

THE EXECUTION



Sharon Cramer

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By Sharon Cramer

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This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

Author's Note:

The backdrop for this story is fourteenth century France. However, I have interpreted, within this period, certain events, timelines, characteristics and people—both fictional and real—in a loose manner that may not coincide with the actual historical course of events. I have done this solely for the purpose of literary embellishment. It is my greatest wish that the reader would enjoy simple and gratuitous entertainment of this piece of historic fantasy.

For Yvonne

My twin...my inspiration.

You knew the story before a word ever hit the page.

PROLOGUE

†

Tomorrow... he would be dead.

CHAPTER ONE



D'ata

Pronunciation: Dee-yah-duh

Origin: Latin as in 'given'

The Dungeon: Eight p.m.

Southwestern France in November was dismal. It was a time of short gray days and long black nights.

The priest's robes hung in heavy woolen folds, damp from the fog, as he made his way along the muddied streets of the sleeping town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The quiet village sat on the mouth of the Basque River and was beautiful in the summer. However, Saint-Jean-de-Luz paid dearly for it in the winter as it received the fury of the winter storms from the Bay of Biscay.

The cotton underlinen clung uncomfortably to the priest's body, and his collar chafed the back of his neck. It was a despicable feeling, and tonight his whole outlook was miserable. D'ata wished for the Marseille, but wishing was not praying, and even prayers seemed to go unheard as of late.

A moth, drawn to the light of a street lamp, spiraled downward into the miniature lake left by another's footstep. D'ata watched as the moth thrashed upside down, its wings tacked to the surface of the muddy water, a thousand ripples spiraling furiously to the edge of the tiny lake. The puddle took on a rainbow color as the dust slowly eroded from the moth's wings...color in a dimly gray world. But D'ata did not see color anymore, save one.

He stepped on the insect, impaling it in the muck, finishing its fate. It was a gesture of mercy, a mercy killing. This gave him pause; he was stunned at what he'd done, and on some level he begrudged the insect its oblivion, sanctuary, and precious nothingness.

It would be good to finish this undesirable business and be back to the stable behind the church where he could shed the godforsaken robes. An evil trick it was, to make a holy man

dress so. Then he could spend the rest of the night reading his beloved, rare books. D'ata spent many nights escaping between the worn, hand written pages of other lands, volumes borrowed from the papal library in Avignon. Often, he would awaken later with his hand resting upon a still-open volume. The other priests were confused by this simple passion and judged him for it, but he was smart, and so it was easy to keep secrets, very easy anymore. While he read, the older priests slept, having again eaten too much, the fat bastards.

The stable room was his sanctuary, away from the huge stone structure of the church. It was a magnificent church, the massive stone tower pointing elegant and cold to the sky—to the one who looked away. D'ata preferred the stable.

His room used to be the tack room and still smelled of old leather and oil. Now, there were no fine horses, just one old nag which, except for the attentions of the young priest, gained no attention at all.

As he trudged along, it was the memory of his secluded haven behind the church that was comforting and familiar to the cloaked figure tonight. He made his way slowly through the darkness, watching his feet as he went. His mind, however, drifted elsewhere.

D'ata kept his door barred at night and lit a single candle to read by. In the summer he stretched out naked on top of the blankets, allowing the cool night breezes to caress his skin after the torture of wearing the heavy robes all day. He didn't believe in the shame of nakedness to the eyes of God. He didn't believe in many things now, for he was not like the others. Perhaps that was why his sleep was so often disturbed. Satan is a trickster, and if the sleeping mind of a persecuted soul becomes the Devil's playground, then D'ata's was the carnival insane.

Sometimes the older priests peered in on his emaciated nakedness, scowling, their faces drawn as though in futile envy. They must have missed the horrible melancholy on the sad face of the youngest priest as he slept, murmuring aloud his heartbroken dreams.

