was a fool, but she was desperate for an ally. Suddenly, the candle flickered. Charles

entered the room. Margareta acted as though she took no notice. If he wished to play a game, he would have to play hers.

“Good evening, wife.”

Margareta would not accept this faux-kindness. She did not have the patience for it. “Where were you today? You missed the banquet.” she said.

“I was with Alison,” he replied.

Margareta felt as though her heart had just fallen out of her chest. He had never mentioned her name in his wife’s presence. She had only heard rumors from her loyal servants. Alison du May was the daughter of the precentor of the church of Saint Georges. “Who is that?” she said, feigning confusion.

“You know.”

Margareta looked at Charles with what she hoped appeared to be indifference. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing this upset her. “And why did you need to miss the banquet to see her?”

“Because she had some important news.”

Margareta tried to remain calm. “*Husband*,” she began, carefully emphasizing he was still married to her. “I have always looked the other way from your indiscretions. If you must have a mistress, very well, but do not miss important occasions at your own castle. It will make your vassals talk.” With that, she turned away from him to signal it was time to end the conversation.

Charles twisted his moustache once more and grinned widely. He had more to say. “Alison is pregnant again. Now, with our daughters both married, I have decided that she is to stay here in the castle. She will act as duchess and attend ‘important’ events with me in your place.”

“What?!” Margareta shrieked. How could he think this acceptable?

“Surely, you are joking. You can not openly have a mistress. What will everyone think? You must be drunk!”

“I have never been more sober,” he replied with a sneer.

Margareta felt a great pressure mounting in her chest. She glared at Charles and felt a great hatred rise up in her like a snake. “Get out!” she said with a forced calm.

“No,” he said. “This is my home, and I have grown weary of your chasing me from it with your hate. I curse you, you wicked woman. I curse you from the deepest, blackest part of my heart. I wish you the worst things that could happen to a woman. I wish you would experience every death you have caused ten times over. And then I wish you would live a long life, growing uglier every day than you already are. And I wish you would lose your ability to manipulate men and that you will be surrounded by far younger women who still hold sway over men. I wish every tree in the forest and every cloud in the sky would block the sun from your sight so that you would live in darkness and could never again write to your child of a brother. I wish you would lose everything you have gained through your wretched actions and then, I wish you would keep losing. I wish you a long life watching the world change without your having the slightest role in it. I pray to God that this happen if not in this world at least in Hell, where you are sure to go, you wretched excuse for a wife.”

Margareta tried to breathe. Why, oh why, were her dresses so tight? She had known this would happen eventually, but she had never imagined Charles would go this far. What could she do? Should she remain in the castle? Oh God! She gasped



for air. No, she could not faint. “Get,” she struggled to say as she slowly lost consciousness. “Out!”

In the winter of 1423, Margareta fled to Heidelberg. By that time, Charles made it clear he truly meant to recognize openly his mistress as though *she* were his wife. Margareta needed her brother’s aid if she was to regain any semblance of dignity. She gathered the guards whose loyalty she had thoroughly purchased and rode off by horse for nearly two days barely any sleep. She could think of nothing but reaching her brother. Surely, he could do something.

She arrived in Heidelberg exhausted. She strode to the castle’s outer gates. The black waters in the moat below had already turned to ice. The trees surrounding the castle were leafless and broken. She reached the inner courtyard of the castle and felt as though something were missing. There was no usual bustle. The few servants who passed her by appeared uneasy for reasons she could not quite explain. What had happened? Ludwig had had some quarrels with Sigmund of late, but she had heard of no real conflicts. Sigmund did not have the funds to cross her brother even if it had been in his interest. Ludwig had not written of anyone being sick. So why did she feel a strange chill? Ludwig dashed outside, scarcely believing what he had just been told.

“Sister,” he said, enthusiastically hugging her. “What an unexpected pleasure. You must be freezing. Please, come inside.” Perhaps her feelings had been misplaced.

“Thank you,” she said. They cautiously trudged through the snow. Inside, there was already a fire waiting for her, but it had mostly died off. In the state she

was in, Margareta poked at the embers herself, paying no heed to the danger of her dress catching on fire. She sat in a stiff, wooden chair beside the fire and tried to warm herself as best she could. “How is Mathilde, your wife?”

