Be.

The Oldest Fable and the Hands That Carried It

300 CE–Present

A Novel in the Series

Beyond His Story We Stand

M. McGilbourne

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Beyond His Story We Stand

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For permissions, enquiries, or correspondence with the author:

2140chronicles@gmail.com

2140chronicles.com

Be. is the first book in the *Beyond His Story We Stand* series — a chronological journey through human civilisation told through the people history did not record by name. Each volume stands alone. Together they form a single unbroken chain from the first stories humanity told itself to the world you are living in now.

This book begins the chain. The series continues at Beyond His Story We Stand.

For homeschooling families, this series was especially written for you.

Two Shadows Before Water

The valley had always been older than its mountains. The peaks came and went — ice broke them, rivers carried them to the sea in grains — but the valley floor had lain in that particular light since before the word for light was made, since before there was a mouth to make the word. The Jhelum moved through it as it had moved through it ten thousand years before any man thought to give the river a name, winding south through stands of chinar and deodar, past fields where barley stood in the last of the warm season, past villages of mud and timber where thin smoke climbed into an evening sky the color of old bronze. The mountains to the north were dark. The snow on their upper faces still caught the sun, so that they glowed above the

shadow of the valley like lamps left burning in an empty room.

This was Kashmir. It had been Kashmir before the Kushans came and after the Kushans went. It would be Kashmir long after the king who currently held its tax rolls was replaced by another, and that king by another, and those kings by languages not yet spoken. In the year that concerns us — the three hundredth since the death of the man some men called the Awakened One — the valley belonged loosely to a young dynasty seated at Pataliputra on the Ganges plain, five weeks' travel to the south. Its armies did not come often. Its tax-collectors came often enough. The Brahmins kept their groves, the farmers their fields, and the jackals their territories at the pond's edge. These arrangements had existed in roughly this form since the first man built a wall and the first jackal learned to sleep downwind of it.

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The old man left his hut each evening at the same hour, in the same direction, on the same path. Not from habit — or not only from habit — but because the path and the hour had been chosen long ago for good reason and the reason had not changed. The tamarind trees lining the path gave

shade until the final stretch, where the ground opened to a small pond surrounded by sedge grass, and there the light arrived from the west at an angle that struck the water without glare. He could see into it. He could see what came to drink.

Vishnu Sharma was eighty years old. His dhoti was clean and white and had been clean and white for sixty years of mornings spent washing it in cold water. His head was shaved except for the small tuft at the crown that his sacred thread required him to keep. His staff was a straight length of teak his wife had cut for him decades ago, and he had not replaced it because replacing it would mean acknowledging that she was gone, and he preferred not to acknowledge this more than once a day. He was thin. He was not frail. The thinness in a man of eighty who had eaten one meal a day for sixty years is not the thinness of diminishment but of reduction — the unnecessary things removed, the essential ones remaining, as a blade is made by what the grindstone takes away.

He walked slowly. He had earned the right to walk slowly and he exercised it without apology.

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The village behind him was doing what the village did at this hour. The conch shell had called the evening prayer from the small temple at the path's head, and its echo still moved between the stone walls. Women carried water jars from the public well, the jars balanced on cloth-ringed heads without the use of hands, the way the women of this valley had carried water since before any scripture was written. The smell of ghee heating in iron pans. A child's voice, high and brief, cut off by a mother's answer. The wooden wheel of a cart turning on dry axle, a sound like a question asked in a language of which only one word had survived.

From the east came the smell of the first fires of evening. Dung cakes, dried in the summer sun, now giving their dense and particular heat to the cooking of rice. Below the smoke smell: the river, clean and cold at this hour, carrying snowmelt from heights no man had ever named.

The old man did not look behind him at the village. He had seen the village. He had been seeing it for the thirty-two years he had lived at its edge, watching its children become parents and its parents become the kind of old people who sit in doorways. What happened in the village was

interesting to him in the way that all human life was interesting to him — the way a piece of copper wire is interesting to a man who knows it carries something invisible. The current matters more than the wire.

He came to the pond.

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They were there before him.

Two jackals stood at the water's edge, close together, their grey-gold flanks nearly touching. They faced the same direction — south — and appeared to be looking at the opposite bank, where a stand of tall grass moved in no wind he could feel. The smaller of the two turned its head toward its companion. A gesture passed between them, brief as breath, the meaning of which a man could not read but which had, unmistakably, the shape of meaning. The larger did not turn its head. After a moment the smaller turned away again, and both resumed their inspection of the far bank.

Vishnu Sharma stopped at the path's edge and stood still. He had lived long enough to know that an old man standing still at dusk is invisible.

He watched them. They drank, separately, each dipping the long muzzle to the water and lifting it with the care of animals who know that the posture of drinking makes them vulnerable. Their ears moved independently. The smaller one — he was certain, now, it was the smaller — said something to the larger. Said something: he knew this was not the word. Made a sound, moved a muscle, shifted a paw. And the larger jackal, without moving, without responding in any visible way, changed. Its attention shifted. He could see this in the set of the shoulders, the angle of the head. Whatever the smaller one had communicated, it had landed.

He thought: *I know this. I have known this for eighty years and I have still not named it.*

Two animals at a pond at dusk. One speaking; one listening; a choice being made between them that had consequences neither could see yet. He had watched men in palace courts do exactly this. He had watched monks in forest schools do it. He had watched his wife do it to him across thirty years of marriage, and he had done it to her, and on the balance of it she had been better at it than he was.

He stood until the jackals moved back into the sedge grass and disappeared.

The pond held the last of the western light. The water was very still. On its surface, for a moment, he could see the dark cut of the far mountains, inverted — the whole world turned upside down and flattened to silver.

He thought: *What if an old man wrote down what they did not say?*

He did not think it again. He turned and walked back along the tamarind path toward his hut and his evening lamp. The thought settled behind him like dust behind a cart, and he forgot it, or he thought he forgot it — in the way that a man thinks he has put down a stone when in fact he has only shifted it to his other hand.

In his hut, he lit the lamp. He ate his one meal. He washed his hands. He slept.

The jackals, somewhere in the dark, were still speaking.

A Messenger at the Grove

The kingdom of Mahilaropya was not a kingdom that troubled history. It sat in the foothills south of the valley, a day's ride from the river, and it paid its tribute to Pataliputra on time and asked nothing in return except to be left alone in the arrangement of its own small dignities. It had a fort of red sandstone. It had a market square where cotton cloth and sesame oil and dried fish changed hands three days a week. It had a temple to Vishnu whose tower needed repair and a temple to Shiva whose tower had been repaired last year and was already cracking at the east face. It had, in the present generation, a king named Amarashakti, which meant *one whose power is unending*, a name his father had given him in the optimism of early fatherhood and which

the years had complicated somewhat. He was a middling king in a middling kingdom, not cruel, not especially wise, capable of anger and of generosity in roughly equal measure, devoted to his sons in the way that men of power are devoted to the evidence of their own continuation.

He had three sons. This was the problem.

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The messenger arrived at the grove in the early morning, before the dew had finished its work on the path's dust. He was young and clearly uncomfortable with the assignment — a palace rider, accustomed to carrying news of armies and grain stores, not to dismounting at the edge of a forest clearing and addressing an old man who was sitting cross-legged before a small cooking fire, watching a pot of rice water come to the boil.

Vishnu Sharma heard the horse before he saw it. He did not look up.

"Sit," he said. "The fire is already made."

The messenger looked at the ground. He sat.

"There is no chair," the old man said. "The ground is older than chairs and serves the same purpose."

The messenger sat on the ground. He was, Vishnu Sharma observed, perhaps twenty-three, with the straight back of a man who had been on horseback since childhood. His tunic bore the mark of the king's household. He had the look of a man carrying a message he had been told to deliver carefully, which meant the message was either very important or had been garbled in the telling and he did not know which.

"Speak," the old man said. "The rice will not care."

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The message was this: King Amarashakti had three sons. The sons were, in the king's own reported words — and here the messenger's face showed the practiced blankness of a man who has been told to repeat something unflattering without editorializing — *great in birth and deficient in everything that birth is given in order to produce*. They were not cruel boys. They were not wicked. They were simply, entirely, magnificently uninterested in the knowledge that a prince was required to carry. Twelve teachers had been summoned

to the palace in the past four years. Twelve teachers had returned the princes in the same condition in which they had received them, with apologies, with refunds of the fees that good manners required be offered, with expressions of continuing goodwill toward the royal house and its remarkable offspring.

The king was not young. The question of succession was present at every meal. Three sons and none of them yet capable of governing a market square, let alone a kingdom.

Vishnu Sharma's name had reached the court through a chain the messenger could not fully trace — a merchant who had once stopped at the grove for water, a physician from Ujjain who had heard something, a court Brahmin who had a cousin. The name had arrived with a particular specification: this was not a teacher who lectured. This was a teacher who told stories. And the princes, whatever they could not do, could listen to a story.

The king asked — the messenger was careful with the word, for *ask* and *require* sit close together when spoken from a throne — that Vishnu Sharma come to the palace and take the princes under his instruction. For six months. The king offered land, silver, cows, the title of royal counsellor.

The messenger finished. He looked at the old man. The old man looked at the pot.

The rice water was boiling.

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"What are their names?" the old man said.

The messenger told him.

"And what do they like?"

The messenger paused. This had not been covered. "Eating," he said at last. "They like eating."

"That is something."

The old man lifted the pot from the fire and set it on the flat stone he used for this purpose. He poured a cup of water from the clay pot beside him and held it out. The messenger took it with both hands, as was proper, and drank.

"How old is the youngest?"

"Fourteen."

"And the oldest?"

"Eighteen."

The old man nodded slowly. He was calculating something that had nothing to do with numbers. He was calculating whether three boys who liked eating and had failed twelve teachers were unreachable or merely unmet.

There was a difference.

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He did not answer the messenger that morning. He told the young man to sleep in the hut — he himself slept outside when the weather permitted, which at this season it did — and to carry the answer south in the morning.

That evening he walked the tamarind path again.

The jackals did not come. The pond was undisturbed. The light was the same as the night before, arriving from the west at its useful angle, striking the water without glare. He stood at the path's edge and watched the far bank for a long time.

He was eighty years old. Six months of princes. The thought arrived with a physical weight, a tiredness that settled across the shoulders before the decision had even been made. He had taught young men for fifty years. He knew exactly what they cost — the patience required, the

repetitions, the slow work of finding the particular gap in a particular mind through which an idea could be passed.

And what would he offer Amarashakti's sons that twelve other teachers had not? The same mathematics. The same statecraft. The same Vedic texts already known by rote and not by comprehension. There was no new knowledge for princes. There was only the same old knowledge, offered differently. Offered, perhaps, in the shape of a story. Offered in the mouths of animals who did not know they were teaching, so that the student did not know he was being taught.

He thought of the two jackals.

He thought of the smaller one, turning its head, communicating something wordless in the set of its jaw. And the larger one, receiving it. A choice made. A direction taken. The unseen consequence moving out ahead of them into the dark sedge grass, already in motion before they moved.

What if an old man wrote down what they did not say?

He was still carrying the stone. He had not put it down after all.

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In the morning, before the messenger had finished eating, the old man told him his answer.

"Tell the king," he said, "that I will come. I will take the princes for six months. I ask no land, no silver, no title. I ask that the boys be brought to me each morning before they have eaten. Hunger makes a mind supple." He paused. "And tell the king that at the end of six months, the boys will be changed. Not because I will have lectured them. Because I will have told them stories. The king will think this is a lesser thing. He will discover it is the only thing."

The messenger wrote nothing. He was not the kind of messenger who wrote. He was the kind who listened and remembered, which is the older and more reliable form.

He mounted his horse. He rode south.

Vishnu Sharma watched him go, then turned back to his grove, to his small fire, to the pot that still needed washing. He had six weeks before the first lesson. Six weeks in which to decide what story to tell first, and how to begin it, and which animal should speak.

He already knew the answer to all three. He had known it, he understood now, since the evening by the pond.

He went to wash the pot. He was smiling in the way that old men smile when they have finally agreed to do the thing they were always going to do.

What the Teacher of My Teacher Said

The messenger had been gone four days when the doubt arrived.

This was customary. In Vishnu Sharma's experience, doubt was not the first response to a decision but the second — it waited until the decision was made and irreversible, until the messenger was three days south on a good horse, and then it came, unhurried, and sat down in the place the decision had vacated. He had made enough decisions in eighty years to know this pattern and to distrust it no more than he distrusted the arrival of rain after heat. Doubt was

weather. It did not mean the crop would fail. It meant the crop required attention.

The doubt, specifically, was this: he had told twelve other teachers they could not reach the princes, and he believed it, and he was now proposing to do what he had said could not be done. He had been certain when he said it. He was still certain when he agreed to try. These two certainties now stood in his mind like two men facing each other across a narrow path, neither willing to step aside.

He sat with it in the grove. He sat with it at the pond's edge, where the jackals did not come — or came, perhaps, when he was not there. He carried it to the well and back with the clay pot and up the tamarind path and into the hut at night where the lamp burned until the oil was gone and then went dark. The doubt was not painful. It was simply present, the way a stone in a sandal is present — not enough to stop walking, sufficient to alter the quality of each step.

On the fifth morning, before the sky had decided to be light, he rose and walked to the village temple.

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The temple to Vishnu stood at the head of the tamarind path, its tower the first thing visible from the road in any direction. The tower needed repair, as it had needed repair for twenty years, as towers of this age and material always needed repair, and like most things that permanently need repair it had achieved a kind of dignity through postponement — the cracked east face and the missing course of stone near the top were no longer defects but features, evidence of long habitation by time.