Along the muddied street, which had just that day been busy with townspeople scurrying here and there, preparing for the next day's big events, there was only ghostly silence. The fog lamps were still lit, left burning for any unfortunate traveler or anyone so disturbed as to be out on such a dreadful night. They sizzled as icy drops of rain began to fall. *Hiss*, the town seemed to whisper to him. *Listen—we have a terrible story to tell!*

The buildings closed in on him like unwelcome echoes in the night. D'ata turned his eyes from the storefronts and cottages. He knew they only pretended to be sleeping, their shuttered

eyes closed. But really they watched, judging the wretched man forced to finish his wretched task.

D'ata wavered from one side of the street to the other, connecting the lights like a black widow weaving its crooked web. To a passerby he thought he might appear drunk, crisscrossing his way through the darkness. This might have amused him, but the lamps only made the shadows seem heavier this sad night. His heart wandered upon the edge of despair, for he could no longer escape the darkness that enveloped his soul.

Turning the corner, he looked beyond the smithery. In the distance, the looming outline of a castle rose beyond the town square. It was black and ominous as though it did not belong in the tiny French village.

The feudal family who'd once lived there had been brutally murdered during the war. They were nobility—tragic casualties of the ever profitable Inquisition. The adults had been drawn and quartered, their bowels doused with molten wax and lit on fire. Such a gruesome act it had been, and particularly creative, even for fourteenth century justice. They'd screamed for mercy before dying an unmerciful death. There had been no children in that family, and for this the young priest secretly thanked God.

Then the tidal waves of Black Death had come, and mankind suffered like never before. Even the earlier starvation of the crop failures was preferable to the plague.

Europe was an unwritten book at this time. In Saint-Jean-de-Luz, it had taken sixty years to raise the stones of the church, and in the scheme of things, that was very efficient. Monumental structures such as these normally required close to a hundred years to finish, like the monastery in Bordeaux. To D'ata, it was not serfdom which had raised the church but the work of medieval society, a society very possessive of its holdings.

Universities were being established in Paris, Oxford, Naples, and Cambridge. The compass and mechanical clock were invented, and Marco Polo had traveled to China. Dante penned his incredibly tragic composition of human fate, and religion was chaos. On one hand society boasted the teachings of the gentle St. Francis, while on the other it blessed the barbarism of the Inquisitions.

France was the most powerful country in Europe, but in the name of faith, war had plunged it into a river of blood and carnage. Then, at cruel intervals, the plague cast its ruthless cloud, eventually consuming one-third of France's population. Death was a wicked lover and invited all

to its arms as it peered into every window, whispering, ready to kiss the lips of any who dared to live.

Despite Europe's recent leaps in commerce, technology, art, and learning, D'ata was aware that it was a dark time. The hearts and minds of men were not right. Humanity was given to hopeless thoughts and desperate deeds. He shook his head and frowned; these were woeful thoughts. But let them have their death and despair; he had enough of his own.

The mucked up streets gave way to cobbled stone as he approached the small township square. He kicked his feet, slinging the mud from his boots as the mire gave way to more solid ground.

Looking up, he saw the black outline of the castle rising high above him. Its towers stretched like arms into the sky as though it would swoop him up and dash him into the rocky sea beyond. He dreaded the visit—had put the task off all day.

The castle housed the criminals of the state for five townships. Tonight it was also the end-stage of his holy pilgrimage. Sighing, he reached up to scratch the back of his neck where his collar punished him.

As he walked past the square, the scaffolding for tomorrow stood skeleton-like, gaunt and spindly. The timbers were giant—an unholy mantis poised in the night, waiting to behead its prey. Unconsciously, D'ata moved away from it to the other side of the street.

There'd been a flurry of activity to raise the platform for the executions. It'd been almost festive. Eat, drink...and watch.

