

THE SEVENTH SEAL

by

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The night had brought little relief from the heat, and at dawn a hot gust of wind blows across the colorless sea. The KNIGHT, Antonius Block, lies prostrate on some spruce branches spread over the fine sand. His eyes are wide-open and bloodshot from lack of sleep.

Nearby his squire JONS is snoring loudly. He has fallen asleep where he collapsed, at the edge of the forest among the wind-gnarled fir trees. His open mouth gapes towards the dawn, and unearthly sounds come from his throat. At the sudden gust of wind, the horses stir, stretching their parched muzzles towards the sea. They are as thin and worn as their masters.

The KNIGHT has risen and waded into the shallow water, where he rinses his sunburned face and blistered lips. JONS rolls over to face the forest and the darkness. He moans in his sleep and vigorously scratches the stubbled hair on his head. A scar stretches diagonally across his scalp, as white as lightning against the grime.

The KNIGHT returns to the beach and falls on his knees. With his eyes closed and brow furrowed, he says his morning prayers. His hands are clenched together and his lips form the words silently. His face is sad and bitter. He opens his eyes and stares directly into the morning sun which wallows up from the misty sea like some bloated, dying fish. The sky is gray and immobile, a dome of lead. A cloud hangs mute and dark over the western horizon. High up, barely visible, a seagull floats on motionless wings. Its cry is weird and restless. The KNIGHT'S large gray horse lifts its head and whinnies. Antonius Block turns around.

Behind him stands a man in black. His face is very pale and he keeps his hands hidden in the wide folds of his cloak.

KNIGHT

Who are you?

DEATH

I am Death.

KNIGHT

Have you come for me?

DEATH

I have been walking by your side for a long time.

KNIGHT

That I know.

DEATH

Are you prepared?

KNIGHT

My body is frightened, but I am not.

DEATH

Well, there is no shame in that.

The KNIGHT has risen to his feet. He shivers. DEATH opens his cloak to place it around the KNIGHT'S shoulders.

KNIGHT

Wait a moment.

DEATH

That's what they all say. I grant no reprieves.

KNIGHT

You play chess, don't you?

A gleam of interest kindles in DEATH'S eyes.

DEATH

How did you know that?

KNIGHT

I have seen it in paintings and heard it sung in ballads.

DEATH

Yes, in fact I'm quite a good chess player.

KNIGHT

But you can't be better than I am.

The KNIGHT rummages in the big black bag which he keeps beside him and takes out a small chessboard. He places it carefully on the ground and begins setting up the pieces.

DEATH

Why do you want to play chess with me?

KNIGHT

I have my reasons.

DEATH

That is your privilege.

KNIGHT

The condition is that I may live as long as I hold out against you. If I win, you will release me. Is it agreed?

The KNIGHT holds out his two fists to DEATH, who smiles at him suddenly.

DEATH points to one of the KNIGHT'S hands; it contains a black pawn.

KNIGHT

You drew black!

DEATH

Very appropriate. Don't you think so?

The KNIGHT and DEATH bend over the chessboard. After a moment of hesitation, Antonius Block opens with his king's pawn. DEATH moves, also using his king's pawn.

The morning breeze has died down. The restless movement of the sea has ceased, the water is silent. The sun rises from the haze and its glow whitens. The sea gull floats under the dark cloud, frozen in space. The day is already scorchingly hot.

The squire JONS is awakened by a kick in the rear. Opening his eyes, he grunts like a pig and yawns broadly. He scrambles to his feet, saddles his horse and picks up the heavy pack.

The KNIGHT slowly rides away from the sea, into the forest near the beach and up towards the road. He pretends not to hear the morning prayers of his squire. JONS soon overtakes him.

JONS

(sings)

Between a strumpet's legs to lie
Is the life for which I sigh.

He stops and looks at his master, but the KNIGHT hasn't heard JON'S song, or he pretends that he hasn't. To give further vent to his irritation, JONS sings even louder.

JONS

(sings)

Up above is God Almighty So very far
away, But your brother the Devil You
will meet on every level.

JONS finally gets the KNIGHT'S attention. He stops singing. The KNIGHT, his horse, JONS'S own horse and JONS himself know all the songs by heart. The long, dusty journey from the Holy Land hasn't made them any cleaner. They ride across a mossy heath which stretches towards the horizon. Beyond it, the sea lies shimmering in the white glitter of the sun.

JONS

In Faerjestad everyone was talking
about evil omens and other horrible
things. Two horses had eaten each
other in the night, and, in the
churchyard, graves had been opened
and the remains of corpses scattered
all over the place.

(MORE)

JONS (CONT'D)

Yesterday afternoon there were as many as four suns in the heavens.

The KNIGHT doesn't answer. Close by, a scrawny dog is whining, crawling towards its master, who is sleeping in a sitting position in the blazing hot sun. A black cloud of flies clusters around his head and shoulders. The miserable-looking dog whines incessantly as it lies flat on its stomach, wagging its tail.

JONS dismounts and approaches the sleeping man. JONS addresses him politely. When he doesn't receive an answer, he walks up to the man in order to shake him awake. He bends over the sleeping man's shoulder, but quickly pulls back his hand. The man falls backward on the heath, his face turned towards JONS.

It is a corpse, staring at JONS with empty eye sockets and white teeth.

JONS remounts and overtakes his master. He takes a drink from his waterskin and hands the bag to the knight.

KNIGHT

Well, did he show you the way?

JONS

Not exactly.

KNIGHT

What did he say?

JONS

Nothing.

KNIGHT

Was he a mute?

JONS

No, sir, I wouldn't say that. As a matter of fact, he was quite eloquent.

