

## A Word for Heathens<sup>1</sup>

Peter Watts

I am the hand of God.

His Spirit fills me even in this desecrated place. It saturates my very bones, it imbues my sword-arm with the strength of ten. The cleansing flame pours from my fingertips and scours the backs of the fleeing infidels. They boil from their hole like grubs exposed by the dislodging of a rotten log. They writhe through the light, seeking only darkness. As if there could be any darkness in the sight of God—did they actually think He would be blind to the despoiling of a place of *worship*, did they think He would not notice this wretched burrow dug out beneath His very *altar*?

Now their blood erupts steaming from the blackened crusts of their own flesh. The sweet stink of burning meat wafts faintly through my filter. Skin peels away like bits of blackened parchment, swirling in the updrafts. One of the heathens lurches over the lip of the hole and collapses at my feet. *Look past the faces*, they told us on the training fields, but today that advice means nothing; this abomination *has* no face, just a steaming clot of seared meat puckered by a bubbling fissure near one end. The fissure splits, revealing absurdly white teeth behind. Something between a whine and a scream, barely audible over the roar of the flames: *Please*, maybe. Or *mommy*.

I swing my truncheon in a glorious backhand. Teeth scatter across the room like tiny dice. Other bodies crawl about the floor of the chapel, leaving charred bloody streaks on the floor like the slime trails of giant slugs. I don't think I've *ever* been so overpowered by God's presence in my life. I am Saul, massacring the people of Amolek. I am Joshua butchering the Amorites. I am

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Asa exterminating the Ethiopians. I hold down the stud and sweep the room with great gouts of fire. I am so filled with divine love I feel ready to burst into flame myself.

"*Praetor!*"

Isaiah claps my shoulder from behind. His wide eyes stare back at me, distorted by the curve of his faceplate. "Sir, they're dead! We need to put out the fire!"

For the first time in what seems like ages I notice the rest of my guard. The prefects stand around the corners of the room as I arranged them, covering the exits, the silver foil of their uniforms writhing with fragments of reflected flame. They grip not flamethrowers, but dousers. Part of me wonders how they could have held back; how could *anyone* feel the Spirit in this way, and not bring down the fire? But the Spirit recedes in me even now, and descending from that peak I can see that God's work is all but finished here. The heathens are dead, guttering stick-figures on the floor. Their refuge has been cleansed, the altar that once concealed it lies toppled on the floor where I kicked it just—

Was it only a few minutes ago? It seems like forever.

"Sir?"

I nod. Isaiah gives the sign; the prefects step forward and spray the chapel with fire-suppressants. The flames vanish; the light goes gray. Crumbling semicremated corpses erupt in clouds of wet hissing steam as the chemicals hit.

Isaiah watches me through the smoky air. It billows around us like a steam bath. "Are you all right, sir?" The sudden moisture lends a hiss to his voice; his respirator needs a new filter.

I nod. "The Spirit was so—so..." I'm lost for words. "I've never felt it so strong before."

There's a hint of a frown behind his mask. "Are you—I mean, are you *sure?*"

I laugh, delighted. "Am I *sure?* I felt like Trajan himself!"

Isaiah looks uncomfortable, perhaps at my invocation of Trajan's name. His funeral was only yesterday, after all. Yet I meant no disrespect—if anything, I acted today in his memory. I can see him standing at God's side, looking down into this steaming abattoir and nodding with approval. Perhaps the very heathen that

murdered him lies here at my feet. I can see Trajan turning to the Lord and pointing out the worm that killed him.

I can hear the Lord saying, *Vengeance is mine.*

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An outcast huddles at the far end of the Josephus platform, leaning across the barrier in a sad attempt to bathe in the tram's maglev field. The action is both pointless and pitiful; the generators are shielded, and even if they weren't the Spirit moves in so many different ways. It never ceases to amaze me how people can fail at such simple distinctions: shown that electromagnetic fields, precisely modulated, can connect us with the divine, they somehow conclude that *any* coil of wire and energy opens the door to redemption.

But the fields that move chariots are not those that grace us with the Rapture. Even if this misguided creature were to get his wish, even if by some perverse miracle the shielding were to vanish around the tram's coils, the best he could hope for would be nausea and disorientation. The worst—and it happens more than some would admit, these days—could be outright possession.