Three men were to be beheaded. One was to be hanged. It was certain to be a lively, social affair. The venders and gawkers would be out in mass, profiting as always from the macabre curiosity of horrible things. *Curious how human nature draws more to a death than a birth. Let a child be born and a few significant loved ones will gather, but let a man die? Even his most remote acquaintance will show up.*

D'ata was expected to be present—some ridiculous notion left unspoken that the presence of a holy man would secure the inevitable will of God. It was a freakish barter at best, and he hated it.

He'd already seen the pathetic unfortunates scheduled to lose their heads. They were pitiless creatures, belching and scratching their genitals while he offered them confession. They'd led lives of petty disregard, their sins carnal and selfish, without the notion of consequence or

redemption. Did they deserve to die? Only God knew. They were most likely victims of these miserable, chaotic times.

No matter, for tomorrow their eyes would briefly look up at their decapitated bodies. They would gaze in surprise as the awareness of their final moments dimmed, like the moth, flailing, staring up at the street lamp before being smashed into Dante's heaven or hell.

D'ata shook his head, as though he might shake the thoughts away. Only one remained to be seen—the murderer, the one to be hung, the *evil* one. Yet the necessity of absolution was divine law! No matter the crimes, all men might seek absolution and, with forgiveness or enough gold, could enter the kingdom of God.

He breathed in deeply of the damp night air. D'ata was a righteous man, but he resented the task he faced. He knew that the elder priests gave him this chore because he was the youngest of the parish. It gave him only minimal satisfaction that one day he too would be above this task; it would be cast off onto a younger, newer priest. Perhaps then he would finally be left alone to pray and take communion within the confines of the church. This notion was selfish, he knew, and he would take his escape in a heartbeat when the time came. For now, however, he would be a good priest, as good as he could be. If it pleased God, perhaps there would be mercy and D'ata would be granted his final indulgence.

For some reason, this gave him no peace tonight. His mood blackened, for he knew that to wish for the passage of time was dangerous. The soul lives to experience the moment. To bleed is to live. A terrible color, though, red. If he could just forget that color...

He paused in his tracks, reached up and gently touched his right temple with the first two fingers of his hand. He was uncomfortable. His thoughts tormented him, and his feet were leaden. It seemed that his heart sagged in his chest. It was like that fall-too-fast feeling which happens when, as a child, you jump from too high a spot and your body outruns your heart. It was very disagreeable, and he tried to shrug the feeling off. *Must just be the night air*, he reasoned, knowing better.

Glancing back for a moment, he thought he saw another clandestine traveler behind him, but the shadow turned out to be only a vapor in the night, disappearing into thin air. He shrugged and walked on.

For now it was to the dungeons, and he dreaded the job ahead of him. He detested laying eyes upon those miserable creatures, smelling their filth and half listening to their confessions,

blasphemies, and complaints. It disrespected humanity...and it disrespected her.

A pang of guilt stabbed at him. God would disapprove of his lack of compassion. He made a mental note to include this in his evening prayers and Saturday confessions. *Forgive me Father, for I have sinned...again.*

Monsignor Leoceonne would not treat him kindly for penance, though D'ata knew the Monsignor felt generally the same as he about the task. The older priest had reason to give him stiff penance at the slightest fault, for the younger man had a tormented history of severe transgressions to be sure. It was a history everyone knew but no one spoke of.

D'ata took a deep breath as the shame of his past snuck briefly into his wandering thoughts, and he groaned aloud. Peculiar how he did that...softly, involuntarily, but definitely a groan. It always happened when the unthinkable would lay siege to his subconscious and claim a thought for itself. He could never predict when it would happen, and it made him pause on his journey tonight; he bowed his head and brought his clenched fists to his forehead.

Struggling, he finally forced the thoughts away, preferring the morbid present to the horrible anguish of his past. *Please, God. Make the memories go away; if you will just take them away.* He breathed in deeply, relaxed a bit. His feet started to move again, and his journey continued.