“She is well. She will soon give birth, and she assures me it is a son. I think I will name him Ludwig IV.”

“Congratulations.” Margareta said. He would soon have two sons, the number of sons Margareta had birthed. Her Raoul and Louis had both died in their infancy. She had always wondered if it had been her fault, as had Charles. “Then why do you look so unhappy?”

“Do I?” he asked, attempting to avoid the matter. After all these years, did he really think Margareta would be deterred?

“Yes, what has happened?” she demanded.

He sighed. “I suppose there is no use keeping it from you. King Sigmund has been slighting me for years now. He has been off fighting countless wars, what with the Hussites in Bohemia and the Tyrolean lords. A little more than a year ago, he appointed the archbishop Conrad of Dhaun to be the imperial vicar in his absence...”

“But such an appointment is *your* right, is it not?” Margareta asked.

“It should be,” Ludwig replied.

“So what have you done about all of this?” Margareta asked. She had been far too busy worrying about Charles and Alison to pay close attention to how bad her brother’s political position had come to be.

“What can I do, sister? Sigmund wants a larger centralization of power in the empire.”

“What can you do?!” Margareta cried out in anger. The answer was so obvious. “You are the Count of the Palatine. You have power to raise taxes. You have the power to dethrone and elect kings. You can arrange for any man to be poisoned on a whim. He is nothing! He can not raise taxes. He is waging two wars. He could not even imprison a traitorous antipope without your aid. Remind him of this. Show him that you and the other princes are unwilling to stand for his so-called centralization of power. Form an alliance. Gather armies. You would not even need to fight. He is spread far too thin to be capable of opposing you.”

Ludwig stared at her, stunned. Well, that certainly would solve his problems. But, in the long-term, would it cause more troubles than it alleviated? Would other electors agree to this? They had expressed their concerns with Sigmund’s leadership, but that was not the same as allying against him. The archbishop of Mainz had been at constant odds with Ludwig. How could Ludwig convince him to join in a league against the Roman king? He sat in silence for a while, unsure what to say in response to Margareta. Finally, he said, “That is too audacious.”

A servant entered the room and began tending to the fire. Margareta leaned forward so as not to be overheard. “Would a move any less audacious catch the king’s attention?”

Ludwig bit his lip and watched the servant place two logs in the fireplace and push them around until they caught flame. “Fair point, sister.” He continued to gaze at the flames as they danced about. “Let us speak of more pleasant matters. I hear Catherine married last year.”

On the seventeenth of February in the year 1425, Ludwig finished negotiating peace with Sigmund after he had formed a league against the king thanks, in large part, to Margareta's advice. The following day, he entered Margareta's room with two goblets full of the best wine in Baden to celebrate. He was so giddy with how well matters had come to pass that he did not notice the letter in her hand.

"My dear, sweet sister, we must celebrate. King Sigmund has formally recognized my power, and my wife is once more with child. What a splendid day this is!"

Margareta barely noticed him. She gazed out her window. The sun struggled to shine a single ray of light into her room through the dark clouds that reached out across the sky. The snow had begun to melt, leaving a brown sludge that spread over the town like a disease. How could she tell her brother the awful news?

"Margareta? What is the matter?" Ludwig asked, suddenly noticing the letter.

"Oh nothing, brother. Congratulations," she said, not bothering to show a smile.

"What does that letter say?" he asked, his tone becoming more concerned with each word.

"What letter?" Margareta asked, feigning an attempt to hide it.

Ludwig quickly grabbed the letter and read. With each line, his eyes grew wider in shock. "He has granted Alison du May a house with furnishings, silver, and gold and has formally recognized their five children as his bastards who will inherit property. What scandal! How could he do this to you? Oh sister, you know you may stay with me as long as you wish. We shall pretend you have no husband."

“Thank you, my dear brother,” she said. “But after the way he has treated me, I am afraid I must ask something greater of you.”

Ludwig eyed her cautiously, guessing what she was about to say. “If I can.”