The priest was not yet there. The inner chamber was unlocked. He lit a lamp from the small clay pot of oil kept in the passage for this purpose and carried it inside and sat on the stone floor before the image of the god, who regarded him from behind an expression of absolute and impersonal serenity that the old man had always found, depending on the day, either consoling or aggravating.

Today it was consoling.

He sat. He did not chant. He did not recite. He simply sat in the way that sixty years of practice had taught him to sit — present in the body, loose in the mind, available.

His teacher came to him.

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Not in any supernatural sense. He was not a young man who believed in visitations, and he was not an old man who had become young again in this regard through the back door of second childhood. His teacher came to him the way the dead come to the people who knew them well — as a voice reproduced from long listening, a voice so thoroughly absorbed into the listener's own thinking that it is no longer possible to say where memory ends and reasoning begins.

Devadatta had taught him in a forest school in the Ganges plain, when Vishnu Sharma was seven years old and certain of nothing except that he was hungry. Devadatta was then already old — or seemed old to a child, which is to say he was perhaps forty — a small compact Brahmin with a quick laugh and a habit of teaching through questions rather than answers that the young Vishnu Sharma had found, at seven, simply maddening, and had found, at thirty, to have been the most generous form of instruction he had ever received. Devadatta had himself studied with a man named Somasharman, who had studied with a man whose name Devadatta could not always remember but who had come from the forest schools of the northwest, which traced their

lineage back to lineages no one living could fully name. The chain went back perhaps seven generations, perhaps more. It went back, in any case, to a time before writing had become common enough to be trusted, when the only reliable vessel for knowledge was a living mind, and the transmission of that knowledge from one mind to another was the most serious work a civilization could undertake.

This, Devadatta had told him once, is what a teacher is. A vessel that carries a lamp from one dark room to the next. The vessel is temporary. The lamp is the thing.

And once, in the particular afternoon light of a lesson that had moved from grammar to philosophy without either of them noticing the transition, Devadatta had said: *A wise man is a debt owed to the future. He is given his wisdom on credit. He must pass it on, or he dies a thief.*

He had been twelve then. He had not understood it as a twelve-year-old understands a mathematical principle — completely, from the outside. He had understood it the way a seed understands the shape of the tree it will become — not yet, not in full, but committed to it, the shape already determined at a depth where understanding does not yet reach.

He understood it now.

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He sat before the god in the lamplight for a long time. The village came awake outside — the conch from the other temple, a dog's voice answered by another dog, the first cart wheel turning. He did not hear these things as interruptions. He heard them as the texture of the world in which the decision had to be made and carried out, neither better nor worse than the world in which Devadatta had made his decisions, and Somasharman before him.

He thought about the princes. Three boys. Fourteen, sixteen, eighteen. The oldest nearly a man, and already formed in his habits, which made him the hardest and the most important. He thought about what had failed in twelve teachers' approaches. The same approach: knowledge delivered as commandment. *This is how a king manages tribute. This is how a king addresses an assembly. These are the categories of political action, the qualities of the good ruler, the obligations of the Kshatriya.* All true. All useless to a boy who would not receive it.

A commandment goes in at the ear and stops there. A story goes in at the ear and continues — it moves through the mind like water through soil, finding the underground

channels the gardener does not know about, arriving eventually at roots the gardener did not plant.

He had known this all his life. He had simply not, until now, applied it at sufficient scale.

The opening tale formed itself without effort, the way a face comes clear in still water once you stop disturbing the surface. Two jackals, one loyal, one ambitious, serving a lion who would trust the wrong one. The lion's friend, a great bull, peaceful and strong, destroyed by a whisper. The lesson wearing the mask of a story. The princes would hear animals. They would laugh, perhaps. They would not know, until years later, in the middle of some crisis of governance, that they were remembering what the jackal had said, and recognizing it, and knowing what to do.

He rose. His knees were stiff. He carried the lamp back to its place in the passage and left the temple in the first grey light of the morning.

He walked back through the village. He was calm in the way that comes not from certainty but from the surrender of the argument — the argument was over, the work remained, and work, at least, was simple.

When he reached the grove he sat at his writing board and took up the reed pen and held it for a long time without writing. Then he wrote the first line. He crossed it out. He wrote it again, differently.

The book had begun, though he would not have called it a book. He would have called it, if asked, an obligation. An old debt, come due.

Of Palm and Lampblack

The scribe arrived on a morning in the dry season, when the tamarind leaves were small and dusty and the path between them gave no shade worth having. He came on foot from the village, carrying a leather satchel over one shoulder and the expression of a young man who has been told he is to serve an old teacher and has decided in advance to be patient about it. He was twenty-two. He was quick-handed and quick-eyed and his Sanskrit was good, which he knew, and his calligraphy was excellent, which he also knew, and these two facts together had given him a confidence that was not yet arrogance but was moving steadily in that direction.

His name was Yajnadatta. His father was a temple scribe in Ujjain. He had been copying manuscripts since he was nine years old.

Vishnu Sharma was sitting in the grove, watching a crow.

"The satchel," the old man said, without turning. "Open it."

Yajnadatta opened it. Inside: six bundles of dried palm leaves, each bundle bound with cotton thread, each leaf smooth and pale as old bone. A small ink stone. Two clay pots of lampblack ink, sealed with cloth. Five reed pens of varying width, cut and ready. A sharpening blade.

"Good," the old man said.

He turned then and looked at the young man for a long moment with the particular attention of someone who is estimating not what a thing is but what it will become.

"You can write as fast as a man speaks?"

"Faster," Yajnadatta said.

"We will see."

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The princes came the next morning, as the old man had required, before they had eaten. They came on horseback with two attendants whom the old man sent away at the grove's edge. The boys dismounted with the loose-limbed ease of young men who had been on horses since childhood and viewed nearly everything else the world offered as inferior to this. The oldest was taller than the old man by a head. He had his father's jaw and his father's expression — not unkind, not engaged. The middle son was seventeen and already going to fat in the way that princes sometimes do when they eat every meal they are offered and take very little exercise that inconveniences them. The youngest was fourteen and looked at the grove with the quick sideways curiosity of a boy who had not yet learned to suppress his interest in things.

The old man looked at the youngest and thought: *there.*

"Sit," he said.

They sat on the ground, which surprised them. He gave them water and a small amount of fruit, which surprised them more — they had expected nothing before the lesson — and

then, before they could speak or ask questions or arrange themselves in the postures of reluctant students, he began to tell them a story.

He did not say: *this is a story.* He did not say: *pay attention.* He said only: "In a great forest, in the time before the time you know, there lived a lion named Pingalaka, who was king of all the animals."

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Yajnadatta, sitting to the side on his mat with the first palm leaf smoothed across his writing board, dipped his reed pen and listened.

He had expected philosophy. He had expected the Vedic texts, the treatises on governance, the categories of political action that every serious teacher of princes was known to use. He had not expected a lion in a forest.

He wrote: *In a great forest, in the time before the time you know, there lived a lion named Pingalaka, who was king of all the animals.*

The old man spoke steadily, not slowly — he was not a man who confused deliberateness with slowness — and Yajnadatta's hand moved with him, the lampblack ink drying fast in the dry-season air, each line pressed onto the

palm leaf's surface in the neat even script his father had spent years producing in him. He was indeed faster than a man speaks. He had room to listen.

He listened.

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The lion had found a bull named Sanjeevaka, vast and white, who had wandered from a merchant's caravan and made his home in the forest. The bull's great bellowing voice had frightened the lion at first — so much so that Pingalaka had drawn back from his own river and would not drink. Two jackals in the lion's service — Karataka and Damanaka — had observed this. Karataka, the elder and more careful, counseled patience and distance. Damanaka, the younger, burning with ambition, saw an opportunity.

Let me go to the lion, Damanaka said, *and ask him why he does not drink. Whatever the cause, I will make myself useful to it. A minister who is useful in fear is a minister who will be needed.*

Karataka looked at his companion for a long moment. He said: A man who enters a house not his own finds whatever is inside. Sometimes he finds treasure. Sometimes he finds a fire.

Damanaka said: I would rather burn inside a great house than freeze outside a small one.

He went to the lion.

The youngest prince laughed. It was an involuntary sound, immediately suppressed, and the boy looked briefly alarmed at his own response. But the old man had not paused and had not looked at him, so the moment passed.

Yajnadatta wrote. He did not laugh. He was concentrating on the script. But somewhere below the concentration, in the part of his mind that continued without his permission, something had registered the exchange between the jackals — not as a lesson, not yet, but as a recognition. He had known a Damanaka. He could not immediately say where.

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This is how six months passed.

The dry season exhausted itself and gave way to the first rains. The rains came hard, as they always did in this valley, arriving from the southwest in a grey wall that turned the path to clay and filled the small pond until its bank disappeared into the surrounding grass. Lessons moved inside, to the old man's hut, where the smell of wet thatch

and lampblack mixed until Yajnadatta could not, years later, smell either alone without immediately smelling the other. The princes rode through rain that would have kept a different class of student at home. This surprised him. He had expected them to stop coming after the first storm. They did not stop. The youngest never stopped. The oldest stopped once — for a week, during which a fever moved through the palace — and came back thinner and quieter, as though the fever had burned something unnecessary.

The palm leaves accumulated. Each completed bundle was wrapped in cloth and stored in the leather satchel, which grew heavy by the month. Yajnadatta developed a callus on the side of his right middle finger where the reed pen rested, and he regarded this callus with a quiet satisfaction, the way a craftsman regards the marks his tools leave on his body — as evidence of something actually done.

The tale of the jackals moved through its middle passages. Damanaka reached the lion. He spoke of the bull's voice as a threat, a warning, a signal of approaching danger, knowing it was none of these. Pingalaka, who was brave in the way that lions are brave — absolutely, in combat, and not at all in the face of the unfamiliar — listened. The bull was

summoned. The bull and the lion became friends, great and intimate friends, which was Damanaka's first problem: it went wrong before it went right. The lion no longer needed him. The minister made useless by peace is the most dangerous of ministers, Vishnu Sharma observed one morning, pausing in the dictation to allow Yajnadatta's pen to catch up. *He will manufacture the war he requires.*

The youngest prince said: "Is that what bad ministers do?"

"It is what bad ministers have always done," the old man said. "And good princes have always failed to see it coming, which is why the story is still worth telling."

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At the end of the sixth month, a chariot came from the palace.

It was finer than the messenger's horse — the king's formal chariot, gilded at the rail, drawn by two matched grey horses with red cloth at their necks. With it came a chest of silver, a deed to a plot of land two days south, and a letter in the king's own hand that Vishnu Sharma read twice and folded and set aside.

The princes had come on the chariot's heels, riding their own horses, and they stood at the grove's edge while the old man examined the king's gifts the way a man examines something he has already decided to return.

"Tell your father," he said to the oldest, "that I am grateful. Tell him I will not take the silver or the land. Tell him I have already received my payment."

The oldest son — eighteen now, and carrying himself differently than he had eight months before, carrying himself like someone who had somewhere to put his weight — said: "He will ask what payment."

"Tell him: ten copies of this book, made by the best scribes in Pataliputra, and sent to ten cities."

A pause. The oldest said: "He will think that is not enough."

"Tell him it is everything."

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The princes rode south with the chariot. The grove went quiet in the way it went quiet at the end of each day — not silently, because the birds were still in the chinar trees and the frogs in the pond had opinions about the evening, but

quietly, the human voices gone, the space between things restored.

Yajnadatta sat with the manuscript.

He had wrapped the last bundle that morning and set it with the others in the satchel. The satchel now held five complete books — the five treatises, the five sections of the whole. Palm leaves in lampblack ink. Cotton thread, cloth wrapping, leather case. It could be carried by one man on one shoulder. He had carried it every day for six months. He knew its weight precisely.

He opened the first bundle. He read the opening lines, which he had written himself and therefore knew by sound as well as sight.

He read through the tale of Damanaka. He read Karataka's warning. He read the lion's decision — the moment Pingalaka, poisoned by whispers, turned from the bull he had called his friend and saw in that same friend's face the evidence of treachery that was not there. He read the bull's death. He read Damanaka's quiet ascension in the aftermath, the new indispensability of the minister who had manufactured the crisis he now helped to manage.

He sat with it for a long time in the diminishing light.

He was twenty-two. He had copied the words without fully entering them, the way a man can walk through a great temple while thinking about something else and emerge having seen none of it. Now, sitting alone with the complete thing, the six months of work assembled before him, he entered it.

He thought about the king he would serve one day, whatever king that turned out to be. He thought about the ministers he would meet in whatever court employed his hand. He thought about Damanaka — not the jackal, but the man Damanaka was; the man he had recognized, that first morning, without being able to say where. He could say now. He had known three of them. He had been grateful for their attention without understanding what their attention cost.

He thought about the fact that this book, these palm leaves, this lampblack pressed into dried surfaces by his own hand, would be copied in Pataliputra by scribes he would never meet. It would travel to cities whose names he knew only as distances. It would be read by princes he would never see, in courts built on ground where nothing had yet been built.

He thought about the old man's voice, which he would never again hear after tomorrow, carrying the words that were now fixed in palm and lampblack in his hands.

He did not have the words, at twenty-two, for what he understood in that moment. He would acquire them later, and by then he would no longer need them. He had what he needed now: the understanding itself, which was simply this — that what he was holding had somewhere to go that neither of them could see, and that the going of it was the point, and that this was enough, and more than enough, for one old man and one young scribe in a grove at the edge of a small village in a valley older than its mountains.

He wrapped the first bundle and returned it to the satchel.

Outside, the jackals had come to the pond. He could hear them — not words, not quite sound, but presence, the pressed-down grass, the night's shift toward its own purposes. He did not go to look. He had learned, from watching the old man watch them, that the moment you move toward them the thing you wanted to see is gone.

He sat still. He listened.

They were still speaking.