D'ata clambered up the long hill to the castle with a slow, tedious step. As he crossed the portcullis and approached the enormous, dark facade, he paused to touch it, allowing his hand to pass over the rough, cold stones. They appeared to weep in the dampness of the night, perhaps for the unfortunate men they imprisoned. Ice cold tears they must be—tears for the dying.

The skirts of his robes were wet a good hand's-breadth up the hem, but the rains had ceased for now. Climbing the steps of the massive fortress, he lifted the heavy wooden knocker, pounding twice on the soggy door. The dull hammering echoed behind him, causing him to glance back again.

He shivered, squinting into the distance from where he'd just been. The fog pushed in, rolling down the streets, claiming for itself the space from which the rain had withdrawn. Saint-Jean-de-Luz was a beautiful town on a sunny day. Tonight, however, D'ata hardly recognized it.

Glancing up, he tried to make out the stars, briefly considering that others must look at the stars just as he did—other people in other towns, perhaps watching the same sky at this very moment. Sometimes it was his way of escaping, by thinking about these strangers so far away. His problems didn't exist where they were; if only he could find his way there. Of course, he'd

tried that once, with devastating consequences. His gaze fell to the little town, and he tried to make out the sea beyond, but the fog forbade him tonight.

The gates creaked on their hinges, startling him from his far away thoughts. A middle-aged guard with disheveled hair, his cheek deeply wrinkled from his slumber, finally answered the summons. His breath was a putrid mix of ale and sloth, and D'ata turned his head away from the stench.

Waving the priest in, his wrist disjointed and floppy with his drunkenness, the guard guided the holy man through a maze of corridors. Mumbling about the ungodly hour, though it was barely past dinner, he led D'ata to one of the two towers adjacent to the donjon.

They passed through a heavy, wooden door which moaned a rusty objection as the guard heaved it open. Then they wandered a ways along an alarmingly narrow hall. The confinement quickened the priest's heart, and he was annoyed that this happened to him every time at this same, particular spot.

The stones wept inside as well as out, though the walls were a good twelve feet thick. It was cold and gloomy, and D'ata's mood paled even more.

Lighting a second oilcloth, the guard shoved it at the priest. He fumbled with a key to unlock a door and nodded toward what appeared to be a dark, bottomless hole.

Holding the torch with both hands like a crucifix, D'ata allowed his eyes to adjust to the black maw before him. The circling steps were sadly familiar to him as they fell away into apparent nothingness. It shortened his breath, as though to venture further would command that he step beneath the surface of humanity into the abyss of heartlessness.

The guard turned, appeared ready to be done with the priest as though he coveted once more the liquor which would lure him back to sleep. "He's a wretched one, Father, and you shouldn't be wasting your time on him. He'll be Satan's whore by tomorrow night, and God be rid of him." He laughed heartily, handed D'ata the spare dungeon key, and slammed the door, locking the priest on the other side.

D'ata stood in merciless silence, glad to be rid of the man but dreading the cold, pitiless beyond. Clearing his throat, the noise echoed loudly, uninviting to his ears. He was aware that his own breathing had deepened and become faster again, so he held his breath, forcing himself to exhale slowly. This was not the first time he'd passed this way.

Why does it seem so foreboding tonight?

Lifting the oilcloth upward, he lit the first of many lamps to guide his way down the long flight of stone steps. They seemed to sink away forever. Squinting, he pushed the heavy hood from his head, and the golden light from the fire washed warmly across his face. Giotto, the painter, would have cried to lay eyes upon this one.

D'ata refused to believe the rumors he'd heard whispered, that his was a tormented and lovely face. They said it carried the weight of tragedy; a beautiful affliction, much too thin and with heartbreaking eyes that seemed to betray his sorrow. They were framed with thick, long lashes. Even she, at one time, had mentioned that when his mood was temperamental or impassioned his eyes had a habit of changing. They would turn from a deep chocolate brown to a blue so dark that they appeared as indigo as a moonlit sea.