“Threaten him with violence. Tell him if he does not return to me, you will send your army.” Margareta suggested.

“And if he says no?” Ludwig asked.

“It will not come to that,” Margareta replied.

“But if it did?” Ludwig asked, knowing what he would have to say.

“Well, you would have to hold to your threat I suppose, but ...”

“In that case, I must say no to you, sister, much as it pains me to do so. I can not afford a conflict with a duke as powerful as your husband.”

Margareta desperately held back her tears. “Brother, he has slighted our family. Our father arranged our marriage as a symbol of good will between Lorraine and the Palatine, and he has blatantly violated our marriage contract. It would be dishonorable to ignore this matter.”

Ludwig tried not to laugh. “Dishonorable? What is this, the age of Barbarossa? Life is more complex than that. I can help you with legal pressures. I can send subtle spies to instigate a riot. But I can not attack Charles outright with such a small provocation.”

Margareta could hold back no longer. She burst out in tears. “*Small* provocation?! Brother, he has all but annulled our marriage. He has given his mistress her home and all the money she could ever need and brings her in my place to all formal events. He has even recognized her children as his and granted them the title Bâtard de Lorraine. I am living in shame. I fear returning to my home. I can

scarcely show my face at events with other nobility. My only allies are a few villagers who are brave enough to recognize me when I dare show my face in the streets.”

Ludwig looked at her, unsure what to do. He had never seen Margareta cry. She had always been the strong one. She had held the family together through countless difficulties. She had remained cool-headed when he had been unable to think at all and guided him through every problem he had ever encountered. And she was a woman! She had never allowed herself to be controlled by the humors known to flow so violently in women. And here she was, finally broken down. Ludwig did not know what he could do. His brotherly instinct was to storm Charles’ castle in Nancy and beat him senseless, but he could not afford to do so now. To be sure, Sigmund had finally recognized the electors’ power, especially Ludwig. But how powerful would Ludwig be when the conflicts with the Hussites and the Tyrolean lords ended? Ludwig helplessly patted his sister on the shoulder, to her great annoyance. He said, “Do not worry, sister. It is just a phase. Charles will tire of Alison soon enough. And in the meantime, you can subtly show that you are the kind, merciful duchess everyone should want. That way, when he leaves his mistress, you will be in an even greater position.”

Margareta continued to sob for some time. It was no use. She had spent more than a dozen years on this fool of a brother, trying to keep him in a powerful position, and for what? After everything she had done for him, Ludwig could do nothing to help her. He was useless. She knew very well Charles was in no hurry to leave Alison. Still, one idea had remained with her: she could use the support of the

villagers to her advantage. The Germans were in constant conflict, but the king of France was not. Charles was more French than German. Perhaps all was not lost.

In February of 1429, Charles received Jeanne d'Arc in a desperate attempt to regain his health. He was sixty-five and nearing death from illness. (Or at least, so he thought.) He frequently felt tired and dizzy. Margareta had heard rumors about this Jeanne d'Arc for a few years by then. She had been traveling through Lorraine, claiming to have visions from God that she was meant to defend France against England. She had grown popular among the peasantry in Lorraine, and, supposedly, the Dauphin of France, Charles VII had granted her an audience. Margareta's Charles, however, was primarily a vassal of the Roman king. He held a small amount of French land, but he was at odds with the Dauphin. So it seemed to Margareta odd that Charles would greet this woman who so strongly supported the French. Then again, his health was failing him so much, he had little to lose.

Margareta watched Jeanne d'Arc enter the castle from her window and reflected on the last few years. Since 1425, when she had returned to the castle in Nancy, Margareta had only dealt with the matter of her husband's mistress in subtle ways. She had carefully selected with whom to speak. She had been kind to her servants and discovered who could be trusted. She had befriended a cook and convinced him to flavor her husband's food with *deuil*<sup>9</sup>. She had gone on countless walks through Nancy, helping the burghers here and there, showing them that things would be better if she were returned to her status as true duchess. She had

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<sup>9</sup> Scientifically known as *Atropa Belladonna*, poisonous if consumed in large doses.