Concerning a Herb of Immortality

Two hundred and seventy years is not a long time for an idea. It is a long time for an empire.

The Gupta dynasty that had claimed Kashmir and the great Gangetic plain in Vishnu Sharma's age had by the sixth century contracted, fragmented, and largely ceased to exist as a political fact, though it continued to exist as a cultural one — as all great ages continue to exist after their political machinery has stopped, the way a fire continues to give heat after the flame is out. The Buddhist universities still stood at Nalanda and Taxila. The Sanskrit manuscripts still moved between them, copied and recopied, carried in leather satchels by men who walked the old roads between one

center of learning and the next. The Panchatantra had reached Nalanda within a generation of its composition. From Nalanda it had gone south and east and west, ten copies becoming a hundred, a hundred becoming a number no one had thought to count.

Meanwhile, to the northwest, the world had rearranged itself entirely.

Persia under the Sasanians had become the greatest empire between Rome and China — or what remained of Rome, which was Constantinople now, and what China was becoming, which was the Sui. Khosrow I, whom his own people called Anushirvan, *the immortal soul*, sat at Ctesiphon on the Tigris in a palace whose great vaulted arch could be seen for a day's ride in three directions. He collected knowledge the way his ancestors had collected gold, understanding that knowledge, unlike gold, increases in the using and is not diminished by the sharing. He invited the last philosophers from Plato's Academy when Justinian closed it in 529. He employed Christian physicians from Syria, Jewish astronomers from Babylon, Indian mathematicians from the universities his envoys visited. He

was curious with the systematic curiosity of a man who has sufficient power to be curious without risk.

In the twenty-third year of his reign, he summoned his court physician.

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Burzoe was forty-one. He had been court physician for eleven years and had not yet killed anyone important, which in this position was the primary measure of success. He was Persian by birth, Zoroastrian by background, and a physician by conviction — which is to say that medicine had not been chosen for him or fallen to him by inheritance, but had seized him in boyhood when he watched a surgeon close a wound with silk thread and had understood, with the clarity that arrives perhaps twice in a life, that he had found the thing.

He had brown hands and the long careful fingers of a man who works at close range. He did not sleep enough. He thought too much about his failures and too little about his successes, which is the correct proportion for a physician and an uncomfortable one for a man. His wife had told him this several times. She was right and it had not changed anything.

He stood before the king in the great audience hall at Ctesiphon and listened to what was required of him.

The king had heard — from travelers, from Indian scholars at court, from the accumulated rumor of a dozen trade routes — that in the forests of India there grew a herb with a specific property. Applied in the correct preparation to a dead man, it restored him to life.

Burzoe waited to be certain this was not metaphor.

It was not metaphor.

He bowed. He said he would go. He said it in the way a physician says he will attempt a difficult case — without promising the outcome, but without refusing the obligation.

"Well?" Khosrow said.

"I will find it, Majesty," Burzoe said. "Or I will bring back a truthful account of why it does not exist."

The king looked at him for a moment. "Those are not the same thing."

"No," Burzoe agreed. "They are not."

He left for India in the spring.

✦ ✦ ✦

The road east from Ctesiphon crossed the Persian plateau in stages — Ecbatana, then the long descent toward the Indus. He traveled with a small company: two guards, a cook, a Syrian interpreter, and a donkey that carried the medical instruments he brought everywhere and used rarely. The plateau in spring was cold at altitude and hot in the valleys, the kind of landscape that commits completely to whatever it is doing — there was no moderation in it, no middle ground between the snowfields and the dust.

He arrived in India in the monsoon.

He spent three months in the north — Taxila, then south along the trading routes. He asked every physician he met about the herb. He was specific: he had descriptions, three different descriptions from three different sources, which disagreed on everything except the essential property. He examined plants. He interviewed mountain people who knew plants he had no names for. He corresponded, through his interpreter, with a forest physician near Mathura who had treated snake bites with preparations that interested him for other reasons.

He found nothing.

He came south to Ujjain in the eighth month, thin from the road and clear-eyed in the way that long travel makes a man clear-eyed — the unnecessary thoughts have been walked off, only the essential ones remain.

✦ ✦ ✦

The pandit's house was at the edge of the city, past the last of the market streets, on a lane where the noise of the city thinned to a sound like distant water. It was a small house of whitewashed mud with a courtyard of packed earth in which two goats lived and a pomegranate tree that had clearly been there longer than the house.

The pandit himself was old — older than the old man who had composed the book, though Burzoe of course did not know this. He was small and very dark and moved slowly in the deliberate way of men who have made peace with the speed at which they move. He received Burzoe in the courtyard, offered him water and curds and a plate of rice with dal, and waited while Burzoe, through the interpreter, explained what he was looking for.

When Burzoe finished, the pandit was quiet for a moment.

Then he laughed.

It was not unkind — Burzoe noted this. It was the laugh of a man who has heard a question and recognized in it an error too large to be corrected in a single response, and has chosen to respond to the largeness of the error rather than its specifics.

"You have come a very long way," the pandit said.

"Yes."

"For a herb."

"Yes."

"There is no such herb."

Burzoe had known this for six months. "No."

The pandit looked at him with the careful attention of a man reassessing his first impression. He rose and went inside. He came back with a bundle wrapped in faded cloth. He unwrapped it on the courtyard floor with the care of someone handling something that has been handled many times — the cloth folded back precisely, the knots in the binding thread eased rather than pulled.

Inside: a bundle of palm leaves, darkened with age, the edges worn soft. Lampblack ink, faded in places to brown, the script clear in others, the strokes still decisive. Yajnadatta's hand, or the hand of someone who had copied Yajnadatta's hand, or someone who had copied that copy.

"This is the herb," the pandit said.

Burzoe looked at him.

"A book?"

"A book." The old man's hand rested on the palm leaves with a lightness that was also a protection. "There is no preparation that returns a dead man to life. But there is a preparation that makes a living man alive in ways he was not alive before. This is the preparation."

✦ ✦ ✦

Burzoe read it in the pandit's courtyard until the light failed. He read it by the lamp the pandit brought him when the light failed. He read it after the pandit slept, sitting with the clay lamp between his knees, the goats breathing softly in their corner of the courtyard, the pomegranate tree a dark shape against a sky of exceptional stars.

He read the opening — the frame of the three princes, the old teacher, the grove. He read the first tale. Two jackals by a pond. A lion. A bull, loyal and enormous, destroyed by a whisper.

He knew Damanaka. He had treated Damanaka's fevers in a dozen courts. He had set Karataka's broken hand. He had attended Pingalaka's children at their births and watched the lion-king make the same mistake that Pingalaka made, watching the wrong face in the throne room, listening to the voice that spoke most frequently because it had the most to gain from speaking.

He was a physician. He read the body for its signs. He had been reading bodies for twenty years, learning to see what the surface concealed and the depth revealed. This book read the body politic in exactly the same way. It looked at the court — any court, the court in Ctesiphon, the court at Ujjain, the court of any king in any year since courts had existed — and it said: *here is where the deception enters. Here is the precise moment the king stops seeing clearly. Here is what it costs him.*

He understood why Khosrow had sent him for an herb of immortality. It was the wrong request made in the right

direction, like a man who cannot name his illness but points accurately to where it hurts.

He had not found what he was sent to find. He had found something that would last longer than any herb — longer, he was now certain, than the empire that had sent him.

✦ ✦ ✦

In the morning he asked the pandit if a copy could be made.

The pandit thought about this. "You have scribes?"

"I can find scribes."

"It will take time."

"I have time."

The pandit looked at him carefully. "You are going to translate it."

"Into Pahlavi. For the king."

"The king sent you for a herb."

"The king," Burzoe said, "will understand the difference. He is that kind of king."

The pandit considered this for a long moment, then nodded once, the nod of a man who has decided to trust a judgment that is not his to make.

"There are conditions," he said.

"Tell me."

"You will write a preface. In your own voice, not the book's. You will say who you are and why you came and what you found instead of what you sought. The book has always traveled with a preface. Each translator leaves something of himself at the door before he enters."

Burzoe thought about this. He thought about the things he would say in such a preface — about the herb that did not exist, about the doubt that had followed him across the plateau like a second shadow, about the patients he had buried and the question he had never been able to stop asking, which was whether the living and the dead were separated by as much as everyone assumed, or only by the thing this book seemed to know: *a story, told correctly, crosses that distance.*

"I can do that," he said.

He meant it. He already knew what he would write. He had been writing it, without knowing it, for twenty years of medicine.

He picked up the palm-leaf bundle and held it in his physician's hands — those long careful fingers, trained to feel what the surface concealed — and felt nothing unusual. Old leaves. Dried ink. Cotton thread.

He held it a moment longer.

Then he set it down and called for his interpreter and asked where in Ujjain a man could find a good scribe.

The Plateau Was White That Year

He left Ujjain in the last week of the monsoon, when the roads were still uncertain but the worst of the water had pulled back from the passes. The copy had taken six weeks — two scribes working from the pandit's original, Burzoe himself checking each completed leaf against its source, a work that required his interpreter and a patience he had not known he still possessed. The finished manuscript was wrapped first in oiled cloth, then in a length of undyed cotton, then placed in a cedarwood box the pandit had produced from somewhere inside the small house and presented without comment. The box smelled of resin and another smell beneath the resin that Burzoe could not name, which meant it was very old.

He packed it in the center of the donkey's load, between the medical instruments on one side and his own sleeping roll on the other. He did this without explaining his reasoning to anyone. His reasoning was simple: if the donkey fell, the instruments and the sleeping roll would absorb the impact. He had not survived twenty years of medicine by being sentimental about the hierarchy of objects.

✦ ✦ ✦

The plateau received them in the old way of the plateau, which is to say without interest. It was vast and it was indifferent and it was beautiful in the manner of things that have been beautiful for so long they have forgotten they are being observed. The Hindu Kush in the early dry season showed its upper teeth of snow above the tree line, and below the tree line the pines gave way to scrub and the scrub to stone and the stone to a pale dust that was the color of old bone and that covered everything — the road, the guards' horses, the donkey, Burzoe himself — within half a day's travel in a fine even layer that made the world look like a preliminary sketch of itself.

He traveled eleven hours each day and stopped when the light went. He ate what the cook prepared, which was

adequate, and slept what the night allowed, which was less. He wrote by campfire in a leather-bound notebook he had carried from Ctesiphon, and what he wrote was not the translation itself but his preface to the translation — the document the pandit had required of him, the voice at the door.

He wrote slowly. He was not, by temperament, a man who wrote about himself. He was a man who wrote about symptoms. But the preface required self-examination and he performed it with the same deliberateness he brought to a difficult diagnosis: noting what was present, noting what was absent, not flinching from findings that reflected poorly on the physician.

He wrote about his father, who had been a minister and had wanted his son to be a minister. He wrote about the moment the surgeon closed the wound with silk thread. He wrote about the patients he had not saved and the question this had produced, which had never left him: *if the body is so frail, and the mind so brief, and the soul so disputed — what exactly is it that a physician preserves?* He wrote about the herb of immortality, and the years of certainty that such a thing existed, and the six months in India in which he had

replaced that certainty with something more durable, which was not certainty at all but which served him better.

He wrote: *I came seeking a preparation to restore the dead. I return with a preparation that makes the living more fully alive. I have decided these are not different things.*

He crossed this out. He wrote it again. He left it.

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Twelve days from the Indus crossing, the brown camel that carried the water supply lay down at a well and did not rise again. This was not dramatic. Animals die on roads; this is one of the things roads are for. The guards redistributed the water skins between the remaining animals and the cook, who accepted this with the expression of a man who has seen worse. They moved on. The well had been bad — something in the taste of the water that Burzoe had noted and the camel had absorbed in larger quantity. He wrote this in the notebook alongside the other notes, the way a physician writes even the incidental findings.

The day after the camel, they encountered the Zoroastrian priests.

They were three, traveling east with their own small caravan, fire-keepers from a temple in the hills above Ecbatana returning from a ceremony in the east. Their robes were white and road-grey. Their fire-box was covered with cloth against the dust, but Burzoe could see the small red eye of the coal within when the cloth moved in the mountain wind.

They stopped and exchanged the customary courtesies. The head priest was a lean man of fifty with pale eyes who spoke Pahlavi with the flat vowels of the northwest. He asked Burzoe his business in India.

Burzoe told him: the king's physician, sent east for a medicinal inquiry, returning to Ctesiphon.

"And you found what you sought?"

"I found more than I sought and less than I was sent for."

The priest looked at the donkey's load. At the cedarwood box visible between the rolled sleeping cloth and the instrument cases.

"What is in the box?"

"A manuscript," Burzoe said. "Indian. For the king's library."

"What kind of manuscript?"

"A collection of stories."

The priest's pale eyes moved from the box to Burzoe's face. He was the kind of man who believed, sincerely, that the borders between civilizations were also the borders between orders of truth — that what came from India carried India's errors along with India's knowledge, and that a physician who had spent a year among Brahmins and Buddhists was a physician who required careful examination before re-entry.

"Stories," the priest said.

"About animals," Burzoe said. "Jackals and lions. A bull. The sort of thing told to princes to teach them how courts work."

A silence. The mountain wind moved the cloth on the fire-box. The coal glowed and subsided.

"The king has approved this?"

"The king sent me to find it."

Another silence. The priest looked at the box for a moment longer, then nodded — the nod of a man who has decided that his suspicion, while legitimate, cannot be acted upon in the face of a royal commission. He wished Burzoe safe

travel. Burzoe wished him the same. The two parties moved in their separate directions and the plateau resumed its indifference and the dust settled back onto everything as it had been.