KNIGHT

Oh?

JONS

He was eloquent, all right. The trouble is that what he had to say was most depressing.

(sings)

One moment you're bright and lively,
The next you're crawling with worms.
Fate is a terrible villain. And
you, my friend, its poor victim.

KNIGHT

Must you sing?

JONS

No.

The KNIGHT hands his squire a piece of bread, which keeps him quiet for a while. The sun burns down on them cruelly, and beads of perspiration trickle down their faces. There is a cloud of dust around the horses' hooves. They ride past an inlet and along verdant groves. In the shade of some large trees stands a bulging wagon covered with a mottled canvas. A horse whinnies nearby and is answered by the KNIGHT'S horse. The two travelers do not stop to rest under the shade of the trees but continue riding until they disappear at the bend of the road.

In his sleep, JOF the juggler hears the neighing of his horse and the answer from a distance. He tries to go on sleeping, but it is stifling inside the wagon. The rays of the sun filtering through the canvas cast streaks of light across the face of JOF'S wife, MIA, and their one-year-old son, MIKAEL, who are sleeping deeply and peacefully. Near them, JONAS SKAT, an older man, snores loudly.

JOF crawls out of the wagon. There is still a spot of shade under the big trees. He takes a drink of water, gargles, stretches and talks to his scrawny old horse.

JOF

Good morning. Have you had breakfast?
I can't eat grass, worse luck. Can't
you teach me how? We're a little
hard up. People aren't very
interested in juggling in this part
of the country.

He has picked up the juggling balls and slowly begins to toss them. Then he stands on his head and cackles like a hen. Suddenly he stops and sits down with a look of utter astonishment on his face. The wind causes the trees to sway slightly. The leaves stir and there is a soft murmur. The flowers and the grass bend gracefully, and somewhere a bird raises its voice in a long warble.

JOF'S face breaks into a smile and his eyes fill with tears. With a dazed expression he sits flat on his behind while the grass rustles softly, and bees and butterflies hum around his head. The unseen bird continues to sing.

Suddenly the breeze stops blowing, the bird stops singing, JOF'S smile fades, the flowers and grass wilt in the heat. The old horse is still walking around grazing and swishing its tail to ward off the flies.

JOF comes to life. He rushes into the wagon and shakes MIA awake.

JOF

Mia, wake up. Wake up! Mia, I've just seen something. I've got to tell you about it!

MIA

(sits up, terrified)
What is it? What's happened?

JOF

Listen, I've had a vision. No, it wasn't a vision. It was real, absolutely real.

MIA

Oh, so you've had a vision again!

MIA's voice is filled with gentle irony. JOF shakes his head and grabs her by the shoulders.

JOF

But I did see her!

MIA

Whom did you see?

JOF

The Virgin Mary.

MIA can't help being impressed by her husband's fervor. She lowers her voice.

MIA

Did you really see her?

JOF

She was so close to me that I could have touched her. She had a golden crown on her head and wore a blue gown with flowers of gold. She was barefoot and had small brown hands with which she was holding the Child and teaching Him to walk. And then she saw me watching her and she smiled at me. My eyes filled with tears and when I wiped them away, she had disappeared. And everything became so still in the sky and on the earth. Can you understand ...

MIA

What an imagination you have.

JOF

You don't believe me!

(MORE)

JOF (CONT'D)

But it was real, I tell you, not the kind of reality you see every day, but a different kind.

MIA

Perhaps it was the kind of reality you told us about when you saw the Devil painting our wagon wheels red, using his tail as a brush.

JOF

(embarrassed)

Why must you keep bringing that up?

MIA

And then you discovered that you had red paint under your nails.

JOF

Well, perhaps that time I made it up.

(eagerly)

I did it just so that you would believe in my other visions. The real ones. The ones that I didn't make up.

MIA

(severely)

You have to keep your visions under control. Otherwise people will think that you're a half-wit, which you're not. At least not yet -- as far as I know. But, come to think of it, I'm not so sure about that.

JOF

(angry)

I didn't ask to have visions. I can't help it if voices speak to me, if the Holy Virgin appears before me and angels and devils like my company.

SKAT

(sits up)

Haven't I told you once and for all that I need my morning's sleep! I have asked you politely, pleaded with you, but nothing works. So now I'm telling you to shut up!

His eyes are popping with rage. He turns over and continues snoring where he left off. MIA and JOF decide that it would be wisest to leave the wagon. They sit down on a crate. MIA has MIKAEL on her knees. He is naked and squirms vigorously. JOF sits close to his wife.

Slumped over, he still looks dazed and astonished. A dry, hot wind blows from the sea.

MIA

If we would only get some rain.
Everything is burned to cinders. We
won't have anything to eat this
winter.

JOF

(yawning)
We'll get by.

He says this smilingly, with a casual air. He stretches and laughs contentedly.

MIA

I want Mikael to have a better life
than ours.

JOF

Mikael will grow up to be a great
acrobat -- or a juggler who can do
the one impossible trick.

MIA

What's that?

JOF

To make one of the balls stand
absolutely still in the air.

MIA

But that's impossible.

JOF

Impossible for us -- but not for
him.

MIA

You're dreaming again.

She yawns. The sun, has made her a bit drowsy and she lies down on the grass. JOF does likewise and puts one arm around his wife's shoulders.

JOF

I've composed a song. I made it up
during the night when I couldn't
sleep. Do you want to hear it?

MIA

Sing it. I'm very curious.

JOF

I have to sit up first.

He sits with his legs crossed, makes a dramatic gesture with his arms and sings in a loud voice.