I've seen the possessed. I've dealt with the demons who inhabit them. The outcast is luckier than he knows.

I step onto the tram. The Spirit pushes the vehicle silently forward, tied miraculously to a ribbon of track it never touches. The platform slides past; the pariah and I lock eyes for a moment before distance disconnects us.

Not shame on his face: dull, inarticulate *rage*.

My armor, I suppose. It was someone like me who arrested him, who denied him a merciful death and left his body lingering in the world, severed from its very soul.

A pair of citizens at my side point at the dwindling figure and giggle. I glare at them: they notice my insignia, my holstered shockprod, and fall silent. I see nothing ridiculous in the outcast's desperation. Pitiful, yes. Ineffective. Irrational. And yet, what would any of us do, cut off from grace? Would any straw be too thin to grasp, for a chance at redemption?

Everything is so utterly clear in the presence of God. The whole universe makes sense, like a child's riddle suddenly solved; you see forever, you wonder how all these glorious pieces of creation could ever have confused you. At the moment, of course, those details are lost to me. All that remains is the indescribable memory of how it felt to have *understood*, absolutely and perfectly... and that memory, hours old, feels more real to me than *now*.

The tram glides smoothly into the next station. The newsfeed across the piazza replays looped imagery of Trajan's funeral. I still can't believe he's dead. Trajan was so strong in the Spirit we'd begun to think him invulnerable. That he could be bested by some *thing* built in the Backlands—it seems almost blasphemous.

Yet there he rests. Blesséd in the eyes of God and Man, a hero to both rabble and elite, a commoner who rose from Prefecthood to Generalship in under a decade: killed by an obscene contraption of levers and pellets and explosions of stinking gas. His peaceful face fills the feed. The physicians have hidden all signs of the thing that killed him, leaving only the marks of honorable injury for us to remember. The famous puckered line running down forehead to cheekbone, the legacy of a dagger than almost blinded him at twenty-five. The angry mass of scars crawling up his shoulder from beneath the tunic: a lucky shockprod strike during the Essene Mutiny. A crescent line on his right temple—a reminder of some other conflict whose name escapes me now, if indeed I ever knew it.

The view pulls back. Trajan's face recedes into an endless crowd of mourners as the tram starts up again. I barely knew the man. I met him a few times at Senate functions, where I'm sure I made no impression at all. But he made an impression on me. He made an impression on everyone. His conviction filled the room. The moment I met him, I thought: *here is a man untroubled by doubt*.

There was a time when I had doubts.

Never about God's might or goodness, of course. Only, sometimes, whether we were truly doing His will. I would confront the enemy, and see not blasphemers but people. Not traitors-in-waiting, but children. I would recite the words of our

savior: did not the Christ Himself say *I come not bringing peace, but a sword*? Did not Holy Constantine baptize his troops with their sword-arms raised? I knew the scriptures, I'd known them from the crèche—and yet sometimes, God help me, they seemed only words, and the enemy had *faces*.

None so blind as those who will not see.

Those days are past. The Spirit has burned brighter in me over the past month than ever before. And this morning—this morning it burned brighter still. In Trajan's memory.

I get off the tram at my usual stop. The platform is empty but for a pair of constables. They do not board. They approach me, their feet clicking across the tiles with the telltale disciplined rhythm of those in authority. They wear the insignia of the priesthood.

I study their faces as they block my way. The memory of the Spirit fades just enough to leave room for a trickle of apprehension.

"Forgive the intrusion, Praetor," one of them says, "but we must ask you to come with us."

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Yes, they are sure they have the right man. No, there is no mistake. No, it cannot wait. They are sorry, but they are simply following orders from the Bishop. No, they do not know what this concerns.

In that, at least, they are lying. It isn't difficult to tell; *colleagues* and *prisoners* are accorded very different treatment in this regime, and they are not treating me as a colleague. I am not shackled, at least. I am not under arrest, my presence is merely required at the temple. They have accused me of nothing.

That, perhaps, is the most frustrating thing of all: accused, I could at least deny the charges.