✦ ✦ ✦

Ctesiphon appeared on the horizon three days before they reached it, which was one of the things about Ctesiphon. The great vaulted arch of the palace — the Taq Kasra, the Arch of Khosrow — rose from the flat land of the Tigris valley like an argument against impermanence, its brickwork rising forty meters from the plain, its parabolic curve so precisely calculated that it had stood for two centuries without mortar failing. He had seen it many times. It still did what it had always done: it made a man feel that whatever he was carrying in from the road was not yet worthy of the room it was about to enter.

He washed. He changed his clothes. He presented himself at the palace the following morning.

✦ ✦ ✦

Khosrow received him in the smaller audience room, not the great hall — a room of carved stucco and blue tile where the king conducted the business he preferred to conduct without ceremony. He was fifty-eight. He was the kind of man who had been physically powerful at thirty and had kept the skeleton of that power while shedding its excess; he sat in his chair the way a good building sits on good ground, without apparent effort, each part doing exactly what it was designed to do.

Burzoe set the cedarwood box on the low table. He stepped back.

"There is no herb," he said.

"I know," the king said. "I knew when I sent you."

Burzoe looked at him.

"Then why—"

"Because I wanted to know what you would bring back instead." The king leaned forward and touched the lid of the box with two fingers. "And because a physician who believes that everything medicine cannot provide does not exist is a

physician whose imagination has grown too small for his work. I sent you to India. Whatever you found there, you needed to find it."

He opened the box. He took out the wrapped manuscript and unfolded the cotton and held the palm leaves in his hands, his head bent, reading the opening lines in the Indian script his scholars had taught him — not fluently, but enough.

He read for a moment. He looked up.

"The jackals," he said.

"Yes."

"I have heard of this book." He set it down carefully. "How long to translate it fully?"

"I have been translating in the field. Two months more, perhaps three."

"And the preface you will write?"

Burzoe paused. "The pandit asked for a preface. Each translator leaves something of himself at the door."

Khosrow looked at him with the particular attention of a man who is paying for something and wants to understand exactly what he is paying for. "And what will you leave?"

"The truth," Burzoe said. "About why I went. About what medicine cannot do and what a story can."

The king was quiet for a moment. Outside, the Tigris moved past Ctesiphon in its ancient business, brown and wide and unimpressed by the arch it passed beneath.

"Write it," the king said. "All of it. The honest version. I have ministers who will tell me what I want to hear. You are the man I send to tell me what is true."

He rose. The audience was finished. At the door he stopped without turning.

"The preface will outlast the translation," he said. "It always does."

He left. Burzoe stood alone in the tiled room with the palm leaves and the cedarwood box and the two months of writing still ahead of him and the preface already complete in the leather-bound notebook in his travelling bag — the preface the king had just, without reading it, described with an accuracy that made the hair on Burzoe's arms rise briefly, in the way that certainty always does when it arrives from an unexpected direction.

He picked up the manuscript. He carried it to his rooms.

He sat down and opened the notebook at the first page of the preface and read what he had written by campfires across five months of plateau and mountain and Indus crossing and did not change a word.

The jackals, in the palm leaves beside him, were still speaking. They spoke now in Pahlavi. They had more to say.

By the Lamp of a Persian Scribe

The round city of Baghdad had been standing for seven years when Ibn al-Muqaffa sat down to make the jackals speak Arabic. It had been built by the caliph al-Mansur with the precision of a man who believed that geometry was a form of governance — a perfect circle of walls, four gates at the cardinal points, the roads inside it running to the palace at the center like the spokes of a wheel, everything converging on the one point where power resided and from which, in theory, all direction flowed. The architects had consulted astrologers. The laborers had numbered one hundred thousand. The mortar had been mixed with naphtha and ash and the particular confidence of a dynasty that had just overthrown another dynasty and wished to

express in brick and canal what it believed about permanence.

The city was a hundred kilometers north of Ctesiphon. The great vaulted arch of Khosrow still stood, visible on clear days from the river road — the old empire's skeleton, still upright, politely refusing to fall. Burzoe had been dead for a hundred and eighty years. The Pahlavi manuscript he had translated had been copied and recopied and moved through the hands of every scholar between Ctesiphon and Samarkand. It had arrived in Basra — the great port city to the south, where the Tigris and Euphrates surrender themselves to the Gulf — in the library of a family of Persian converts, and it had arrived in Ibn al-Muqaffa's hands in the way that the right book always arrives: too late to be comfortable, too early to be ignored.

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His house in Basra was modest for a man of his reputation, which was either the affectation of a man who wished to appear modest or the genuine condition of a man who had never learned to negotiate his own worth. Those who knew him well could not decide which. He was thirty-four. He was Persian by birth, Muslim by conversion, and Arab by

ambition — which is to say that he had taken the language of the conquerors and made of it something finer than most of the conquerors could manage, a prose style of such precision and rhythm that men read his official letters for pleasure long after the business they contained had been resolved. He had been born Rūzbih. He had become Abdullah. He was known as Ibn al-Muqaffa — son of the crippled one — because his father's hand had been destroyed by a governor's punishment for an embezzlement his father had committed and which Ibn al-Muqaffa believed, with the loyalty of the well-loved son, had been overstated by the governor in question.

He did not love governors.

This was one of his problems. He had several.

✦ ✦ ✦

Abd al-Hamid arrived each evening at the second hour after sunset and set up at the smaller desk by the east window. He was twenty-six, Syrian Christian, trained in a Nestorian scriptorium in his boyhood and subsequently employed as a copyist by anyone in Basra who needed Arabic written quickly and accurately. He had worked for Ibn al-Muqaffa

for three years and understood him the way a craftsman understands a difficult instrument — completely in use, imperfectly at rest.

On the night the chapter concerns itself with, Abd al-Hamid arrived to find the Pahlavi manuscript open on the main desk and Ibn al-Muqaffa standing at the window with a cup of water, looking at the street below with the expression of a man who is not seeing the street.

"You're not working," Abd al-Hamid said.

"I am thinking about working. The two activities are related."

"Less closely than you believe."

Ibn al-Muqaffa turned from the window. He was not tall. He had the compact build of a man who moved quickly and the dark eyes of a man who watched everything and the particular set of the mouth that belongs to men who find the world consistently funnier than the world intends. He sat at his desk and picked up the reed pen.

"The lion speaks tonight," he said. "Pingalaka addresses his court. I need him to sound like a caliph without sounding like our caliph."

"A difficult interval."

"A precise interval. Sit down."

✦ ✦ ✦

He had been translating for six weeks. The Pahlavi was good — Burzoe's Pahlavi, preserved through several copies, still carried the physician's particular voice: careful, doubting, cleaner than the original Sanskrit, which he did not read, but faithful to its structure. Ibn al-Muqaffa was not interested in faithfulness. He was interested in Arabic. He was interested in what Arabic could do when pushed past its conventional uses — past the Quran's rhythms, past the tribal poetry of the desert, into a new territory of prose that could carry a philosophical argument while wearing the clothes of a story about animals.

He wrote the lion's speech. Abd al-Hamid copied.

The lion convened his court. His ministers assembled — the jackal Damanaka foremost among them, his posture impeccable, his expression arranged in the precise register of loyal concern. The bull Sanjeevaka, the lion's oldest friend, stood at a slight distance. He did not know that Damanaka had spent three days constructing, in the lion's

mind, a suspicion that he could not now dismantle because the king who holds a suspicion does not know it is a construction. He thinks it is a perception. There is no argument against a perception. The perceiver trusts his own eyes and does not know that what he sees has been arranged in advance.

Ibn al-Muqaffa wrote this. He wrote Damanaka's voice: smooth, economical, deploying evidence that was technically accurate and directionally false. He wrote the lion's face as Damanaka described what he had seen — the tightening of the great jaw, the small shift in the eyes from openness to something harder, the beginning of the end of the friendship.

He stopped. He set the pen down.

Abd al-Hamid looked up from his copying.

"What?"

"I know him," Ibn al-Muqaffa said.

"Damanaka?"

"I have known him for ten years. He sits two rooms to the left of the governor's chair in Basra and his name is Sufyan

ibn Mu'awiya and he has been whispering to every lion who will receive him since before I arrived in this city."

Abd al-Hamid was quiet for a moment. "You should not say that."

"I have said worse things about Sufyan. In verse. With his name attached."

"I know. That is what I mean."

✦ ✦ ✦

The thing with the aman had happened eight months ago and had not been resolved, which meant it had not been forgotten, which meant it was being saved. Ibn al-Muqaffa had written a document of safe-conduct for a rebel prince — written it in his own precise Arabic, every legal formulation closed, every loophole considered and excluded, the document so airtight that the caliph al-Mansur himself could not revoke it without violating the conventions of Islamic law that his own legitimacy rested upon. He had done this at the request of the rebel's brother, who was the caliph's own uncle, and he had done it because he was asked and because the work was interesting and because he was the kind of man who found the intellectual challenge of a

difficult document more engaging than the political consequences of completing it.

The caliph was not pleased. The caliph's displeasure existed somewhere in the palace at Baghdad, unspoken and patient, gathering the particular weight that displeasures gather when they are allowed to sit.

Sufyan, the governor, was not a man of patience in general, but he was a man of patience in this specific: he would wait for the right moment to be useful to the caliph's displeasure.

Ibn al-Muqaffa knew all of this. He was not unaware of danger. He was the kind of man who was aware of danger and continued anyway, which is either courage or foolishness and which is in any case the same behavior.

✦ ✦ ✦

He picked up the pen. He wrote the bull's death. He wrote it in twenty lines of Arabic — the moment the lion looked at Sanjeevaka and saw what Damanaka had taught him to see, the moment the friendship ended in the space between two heartbeats, the terrible speed of it. He wrote Karataka watching from the court's edge, saying nothing, knowing it was already done. He wrote it with a precision that was also

grief, in the way that all honest writing about inevitable things carries grief for the writer who sees it coming and writes it anyway.

Abd al-Hamid's pen had stopped moving.

"Keep writing," Ibn al-Muqaffa said.

"I am reading."

"Copy first. Read when you are home."

Abd al-Hamid looked at him. "You know they will come."

"Probably."

"And you are writing faster because of it, not slower."

"Also probably."

"This is not rational behavior."

"No," Ibn al-Muqaffa said. "But consider." He held the pages up — the completed sheets, the Arabic settled into its shapes on the good linen paper, the jackals now speaking the language of the city that had replaced the city that had replaced the city in which the book was born. "If they come tomorrow, these exist tonight. If these exist tonight and

there is one copy made by morning, which you will make before you sleep—"

"I know," Abd al-Hamid said quietly.

"Then tomorrow doesn't matter."

Abd al-Hamid looked at his friend for a moment — his employer, his instructor in the uses of Arabic prose, the most careless careful man he had ever met. He looked at him the way Karataka looked at the court from its edge: seeing clearly, helpless, already mourning.

He dipped his pen. He copied.

✦ ✦ ✦

By the third hour after midnight they had finished the night's work. The lamp had been refilled once. The street outside was silent — Basra at this hour belonging entirely to its own darkness, the Gulf wind moving through the date palms along the canal road with a sound like the turning of pages.

Abd al-Hamid gathered his copied sheets, rolled them, and tucked them inside his robe. He did this without discussion, the way a man does something that does not require

explanation because its purpose is understood by everyone in the room.

At the door he stopped.

"The preface," he said. "Burzoe's preface — the physician's. Will you keep it?"

"I've rewritten it. The physician says what a physician says. I want to say what I say."

"Which is?"

Ibn al-Muqaffa considered. He was standing in the middle of the room with the lamplight behind him, the Pahlavi manuscript closed on the desk, the night still fully around them.

"That this book was not written by Vishnu Sharma," he said. "Or not only by him. It was written by everyone who ever watched a jackal speak into a lion's ear and understood what was happening and could not stop it. And that the reason to write it down, in every language, in every century, is not that we believe the next lion will listen. It is that the next Karataka — the one who watches from the edge and knows — should not have to watch alone."

Abd al-Hamid stood in the doorway for a moment.

Then he left.

Ibn al-Muqaffa went back to his desk. He opened the manuscript again. He was not finished. He would not be finished tonight. He picked up the pen, and the jackals resumed their ancient argument, and the lamp burned, and the Gulf wind turned the date palms, and Basra moved through its dark hours toward whatever morning it had waiting.

The Oven

The soldiers came at the first hour of morning, which is the hour chosen by men who understand that the body at first light is at its lowest resistance — the sleep not yet fully left, the mind not yet assembled into the shape it wears by day. There were four of them. They did not knock. The door of Ibn al-Muqaffa's house opened under the flat of a hand and they entered and found him at his desk, which surprised them, because men who know soldiers are coming are not usually at their desks.

He was writing. He finished the sentence before he looked up.

"One moment," he said.

The soldier who was in charge — a large man with a Khurasani accent and the expression of someone performing a task he has been told is distasteful without being told why — waited one moment, because the request had been made with a specificity that made refusal feel rude, and because the man at the desk did not look like the descriptions of dangerous men he had been given in the course of his career.

Ibn al-Muqaffa set the pen down. He blotted the page. He rose.

"The governor," he said. It was not a question.

"The governor," the soldier confirmed.

"I'll need my robe."

He was given his robe.

✦ ✦ ✦

Abd al-Hamid heard the soldiers from his room above the coppersmith's shop on the next street, which is to say he did not hear the soldiers but heard the quality of silence that soldiers produce in a sleeping street — the particular silence of people who have woken at a sound and chosen not to

produce another sound until they know what the first one meant. He had learned this distinction in childhood, during a period of his family's history that he did not discuss. He rose and dressed and waited.

At the second hour of morning a boy from the street came to his window and told him that Ibn al-Muqaffa had been taken to the governor's house. Abd al-Hamid gave the boy a coin. He sat on the edge of his sleeping mat for a long time. He looked at the rolled sheets inside his robe where he had placed them the night before, and had placed them every night for six weeks, and thought about what came next.