JOF

(sings)

On a lily branch a dove is perched
Against the summer sky,
She sings a wondrous song of Christ
And there's great joy on high.

He interrupts his singing in order to be complimented by his wife.

JOF

Mia! Are you asleep?

MIA

It's a lovely song.

JOF

I haven't finished yet.

MIA

I heard it, but I think I'll sleep a little longer. You can sing the rest to me afterwards.

JOF

All you do is sleep.

JOF is a bit offended and glances over at his son, MIKAEL, but he is also sleeping soundly in the high grass. JONAS SKAT comes out from the wagon. He yawns; he is very tired and in a bad humor. In his hands he holds a crudely made death mask.

SKAT

Is this supposed to be a mask for an actor? If the priests didn't pay us so well, I'd say no thank you.

JOF

Are you going to play Death?

SKAT

Just think, scaring decent folk out of their wits with this kind of nonsense.

JOF

When are we supposed to do this play?

SKAT

At the saints' feast in Elsinore.
We're going to perform right on the church steps, believe it or not.

JOF

Wouldn't it be better to play something bawdy? People like it better, and, besides, it's more fun.

SKAT

Idiot. There's a rumor going around that there's a terrible pestilence in the land, and now the priests are prophesying sudden death and all sorts of spiritual agonies.

MIA is awake now and lies contentedly on her back, sucking on a blade of grass and looking smilingly at her husband.

JOF

And what part am I to play?

SKAT

You're such a damn fool, so you're going to be the Soul of Man.

JOF

That's a bad part, of course.

SKAT

Who makes the decisions around here? Who is the director of this company anyhow?

SKAT, grinning, holds the mask in front of his face and recites dramatically.

SKAT

Bear this in mind, you fool. Your life hangs by a thread. Your time is short.

(in his usual voice)

Are the women going to like me in this getup? Will I make a hit? No! I feel as if I were dead already.

He stumbles into the wagon muttering furiously. JOF sits, leaning forward. MIA lies beside him on the grass.

MIA

Jof!

JOF

What is it?

MIA

Sit still. Don't move.

JOF

What do you mean?

MIA
Don't say anything.

JOF
I'm as silent as a grave.

MIA
Shh! I love you.

Waves of heat envelop the gray stone church in a strange white mist. The KNIGHT dismounts and enters. After tying up the horses, JONS slowly follows him in. When he comes onto the church porch he stops in surprise. To the right of the entrance there is a large fresco on the wall, not quite finished. Perched on a crude scaffolding is a PAINTER wearing a red cap and paint-stained clothes. He has one brush in his mouth, while with another in his hand he outlines a small, terrified human face amidst a sea of other faces.

JONS
What is this supposed to represent?

PAINTER
The Dance of Death.

JONS
And that one is Death?

PAINTER
Yes, he dances off with all of them.

JONS
Why do you paint such nonsense?

PAINTER
I thought it would serve to remind people that they must die.

JONS
Well, it's not going to make them feel any happier.

PAINTER
Why should one always make people happy? It might not be a bad idea to scare them a little once in a while.

JONS
Then they'll close their eyes and refuse to look at your painting.

PAINTER
Oh, they'll look. A skull is almost more interesting than a naked woman.

JONS
If you do scare them ...

PAINTER
They'll think.

JONS
And if they think ...

PAINTER
They'll become still more scared.

JONS
And then they'll run right into the
arms of the priests.

PAINTER
That's not my business.

JONS
You're only painting your Dance of
Death.

PAINTER
I'm only painting things as they
are. Everyone else can do as he likes.

JONS
Just think how some people will curse
you.

PAINTER
Maybe. But then I'll paint something
amusing for them to look at. I have
to make a living -- at least until
the plague takes me.

JONS
The plague. That sounds horrible.

PAINTER
You should see the boils on a diseased
man's throat. You should see how his
body shrivels up so that his legs
look like knotted strings -- like
the man I've painted over there.

The PAINTER points with his brush. JONS sees a small human
form writhing in the grass, its eyes turned upwards in a
frenzied look of horror and pain.

JONS
That looks terrible.

PAINTER
It certainly does. He tries to rip
out the boil, he bites his hands,
tears his veins open with his
fingernails and his screams can be
(MORE)

PAINTER (CONT'D)

heard everywhere. Does that scare you?

JONS

Scare? Me? You don't know me. What are the horrors you've painted over there?

PAINTER

The remarkable thing is that the poor creatures think the pestilence is the Lord's punishment. Mobs of people who call themselves Slaves of Sin are swarming over the country, flagellating themselves and others, all for the glory of God.

JONS

Do they really whip themselves?

PAINTER

Yes, it's a terrible sight. I crawl into a ditch and hide when they pass by.

JONS

Do you have any brandy? I've been drinking water all day and it's made me as thirsty as a camel in the desert.

PAINTER

I think I frightened you after all.

JONS sits down with the PAINTER, who produces a jug of brandy.

The KNIGHT is kneeling before a small altar. It is dark and quiet around him. The air is cool and musty. Pictures of saints look down on him with stony eyes. Christ's face is turned upwards, His mouth open as if in a cry of anguish. On the ceiling beam there is a representation of a hideous devil spying on a miserable human being. The KNIGHT hears a sound from the confession booth and approaches it. The face of DEATH appears behind the grille for an instant, but the KNIGHT doesn't see him.

KNIGHT

I want to talk to you as openly as I can, but my heart is empty.

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

The emptiness is a mirror turned towards my own face.

(MORE)

KNIGHT (CONT'D)

I see myself in it, and I am filled
with fear and disgust.