particularly befriended a carpenter by the name of Michel, a strong man with a square jaw, which he attempted to cloak with flowing, black hair that cascaded out of his head. She would commission him to build small things for her and pay him handsomely, enthusiastically complimenting everything he did. She would even flirt with him very subtly. In his eyes, she was the most glorious woman in Nancy and was horribly wronged. In her eyes, he would soon prove a useful tool. Margareta's seeds of good will were abetted by the fact that Alison du May did nothing but haughtily walk through the streets covered in gold jewelry. She would even kick peasants over who stood in her way as she paraded through the town. As Margareta set a few things in order, slowly gaining favor where she could, she watched as Charles and Alison became less popular. Margareta patiently waited for her opportunity.

Margareta looked at Jeanne d'Arc and thought perhaps this truly was the sliver of good fortune she had been waiting for that would help her pull Charles away from Alison. Jeanne d'Arc was a religious woman. Surely, she could be convinced to pressure Charles to return to Margareta. He had much to gain by reconciling with the dauphin of France. Besides, he had spent more than a dozen years with Alison, Surely, he would tire of the witch soon enough, as Margareta had subtly reminded him. All had been set in place. Jeanne was not supposed to meet with Charles until the late afternoon. Margareta had secretly arranged to see the maid immediately upon her arrival. Perhaps Margareta's troubles truly would come to an end. After all, how could Charles refuse God?



That afternoon, Charles greeted Jeanne d'Arc with Alison by his side in the grand hall of the castle. Margareta stood behind a pillar on the balcony above the hall and watched the scene, knowing how it would unfold. There he sat, propped on countless pillows, in his ornate, dark-wood chair. His various guests and entertainers stood around him as Jeanne d'Arc approached. Margareta saw the women's ornate hats bob back and forth as they peered at the oddity in the room. It was a dirt-covered, short-haired woman, dressed in men's clothing. Despite this, there was an indefinable aura about her that one could not help but sense. Margareta was not presumptuous enough to think it was clearly God, but there was unquestionably more to this woman than her odd appearance.

Charles could sense this too. He sat in his chair, too ill to rise (from old age, as far as anyone but the chefs and Margareta knew) and greeted her as warmly as he would a king. She asked for help with her mission to meet with the dauphin of France and regain the north from the English. Charles offered her anything she would like if she could cure him of his ailments.

"My good Duke," the maiden said. "I thank you for your kind welcome, but I myself can not provide a cure. Only God can do that."

"But of course," Charles replied. "But surely, as his messenger, you can, er, intercede through your, er, patron saint on my behalf."

She looked straight at Alison. "There is no need. With all due respect, my lord, perhaps it is that you are living in such flagrant depravity. It seems God wishes to give you a warning to repent before it is too late. If you would but leave your mistress and return to your wife as God wishes, I am sure your ailments would pass from you at once."

Every person in the room went silent. One of the jugglers even dropped his colorful balls. No one had said a word since their duke had openly taken a mistress and left his wife, and here was this odd peasant girl saying something so strongly. It was as though there had been a wolf in the room, waiting to attack, and Jeanne d'Arc had poked it. Margareta's breathing increased. Alison's skin grew even paler, and the sparkle in her blue eyes faded to pure terror. This Jeanne d'Arc was smart. There were too many there who had heard. If he remained with Alison, he would be openly declaring himself against God. Margareta had won. Now, it was time to hear her husband's speech of defeat.

"Tell me, *young woman*," Charles said, "Is God cruel?"

Jeanne d'Arc looked confused. "At times, he can test us." Oh no, she was falling into his trap.

"Perhaps, and yet, I can not help but think it is not God's will that I return to my wife."

There was a great commotion. One knight's daughter audibly gasped and fainted. The knight apologized profusely as others murmured amongst themselves, glad for the distraction. Then all attention returned to Jeanne d'Arc.

"But, my lord, it is written in the Bible, in the very ten commandments that you shall not commit adultery."