What came next was copying. He lit his own lamp. He sat at his own smaller desk. He took the sheets from inside his robe and arranged them in order and took fresh paper — the good linen paper that Ibn al-Muqaffa had supplied from Baghdad, the paper that accepted the ink cleanly and held it without bleeding — and he began to copy.

He copied for three hours. His hand did not shake. He was surprised that it did not shake, and then he understood that this was not steadiness but concentration — the body finding its work and holding to it the way a man holds to a

wall in water, not because the wall is safe but because it is the only thing available to hold.

When the light was sufficient he stopped copying and went to the governor's house.

✦ ✦ ✦

Sufyan ibn Mu'awiya had governed Basra for three years with the efficiency of a man who governs primarily for his own benefit and has learned to make this arrangement convenient for those above him. He was large, patient in his hatreds, and possessed of that particular form of administrative intelligence which consists not in solving problems but in waiting until the problems solve themselves or can be attributed to someone else. He had disliked Ibn al-Muqaffa from the first meeting, which was a dinner at which Ibn al-Muqaffa had made a joke about the governor's mother that everyone at the table had understood and no one, in the governor's presence, had laughed at, which was somehow worse.

The aman document had given him the instrument he needed. The caliph's cold anger, carefully preserved in Baghdad, had given him the permission.

He had prepared the oven himself, which was the detail that the later accounts would preserve and which Abd al-Hamid would spend the rest of his life wishing he had not heard from the doorkeeper who told him, in a low voice, with the expression of a man discharging a terrible obligation.

Abd al-Hamid stood in the street outside the governor's house for two hours. He did not go inside. He had no standing inside — he was a copyist, a Christian, a man of no title. He stood in the street and the morning moved around him and the sun reached the tops of the walls and began its descent toward the hour when it would find the street itself and he would have no more shadow to stand in.

He heard nothing from inside the walls. He had expected to hear something. He heard the governor's household going about its morning. A woman's voice. A wheel on stone. The date palms along the canal moved in the Gulf wind with the sound he had been hearing since childhood without ever finding another word for it — the sound of pages turning in a book that is always slightly too large for any single pair of hands.

At midday a servant came out carrying ashes in a clay pot. The servant walked to the canal and threw the ashes into the

water. He did not look at Abd al-Hamid. He went back inside.

Abd al-Hamid turned and walked north.

✦ ✦ ✦

He reached Baghdad in four days. He knew a copyist there — a man named Mahmud, Egyptian, who ran a small shop off the street of the booksellers in the western quarter of the round city. Mahmud's shop smelled of paper and of the particular chemical smell of new ink drying, which Abd al-Hamid had always found clarifying in the way that certain smells clarify — cutting through whatever confusion surrounds them and establishing a simpler fact.

He laid the completed sheets on Mahmud's table.

Mahmud looked at them. He looked at Abd al-Hamid. He looked at the sheets again.

"Kalila and Dimna," he said. He had heard the title, though the full Arabic text was not yet widely known. "His translation."

"Complete," Abd al-Hamid said. "Or nearly complete. Two sections remain." He put his hand on the sheets. "I need

copies made. As many as possible, as quickly as possible, to as many cities as can receive them."

Mahmud calculated something that involved his resources and his risks and the relationship between the two. "The governor—"

"The governor has done what the governor will do. The governor cannot now unwrite what is already written."

Another calculation. Mahmud was not a brave man. He was a practical man, which in this circumstance produced the same result as bravery — the recognition that a text already copied ten times is beyond the reach of a governor in Basra in a way that a text copied once is not.

"Come back tomorrow," Mahmud said.

Abd al-Hamid came back tomorrow. And the day after. For a week he moved between the copyists of Baghdad — there were more of them in this city than in any city he had known, the great suq of booksellers having produced its own ecosystem of scribes, illuminators, binders, and dealers in paper and vellum — distributing the sheets, explaining the urgency without explaining the details, which were already moving through the city in the way that such details

move: faster than caravans, quieter than official messengers, arriving everywhere before anyone had officially sent them.

In a month there were thirty copies. In three months, three hundred. In a year the text had reached Kufa, Mosul, Damascus, Fustat in Egypt, Qayrawan in North Africa, and the beginnings of al-Andalus, where a survivor of the Umayyad dynasty that the Abbasids had overthrown was building a new emirate in the south of a peninsula at the edge of the world.

Sufyan ibn Mu'awiya governed Basra for four more years and died of a fever, as governors do. He is remembered for one thing.

✦ ✦ ✦

Thirty years later Abd al-Hamid was old. He was fifty-six, which was not old for a man who had chosen his work carefully and avoided campaigns, but felt old in the way that the body feels old when it has been carrying something for a long time — not broken, not even weakened, but aware of the weight in a way it was not aware at the beginning.

He lived in a small house near the canal road in Basra. The city had changed. It was larger and louder and the canal smelled differently than it had when he first came, a smell he associated with money and sewage in roughly equal proportion. He still copied. His hand was slower and his eyes required the lamp to be nearer. He had trained two young scribes, a girl from his sister's household and a Yemeni boy with quick hands, and he supervised their work in the mornings and did his own in the evenings when the light was low enough that they had gone home.

His grandson visited on Fridays. The boy was nine, the son of Abd al-Hamid's eldest daughter, a serious child with the quality that serious children have of listening to adults without appearing to listen — the eyes engaged elsewhere, the ears open.

On the Friday that concerns us, the boy arrived before the evening prayer and found Abd al-Hamid at his desk, finishing a passage he had been working on all afternoon. The boy sat on the mat and waited, which was what he always did, which was one of the things Abd al-Hamid valued most about him.

He finished. He put the pen down. He turned.

"The jackals," the boy said, before he could speak.

"What?"

"You told me there was a story about jackals. You said you would tell it."

He had said this six Fridays ago and had not returned to it, and the boy had waited six Fridays without raising it. Abd al-Hamid looked at him for a moment.

"Come here," he said.

The boy came and sat beside the desk. Abd al-Hamid found, in the chest beneath the window, a copy — his own copy, the one he had made himself and kept, the copy that had traveled with him from Baghdad back to Basra seventeen years ago, the paper rubbed soft at the edges with handling. He opened it.

He began to tell the boy the story of the two jackals. He told it the way he had heard it told — not read, but told — at a dinner in Baghdad twenty years ago when a scholar from Khorasan had recited the opening from memory with the ease of a man reciting something that had been in his family since before memory. He told it as Vishnu Sharma had

intended it to be told, which was as entertainment, which was how it had always done its deepest work.

The boy listened. When Damanaka first whispered into the lion's ear, the boy's eyes sharpened.

When the bull died, the boy was very still.

When it was done he sat for a moment with the story settling through him, the way the story always settled, finding the channels.

Then he said: "Is Damanaka the bad one?"

"Yes," Abd al-Hamid said.

"And does he win?"

Abd al-Hamid considered this. Outside, the canal moved past in the dark, carrying whatever the river had given it — the silt and the seeds and the broken things and the ashes of everything the cities upstream had surrendered to it.

"He wins the argument," Abd al-Hamid said. "He does not win the story."

The boy thought about this. "What is the difference?"

"The argument ends when the lion decides. The story continues after the lion is dead." He closed the manuscript. He held it for a moment — the rubbed-soft edges, the linen paper, the ink that was thirty years old and still as sharp as the night it was set down by a man who finished a sentence before he looked up at the soldiers. "The story is still here. Damanaka is not."

The boy looked at the manuscript. He reached out and touched it — one finger, briefly, on the cover — with the tentative reverence of a child touching something that has communicated, without being told, that it is older than the room it sits in.

Abd al-Hamid watched the boy's face. He saw it, in that moment, the thing he had seen in Ibn al-Muqaffa's face the night he set the pen down and said *I know him* — the recognition, the lamp passing from one hand to another, the transaction completed so quietly that neither party could have said exactly when it happened.

He set the manuscript on the desk between them.

"Keep coming on Fridays," he said. "There is more."

The Hand That Read From the Other Side

Toledo sat on its rock above the Tagus like a man who has been told many times to come down and has decided, finally, that the view from where he stands is sufficient justification for remaining. The river bent around three sides of the city in a wide brown arc, and the city rose from this arc in layers — the streets of the lower quarter first, then the market streets, then the cathedral still under construction at the summit, its scaffolding visible from the road two hours before you reached the gate. The Christians had held Toledo for a hundred and fifty years. Before them, for three hundred and seventy years, the Muslims. Before that, the

Visigoths, and before the Visigoths, Rome, and before Rome the Celtiberians, who had built on the rock because the rock was obvious and defensible and because human beings, given a rock of sufficient height and a river of sufficient width, will build on it without further discussion.

The Jewish quarter lay on the western slope, below the cathedral and above the river, in a density of white-walled lanes that had been there in various forms since the Roman occupation. The synagogues were old. The houses were old in the way that houses are old when families have not left them — not ruined but deepened, each generation's repairs absorbed into the previous generation's structure until the original and the addition were indistinguishable, which is also how a tradition works.

Rabbi Yosef ben Shlomo had lived on the western slope for all of his sixty-three years. He had studied in his father's house, in the synagogue school, in correspondence with scholars in Fustat and Baghdad and the remaining academies of the east. He read Arabic. He read Aramaic. He read the Latin of the Church with a competence he found professionally useful and personally irrelevant. He had recently, at the request of a colleague in Burgos, worked

through a section of the Arabic Kalila in preparation for a Hebrew version — not the first Hebrew version, which Rabbi Joel had completed a year before, but a study of Joel's choices, an examination of where the Arabic had been served and where it had been domesticated in ways that changed its flavor.

He had expected a month's work. He had been at it for eight.

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The scriptorium of Alfonso X was in a building attached to the royal palace — a long room of thick stone walls and tall south-facing windows that admitted, depending on the season, either adequate light or the kind of light that made a man feel the inadequacy of his own eyes. It smelled of parchment and of the iron-gall ink that the Christian scribes preferred, which was darker than the ink Rabbi Yosef used at home and had a faint smell of oak that he had come to associate with this room and, by extension, with the particular quality of work done here — collaborative, contested, productive in the way that things are productive when no single person is fully in charge.

The king had summoned him in the spring. Alfonso X was thirty years old, newly crowned, and pursuing with the systematic energy of a young man who has inherited power and intends to use it every form of knowledge his kingdom contained. He was assembling a scriptorium not of copyists but of translators — scholars who could move between Arabic and Castilian, Hebrew and Latin, Greek and the vernacular languages that were becoming, across the peninsula, the real languages of thought. He wanted, specifically, the book of the jackals. He had read a Latin version — John of Capua's work was not yet done, but partial versions circulated — and had found it insufficient. He wanted a Castilian version. He wanted it to sound like Castilian. He wanted a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian to produce it together, because this was the method he had found produced translations that none of the three would have produced alone.

Rabbi Yosef had arrived in May. The Muslim scholar, a geographer from Almería named Ahmad ibn Rushd — not the great Averroes, dead thirty years, but a younger man of the same family's intellectual habit — had arrived in June. The Christian translator, a Castilian cleric named Fernán de

Tolosa, young and quick and slightly overwhelmed by the company in which he found himself, had arrived in April and had spent May and June reading.

By July they were working.

✦ ✦ ✦

The difficulty was the lion.

In the Sanskrit, in the Arabic, in Burzoe's Pahlavi, in Rabbi Joel's Hebrew — in all prior versions, the lion-king Pingalaka was a lion. He ruled a forest. His ministers were jackals and wolves and bears. The animal allegory was sustained throughout, the reader understanding that the lion was a king and the jackals were ministers without the text requiring this to be stated.

Fernán de Tolosa wanted to make Pingalaka a king. Not a lion — a king. *Rey*, he said, at the table where all three of them sat with their respective versions open before them. The Arabic open before Ahmad, the Hebrew before Rabbi Yosef, the Latin before Fernán. *Rey* is clear. *León* is an animal. The reader in Castile, he argued, will not be confused by a lion who holds court, but the reader in Castile will lose something of the immediacy, the identification, if the king

is only an animal. Make him a king. Let the court be a human court.

Ahmad ibn Rushd said, quietly, that this was exactly what the book's entire intelligence was working against. The animal was the point. The animal was the disguise that allowed the text to say what it said. A king who reads about a jackal whispering to a lion understands immediately, without feeling accused. A king who reads about a jackal whispering to a *rey* — to a king — puts the book down. The mask must be maintained.

Fernán said: the mask works in Arabic because Arabic literature uses this tradition. The mask works in Sanskrit because the Panchatantra established it. In Castilian the tradition does not exist. The reader needs help.

Rabbi Yosef, who had been listening with the specific quality of attention he gave to arguments that were both correct — which this one was, on both sides, which was why it was interesting — said: *Give the reader less help than you think he needs. He will fill the space himself, and what he supplies from his own experience will lodge more deeply than what the text supplies for him. The jackal should remain a jackal. The lion should remain a lion. The reader who sees his own minister in the jackal should arrive at*

this conclusion by himself. If we draw the conclusion for him, we have written a different book.

Fernán considered this for a long moment.

"A different book," he said. "Or the same book for a different reader."

"The same reader," Rabbi Yosef said. "A different opinion of himself."

✦ ✦ ✦

The lion remained a lion.

This was how the work proceeded — not through agreement but through argument that eventually found its resolution, the three versions laid open on the table, the three men circling the text from three directions, each seeing what the others did not see because they were each approaching from a different door into the same building. Ahmad heard the Arabic rhythms beneath Rabbi Joel's Hebrew and could say when a choice had bent the meaning; Fernán heard what the Castilian would do to a Spanish ear and could say when a translation's accuracy produced a sentence that the language refused to carry; Rabbi Yosef moved between the two, reading the Hebrew aloud and then the proposed

Castilian and then falling silent in the way that his silence was legible — productive, comparing, not finished.