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

Through my indifference to my fellow
men, I have isolated myself from
their company. Now I live in a world
of phantoms. I am imprisoned in my
dreams and fantasies.

DEATH

And yet you don't want to die.

KNIGHT

Yes, I do.

DEATH

What are you waiting for?

KNIGHT

I want knowledge.

DEATH

You want guarantees?

KNIGHT

Call it whatever you like. Is it so
cruelly inconceivable to grasp God
with the senses? Why should He hide
himself in a mist of half-spoken
promises and unseen miracles?

DEATH doesn't answer.

KNIGHT

How can we have faith in those who
believe when we can't have faith in
ourselves? What is going to happen
to those of us who want to believe
but aren't able to? And what is to
become of those who neither want to
nor are capable of believing?

The KNIGHT stops and waits for a reply, but no one speaks or
answers him.

There is complete silence.

KNIGHT

Why can't I kill God within me? Why
does He live on in this painful and
humiliating way even though I curse
Him and want to tear Him out of my

(MORE)

KNIGHT (CONT'D)

heart? Why, in spite of everything,
is He a baffling reality that I can't
shake off? Do you hear me?

DEATH

Yes, I hear you.

KNIGHT

I want knowledge, not faith, not
suppositions, but knowledge. I want
God to stretch out His hand towards
me, reveal Himself and speak to me.

DEATH

But He remains silent.

KNIGHT

I call out to Him in the dark but no
one seems to be there.

DEATH

Perhaps no one is there.

KNIGHT

Then life is an outrageous horror.
No one can live in the face of death,
knowing that all is nothingness.

DEATH

Most people never reflect about either
death or the futility of life.

KNIGHT

But one day they will have to stand
at that last moment of life and look
towards the darkness.

DEATH

When that day comes ...

KNIGHT

In our fear, we make an image, and
that image we call God.

DEATH

You are worrying ...

KNIGHT

Death visited me this morning. We
are playing chess together. This
reprieve gives me the chance to
arrange an urgent matter.

DEATH

What matter is that?

KNIGHT

My life has been a futile pursuit, a wandering, a great deal of talk without meaning. I feel no bitterness or self-reproach because the lives of most people are very much like this. But I will use my reprieve for one meaningful deed.

DEATH

Is that why you are playing chess with Death?

KNIGHT

He is a clever opponent, but up to now I haven't lost a single man.

DEATH

How will you outwit Death in your game?

KNIGHT

I use a combination of the bishop and the knight which he hasn't yet discovered. In the next move I'll shatter one of his flanks.

DEATH

I'll remember that.

DEATH shows his face at the grill of the confession booth for a moment but disappears instantly.

KNIGHT

You've tricked and cheated me! But we'll meet again, and I'll find a way.

DEATH

(invisible)

We'll meet at the inn, and there we'll continue playing.

The KNIGHT raises his hand and looks at it in the sunlight which comes through the tiny window.

KNIGHT

This is my hand. I can move it, feel the blood pulsing through it. The sun is still high in the sky and I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with Death.

He makes a fist of his hand and lifts it to his temple.

Meanwhile, JONS and the PAINTER have got drunk and are talking animatedly together.

JONS

Me and my master have been abroad
and have just come home. Do you
understand, you little pictor?

PAINTER

The Crusade.

JONS

(drunk)

Precisely. For ten years we sat in
the Holy Land and let snakes bite
us, flies sting us, wild animals eat
us, heathens butcher us, the wine
poison us, the women give us lice,
the lice devour us, the fevers rot
us, all for the Glory of God. Our
crusade was such madness that only a
real idealist could have thought it
up. But what you said about the
plague was horrible.

PAINTER

It's worse than that.

JONS

Ah, me. No matter which way you turn,
you have your rump behind you. That's
the truth.

PAINTER

The rump behind you, the rump behind
you there's a profound truth.

JONS paints a small figure which is supposed to represent
himself.

JONS

This is squire J[^]ns. He grins at
Death, mocks the Lord, laughs at
himself and leers at the girls. His
world is a J[^]nsworld, believable
only to himself, ridiculous to all
including himself, meaningless to
Heaven and of no interest to Hell.

The KNIGHT walks by, calls to his squire and goes out into
the bright sunshine. JONS manages to set himself down from
the scaffolding.

Outside the church, four soldiers and a monk are in the
process of putting a woman in the stocks. Her face is pale
and child-like, her head has been shaved, and her knuckles
are bloody and broken. Her eyes are wide open, yet she doesn't
appear to be fully conscious.

JONS and the KNIGHT stop and watch in silence. The soldiers are working quickly and skillfully, but they seem frightened and dejected. The monk mumbles from a small book. One of the soldiers picks up a wooden bucket and with his hand begins to smear a bloody paste on the wall of the church and around the woman. JONS holds his nose.

JONS

That soup of yours has a hell of a stink. What is it good for?

SOLDIER

She has had carnal intercourse with the Evil One.

He whispers this with a horrified face and continues to splash the sticky mess on the wall.

JONS

And now she's in the stocks.

SOLDIER

She will be burned tomorrow morning at the parish boundary. But we have to keep the Devil away from the rest of us.

JONS

(holding his nose)

And you do that with this stinking mess?

SOLDIER

It's the best remedy: blood mixed with the bile of a big black dog. The Devil can't stand the smell.

JONS

Neither can I.

JONS walks over towards the horses. The KNIGHT stands for a few moments looking at the young girl. She is almost a child. Slowly she turns her eyes towards him.

KNIGHT

Have you seen the Devil?

The MONK stops reading and raises his head.

MONK

You must not talk to her.

KNIGHT

Can that be so dangerous?

MONK

I don't know, but she is believed to have caused the pestilence with which we are affected.