"The Bible says a great many things," Charles replied. "My wife is a snake, poised to bite at any time, and I defy any God who wishes I remain with her. Indeed, if he saw her fit to be my wife, he would have allowed our sons to live past infancy. Yet here I am, sixty-five years of age, heirless, and married to a woman who has long ago ceased to bear children. Tell me, why would God want me to live such a life?"

“It is not for us to know the ways of God.” Margareta began to panic. This was not what was supposed to happen. She wished she could help Jeanne d’Arc.

“Perhaps God is jealous. Why would he give me a beautiful woman who loves me and has provided me with five children and then expect me to leave her for a serpent who stands behind pillars in my grand hall as I greet guests?”

Margareta felt as though she had been struck in the head. How long had he known she was there? Everything was ruined. All gazed at her on Charles’ last words. What could she do? Should she face him? Should she run? Best to keep her image as the noble wife being persecuted. She called out, “Husband, I will pray for you for these words of heresy you spoke today.” And with that, she fled the room, leaving him to angrily dismiss Jeanne d’Arc.

That night, Margareta tossed back and forth in her bed. What was she to do? She could not think, and the relief of sleep was nowhere near. When she finally did force herself to rest, Margareta had a feverish dream. She was a child in Heidelberg again, but the castle had changed. It was dark. The walls endlessly towered to the sky, and there was no roof. She could see the moon above her in between the leafless trees of the garden outside. She felt a presence. Elisabeth. No, a phantom of Elisabeth was going through childbirth, and if it succeeded, Elisabeth would be returned to life. She was at the end of the hallway, struggling. She needed her sister or she would die all over again. Margareta ran along the hallway, but it seemed to extend further and further. If she could just run faster, she would be able to reach her sister in time, but her black dress was too tight, and she could not breathe enough. She could feel her sister’s life draining away.

No, wait, that was her own life. Margareta was the one dying in childbirth. Elisabeth stood over Margareta as the two had exchanged bodies. Elisabeth turned to Charles and kissed him with passion. He hesitated until he realized it was a younger woman. He turned to Margareta and told her Elisabeth deserved to live instead because she was younger and would be a better mother. Margareta said there was a mistake. Elisabeth was supposed to die. She reached for Charles. If she could just touch him, she could have her body back, but she was slowly turning into a wolf. Elisabeth watched and cackled.

No, that was not Elisabeth. It was Alison du May, and she was secretly a witch. She stole Margareta's human life source and turned her into a wolf. Charles took Alison by the hand and led her to Margareta's bed chamber. Wolf-Margareta lunged after them to reverse the spell, but when she reached them, the wolf took over. She tore apart their bodies, breaking each bone, unable to stop herself. Charles and Alison screamed. Margareta's sharp teeth sank into Alison's chest. A moment later, Alison was staring in utter terror as her beating heart left her blood-drenched body. Of course, this was not enough to kill the witch. Margareta started towards Alison's head, but she became aware Charles was whipping her. He was trying to make her an obedient beast. The wolf grew angry. She bit in between his legs and pulled mercilessly. First his genitals fell to the floor. His innards soon followed. He cried out in agony as a string of intestine hung to the floor. Margareta pulled at it, and they came out endlessly. Soon, he was dead. Then the wolf turned to Alison and tore away at her throat. As she did so, Margareta realized this was the only way to get her identity back. Otherwise, she would be a caged animal forever.

Margareta awoke in a sweat. She had a feeling, but she did not wish to admit it to her conscious mind. No, there must be another way. But then again, had she not already caused several deaths? Would Ludwig have poisoned Jobst if not for her? Would Jan Hus have been convicted if not for her? And for what had she done these things? For Ludwig? For her family? In the end, she had gained nothing from her actions. She still lived as the slighted wife. Charles hated her so much he was willing to defy God rather than return to her. It was not her fault everything had reached such a desperate state. She had not chosen to live in such a time when assassination and execution were so necessary. In another, more peaceful age, she could have been living happily with Charles at her side. All would have been well. She had only done what she had out of necessity. Her family was important in such times, and she had needed to protect them. As long as Ludwig held power, she had a small say in how the world was shaped. That was not something she could let pass her by.