They worked through the summer into the autumn. The tall windows moved the afternoon light across the table in a slow diagonal, and the three men moved with it — shifting their chairs, repositioning their lamps, adjusting without discussion to the room's changing conditions in the way of people who have been working together long enough to read each other's small physical signals.

Damanaka entered the lion's court in Castilian. He was still a jackal. He whispered with the same intelligence he had whispered with in Sanskrit, in Pahlavi, in Arabic, in Hebrew. The whispering sounded different in Castilian — the language was younger, its syllables harder, its rhythms less ornamented than Arabic, more direct. Something was gained: Damanaka in Castilian was quicker, more dangerous, a jackal who wasted nothing. Something was lost: the Arabic Damanaka's elegance, the particular quality of menace that surfaces when something very threatening is expressed very beautifully.

Rabbi Yosef wrote a note to himself: *Each language discovers a different jackal. The jackal is not changed. The language reveals a different angle of the same animal.*

He folded the note and put it in the pocket of his robe. It was not for the translation. It was for himself.

✦ ✦ ✦

Alfonso X came to the scriptorium on a Thursday in October, alone except for a secretary he kept at the door. He was not a tall man, but he had the quality of filling the room he stood in — not through any deliberate performance but through the simple fact of being a king who was genuinely interested in what was on the tables, which is rarer in kings than the chronicles suggest.

He read Castilian from the finished pages. He read in silence, moving through the first section — the frame, the three princes, the old teacher — and then into the opening of the jackal tale. His lips did not move. He turned the pages without speaking.

After a time he said, to no one in particular: "This is better than the Latin."

Ahmad said: "The Latin is from the Hebrew. The Hebrew is from the Arabic. Each generation of translation loses something. We went back to the Arabic."

"And the Arabic?"

"From the Persian. And the Persian from the Sanskrit."

Alfonso considered this. He looked at the three men — the Castilian cleric, the Jewish scholar, the Muslim geographer — seated around a table in his scriptorium with three versions of a text that had been traveling for nine hundred years.

He said: "How many languages has it crossed?"

Rabbi Yosef told him.

The king was quiet for a moment. Then he said: "And each time someone translated it, it survived."

"Yes."

"Because the jackals were true."

"Because the jackals were true," Rabbi Yosef agreed.

Alfonso looked at the pages for a moment longer. He was thinking about something that he did not say — Rabbi Yosef

could see him thinking it, the slight distance behind the eyes that a man gets when he is not quite in the room he is standing in. Then he nodded, set the pages down, and left.

✦ ✦ ✦

Rabbi Yosef walked home at dusk, down through the tangle of the Jewish quarter, past the old synagogue, through the lane where his neighbor the dyer's household still had lamps burning and the smell of indigo lay heavy on the air. The Tagus below the city caught the last light and held it for a moment, brown and gold, before releasing it to the evening.

He walked slowly. He was sixty-three and his knees advised against haste.

He thought about the Castilian — the young language, finding its feet. He thought about where it might go. The kingdom of Castile was not large. But kingdoms, unlike languages, had edges. Languages crossed edges. Languages followed the people who spoke them, and people followed the roads, and the roads — at the western edge of this peninsula, where the Atlantic began — went somewhere that no road he knew of had yet described.

He did not know this. He could not know this. He was a man in 1251 with no map of what was west of the Azores, which were themselves barely named. He had no mechanism for the knowledge. Only the slight, irrational conviction that had accompanied him since the first day in the scriptorium — that this language, of all the languages the jackals had so far learned to speak, had the furthest still to travel.

He turned into his lane. He unlocked his door. He lit his lamp.

He sat at his desk and wrote a sentence of Castilian — the sentence about the lion's court, which they had finished that afternoon — and read it again in the lamplight, testing it the way a craftsman tests the joint in a piece of wood, pressing to find where it might give.

It held.

He wrote: *Fini* on the back of his note and then crossed it out — it was not finished, they had weeks left, and in any case the book was never finished, it had never in nine hundred years been finished, it had only been handed forward from one pair of hands to the next, each pair adding what it could and releasing what it could not carry.

He released the pen. He closed the lamp. The Tagus, somewhere below the city, continued its ancient business in the dark.

Frater Damanacus

The Cistercians had built their abbey in a valley because Bernard of Clairvaux had taught them that God was found in low places, in the silence of running water and the discipline of the plain, and so they had come to the valleys of France and England and the German lands and drained the marshes and felled the timber and laid their white stone churches in the wet ground with a precision that was itself a form of prayer. They did not ornament. They did not gild. They built long and low and severe and let the proportions do what the Cluniacs did with paint and gold leaf — which was to make the body feel small and the soul feel, by comparison, less provisional than usual.

The abbey at Mortemer in Normandy had been standing for a hundred and forty years by the winter of 1275. Its stone had gone from white to grey in that time, the Norman rain doing to limestone what time does to faces — not destroying the original form but recording everything that had happened to it. The cloister walk was cold in the months between October and April with a cold that came up through the flags and entered the foot through the sandal sole and moved unhurriedly from there into the rest of the body. The brothers wore wool and walked quickly between the church and the warming room and back. The warming room had a fire. The scriptorium did not.

Brother Anselm had been in the scriptorium for twenty-six years.

✦ ✦ ✦

He was forty-nine and had arrived at his desk each morning, except Sundays and the greater feast days, at the hour after prime, and had left it at the hour before vespers, and in the interval between these two facts had produced, by his own careful count, eleven complete manuscript books, four partial ones, and a quantity of individual documents — charters, letters, legal instruments, liturgical pieces — that

he had long since stopped counting because the counting produced a satisfaction he found theologically suspect.

He was not an ambitious man. He had been, in youth, a vain one — vain of his handwriting, which was excellent, and of his Latin, which was better than excellent, and of the particular speed at which he could work without loss of accuracy, which was faster than any other scribe in the house and which the prior had noted, years ago, with the expression of a man recognizing something useful. He had made his peace with the vanity. It was still there, quiet, like a healed fracture that aches before rain.

This winter the prior had given him a new task. A copy of the *Directorium Humanae Vitae* had arrived from a house in Paris — John of Capua's Latin rendering of a Hebrew text which was itself, the prior explained, a rendering of an Arabic text from the east. Stories about animals. Fables of the Indian sort, wrapped around a framework about princes and a teacher. Useful for sermons. The prior wanted two copies made, one for the library and one to send to a house in the English midlands whose abbot had written to request it.

Brother Anselm had begun it on the Monday after Epiphany. He was now in his seventh week.

✦ ✦ ✦

The cold was specific that morning — not the general cold of winter but the cold that arrives when the temperature falls a further degree past the point where the body has already conceded, the cold that tightens the ink in the pot and makes the fingers slow. He had wrapped his hands in a length of undyed wool that he unwrapped only to write, holding the warmth as long as the work allowed, writing a line and returning the hands to the wool and reading ahead while the ink set.

He was in the third book of the five. The jackal Damanaka had reached the lion's court. The lion had received him. The whispering had begun.

Brother Anselm wrote the passage. He wrote it in his excellent hand, the letters even and well-spaced, the lines straight without a ruled guide because he no longer needed one, his eye having internalized the geometry of the page over twenty-six years until the straight line was simply where the pen went, naturally, the way water goes to level.

He wrote Damanaka's words to the lion. He wrote the logic of them — the evidence offered, each piece accurate, the whole arrangement false. The lion's trusted friend is dangerous. The trusted friend's great strength, which the king has always admired, is actually a threat. The trusted friend's very loyalty, so long apparent, is now, in this new light, suspicious — for what loyal friend requires nothing in return? A loyal friend who wants nothing is a friend who is waiting. The lion should see this. Any reasonable lion, looking clearly, would see this.

Brother Anselm stopped.

He looked at what he had written.

✦ ✦ ✦

In twenty-six years of the cloister he had known three Damanakas. The first had been the cellarer of a previous prior, a man of extraordinary administrative efficiency and extraordinary patience, who had over the course of four years constructed in the prior's mind a complete and accurate and entirely misleading picture of the guestmaster — Brother Anselm's friend, a large gentle man who kept bees and knew the name of every pilgrim who had passed

through the house in the previous decade — as a man whose competence concealed laziness, whose hospitality concealed pride, whose bees were a private pleasure dressed as community service. The prior had eventually removed the guestmaster from his position. The cellarer had taken on his responsibilities. The bees died the following winter, untended.

The second and third were more recent and he did not need to name them even in his own thinking, which was careful about this — the cloister was not a place where certain thoughts were safe to have loudly, even in the privacy of one's own skull.

He sat with the passage for a moment. The cold pressed in through the window stones.

He thought: *This book was written in India. It crossed into Persian. It crossed into Arabic. It crossed into Hebrew. It crossed into this Latin in which I am now reading it. At every crossing, someone made choices — what to keep, what to translate, what to carry over the border of one language into another.* And in all of those crossings, through all of those desks in all of those rooms in all of those countries, the jackal had remained the same. The jackal had crossed every border without difficulty, without

loss, without any translator finding it necessary to change him, because every translator had known him personally and had known exactly what to keep.

He almost laughed. He did not laugh. The scriptorium was a room for silence and he respected this — not from fear of the rule but from genuine understanding of what the silence was for.

He dipped the pen. He continued.

✦ ✦ ✦

When the bell rang for vespers he stopped at the end of a line and cleaned the pen and replaced the cloth over the ink pot and wrapped his hands and stood. He was stiff. He was always stiff at vespers in the winter months, the cold having made its arrangements with the joints during the long still hours at the desk.

He looked at the page before he covered it — the habit of twenty-six years, a final inspection of the morning's work. The lines were straight. The letters were even. Damanaka's words to the lion were preserved in Latin, in his hand, on good vellum that would outlast him by centuries if the house stood and the water stayed out of the library. Another

brother would take up the copy tomorrow, or he would take it up himself — it did not matter. The work was continuous and the hand that held the pen at any given hour was not the point.

He covered the page with a cloth against the dust.

He pulled on his outer robe. He walked out of the scriptorium into the cloister walk, where the cold received him without ceremony, and he crossed the stone flags toward the church, where the bell was still counting the hour in its patient way, each tone moving outward from the tower across the Normandy fields to wherever the Normandy fields decided to stop.

Behind him, on the desk, in the Latin of a man from Capua who had worked from the Hebrew of a man from Castile who had worked from the Arabic of a man burned in an oven in Basra who had worked from the Pahlavi of a physician who had gone to India for a herb that did not exist — the jackal waited.

Frater Damanacus. Brother Whisper. The same animal in every language, patient as cold, waiting for the next pair of hands.

By Madame's Fire

Paris in the winter of 1667 was a city engaged in the serious business of becoming the world's idea of itself. The Louvre was being extended — Bernini had come from Rome with proposals and had been sent back with polite rejections, the French preferring their own Perrault's colonnade, which was already going up along the eastern face in the precise grammar of French classicism: ordered, rational, confident in its proportions the way only a civilization at its own high-water mark can be confident in anything. The streets behind the Louvre were, by contrast, medieval in their indifference to order — narrow, unpaved in the alleys, smelling of horse and chimney smoke and the particular cuisine of winter Paris, which was fat and heavy and satisfied with itself. The

Seine moved through all of it with the patience of a river that has watched many cities decide they are eternal.

Versailles was rising twelve kilometers to the southwest. Louis XIV had been building it for six years and would build it for thirty more, the palace growing outward from its original hunting lodge like a proposition that keeps adding evidence — the gardens extending, the wings extending, the fountains multiplying, the whole enterprise a statement about permanence made in stone and water and the labor of thirty thousand men who were not asked their opinion of permanence. The court had not yet moved there. The court was still in Paris, distributed among the great houses of the Marais and the Île Saint-Louis and the rue Saint-Honoré, conducting the elaborate rituals of proximity to power that constitute, in all ages and under all monarchies, the primary occupation of intelligent people who are not themselves powerful.

Jean de La Fontaine was not powerful. He was, at forty-six, something rarer and more precarious: he was beloved. He was beloved by women of intelligence who kept salons, by scholars who respected his Latin and his Greek, by readers who had found in his early verse a voice that was classical in

its learning and intimate in its address — a voice that spoke to one reader as though that reader were the only reader, which is the voice that lasts. He was also beloved in the way that charming, careless, unworldly men are beloved by people who enjoy worrying about someone — his finances were perpetually catastrophic, his domestic arrangements a source of civic concern, his ability to forget appointments he had just made the stuff of stories told at the dinners to which he was always invited and from which he sometimes failed to emerge for three days.

Madame de La Sablière had given him a room. This was, by 1667, the arrangement of four years' standing. Marguerite de La Sablière — thirty-two, separated from a husband who had been faithless and financially destructive in roughly equal measure, mother of three children she was raising with a competence that impressed everyone who observed it — kept a salon in her house on the rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs where the serious thinkers of Paris came to be taken seriously. She knew mathematics. She knew astronomy — she would later correspond with the Cassinis about the moons of Saturn, and they would correspond back, which was not a given for a woman of any rank in 1667.

She had given La Fontaine the room because she found his company delightful and his person in need of management, and because she understood, as intelligent patrons always understand, that the work was worth the trouble of the man.

The room was on the second floor. It had a writing desk, a bed, and a window overlooking the courtyard where the horses were kept, and in the evenings, when the salon had thinned to the three or four guests who stayed for supper, La Fontaine came downstairs and sat by the fire and was himself — which was different from the self he presented at larger gatherings, the witty public self, the teller of stories that made the room laugh. By the fire he was quieter. He listened more than he spoke. He read.