However, when D'ata studied his face in the faded looking glass at the monastery, he did not see these things. Anymore, he didn't even recognize the man who stared back. *Who is this?* he sometimes wondered, peering at the cheekbones that rose so sharply. Sometimes he forgot entirely who he'd once been, with lips that were once so full and wide, curling up gently at the sides as though they'd held a forbidden secret. But there were no more secrets now...and his lips no longer smiled.

Monsignor Leopold had scolded him, demanding he shave his locks, leaving the skullcap that marked his diocese. But the nights were so long and cold, and he was filled with such a bitter and incurable despair, that he'd allowed his hair to grow long. It curled thick and soft around the nape of his neck and swept across his eyes when he bowed his head, shielding him from the prying eyes of others in the congregation. As for the monsignor's demands, they were the least of his concerns anymore.

He was sorrowful and yet still lovely to behold, though he'd never fancied himself so. His appearance had once lent itself poorly to his calling. And then there was his terrible history—one of intermittent acts of regrettable rebellion. Here lay his greatest shame. The story was well known, though seldom spoken of, and he tried desperately to recall it only in his dreams.

Funny, how one can drown repeatedly in one's dreams.

His eyebrows sloped gently above his sad eyes and furrowed slightly at the task ahead of him. Reaching up once more, beneath the collar of his robes, he rubbed his neck absently, peering into the darkness which threatened and invited him all at once. The calling was what gave him pause just now.

Slowly, as though he didn't trust his own legs, he descended the steps, his heart heavy for the task that lay ahead. He sighed again. The prisoner should be seen, and after all, it was God's will. No man should face death without the opportunity to confess, to make his peace with the creator or spit his final insult. It just seemed that so often these men cared neither for their acts nor their fates. He frowned. Life was piteous and unpredictable, and it wasn't hard to imagine caring so little that the prospect of death seemed almost enviable.

He continued on, descending the steps gradually. The water dripped in sleepy rivulets down the massive stone walls. D'ata had seen the lifeblood of the beheaded drip just so, after the initial geyser following the executioner's blade. He wondered if the soul left in the same manner, an initial rush, then dragging behind it the final droplets of what a man truly was.

The stone steps were enormous, a good fourteen inches vertical, as though the castle had been built for giants. The dungeon stairs deepened, and the rats scurried away from the unwelcome light as he lit the lamps one by one. The steps seemed to go on forever, and D'ata was overcome with the sensation of descending into the bowels of the earth, the way station for travelers on their way to hell.

"Damn these thoughts! For hell's sake, give the poor bastard a chance," he said aloud and then swore softly again at his blasphemy. "Forgive me father..."

D'ata's unorthodox lack of conformity, and his mouth, landed him in trouble more than seldom with the church. In the past, D'ata had difficulty purifying his mind, and his words truthfully followed his thoughts. He often struggled with composure for he was honest, speaking as he felt. It made for uncomfortable moments, but most of these seemed so long ago. Now he remained mostly silent, and when he did have to speak, even at confession, he tempered what he said and how he said it.

Many hours he'd knelt on the stones, asking forgiveness for his transgressions, for he truly wished to be a holy representative of the Father above. Even more, however, he wished to forget what happened. He would do anything, only if he could forget. He would stay on his knees for eternity if God would take away the pain.

All the same, his knees and his heart had become callused with the time he'd spent in redemption for his sins, during his private search for peace. His past, however, was another story, for there were no calluses on his memories. They haunted him every day anew, fresh as a thousand sliver cuts, and he flushed visibly as his mind tricked him again, inviting the

unwelcome thoughts against his wishes.

“No,” he whispered and forced himself to concentrate on the steps, counting them as down, down he went, further into the belly of the beast.

Finally, the steps ended and he halted, breathing hard, not from exertion but from the anxiety that wrapped thickly around him like the damnable robes. His spit was hard to swallow, and he had the sensation of being trapped, as though he was as much a prisoner as the creatures held here.