And now, if Charles' life were to suddenly end, would it not help everything along? He was already old, far too old. If he went away, Isabelle and her husband would be in power. This was a monumental time in France. There was a question of who would lead what areas, and Margareta had the opportunity to help make that decision. After all, Lorraine was in the north and was both a part of France and of the Holy Roman Empire. Charles was unfit to decide who should rule it. She would be doing the world a favor. Yes, he needed to go away. It was time to pass the reins to the next generation. Margareta would merely be helping him along. And besides, she would not directly cause anything. She would merely speed the aging process.

All Margareta needed to do was set a few matters in motion first. She would need to be patient if matters were to occur as she wished. Indeed, there was no other way.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January in the year 1431, Charles II, Duke of Lorraine, died in his bed, supposedly of sickness. Only Margareta and the cook she had befriended knew of the wolfsbane. Margareta was at his side until the last moment, refusing to let him see Alison du May. There was far too great a surprise awaiting the witch outside for her to be allowed into the safety of such a strong castle. And besides, Margareta wished to relish Charles' death in peace. She watched with pure joy as the light slowly left his eyes. She held his hand in hers and felt it go limp. At last, she had triumphed. He was dead, and she was mistress of the castle. There was just one thing left to do: watch as Alison du May was carried through the streets by the townsfolk.

Margareta had mentioned to the carpenter Michel that Charles would soon die and had subtly suggested over time that Nancy would be better without Alison du May once the duke could not protect her. Michel had pushed his flowing black hair away from his square jaw and assured his duchess her tribulations would soon come to an end. Margareta gazed out the windows as word spread that the duke was dead and unable to protect his accursed mistress any longer. She watched as everyone in town gathered together with pitchforks and torches and dashed through the streets to the house Charles had granted Alison. Margareta heard the witch scream in terror as she was dragged out of the safety of her home. They carried her through the streets. She cried and begged for her life. Margareta could not help but smile. There she was, on the balcony of her dead husband's bedchambers where he had betrayed her so

many times with that woman. It would soon be over. Alison was marched to the town gallows. Parents and children alike gathered around her like a pack of wolves, their eyes filled with excitement. Their town had been mocked as the center of whoredom for countless years because their duke openly defied the words of God. Finally, they had an opportunity for revenge.

“Wait,” Alison called out. “I beg of you. Let me first...”

Everyone in the square shouted “No!” Michel the carpenter stood atop the gallows and slapped Alison. He said a few words about her life of sin while a rope was slowly tied around her head. He said she had ensnared their duke and should not be allowed to continue lest she ensnare another man. He looked up to the castle above. Margareta nodded in approval. He gave the signal. Alison was pushed forward. She kicked about, struggling for breath. Her lips slowly turned purple. The mob burst into applause. Margareta’s heart leaped in her chest. Soon, Alison’s pale, lifeless body was swaying in the wind. Margareta had won. It was over. The time had come for a new chapter in history, here in Lorraine and elsewhere.

Afterword



*“History never looks like history when you are living through it.”*

*~ John W. Gardner*

While the Council of Constance was an important part of history, it is complex and difficult to follow. Thus I felt that fiction would be a good way to demonstrate the time period. Each story shows a major part of the council that led to a conflict thereafter, using a plot to keep the reader invested in the finer details. The first chapter depicts a part of the history that led up to the Hussite Wars. The second chapter touches on the beginning of the conflict between Friedrich IV, the Duke of Austria, and the Tyrolean lords who followed the Council of Constance. The third chapter shows a part of the conflict between King Sigmund and the electors, which prompted the Binger Kurverein (or Alliance of Bingen) in 1424. Led by Pfalzgraf Ludwig III, the electors refused to come to the king when summoned, claimed to be co-rulers, and threatened to depose him.

Beyond the major conflicts that followed the Council of Constance, each story depicts a different cultural aspect of the history. The first deals with the religious outrage against the church and Jan Hus’ trial. The second depicts the social history surrounding the council. Aside from the trials and meetings, there were countless tournaments and banquets, as is to be expected when nobles from far and wide convene in one area. The third story shows the politics surrounding the Council. With the extensive backroom dealings, suspicious deaths, and lack of centralized government, this was a time when power was in great flux, especially because the religious situation was so tenuous. One result of the Council was a small shift of power from the religious to the secular.