Their cart winds through Constantinople, coasting from rail to rail with a click and a hum. I stand at the prow, forward of the control column. My escorts stand behind. Another unspoken accusation, this arrangement; I have not been ordered to keep my eyes front, but if I faced them—if I asserted the right to look *back*

—how long would it be before a firm hand came down on my shoulder and turned me forward again?

"This is not the way to the temple," I say over my shoulder.

"Origen's blocked to Augustine. Cleaning up after the funeral."

Another lie. My own company guarded the procession down Augustine not two days ago. We left no obstructions. The constables probably know this. They are not trying to mislead me; they are showing me that they don't care enough to bother with a convincing lie.

I turn to confront them, and am preempted before I can speak: "Praetor, I must ask you to remove your helmet."

"You're joking."

"No sir. The bishop was quite explicit."

Stupefied and disbelieving, I undo the chin strap and lift the instrument from my skull. I begin to tuck it under my arm, but the constable reaches out and takes it from me.

"This is insane," I tell him. Without the helmet I'm as blind and deaf as any heathen. "I've done nothing wrong. What possible reason—"

The constable at the wheel turns us left onto a new track. The other puts his hand on my shoulder, and firmly turns me around.

Golgotha Plaza. Of course.

This is where the Godless come to die. The loss of my helmet is moot here; no one feels the presence of the Lord in this place. Our cart slides silently past the ranks of the heretics and the demon-possessed on their crosses, their eyes rolled back in their heads, bloody rivulets trickling from the spikes hammered through their wrists. Some have probably been here since before Trajan died; crucifixion could take days even in the days before anesthetics, and now we are a more civilized nation. We do not permit needless suffering even among our condemned.

It's an old trick, and a transparent one; many prisoners, paraded past these ranks, have chosen to cooperate before interrogation even begins. Do these two think I don't see through them? Do they think I haven't done this *myself*, more times than I can count?

Some of the dying cry out as we pass—not with pain, but with the voices of the demons in their heads. Even now, they preach.

Even now, they seek to convert others to their Godless ways. No wonder the Church damps this place—for what might a simple man think, feeling the Divine Presence while hearing sacrilege?

And yet, I almost *can* feel God's presence. It should be impossible, even if the constables hadn't confiscated my helmet. But there it is: a trickle of the Divine, like a thin bright shaft of sunlight breaking through the roof of a storm. It doesn't overpower; God's presence does not flood through me as it did earlier. But there is comfort, nonetheless. He is everywhere. He is even here. We do not banish Him with damper fields, any more than we turn off the sun by closing a window.

God is telling me, *Have strength. I am with you.*

My fear recedes like an ebbing tide. I turn back to my escorts and smile; God is with them too, if they'd only realize it.

But I don't believe they do. Something changes in their faces when they look at me. The last time I turned to face them, they were merely grim and uncooperative.

Now, for some reason, they almost look afraid.

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They take me to the temple, but not to the bishop. They send me through the tunnel of light instead. They tell me it is entirely routine, although I went through the tunnel only four months ago and am not due again for another eight.

My armor is not returned to me afterwards. Instead, they escort me into the bishop's sanctum, through an ornate doorway embellished with the likeness of a fiery cross and God's commandment to Constantine: *In hoc signo vinces*. In this sign, conquer.

They leave me alone, but I know the procedure. There are guards outside.

The sanctum is dark and comforting, all cushions and velvet drapes and mahogany bones. There are no windows. A screen on one wall glows with a succession of volumetric images. Each lingers for a few moments before dissolving hypnotically into the next: the Sinai foothills; Prolinius leading the charge against the

Hindus; the Holy Grotto itself, where God showed Moses the Burning Bush, where He showed all of us the way of the Spirit.

"Imagine that we had never found it."

I turn to find the bishop standing behind me as if freshly materialized. He holds a large envelope the color of ivory. He watches me with the faintest trace of a smile on his lips.

"Teacher?" I say.

"Imagine that Constantine never had his vision, that Eusebius never sent his expedition into Sinai. Imagine that the Grotto had never been rediscovered after Moses. No thousand-year legacy, no technological renaissance. Just another unprovable legend about a prophet hallucinating in the mountains, and ten commandments handed down with no tools to enforce them. We'd be no better than the heathens."