✦ ✦ ✦

He had found the *Livre des Lumières* on the table in the salon in October — Madame de La Sablière had acquired it from a bookseller on the Quai des Augustins who had a particular talent for finding the translated and the foreign and the unusual. David Sahid of Isfahan's French rendering of the Arabic Kalila, published in Paris in 1644, was not a new book but it had come to him at the right moment, which is the only moment a book has to come to the right reader.

He read it in two days. He read it again in three. He carried it downstairs to the fire on a Thursday evening in late November when the last guests had gone and Madame de La Sablière was at her desk writing letters and he sat in the chair nearest the grate and opened it at the beginning of the jackal tale and read it again, more slowly this time, in the way a man reads something the third time — not for plot, which he knows, not for argument, which he has followed, but for something beneath both of these, the structural thing, the reason the text works, the particular mechanism by which a story about two jackals and a lion manages to be, simultaneously, a story about every court he has ever stood in and every king he has ever watched and every minister he has ever watched watching the king.

"You're not reading," Madame de La Sablière said, without looking up from her letters. "You're sitting very still, which is different."

"I am thinking about a fox."

"There is no fox in that book."

"There will be."

She looked up at him then. She had the quality of attention that a few people have — the quality of being entirely in the present conversation, whatever else is happening in the room or the house or the street outside. It was one of the things he valued most about her company: she could not be half-present. She was incapable of the polite performance of listening that constituted most of social life. When she looked at him, she was looking at him.

"Tell me," she said.

✦ ✦ ✦

He told her about Damanaka. He told her about the lion and the bull. He told her about the logic of the false evidence — each piece true, the whole arrangement a lie — and about the king who received it because the king who holds a suspicion has already decided to distrust the friend and requires only the architecture of justification.

"This is Aesop," she said.

"This is older than Aesop. Or as old. India, the Indian text. Then Persia — a physician translated it. Then Arabic. Then Hebrew in Spain. Then Latin. Then this." He held up the

book. "This is the French version. Which means someone has been translating this jackal for thirteen hundred years."

She looked at him steadily. "And you want to translate it again."

"I want to make it verse. I want to make it French in the way that French can be — not this." He set the book down with the affection of a man setting down something that has served him and has reached its limit of usefulness. "This is good. This is faithful. But it is prose, and prose is transparent — the reader sees through it to the content. Verse is not transparent. Verse holds the light. The reader must stop and see what the lines are doing before he can see what they mean, and in that pause — in that moment of the reader's attention caught by the sound before it reaches the sense — something enters that does not enter through prose."

"The fox," Madame de La Sablière said. "That you mentioned."

"A fox. A crow. A wolf. A lamb. A hare." He was looking at the fire now, his head slightly forward, the gesture of a man who is seeing something in front of him that is not quite in

the room. "The plague. All the animals sick of the plague, gathering in the lion's court to confess their sins. The lion confesses to killing sheep — he is forgiven. The wolf confesses worse — he is forgiven. The ass admits to eating a mouthful of grass from a monastery meadow — and he is hanged for it." He paused. "I can hear it. I can hear how it goes. The rhyme at the end. *Selon que vous serez puissant ou misérable, / Les jugements de cour vous rendront blanc ou noir.*"

She said nothing for a moment. She was testing the lines the way she tested mathematical propositions — looking for the point where they failed, and finding, this time, that they did not fail.

"How long have you been carrying this?"

"Since October."

"Write it tonight."

He looked at her. "It is after midnight."

"The fire is still there. The paper is on the desk." She returned to her letters. "You have been sitting very still for three hours, which means you have been writing it without paper. Use paper."

✦ ✦ ✦

He took the paper. He moved to the writing desk in the corner of the salon, where the fire gave sufficient light if he angled the chair correctly. He wrote the first line. He crossed it out. He wrote it again in a different meter and felt the meter settle into the idea like a foot into a boot made for it — the specific click of the right form found.

He wrote for two hours. Madame de La Sablière finished her letters and read at the fire and did not speak and did not leave.

When he had a draft he read it aloud, quietly, to the fire and the room and the sleeping house and the woman reading by the grate. The plague arrives. The animals confess. The lion is forgiven. The wolf is forgiven. The ass eats the monastery grass and the court finds him guilty and he dies for the crime that all the great ones have committed and been pardoned.

Selon que vous serez puissant ou misérable—

He stopped. He read the ending again.

He understood, sitting at the desk in the firelit salon on the rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs at two in the morning, that

he was not the author of this. He was the latest translator. The same thing that Burzoe had understood on the plateau. The same thing that Ibn al-Muqaffa had understood at his desk in Basra. The same thing that Rabbi Yosef had understood in Toledo. Each of them had sat with the jackals and recognized them and found the new language in which they needed to speak and had given them that language and had stepped back.

His contribution was the rhyme. The French verse. The particular music of the Alexandrine holding the logic of the fable in a container so elegant that readers would hear the music before they understood the argument, and understanding the argument would feel it had always been theirs.

He wrote at the bottom of the draft, in small letters, a note to himself that he later crossed out: *Vishnu Sharma — Burzoe — Ibn al-Muqaffa — anonymous monk — David Sahid of Isfahan — La Fontaine. And after me, someone else.*

He crossed it out because he did not need it. He crossed it out because the poem itself was the record.

He blotted the page. He set it down.

"Well?" Madame de La Sablière said, from the fire.

He considered.

"The ass dies," he said. "The wolf is pardoned. The jackal is pleased."

"And you?"

He looked at the page. Outside, Paris continued its ancient noise — a cart on the cobbles, a dog's brief argument with the dark, the Seine moving past its banks with the patience of water that has been doing this since before anyone thought to build on it.

"I am very glad," he said, "that I cannot fall asleep."

A Small Voice on a Wooden Bench

The Third Republic had decided, with the particular conviction of a government that has survived two empires and a commune and several varieties of catastrophe, that the future of France was a matter of primary education. Jules Ferry, minister of public instruction, had produced in 1881 and 1882 a series of laws so thorough in their ambition that they amounted not to a reform of schooling but to a replacement of it — primary school compulsory for every French child between six and thirteen, free of charge, secular in its instruction, the crucifix removed from the classroom wall and replaced with the portrait of the Republic, which was a woman in a Phrygian cap who looked, in the cheaper reproductions sent to the rural schools, as

though she had been interrupted in the middle of an argument she was winning.

The intention was the making of citizens. The Republic understood, as all republics eventually understand, that a population which cannot read cannot be appealed to, cannot be argued with, cannot be brought to any position except by force — and force was what the Republic had spent the previous decade trying to put behind it. You could not build a secular democratic state on illiteracy. You needed every blacksmith's son in the Dordogne reading by the age of nine, and to read he needed a schoolmaster, and to have a schoolmaster he needed a school, and to make the school worth attending the school needed something that would make a child want to come back the next day.

Jules Ferry chose, among other things, La Fontaine.

✦ ✦ ✦

The school at Saint-Cyprien had been built twelve years before the laws required it, which meant it was slightly better than most of the schools the laws subsequently mandated — two rooms instead of one, a separate entrance for the girls who attended in the mornings, a courtyard with

two chestnut trees that in November were bare and in May produced a shade worth sitting under. The schoolmaster, Monsieur Laurent, was twenty-eight, trained at the École Normale Supérieure of Périgueux, and possessed of the particular combination of genuine intellectual enthusiasm and carefully managed expectation that the profession tended to produce in those it had not yet defeated.

He believed in the Republic. He believed in literacy. He believed, with slightly less certainty than he projected, in the transformative power of French literature delivered at close range to children who would have preferred to be elsewhere. He believed in La Fontaine the way one believes in a reliable tool — not with passion, not with the reverence he reserved for Racine and Montaigne, but with the practical respect a carpenter has for a good square: it does what it does without requiring your opinion of it.

He had written on the blackboard, in his neat institutional hand: *Le Loup et l'Agneau.*

Below it, the first line: *La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Émile Beaulieu was nine years old and sat in the third row from the front, which was where the middle children sat — not the quick ones who competed for the front benches, not the slow or restless ones who were distributed toward the back where Monsieur Laurent's eye could reach them by effort rather than accident. Émile was neither quick nor slow. He was the kind of child who is quiet in rooms full of adults and loud everywhere else, who notices things without being noticed noticing them, who files information in some internal arrangement whose organizing principle is not yet apparent to the people around him and may not yet be apparent to himself.

His father was the blacksmith. His hands already had the beginning of his father's hands — broad across the palm, the fingers slightly thickened at the first joint. He came to school in the same trousers three days out of five and was not the only one.

He had been reciting La Fontaine for two years. He knew *Le Corbeau et le Renard* entirely — the crow on his branch, the fox below, the flattery, the cheese falling. He knew *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, the grasshopper's summer frivolity and the ant's

cold vindication, which he had never fully understood because in his experience his father worked harder than anyone he knew and still had less than the people who worked less hard, which seemed to complicate the lesson. He was working now on *Le Loup et l'Agneau*, which was newer to him and which he found, without yet having the words for this response, more honest than the others.

Monsieur Laurent called his name.

✦ ✦ ✦

He stood. He put his hands at his sides, which was the required posture — hands visible, still, the body upright, the face forward. The other children settled into the specific quality of attention that a recitation produces in a classroom: not rapt, not indifferent, but provisional, waiting to see whether what was coming would be worth listening to or would provide the preferable alternative of a classmate's humiliation.

He began.

La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure—

Good. Monsieur Laurent's pencil was still.

Nous l'allons montrer tout à l'heure.

He took a breath. The second stanza, the wolf appearing at the stream. He knew this part. He had practiced it at home in the forge yard, in the particular acoustics of the stone walls and the anvil and the cooling metal, his voice finding a strange clarity there that it did not have in rooms.

Un Agneau se désaltérait Dans le courant d'une onde pure.

He was not performing. He was recalling — the recall of a child who has memorized not by understanding but by repetition, the lines laid in by sound before the sense had arrived, the sound now carrying the sense the way a river carries what the rain has given it, without choosing it.

The wolf accuses the lamb of troubling his water. The lamb objects: he is drinking downstream; he cannot be troubling water above him; the mathematics of the stream prevent it. The wolf accuses again: last year the lamb spoke ill of him. The lamb objects again: he was not yet born last year. The wolf accuses: then it was one of your brothers, one of your family, one of your kind.

C'est donc quelqu'un des tiens: car vous ne m'épargnez guère, Vous, vos bergers, et vos chiens. On me l'a dit: il faut que je me venge. Là-

dessus, au fond des forêts Le Loup l'emporte, et puis le mange, Sans autre forme de procès.

He sat down.

Monsieur Laurent's pencil made a mark in the register. "Good," he said. "The fifth line of the third stanza — *il faut que je me venge* — give it less speed. The wolf is not in a hurry. He has already decided. The hurry is the lamb's, not his."

Émile nodded. He filed this.

✦ ✦ ✦

The boy behind him — Rémi Cousteix, the butcher's son, large and good-natured and reliably bored by anything that did not involve animals or machinery — leaned forward during the next recitation and whispered: "The wolf just eats him. What's the lesson."

Émile considered. "The lesson is the wolf eats him."

"That's not a lesson. That's just what happens."

"It happens every time," Émile said. "That's the lesson."

Rémi thought about this with the expression of a boy who is not certain he has been satisfied but cannot identify exactly

where the dissatisfaction lies. He sat back. Monsieur Laurent's eye moved over them and moved on.

✦ ✦ ✦

At midday Émile walked home through the November streets of Saint-Cyprien, past the baker's, past the church, past the café where his father sometimes sat on a Sunday and where, he had noticed, there was a man who laughed at everything the mayor said. A large man with a careful laugh — the laugh arriving a half-second after the mayor's joke, precisely when it would be most useful, never before. Émile had noticed this for two years without knowing what he was noticing.

He turned into the lane toward the forge. The smell of coal and iron reached him before the building did. He could hear his father's hammer — not random, but rhythmic, the pause and strike of a man who has been doing this for twenty years and has his own time, the work having organized itself into a beat that was his specifically, distinguishable at a distance from any other smith's in the region.

He stopped at the lane's entrance. He stood for a moment.

La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure.

The strongest one's reason is always the best. He had been reciting this for three weeks without hearing it. He heard it now — heard it in the way that certain lines arrive in the body before the mind has caught up, settling into the chest with the weight of something confirmed rather than something learned.

The man in the café. The mayor's laugh. The wolf with his reasons. The lamb with his mathematics, his accurate downstream position, his not-yet-born-ness when last year's offense was committed. All the accuracy, all the precision, all the correctness of the lamb's position. And then the forest and the end of the argument.

He was nine years old. He did not have the word jackal. He had never heard of Vishnu Sharma or Burzoe or Ibn al-Muqaffa or the three scholars in Alfonso's scriptorium. He had not heard La Fontaine's name spoken with any of the weight attached to it in Paris — in Saint-Cyprien, La Fontaine was the man in the schoolbook the same way Charlemagne was the man in the history book: present, authorial, not quite alive.

But the wolf was alive. The wolf was entirely alive and standing at the stream with his reasons, and the lamb's logic was impeccable and the lamb was dead.

He walked the rest of the way to the forge. He went inside. He sat at the table where his mother had left bread and a bowl of soup and he ate, listening to his father's hammer in the next room — the pause, the strike, the pause, the strike, each blow landing exactly where his father had decided it would land, the iron accepting this, the work continuing.

The fable had entered him in the only way that matters: without his permission, through the ear, finding its channel, arriving where it would lodge.

He finished the soup. He went back to school.

The Candle in the Rue Daguerre

Paris in November 1944 was a city in the complicated condition of having been liberated and not yet recovered, which are two events that resemble each other from a distance and nothing like each other from close up. The Germans had left in August — the tanks coming down the Avenue d'Orléans, the crowds on the pavements in the August heat, the sound of it, the particular sound of a city that has been holding its breath for four years releasing it all at once in a noise that was not quite cheering and not quite weeping but contained both and several things that had no name. General de Gaulle had walked down the Champs-Élysées. Someone had fired shots from a rooftop, and the crowd had flattened and risen again, because crowds, like

cities, learn to flatten and rise. The tricolor was on the Hôtel de Ville.