A cold sweat broke damp and unwelcome beneath his robes. His thoughts turned to his warm quarters behind the church, where he could shed the heavy woolen clothes and slip beneath his linens and wool blanket. There he could sip hot brandy, read and reread his books, eventually drifting off to sleep. Only then might he remember when he'd been happy, and maybe a compassionate God would not disturb him.

Sometimes, it occurred to him that God was his torturer. God held him in his outstretched hand and dropped him, only to have him fall short of death. Horrid, cutting bands, treacherous cords about his heart—these were what saved him. Yet God would be his relief, his salvation...at least, that is what the Church believed. *Was it not so?*

He shook his head. He'd been given his chance to make right with God and repent his past, to repair his heart and find peace. That was how it was supposed to happen. *Wasn't it?*

D'ata stepped onto the flat stones of the dungeon floor and swallowed twice to pop his ears. The dampness reeked as an unlikely breeze greeted his nostrils. It was rank and repulsive, and he thought it must come from the very rock beneath his feet.

He could make out the dark rows of cells, two of them, like long black fingers stretching from the hand of the devil himself. The unfortunate men who were cast in here were miserable souls, most of them truly evil with dreadful crimes to share their nature. Sometimes, though, they were just unlucky or enemies to the wrong power. Nevertheless, they held something in common with him—misery.

Making his way down the left row of the dungeons, D'ata held the oilcloth outstretched to broaden the sphere of light. The stench drifting out from the holds was overwhelming now, a vile mix of rotting death and of the nearly dead. He shuddered. Sometimes the maggots invaded even before the end came.

He fought the overwhelming urge to vomit, to abandon his mission and flee. *I will do my*

bidding and be gone from here, back to my room for prayer, a hot drink, and a good night's sleep.

He tried not to glance into the cells as he walked by them, only holding the torch high enough to make his way. It might be worse to see into the holds than to just imagine. The groans from within seemed inhuman, and the unmistakable affront of a wretched, naked form evacuating his bowels gave him barely a moment's pause.

The moans and gasps hurried him along, and his eyes remained fixed to the stone floor in front of him. An outstretched hand extended grisly and mutilated from a cell and startled him. He knew the horrid torture of slowly crushing the digits of a man's extremity, and D'ata wasn't at all certain the hand was even attached to an arm. He stepped over it carefully, maintaining his direction, bent now upon his purpose. Replacing his cloak, he kept his head down, knowing well enough where he must stop.

D'ata must have appeared the dark angel that he was, passing over death and despair as he carefully and silently made his way to the last cell. He was beginning to wonder if he would never get there, for eternity seemed to have a grip on him. But eventually he arrived at the solitary dungeon with its massive bars and heavily bolted door.

Holding the oilcloth up, he thought at first that no one was in the hold. He squinted hard, swinging the torch carefully to and fro, searching the cell while commanding his eyes to stop their tricks. Finally, he made out a wretched form in the far corner.

The man was wrapped in the clothing of a mercenary, although the armor was gone and what was left was soiled and shredded. He huddled as far from the door as possible, burrowed into the straw like a miserable animal as though to gain what warmth he could. From the cell door, he looked fragile and small. The flesh that showed was bruised and scraped. D'ata knew this was because the prisoner had been subjected to torture before his sentencing. The man possessed an evil history, and it was the way of things.

If they were loathed, the prisoners suffered horrible fates. Men were castrated by suspension until the weight of their bodies tore the delicate orbs from them. If they were adulterous, they were sodomized by the guards. If, however, they were feared, they were beaten, but no hand would touch them directly. It was believed that the truly evil in life could spite one in death, and there was a respectful cruelty reserved for prisoners such as this one.

D'ata drew a deep breath. For a moment, he thought the prisoner dead. He thought he might

be too late, but as his eyes better adjusted, he saw the slow, shallow rise and fall of the mercenary's breathing.

“You there. It is I, D'ata, the priest. I have come to hear your confession.”