He gestures me towards a settee, a decadent thing, overstuffed and wine-colored. I do not wish to sit, but neither do I wish to give offence. I perch carefully on one edge.

The bishop remains standing. "I've been there, you know," he continues. "In the very heart of the grotto. Kneeling in the very place Moses Himself must have knelt."

He's waiting for a response. I clear my throat. "It must have been...indescribable."

"Not really." He shrugs. "You probably feel closer to God during your morning devotionals. It's...unrefined, after all. Raw ore. Astounding enough that a natural formation could induce *any* kind of religious response, much less one consistent enough to base a culture on. Still, the effect is...weaker than you might expect. Overrated."

I swallow and hold my tongue.

"Of course, you could say the same thing about the religious experience in principal," he continues, blandly sacrilegious. "Just an electrical hiccough in the temporal lobe, no more *divine* than the force that turns compass needles and draws iron filings to a magnet."

I remember the first time I heard such words: with the rest of my crèche, just before our first Communion. *It's like a magic trick, they said. Like static interfering with a radio. It confuses the part*

*of your brain that keeps track of your edges, of where you stop and everything else begins—and when that part gets confused, it thinks you go on forever, that you and creation are one. It tricks you into believing you're in the very presence of God.* They showed us a picture of the brain sitting like a great wrinkled prune within the shadowy outline of a human head, arrows and labels drawing our attention to the relevant parts. They opened up wands and prayer caps to reveal the tiny magnets and solenoids inside, all the subtle instrumentality that had subverted an entire race.

Not all of us got it at first. When you're a child, *electromagnet* is just another word for *miracle*. But they were patient, repeating the essentials in words simple enough for young minds, until we'd all grasped the essential point: we were but soft machines, and God was a malfunction.

And then they put the prayer caps on our heads and opened us to the Spirit and we knew, beyond any doubting, that God was real. The experience transcended debate, transcended logic. There was no room for argument. We *knew*. Everything else was just words.

*Remember*, they said afterwards. *When the heathens would tell you our God is a lie, remember this moment.*

I cannot believe that the bishop is playing the same games with me now. If he is joking, it is in very bad taste. If he is testing my conviction he falls laughably short. Neither alternative explains my presence here.

But he won't take silence for an answer: "Don't you agree?" he presses.

I tread carefully. "I was taught that the Spirit lives within iron filings and compass needles as much as in our minds and our hearts. That makes it no less Divine." I take a breath. "I mean no disrespect, teacher, but why am I here?"

He glances at the envelope in his hand. "I wished to discuss your recent... exemplary performance."

I wait, not taken in. My guards did not treat me as an *exemplary* performer.

"You," he continues, "are why we prevail against the heathens. It's not just the technology that the Spirit provides, it's the *certainty*. We *know* our God. He is empirical, He can be tested

and proven and experienced. We have no doubt. *You* have no doubt. That is why we have been unstoppable for a thousand years, that is why neither Backland spies nor heathen flying machines nor the very breadth of an ocean will keep us from victory."

They are not words that need corroboration.

"Imagine what it must be like to have to *believe*." The bishop shakes his head, almost sadly. "Imagine the doubt, the uncertainty, the discord and petty strife over which dreams are divine and which are blasphemous. Sometimes I almost pity the heathens. What a terrible thing it must be, to need *faith*. And yet they cling to it. They creep into our towns and they wear our clothes and they move among us, and they *shield* themselves from the very presence of God." He sighs. "I confess I do not entirely understand them."

"They ingest some sort of herb or fungus," I tell him. "They claim it connects them with their own *god*."

The bishop *mmms*. Doubtless he knew this already. "I would like to see their *fungus* move a monorail. Or even turn a compass needle. And yet, surrounded by evidence of the Lord's hand, they continue to cut themselves off from it. This is not widely known, but we've received reports that they can successfully scramble entire rooms. Whole villas, even."

He runs one long fingernail along the envelope, slitting it lengthwise.

"Like the chapel you purged this morning, Praetor. It was scrambled. The Spirit could not manifest."

I shake my head. "You are mistaken, teacher. I've never felt the Spirit more strongly than—"

The grim-faced escorts. The detour through Golgotha. The shaft of inexplicable sunlight. Everything falls into place.

A yawning chasm opens in the pit of my stomach.