KNIGHT

I understand.

He nods resignedly and walks away. The young woman starts to moan as though she were having a horrible nightmare. The sound of her cries follows the two riders for a considerable distance down the road.

The sun stands high in the sky, like a red ball of fire. The waterskin is empty and JONS looks for a well where he can fill it.

They approach a group of peasant cottages at the edge of the forest. JONS ties up the horses, slings the skin over his shoulder and walks along the path towards the nearest cottage. As always, his movements are light and almost soundless. The door to the cottage is open. He stops outside, but when no one appears he enters. It is very dark inside and his foot touches a soft object. He looks down. Beside the whitewashed fireplace, a woman is lying with her face to the ground.

At the sound of approaching steps, JONS quickly hides behind the door. A man comes down a ladder from the loft. He is broad and thick-set. His eyes are black and his face is pale and puffy. His clothes are well cut but dirty and in rags. He carries a cloth sack. Looking around, he goes into the inner room, bends over the bed, tucks something into the bag, slinks along the walls, looking on the shelves, finds something else which he tucks in his bag.

Slowly he re-enters the outer room, bends over the dead woman and carefully slips a ring from her finger. At that moment a young woman comes through the door. She stops and stares at the stranger.

RAVEL

Why do you look so surprised? I steal from the dead. These days it's quite a lucrative enterprise.

The GIRL makes a movement as if to run away.

RAVEL

You're thinking of running to the village and telling. That wouldn't serve any purpose. Each of us has to save his own skin. It's as simple as that.

GIRL

Don't touch me.

RAVAL

Don't try to scream. There's no one around to hear you, neither God nor man.

Slowly he closes the door behind the GIRL. The stuffy room is now in almost total darkness. But JONS becomes clearly visible.

JONS

I recognize you, although it's a long time since we met. Your name is Raval, from the theological college at Roskilde. You are Dr. Mirabilis, Coelestis et Diabilis.

RAVAL smiles uneasily and looks around.

JONS

Am I not right?

The GIRL stands immobile.

JONS

You were the one who, ten years ago, convinced my master of the necessity to join a better-class crusade to the Holy Land.

RAVAL looks around.

JONS

You look uncomfortable. Do you have a stomachache?

RAVAL smiles anxiously.

JONS

When I see you, I suddenly understand the meaning of these ten years, which previously seemed to me such a waste. Our life was too good and we were too satisfied with ourselves. The Lord wanted to punish us for our complacency. That is why He sent you to spew out your holy venom and poison the knight.

RAVAL

I acted in good faith.

JONS

But now you know better, don't you? Because now you have turned into a thief. A more fitting and rewarding occupation for scoundrels. Isn't that so?

With a quick movement he knocks the knife out of RAVAL'S hand, gives him a kick so that he falls on the floor and is about to finish him off. Suddenly the GIRL screams. JONS stops and makes a gesture of generosity with his hand.

JONS

By all means. I'm not bloodthirsty.

He bends over RAVAL.

RAVAL

Don't beat me.

JONS

I don't have the heart to touch you, Doctor. But remember this: the next time we meet, I'll brand your face the way one does with thieves.

(he rises)

What I really came for is to get my waterskin filled.

GIRL

We have a deep well with cool, fresh water. Come, I'll show you.

They walk out of the house. RAVAL lies still for a few moments, then he rises slowly and looks around. When no one is in sight, he takes his bag and steals away. JONS quenches his thirst and fills his bag with water. The GIRL helps him.

JONS

Jons is my name. I am a pleasant and talkative young man who has never had anything but kind thoughts and has only done beautiful and noble deeds. I'm kindest of all to young women. With them, there is no limit to my kindness.

He embraces her and tries to kiss her, but she holds herself back. Almost immediately he loses interest, hoists the waterbag on his shoulder and pats the GIRL on the cheek.

JONS

Goodbye, my girl. I could very well have raped you, but between you and me, I'm tired of that kind of love. It runs a little dry in the end.

He laughs kindly and walks away from her. When he has walked a short distance he turns; the GIRL is still there.

JONS

Now that I think of it, I will need a housekeeper. Can you prepare good food?

(MORE)

JONS (CONT'D)

(the GIRL nods)

As far as I know, I'm still a married man, but I have high hopes that my wife is dead by now. That's why I need a housekeeper.

(the GIRL doesn't

answer but gets up)

The devil with it! Come along and don't stand there staring. I've saved your life, so you owe me a great deal.

She begins walking towards him, her head bent. He doesn't wait for her but walks towards the KNIGHT, who patiently awaits his squire.

The Embarrassment Inn lies in the eastern section of the province. The plague has not yet reached this area on its way along the coast.

The actors have placed their wagon under a tree in the yard of the inn. Dressed in colorful costumes, they perform a farce.

The spectators watch the performance, commenting on it noisily. There are merchants with fat, beer-sweaty faces, apprentices and journeymen, farmhands and milkmaids. A whole flock of children perch in the trees around the wagon.

The KNIGHT and his squire have sat down in the shadow of a wall. They drink beer and doze in the midday heat. The GIRL from the deserted village sleeps at JONS'S side. SKAT beats the drums, JOF blows the flute, MIA performs a gay and lively dance. They perspire under the hot white sun. When they have finished SKAT comes forward and bows.

SKAT

Noble ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your interest. Please remain standing for a little longer, or sit on the ground, because we are now going to perform a tragedia about an unfaithful wife, her jealous husband, and the handsome lover -- that's me.

MIA and JOF have quickly changed costumes and again step out on the stage.

They bow, to the public.