Within historical boundaries, I made a point of ensuring that the stories were my own and not merely dramatized depictions of reports from the time. A great deal of thought went into what these characters could have been like. Jan Hus is portrayed as internally conflicted about the violence of his followers. I felt that this made him more sympathetic as it can be difficult to relate to a religious figure who is too perfect. Based on Oswald von Wolkenstein's songs, it is easy to imagine that he was a man who thoroughly enjoyed his freedom from marital entanglements. However, it is hinted that this attitude stemmed from a past with his first love, Sabina. Margareta Pfalzgräfin<sup>10</sup> is portrayed as a manipulative, mean woman. During such a time, it is easy to imagine the difficulty for an active, power-seeking woman to live in a society which so heavily focused on men. In short, I used my own imagination to embellish these historical figures so that the reader is more engaged in what happens to them in history than he could from a documentary account.

Outside of the history, I wanted each story to stand alone as a piece of fiction. While each story builds up to a real event, I was careful in choosing which events to depict as leading up to the respective climaxes. One aspect of plot development is pacing. As a general rule, story should not have one active scene after another because it diminishes the impact of each scene. This made the first chapter rather difficult. In Prague, there were burnings, riots, and beheadings. Once in Constance, Jan Hus was imprisoned, so few exciting things happened there. Thus, I could not

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<sup>10</sup> Note that Pfalzgräfin Margareta (third chapter) and Margareta von Schwangau (second chapter) are not the same woman. One problem with writing historical fiction is one does not get to choose the names.

maintain pacing and keep the story in chronological order. My solution was to develop the story with parallel time lines.

Another feature of plot is, obviously, conflict. For my second chapter, I felt it would not be enough simply to show Oswald von Wolkenstein feeling unsure about getting married, nor was the conflict with Duke Friedrich IV enough either, since it primarily took place after the Council of Constance. I therefore set the Tyrolean conflict as a background that interfered with Oswald's seeing Margareta.

Furthermore, Margareta becomes pregnant. This is quite conceivable, historically. As there are no birth records of when exactly his children were born, it is reasonable to suggest they married because she was pregnant. This gives a sense of urgency to Oswald's bet with Hugo and adds an emotional layer to the wedding scene.

In the third chapter, I set out to create narrative tension by portraying strained relationships between Pfalzgräfin Margareta and, respectively, her brother, Pfalzgraf Ludwig III, and husband, Duke Charles II of Lorraine. This gives a sense that Margareta is slowly losing power over those around her as they become more assertive. Ludwig III learns to handle political dealings, and Charles grows the courage to cast her out openly. Furthermore, I made Margareta keenly aware of the political situation and tied it to her relationship with her husband. While she knows the two are not directly connected, she has a constant sense that her brother's remaining in favor with King Sigmund helps to keep her husband from straying too far. Once the Council of Constance is over and the king is more concerned with conflicts on the other side of the empire, Charles feels freer openly to acknowledge his mistress, Alison du May, and their children. Thus there is a sense of desperation when Margareta arranges to have her husband and his mistress "go away."

Many people have asked me why I chose to write this thesis. First, I find the Council of Constance fascinating and historically important. As I said in the foreword, it signified the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages. It showed the weaknesses of the Holy Roman Empire. In turn, this led to political, religious, and social reforms that paved the road for the Modern Era. With this period in mind, I chose to present it through fiction because it can show, rather than tell, the reader what happened. Historical fiction encourages the reader to invest personally in the people and history described. It reflects what life was like in the past and makes history more accessible to those who may not be otherwise historically inclined. Perhaps it can even inspire the reader to investigate further the period it depicts. The past can shed light on how we came to the place where we are now. We are living in a time, like so many others, of religious, social, and political questioning, not to speak of violence. While a greater understanding of the Council of Constance can not determine the answers to the world's questions, it is a piece of the history that has played a role in bringing humankind to its present state. Perhaps these stories can illuminate this small yet significant piece of history.

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