The bishop extracts a sheet of film from the envelope: a snapshot of my passage through the Tunnel of Light. "You are possessed," he says.

No. There is some mistake.

He holds up the snapshot, a ghostly, translucent image of my head rendered in grays and greens. I can see the demon clearly. It

festers within my skull, a malign little lump of darkness just above my right ear. A perfect spot from which to whisper lies and treachery.

I am unarmed. I am imprisoned: I will not leave this place a free man. There are guards beyond the door, and unseen priestholes hidden in the dark corners of the room. If I so much as raise a hand to the Bishop I am dead.

I am dead anyway. I am possessed.

"No," I whisper.

"*I am the way, the truth, and the light,*" the bishop intones. "*None can come to the Father except through me.*" He stabs at the lump on the plate with one accusing finger. "Is *this* of the Christ? Is it of His Church? How then can it be real?"

I shake my head, dumbly. I cannot believe this is happening. I cannot believe what I see. I felt the Spirit today. I *felt* it. I am as certain of that as I have been of anything.

Is it me thinking these thoughts? Is it the demon, whispering to me?

"It seems there are more of them every day," the bishop remarks sadly. "And they are not content to corrupt the soul. They kill the body as well."

They force the *Church* to kill the body, he means. The Church is going to kill me.

But the bishop shakes his head, as though reading my mind. "I speak literally, Praetor. The demon will take your life. Not immediately—it may seduce you with this false rapture for some time. But then you will feel pain, and your mind will go. You will change; not even your loved ones will recognize you by your acts. Perhaps, near the end, you will become a drooling infant, squalling and soiling yourself. Or perhaps the pain will simply grow unbearable. Either way, you will die."

"How—how long?"

"A few days, a few weeks...I know of one poor soul who was ridden for nearly a year before she was saved."

Saved. Like the heretics at Golgotha.

*And yet, whispers a tiny inner voice, even a few days spent in that Presence would be easily worth a lifetime...*

I bring my hand to my temple. The demon lurks in there, festering in wet darkness only a skull's thickness away. I stare at the floor. "It can't be."

"It is. But it does not *have* to be."

It takes me a moment to realize what he's just said. I look up and meet his eyes.

He's smiling. "There is another way," he says. "Yes, usually the body must die that the soul can be saved—crucifixion is infinitely kinder than the fate that usually awaits the possessed. But there's an alternative, for those with—potential. I will not mislead you, Praetor. There are risks. But there have been successes as well."

"An...an alternative...?"

"We may be able to exorcise the demon. We may be able to *remove* it, physically, from your head. If it works we can both save your life and return you to the Lord's presence."

"If it works..."

"You are a soldier. You know that death is always a possibility. It is a risk here, as in all things." He takes a deep, considered breath. "On the cross, death would be a certainty."

The demon in my head does not argue. It whispers no blasphemies, makes no desperate plea against the prospect of its extraction. It merely opens the door to Heaven a crack, and bathes my soul in a sliver of the Divine.

It shows me the Truth.

I *know*, as I knew in the crèche, as I knew this morning. I am in the presence of God, and if the Bishop cannot see it then the Bishop is a babbling charlatan, or worse.

I would gladly go to the cross for just such a moment as this.

I smile and shake my head. "Do you think me *blind*, Bishop? You would wrap your wretched plottings up in Scripture, that I would not see them for what they are?" And I *do* see them now, laid bare in the Spirit's radiance. Of course these vile Pharisees would trap the Lord in trinkets and talismans if they could. They would ration God through a spigot to which only they have access—and those to whom He would speak without their consent, they would brand *possessed*.

And I *am* possessed, but not by any demon. I am possessed by Almighty God. And neither He nor His Sons are hermit crabs, driven to take up residence in the shells of idols and machinery.

"Tell me, Bishop," I cry. "Was Saul wearing one of your *prayer caps* on the road to Damascus? Did Elisha summon his bears with one of your wands? Or were *they* possessed of demons as well?"

He shakes his head, feigning sadness. "It is not the Praetor that speaks."

He's right. God speaks through me, as he spoke through the Prophets of old. I am God's voice, and it doesn't matter that I am unarmed and unarmored, it doesn't matter that I am deep in the devil's sanctum. I need only raise my hand and God will strike this blasphemer down.