SKAT

Here is the husband. Here is the wife. If you'll shut up over there, you'll see something splendid.

(MORE)

SKAT (CONT'D)

As I said, I play the lover and I haven't entered yet. That's why I'm going to hide behind the curtain for the time being.

(he wipes the sweat
from his forehead)

It's damned hot. I think we'll have a thunderstorm.

He places his leg in front of JOF as if to trip him, raises MIA's skirt, makes a face as if he could see all the wonders of the world underneath it, and disappears behind the gaudily patched curtains.

SKAT is very handsome, now that he can see himself in the reflection of a tin washbowl. His hair is tightly curled, his eyebrows are beautifully bushy, glittering earrings vie for equal attention with his teeth, and his cheeks are flushed rose red.

He sits out in back on the tailboard of the wagon, dangling his legs and whistling to himself.

In the meantime JOF and MIA play their tragedy; it is not, however, received with great acclaim. SKAT suddenly discovers that someone is watching him as he gazes contentedly into the tin bowl. A woman stands there, stately in both height and volume.

SKAT frowns, toys with his small dagger and occasionally throws a roguish but fiery glance at the beautiful visitor. She suddenly discovers that one of her shoes doesn't quite fit. She leans down to fix it and in doing so allows her generous bosom to burst out of its prison -- no more than honor and chastity allow, but still enough so that the actor with his experienced eye immediately sees that there are ample rewards to be had here.

Now she comes a little closer, kneels down and opens a bundle containing several dainty morsels and a skin filled with red wine. JONAS SKAT manages not to fall off the wagon in his excitement. Standing on the steps of the wagon, he supports himself against a nearby tree, crosses his legs and bows.

The woman quietly bites into a chicken leg dripping with fat. At this moment the actor is stricken by a radiant glance full of lustful appetites.

When he sees this look, SKAT makes an instantaneous decision, jumps down from the wagon and kneels in front of the blushing damsel.

She becomes weak and faint from his nearness, looks at him with a glassy glance and breathes heavily. SKAT doesn't neglect to press kisses on her small, chubby hands. The sun shines brightly and small birds make noises in the bushes.

Now she is forced to sit back; her legs seem unwilling to support her any longer. Bewildered, she singles out another chicken leg from the large sack of food and holds it up in front of SKAT with an appealing and triumphant expression, as if it were her maidenhood being offered as a prize.

SKAT hesitates momentarily, but he is still the strategist. He lets the chicken leg fall to the grass, and murmurs in the woman's rosy ear.

His words seem to please her. She puts her arms around the actor's neck and pulls him to her with such fierceness that both of them lose their balance and tumble down on the soft grass. The small birds take to their wings with frightened shrieks.

JOF stands in the hot sun with a flickering lantern in his hand. MIA pretends to be asleep on a bench which has been pulled forward on the stage.

JOF

Night and moonlight now prevail Here
sleeps my wife so frail ...

VOICE FROM THE PUBLIC

Does she snore?

JOF

May I point out that this is a
tragedy, and in tragedies one doesn't
snore.

VOICE FROM THE PUBLIC

I think she should snore anyhow.

This opinion causes mirth in the audience. JOF becomes slightly confused and goes out of character, but MIA keeps her head and begins snoring.

JOF

Night and moonlight now prevail.
There snores -- I mean sleeps --
My wife so frail.
Jealous I am, as never before,
I hide myself behind this door.
Faithful is she
To her lover -- not me.
He soon comes a-stealing
To awaken her lusty feeling.
I shall now kill him dead
For cuckolding me in my bed.
There he comes in the moonlight,
His white legs shining bright.
Quiet as a mouse, here I'll lie,
Tell him not that he's about to die.

JOF hides himself. MIA immediately ends her snoring and sits up, looking to the left.

MIA

Look, there he comes in the night My
lover, my heart's delight.

She becomes silent and looks wide-eyed in front of her. The mood in the yard in front of the inn has, up to now, been rather lighthearted despite the heat.

Now a rapid change occurs. People who had been laughing and chattering fall silent. Their faces seem to pale under their sunbrowned skins, the children stop their games and stand with gaping mouths and frightened eyes.

JOF steps out in front of the curtain. His painted face bears an expression of horror. MIA has risen with MIKAEL in her arms. Some of the women in the yard have fallen on their knees, others hide their faces, many begin to mutter half-forgotten prayers.

All have turned their faces towards the white road. Now a shrill song is heard. It is frenzied, almost a scream. A crucified Christ sways above the hilltop.

The cross-bearers soon come into sight. They are Dominican monks, their hoods pulled down over their faces. More and more of them follow, carrying litters with heavy coffins or clutching holy relics, their hands stretched out spasmodically. The dust wells up around their black hoods; the censers sway and emit a thick, ashen smoke which smells of rancid herbs.

After the line of monks comes another procession. It is a column of men, boys, old men, women, girls, children. All of them have steel-edged scourges in their hands with which they whip themselves and each other, howling ecstatically. They twist in pain; their eyes bulge wildly; their lips are gnawed to shreds and dripping with foam. They have been seized by madness. They bite their own hands and arms, whip each other in violent, almost rhythmic outbursts. Throughout it all the shrill song howls from their bursting throats. Many sway and fall, lift themselves up again, support each other and help each other to intensify the scourging.

Now the procession pauses at the crossroads in front of the inn. The monks fall on their knees, hiding their faces with clenched hands, arms pressed tightly together. Their song never stops. The Christ figure on its timbered cross is raised above the heads of the crowd. It is not Christ triumphant, but the suffering Jesus with the sores, the blood, the hammered nails and the face in convulsive pain. The Son of God, nailed on the wood of the cross, suffering scorn and shame.