There was no response, and the creature remained unmoving.

He tried again, “I am here with the seventh sacrament. Do you wish salvation?”

Again, there was no response.

Unlocking the gate with the heavy iron key the guard had given him, D'ata moved into the cell. He locked it quickly and hid the key on his sash, between the folds of his robes. “I give you the chance to seek the forgiveness of our Father, to go to your death in peace.”

The prisoner remained terribly still.

Holding the torch up, the cell appeared larger than he'd first thought—a good size, nearly five long paces square. Most of the floor was bare stone, stained with the blood and decay from past prisoners, layered with old and moldy straw. The air was dead, unmoving, and heavy.

Kneeling next to the man, D'ata stretched his hand out to touch the huddled form. It occurred to him the prisoner might be sleeping or unconscious. The man may not have even heard anything he'd said.

At such a close range, he became aware that the creature was not a wretched withered shape after all as he'd appeared from outside the cell. The murderer was a stalwartly man, perhaps over four cubits tall, like himself. He'd expected less, a pitiless fragment of a man. Surely it must be so since the crime was worthy of only ugliness and weakness. He was a taker of life, and now his would be taken.

The priest's eyes sharpened as he noticed the folds of lean muscle layered over the bare ribs; this probably protected them from breaking during the beatings. He glanced at the strong sinews of an exposed thigh, the knees folded for warmth under an unmoving body. A ragged scar of an obvious impalement marked the thigh. There were many scars upon this one—this man was cruelly battle-worn.

He next observed the broadness of the shoulders, wisps of straw clinging here and there. There was nothing weak about this man, but D'ata sensed that the prisoner was indeed forsaken. He swallowed. Perhaps they were not so different after all.

The head of the condemned man was completely buried beneath the straw, arms clasped around it as though to protect it, even as he slept.

D'ata paused—considered the gentle rise and fall of the man's breathing, soft and sincere like a child's. "I have bread and wine for you," he whispered.

He had hidden the loaf and flask from the guard. It was forbidden to bring other than spiritual comfort to the condemned, but D'ata was not unkind and carried these few comforts to share, if he felt it deserving.

It occurred to him that perhaps the prisoner was deaf from the beatings or maybe unable to move—his back broken as sometimes happened with the tortures. He'd seen the guards drag a man to the gallows, unable to carry himself even to his death.

Hesitating, he reached his hand out, the stark cleanliness of it strangely corrupt against the filth of the bare shoulder. He didn't shake the man but instead gently pressed his fingers around the collarbone. It startled him when he felt muscle glide over sinew, as the form groaned and stirred. Swiftly yanking his hand away, he rocked back on his heels and waited.

Pushing his bruised body to his knees, the man struggled, his head hanging loosely.

It was just about then that the priest became more acutely aware of the significance of the prisoner's frame—the lean but muscled form and size of the man. He recalled that this was a barbarian, and briefly wondered at his own uncommon lack of good sense, coming into the cell as he had. Good judgment was not necessarily one of his gifts.

The man groaned, his battered body moving in agonizing jerks, likely stiffened from sleeping on the cold floor. D'ata watched silently as the man struggled to will his body to move, like a marionette coming strangely to life.

Drawing several short, torturous breaths, the prisoner crouched with his head still hanging. He wrenched his hands to the sides of his head as though he might stop the explosion that was sure to occur. Finally, the gasping stopped and the man's breathing became deep and regular, his hands falling to his knees.

The prisoner slowly raised his head to peer at his antagonist, expecting, but not retreating, from the forthcoming blows. He squinted and blinked from beneath thick, tangled black locks as the meager light from the oilcloth seemed to offend his eyes. D'ata knew prisoners would frequently sit in darkness for a very long time, sometimes for days without seeing the full light of day.

The man looked strangely like a medusa with a dozen or so long straws clinging to his tangled mane. He appeared to struggle as he tried to focus on the face of the young priest who

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