I raise my fist. I am fifty cubits high. The bishops stands before me, an insect unaware of its own insignificance. He has one of his ridiculous machines in one hand.

"Down, devil!" we both cry, and there is blackness.

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I awaken into bondage. Broad straps hold me against the bed. The left side of my face is on fire. Smiling physicians lean into view and tell me all is well. Someone holds up a mirror. My head has been shaved on the right side; a bleeding crescent, inexplicably familiar, cuts across my temple. Crosses of black thread sew my flesh together as though I were some torn garment, clumsily repaired.

The exorcism was successful, they say. I will be back with my company within the month. The restraints are merely a precaution. I will be free of them soon, as I am free of the demon.

"Bring me to God," I croak. My throat burns like a desert.

They hold a prayer wand to my head. I feel nothing.

I feel *nothing*.

The wand is in working order. The batteries are fully charged. It's probably nothing, they say. A temporary after-effect of the exorcism. Give it time. Probably best to leave the restraints for the moment, but there's nothing to worry about.

Of course they are right. I have dwelt in the Spirit, I know the mind of the Almighty—after all, were not all of us chosen made in His image? God would never abandon even the least of his flock. I do not have to believe this, it is something I *know*. Father, you will not forsake me.

It will come back. It will come back.

\*

They urge me to be patient. After three days they admit that they've seen this before. Not often, mind you; it was a rare procedure, and this is an even rarer consequence. But it's possible that the demon may have injured the part of the mind that lets us truly know God. The physicians recite medical terms which mean nothing to me. I ask them about the others that preceded me down this path: how long before *they* were restored to God's sight? But it seems there are no hard and fast rules, no overall patterns.

Trajan burns on the wall beside my bed. Trajan burns daily there and is never consumed, a little like the Burning Bush itself. My keepers have been replaying his cremation daily, a thin gruel of recorded images thrown against the wall; I suspect they are meant to be inspirational. It is always just past sundown in these replays. Trajan's fiery passing returns a kind of daylight to the piazza, an orange glow reflecting in ten thousand upturned faces.

He is with God now, forever in His presence. Some say that was true even before he passed, that Trajan lived his whole life in the Spirit. I don't know whether that's true; maybe people just couldn't explain his zeal and devotion any other way.

A whole lifetime in the presence of God. I'd give a lifetime now for even a minute.

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We are in unexplored territory, they say. That is where they are, perhaps.

*I am in Hell.*

Finally they admit it: none of the others have recovered. They have been lying to me all along. I have been cast into darkness, I am cut off from God. And they called this butchery a *success*.

"It will be a test of your faith," they tell me. My *faith*. I gape like a fish at the word. It is a word for heathens, for people with made-up gods. The cross would have been infinitely preferable. I would kill these smug meat-cutters with my bare hands, if my bare hands were free.

"Kill me," I beg. They refuse. The Bishop himself has commanded that I be kept alive and in good health. "Then summon the bishop," I tell them. "Let me talk to him. Please."

They smile sadly and shake their heads. One does not *summon* the Bishop.

More lies, perhaps. Maybe the bishop has forgotten that I even exist, maybe these people just enjoy watching the innocent suffer. Who else, after all, would dedicate their lives to potions and bloodletting?

The cut in my head keeps me awake at night, itches maddeningly as scar tissue builds and puckers along its curved edges. I still can't remember where I've seen its like before.

I curse the bishop. He told me there would be risks, but he only mentioned death. Death is not a risk to me here. It is an aspiration.

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I refuse food for four days. They force-feed me liquids through a tube in my nose.

It's a strange paradox. There is no hope here; I will never again know God, I am denied even surcease. And yet these butchers, by the very act of refusing me a merciful death, have somehow awakened a tiny spark that wants to live. It is *their* sin I am suffering for, after all. This darkness is of *their* making. I did not turn away from God; they hacked God out of me like a goblet of gangrenous flesh. It can't be that they want me to live, for there is no living apart from God. It can only be that they want me to *suffer*.

And with this realization comes a sudden desire to deny them that satisfaction.

They will not let me die. Perhaps, soon, they will wish they had. God damn them.