The penitents have now sunk down in the dirt of the road. They collapse where they stood like slaughtered cattle. Their screams rise with the song of the monks, through misty clouds of incense, towards the white fire of the sun.

A large square monk rises from his knees and reveals his face, which is red-brown from the sun. His eyes glitter; his voice is thick with impotent scorn.

MONK

God has sentenced us to punishment.
 We shall all perish in the black
 death. You, standing there like gaping
 cattle, you who sit there in your
 gluttoned complacency, do you know
 that this may be your last hour?
 Death stands right behind you. I can
 see how his crown gleams in the sun.
 His scythe flashes as he raises it
 above your heads. Which one of you
 shall he strike first? You there,
 who stand staring like a goat, will
 your mouth be twisted into the last
 unfinished gasp before nightfall?
 And you, woman, who bloom with life
 and self-satisfaction, will you pale
 and become extinguished before the
 morning dawns? You back there, with
 your swollen nose and stupid grin,
 do you have another year left to
 dirty the earth with your refuse?
 Do you know, you insensible fools,
 that you shall die today or tomorrow,
 or the next day, because all of you
 have been sentenced? Do you hear
 what I say? Do you hear the word?
 You have been sentenced, sentenced!

The MONK falls silent, looking around with a bitter face and a cold, scornful glance. Now, he clenches his hands, straddles the ground and turns his face upwards.

MONK

Lord have mercy on us in our
 humiliation! Don't turn your face
 from us in loathing and contempt,
 but be merciful to us for the sake
 of your son, Jesus Christ.

He makes the sign of the cross over the crowd and then begins a new song in a strong voice. The monks rise and join in the song. As if driven by some superhuman force, the penitents begin to whip themselves again, still wailing and moaning.

The procession continues. New members have joined the rear of the column; others who were unable to go on lie weeping in the dust of the road. JONS the squire drinks his beer.

JONS

This damned ranting about doom. Is that food for the minds of modern people? Do they really expect us to take them seriously?

The KNIGHT grins tiredly.

JONS

Yes, now you grin at me, my lord. But allow me to point out that I've either read, heard or experienced most of the tales which we people tell each other.

KNIGHT

(yawns)

Yes, yes.

JONS

Even the ghost stories about God the Father, the angels, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost -- all these I've accepted without too much emotion.

He leans down over the GIRL as she crouches at his feet and pats her on the head. The KNIGHT drinks his beer silently.

JONS

(contentedly)

My little stomach is my world, my head is my eternity, and my hands, two wonderful suns. My legs are time's damned pendulums, and my dirty feet are two splendid starting points for my philosophy. Everything is worth precisely as much as a belch, the only difference being that a belch is more satisfying.

The beer mug is empty. Sighing, JONS gets to his feet. The GIRL follows him like a shadow.

In the yard he meets a large man with a sooty face and a dark expression. He stops JONS with a roar.

JONS

What are you screaming about?

PLOG

I am Plog, the smith, and you are the squire Jons.

JONS

That's possible.

PLOG

Have you seen my wife?

JONS

No, I haven't. But if I had seen her and she looked like you, I'd quickly forget that I'd seen her.

PLOG

Well, in that case you haven't seen her.

JONS

Maybe she's run off.

PLOG

Do you know anything?

JONS

I know quite a lot, but not about your wife. Go to the inn. Maybe they can help you.

The smith sighs sadly and goes inside.

The inn is very small and full of people eating and drinking to forget their newly aroused fears of eternity. In the open fireplace a roasting pig turns on an iron spit. The sun shines outside the casement window, its sharp rays piercing the darkness of the room, which is thick with fumes and perspiration.

MERCHANT

Yes, it's true! The plague is spreading along the west coast. People are dying like flies. Usually business would be good at this time of year, but, damn it, I've still got my whole stock unsold.

WOMAN

They speak of the judgment day. And all these omens are terrible. Worms, chopped-off hands and other monstrosities began pouring out of an old woman, and down in the village another woman gave birth to a calf's head.

OLD MAN

The day of judgment. Imagine.

FARMER

It hasn't rained here for a month. We'll surely lose our crops.

MERCHANT

And people are acting crazy, I'd say. They flee the country and carry the plague with them wherever they go.

OLD MAN

The day of judgment. Just think, just think!

FARMER

If it's as they say, I suppose a person should look after his house and try to enjoy life as long as he can.

WOMAN

But there have been other things too, such things that can't even be spoken of.

(whispers)

Things that mustn't be named -- but the priests say that the woman carries it between her legs and that's why she must cleanse herself.

OLD MAN

Judgment day. And the Riders of the Apocalypse stand at the bend in the village road. I imagine they'll come on judgment night, at sundown.

WOMAN

There are many who have purged themselves with fire and died from it, but the priests say that it's better to die pure than to live for hell.

MERCHANT

This is the end, yes, it is. No one says it out loud, but all of us know that it's the end. And people are going mad from fear.

FARMER

So you're afraid too.

MERCHANT

Of course I'm afraid.

OLD MAN

The judgment day becomes night, and the angels descend and the graves open. It will be terrible to see.

They whisper in low tones and sit close to each other.

PLOG, the smith, shoves his way into a place next to JOF, who is still dressed in his costume. Opposite him sits RAVAL, leaning slightly forward, his face perspiring heavily. RAVAL rolls an armlet out on the table.

RAVAL

Do you want this armlet? You can have it cheap.

JOF

I can't afford it.

RAVAL

It's real silver.

JOF

It's nice. But it's surely too expensive for me.

PLOG

Excuse me, but has anyone here seen my wife?