And then the practical facts of November: the coal rationed, the electricity failing three nights out of seven, the bread queues beginning before dawn, the men not yet home from the camps and the fronts and the forced labor in Germany, the women who had waited four years learning, in the liberation's aftermath, a new and harder form of waiting — the waiting that knows the worst is over and has not yet been told whether the specific thing it is waiting for is among the things that survived.

The fourteenth arrondissement had been neither the worst nor the best of Paris in the Occupation — it had been Paris, which meant it had contained within its few square kilometers every form of courage and every form of accommodation and every form of active collaboration that four years of German administration produce in a city of human beings. The Rue Daguerre was a market street — cheese, bread, vegetables, rabbit when there was rabbit, the traders and the customers conducting in the language of shortage and ration card and occasional black market the same transactions they had conducted in the language of

abundance, which is to say the essential business of feeding oneself and one's household continued under every government, as it has always continued, as it will continue after every government has been replaced by another.

Madame Hélène Vaultier lived at number 23, on the third floor, in two rooms that had been three rooms before her husband's death in 1919 had made the third room unnecessary and then unbearable and then rented to a young woman from Lyon who had since married and moved to the fifteenth. She was seventy-three. She had a hip that advised against the stairs and which she ignored because the alternative was not going up and down the stairs, which was not acceptable. She had her husband's photograph on the mantelpiece and his edition of La Fontaine on the shelf beside it — a small blue-cloth volume, the spine faded to a grey-blue, the pages brown at the edges in the way of paper that has been kept in rooms where the heat and cold alternate without being consulted. His name was written in pencil on the inside cover, in his handwriting, which she could still read in the way that certain things remain legible long after the hand that made them is gone.

Her son Marcel was in a Stalag in Silesia. The Red Cross had confirmed this in July. No letter had arrived since August. She had stopped allowing herself to calculate what this meant and had begun instead to move through the days as she moved through the stairs — with the hip's advice noted and set aside, one step at a time, the next step the only one that required attention.

Lise was six. She was Marcel's daughter, left in Paris when Marcel went east with his regiment in 1940, her mother having died of a lung infection in the winter of 1941 with the quiet efficiency of the wartime ill, who could not afford the time that peacetime illness allows. Lise had lived with her grandmother since then — three years in which the grandmother had come to understand, without discussing it, that the child was the step she was currently on, the only one requiring attention, the rest of the stairs being what they were.

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The electricity had failed at six o'clock. This was not unexpected. Hélène had the candles in the drawer by the stove — three of them, good wax, not tallow, saved from a box given to her by the neighbor Madame Fortuné whose

husband had worked at a church before the war. She lit one and set it on the table in its holder and brought the second chair close to the table and told Lise to bring the book.

Lise knew which book. There was only one book they read by candlelight, which was not a formal rule but had become one by repetition, which is how most rules are actually made. She brought the small blue-cloth volume from the shelf and climbed into the chair and pulled the blanket from the back of it around her shoulders and waited with the patience of a child who has learned to wait, which is a patience different from the patience of a child who has not yet needed to.

Hélène opened the book. The candlelight made the page warm — the brown edges of the paper absorbing the yellow light, the text appearing darker by contrast, the lines her husband had penciled in the margins of certain poems still faintly visible, his annotations from fifty years ago.

She read *Le Corbeau et le Renard* first, because Lise liked the crow, because the crow's vanity was recognizable to Lise in a way she could not articulate but demonstrated by making the precise face of the crow when the flattery arrived — the face of someone being told exactly what they most wished to

hear. They had read this poem many times. It was comfortable, the way certain paths are comfortable — the walker knows every turn and walks the better for knowing.

Then she read *Le Loup et l'Agneau.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Lise listened with the blanket pulled to her chin. The candle between them made her face half-lit, half-shadow, the way all faces look by candlelight — more serious than by day, the features simplified by the single source of light into something that resembles, briefly, the face as it will look when it is older.

When the wolf's last reason had been delivered and the lamb had been carried to the forest, Lise was quiet for a moment.

"Grand-mère."

"Yes."

"Why is the wolf allowed to eat the lamb?"

Hélène looked at the page. The question was Lise's and it was also a question she had been carrying for seventy-three years in various forms — the form it took when she was nine

and the form it took when her husband died at thirty-one and the form it took in June 1942 when the buses came to the Rue de la Roquette and Monsieur Weill and his wife and their two daughters were taken in the middle of the morning and the street watched from behind its shutters and the buses left.

"Because the wolf is stronger," she said. "And stronger creatures sometimes tell themselves stories to justify what they do. La Fontaine wrote this so that we would remember."

Lise considered. The candle moved in a draft from the window's edge and steadied.

"Did Monsieur Weill know this story?"

The question arrived the way certain questions arrive — not from nowhere but from a direction she had not been watching, landing before she had assembled the defenses she would have assembled if she had seen it coming.

She looked at the candle.

"Yes," she said. "He knew it. Everyone has always known it."

"Then why didn't it help?"

She sat with this for a long time. The candle between them burned with the steadiness of good wax, without drama, without the guttering of the tallow candles she had used earlier in the war, simply burning at its own rate, giving what it had.

"It helped the way knowing helps," she said at last. "It named the thing. It told him what was happening and why. That is not protection. But it is — " she stopped. She tried again. "When something terrible happens and you do not know what it is, you are alone with it. When you know what it is, and you know that other people have known it, in other times, in other places — you are less alone with it."

Lise looked at her. The six-year-old's face, by candlelight, holding the question.

"The wolf is still there," she said.

"The wolf is still there. Yes."

"But so is the story."

Hélène looked at her granddaughter. She thought about Marcel, about the Stalag in Silesia, about the letter that had not come since August. She thought about the buses in June 1942. She thought about the man on the white horse in

August, walking down the Champs-Élysées with the shots from the rooftops and the crowd flattening and rising, the city releasing its held breath.

"So is the story," she said.

She closed the book. She did not put it back on the shelf. She held it for a moment in both hands — the small blue-cloth volume, the faded spine, the penciled name inside the cover, the pages warm from the candlelight.

Outside, the Rue Daguerre was quiet in the particular way of a November night in a city still learning how to be itself again — the market stalls closed, the cobblestones wet from the afternoon's rain, the smell of coal smoke from the chimneys of the buildings that still had coal. Somewhere to the north, a tram. Somewhere further, the river.

She kissed the top of Lise's head.

She blew out the candle.

In the dark, the small blue book sat on the table between the candle-holder and the folded blanket. It had come a long way to reach this table. It had further to go.

The Book You Are Holding

The grove in Kashmir where an old man watched two jackals is gone. The tamarind trees fell or were cleared or simply ceased, in the way of trees that have no one left to remember them, and the ground where they stood is now ground of another kind — farmed or flooded or built upon or returned to forest with different trees, the original arrangement erased by the ordinary passage of time, which erases everything eventually and makes no apology for doing so. The pond is gone or changed beyond recognition. The path is gone. The hut where the lamp burned through the night while a young scribe's hand moved across a palm leaf has been gone for seventeen centuries.

Ctesiphon is a mound of earth on the Tigris south of Baghdad. The great vaulted arch of Khosrow still stands — it has been standing for fifteen hundred years and appears to intend to continue — but the palace around it is dust and the court where Burzoe presented his cedarwood box is dust and the road he traveled across the Persian plateau is a different road, serving different purposes, carrying different goods.

The house in Basra where Ibn al-Muqaffa finished a sentence before he looked up at the soldiers has been replaced many times. The canal road outside it smells differently now. The date palms are different palms. The oven is gone with the governor's house and the governor's name, which survives only in accounts written by men who wanted it preserved as a warning.

The scriptorium of Alfonso X in Toledo is a room in a building much altered. The window that admitted the October light in 1251 — the light that moved across the table where three men argued about whether a lion should remain a lion — is a different window, enlarged in a later century, admitting different light to a room with different purposes. Rabbi Yosef is a name in a record. His note, folded and pocketed, is gone.

The abbey at Mortemer still stands in its Normandy valley, the stone now grey with seven centuries of Norman rain, the cloister cold in winter as it was cold in Brother Anselm's winter, the bells marking the same hours they have always marked in the patient way of bells that have no opinion about who hears them. The scriptorium desk where the jackal arrived in Latin is, perhaps, still there. The cloth cover that Brother Anselm placed over the page before vespers has been dust for five hundred years.

The salon on the rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs where La Fontaine sat by the fire is gone with the street's old buildings, replaced twice since 1667, the address now belonging to a city that has forgotten the salon entirely and remembers La Fontaine only as the man on the schoolbook cover. The fire is out. The chair is gone. The page he blotted and set down that night — his draft, his first French draft of the fable he could hear before he had written it — exists in an archive in Paris where it may be consulted by appointment.

The school in Saint-Cyprien still exists, though it has been extended and its chestnut trees are not the same trees. Émile Beaulieu's bench is gone. The blacksmith's forge is gone, the

family gone or dispersed into the ordinary dispersal of families across the twentieth century. His voice reciting the wolf and the lamb on a November morning in 1883 is as gone as any voice that has ever been raised and fallen in a stone room.

The apartment on the Rue Daguerre still stands. The third floor, number 23. The table where the candle burned in November 1944 is perhaps still there, or perhaps not. Madame Hélène Vaultier is gone. Marcel came home from Silesia in the spring of 1945, which is another story. Lise is — wherever Lise is. She would be old now, or gone. She asked a question by candlelight that has not yet been answered and will not be answered in this book because it cannot be answered in any book, only held, and examined, and passed forward.

✦ ✦ ✦

You are holding the book.

This is not a metaphor. You are, at this moment, the latest hand in a chain of hands that reaches back seventeen centuries to a grove in Kashmir where an old man of eighty watched two jackals at the edge of a small pond and understood something about the shape of human

conversation that he wrote down in lampblack ink on dried palm leaves, tied the bundle with cotton thread, and asked that it be copied and sent forward into a future he could not see and did not need to see.

The book has been in Arabic. It has been in Pahlavi and Hebrew and Latin and Castilian and French. It has been in the hands of a physician on a Persian plateau, a translator at midnight in Basra, a monk in a cold scriptorium in Normandy, a poet by a fire in Paris, a child on a wooden bench in the Dordogne, an old woman reading to a six-year-old by the last of the candlelight.

It is in your hands now.

The question it carries is always the same. It has been the same in every language, in every century, in every room where someone has read it by whatever light was available. The question is not about jackals. The jackals are the mask. Behind the mask, as behind every mask that has lasted, is a face you recognize.

You know Damanaka. You have known him all your life — in every hierarchy you have inhabited, in every room where a whisper has found a willing ear, in every moment you have watched someone construct, with great care and from

accurate materials, a lie. You have perhaps, in a small way, on an unremarkable day, been him. The book does not condemn you for this. The book simply shows you what he does, and what it costs, and who pays.

You know Karataka. You know the particular loneliness of watching from the court's edge, of seeing clearly and being unable to act, of mourning the friendship before it has ended because you can see the ending coming. You have sat where he sits. Most people, in most lives, sit where he sits more often than they sit anywhere else.

And you know the lion. This is the hardest knowledge. The book saves it for the reader who has finished — who has followed the jackals through seventeen centuries and arrived here, in this room, in this light, with this page. The lion is not stupid. The lion is not wicked. The lion is a creature of great power who is also, finally, alone, and who listens to the voice that finds him in his aloneness and tells him that his oldest friend is his enemy. This is not a failure of intelligence. It is a failure of the sort that power produces: the isolation that makes a man prey to the one who knows how to speak to his fear.

The book has been telling you this for seventeen hundred years. Not because it believes that knowing will protect you. Karataka knew. It did not protect the bull.

It tells you because knowing is what remains when protection fails. Because the recognized thing, the named thing, the thing that has been written down in lampblack and reed pen and iron-gall ink and the good French of a man sitting by a dying fire in 1667 — the recognized thing is less able to destroy you completely. You are less alone with it. Other people have watched it. Other people have written it down and tied it with cotton thread and carried it across a plateau in a cedarwood box and copied it in a cold room and recited it on a wooden bench and read it aloud to a child in the dark.

The grove is gone. The pond is gone. The palm leaves are dust.

The two jackals are on the page in front of you.

They are in your mind as you read.

They are still speaking.

This story is yours now.

It always was.

Last Words

You have just finished reading. Seventeen centuries of hands, one story, six languages, one question that never changed its shape beneath the changing words. It began as prose in a grove in Kashmir, crossed a Persian plateau, moved through the streets of Baghdad, passed through the cold of a Norman scriptorium, became verse beside a candlelit fire in Paris — and then became music, on a cinema screen, where the whole world watched a lion and a hyena and a faithful friend and recognized it instantly, because it was already inside of us. It has always been inside us. It is written in something older than language.

Now is your turn.

This book has no foreword. It refused to write one. The foreword belongs to you — the reader who earned the right to write it by finishing what comes after. Not a summary. Not a review. The page that should appear before the story begins, in your words, with your name above them.

Write it. Give the book the title you would have given it and tell me the thinking behind it. Write whatever goes through your mind.

Write it in the amazon review section, where every reader who comes after you will find it before they begin. Make it yours. Make it the foreword this book waited for.

Your writing is the next chapter.

The only thing required of you is what was required of Yajnadatta, of Burzoe, of Ibn al-Muqaffa, of Rabbi Yosef, of Brother Anselm, of La Fontaine, of the grandmother in the Rue Daguerre.

Read it. Recognize it. Pass it forward.

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