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*God damn them. Of course.*

I've been a fool. I've forgotten what really matters. I've been so obsessed by these petty torments that I've lost sight of one simple truth: God does not turn on his children. God does not abandon His own.

But *test* them—yes. God tests us all the time. Did He not strip Job of all his worldly goods and leave him picking his boils in the dust? Did He not tell Abraham to kill his own son? Did He not restore them to His sight, once they had proven worthy of it?

I believe that God rewards the righteous. I believe that the Christ said *Blessed are those who believe even though they have not seen*. And now, at last, I believe that perhaps *faith* is not the obscenity I once thought, for it can give strength when one is cut off from the truth.

I am not abandoned. I am *tested*.

I send for the bishop. Somehow, this time I know he'll come.

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He does.

"They say I've lost the Spirit," I tell him. "They're wrong."

He sees something in my face. Something changes in his.

"Moses was denied the Promised Land," I continue. "Constantine saw the flaming cross but twice in his lifetime. God spoke to Saul of Tarsus only once. Did *they* lose faith?"

"They moved the world," the bishop says.

I bare my teeth. My conviction fills the room. "So will I."

He smiles gently. "I believe you."

I stare at him, astonished by my own blindness. "You knew this would happen."

He shakes his head. "I could only hope. But yes, there is a—strange truth we are only learning now. I'm still not sure I believe it myself. Sometimes it isn't the *experience* of redemption that makes the greatest champions, but the *longing* for it."

On the panel beside me, Trajan burns and is not consumed. I wonder briefly if my fall from grace was entirely accidental. But in the end it does not matter. I remember, at last, where I once saw a scar like mine.

Before today, the acts I committed in God's name were pale, bloodless things. No longer. I will return to the Kingdom of Heaven. I will raise my sword-arm high and I will not lay it down until the last of the unbelievers has been slaughtered. I will build mountains of flesh in His name. Rivers will flow from the throats that I cut. I will not stop until I have earned my way back into His sight.

The bishop leans forward and loosens my straps. "I don't think we need these any more."

They couldn't hold me anyway. I could tear them like paper. I am the fist of God.

## Afterword

*Contrary to what you may have heard, God isn't everywhere. The only place He reliably hangs out is in the temporal lobes—at least, that's where Vilayanur Ramashandran found Him when he went looking in the brains of hyper-religious epileptics at UC-San Diego. You'll never find the Almighty slumming in the parietal cortex, judging by radioisotopes Andrew Newberg tracked through the heads of a meditating Buddhist monk at the University of Pennsylvania. Most spectacularly—and controversially—Michael Persinger of Laurentian University claims to be able to induce religious experiences using a helmet which bathes the brain in precisely-controlled electromagnetic fields.*

*We begin to understand the mechanism: Rapture is as purely neurological as any other human experience. With that*

*understanding, inevitably, comes the potential for control. Religious belief—that profound, irrational disorder afflicting so many of our species—may actually have a cure.*

*Of course, a cure is the last thing many would want. Religion has been a kick-ass form of social control for millennia, even absent any understanding of its neurology. It seems likely that these new insights will be used not to free us from the rapture, but to tweak it to maximum effect—to make us even more docile, even more obedient, even less skeptical of our masters than we are now.*

*Today we're just taking our first steps down that road—but what if we'd taken them back in the third century, instead of the dawn of the twenty-first? That was the time of Constantine, the Roman Emperor who legitimized Christianity after a religious vision promised him victory in battle. It's not much of a stretch to posit a subsequent expedition to the Holy Land, in search of ancient miracles.*

*I see a vein of magnetic ore in the Sinai hills. I see it speak to Constantine's pilgrims as it spoke to Moses, sixteen centuries earlier. I watch it seed a renaissance in neurotheology—inevitably, in all manner of electromagnetic physics—and then I jump forward a thousand years and tell you a story...*

*It's an unbelievable gimmick of course, a natural miracle filling in for Persinger's God Helmet. But given that conceit, the social consequences seem more than plausible; they almost have a ring of inevitability to them. Perhaps, in all these stories about parallel universes, we've focused too much on chaos and too little on inertia. Perhaps it doesn't matter where the butterfly flaps its wings.*

*Perhaps human nature pulls all timelines back to same endpoint.*