JOF

Has she disappeared?

PLOG

They say she's run away.

JOF

Has she deserted you?

PLOG

With an actor.

JOF

An actor! If she's got such bad taste, then I think you should let her go.

PLOG

You're right. My first thought, of course, was to kill her.

JOF

Oh. But to murder her, that's a terrible thing to do.

PLOG

I'm also going to kill the actor.

JOF

The actor?

PLOG

Of course, the one she eloped with.

JOF

What has he done to deserve that?

PLOG

Are you stupid?

JOF

The actor! Now I understand. There are too many of them, so even if he hasn't done anything in particular you ought to kill him merely because he's an actor.

PLOG

You see, my wife has always been interested in the tricks of the theatre.

JOF

And that turned out to be her misfortune.

PLOG

Her misfortune, but not mine, because a person who's born unfortunate can hardly suffer from any further misfortune. Isn't that true?

Now RAVAL enters the discussion. He is slightly drunk and his voice is shrill and evil.

RAVAL

Listen, you! You sit there and lie to the smith.

JOF

I! A liar!

RAVAL

You're an actor too and it's probably your partner who's run off with Plog's old lady.

PLOG

Are you an actor too?

JOF

An actor! Me! I wouldn't quite call myself that!

RAVAL

We ought to kill you; it's only logical.

JOF

(laughs)

You're really funny.

RAVAL

How strange -- you've turned pale.
Have you anything on your conscience?

JOF

You're funny. Don't you think he's
funny?

(to Plog)

Oh, you don't.

RAVAL

Maybe we should mark you up a little
with a knife, like they do petty
scoundrels of your kind.

PLOG bangs his hands down on the table so that the dishes
jump. He gets up.

PLOG

(shouting)

What have you done with my wife?

The room becomes silent. JOF looks around, but there is no
exit, no way to escape. He puts his hands on the table.
Suddenly a knife flashes through the air and sinks into the
table top between his fingers.

JOF snatches away his hands and raises his head. He looks
half surprised, as if the truth had just become apparent to
him.

JOF

Do you want to hurt me? Why? Have I
provoked someone, or got in the way?
I'll leave right now and never come
back.

JOF looks from one face to another, but no one seems ready
to help him or come to his defense.

RAVAL

Get up so everyone can hear you.
Talk louder.

Trembling, JOF rises. He opens his mouth as if to say
something, but not a word comes out.

RAVAL

Stand on your head so that we can
see how good an actor you are.

JOF gets up on the table and stands on his head. A hand pushes
him forward so that he collapses on the floor. PLOG rises,
pulls him to his feet with one hand.

PLOG

(shouts)

What have you done with my wife?

PLOG beats him so furiously that JOF flies across the table. RAVAL leans over him.

RAVAL

Don't lie there moaning. Get up and dance.

JOF

I don't want to. I can't.

RAVAL

Show us how you imitate a bear.

JOF

I can't play a bear.

RAVAL

Let's see if you can't after all.

RAVAL prods JOF lightly with the knife point. JOF gets up with cold sweat on his cheeks and forehead, frightened half to death. He begins to jump and hop on top of the tables, swinging his arms and legs and making grotesque faces. Some laugh, but most of the people sit silently. JOF gasps as if his lungs were about to burst. He sinks to his knees, and someone pours beer over him.

RAVAL

Up again! Be a good bear.

JOF

I haven't done any harm. I haven't got the strength to play a bear any more.

At that moment the door opens and JONS enters. JOF sees his chance and steals out. RAVAL intends to follow him, but suddenly stops. JONS and RAVAL look at each other.

JONS

Do you remember what I was going to do to you if we met again?

RAVAL steps back without speaking.

JONS

I'm a man who keeps his word.

JONS raises his knife and cuts RAVAL from forehead to cheek. RAVAL staggers towards the wall.

The hot day has become night. Singing and howling can be heard from the inn.

In a hollow near the forest, the light still lingers. Hidden in the grass and the shrubbery, nightingales sing and their voices echo through the stillness.

The players' wagon stands in a small ravine, and not far away the horse grazes on the dry grass. MIA has sat down in front of the wagon with her son in her arms. They play together and laugh happily.

Now, a soft gleam of light strokes the hilltops, a last reflection from the red clouds over the sea.

Not far from the wagon, the KNIGHT sits crouched over his chess game. He lifts his head.

The evening light moves across the heavy wagon wheels, across the woman and the child. The KNIGHT gets up.

MIA sees him and smiles. She holds up her struggling son, as if to amuse the KNIGHT.

KNIGHT

What's his name?

MIA

Mikael.

KNIGHT

How old is he?

MIA

Oh, he'll soon be two.

KNIGHT

He's big for his age.

MIA

Do you think so? Yes, I guess he's rather big.

She puts the child down on the ground and half rises to shake out her red skirt. When she sits down again, the KNIGHT steps closer.

KNIGHT

You played some kind of show this afternoon.

MIA

Did you think it was bad?

KNIGHT

You are more beautiful now without your face painted, and this gown is more becoming.

MIA

You see, Jonas Skat has run off and left us, so we're in real trouble now.

KNIGHT

Is that your husband?

MIA

(laughs)

Jonas! The other man is my husband. His name is Jof.

KNIGHT

Oh, that one.

MIA

And now there's only him and me. We'll have to start doing tricks again and that's more trouble than it's worth.

KNIGHT

Do you do tricks also?

MIA

We certainly do. And Jof is a very skillful juggler.

KNIGHT

Is Mikael going to be an acrobat?

MIA

Jof wants him to be.

KNIGHT

But you don't.

MIA

I don't know.

(smiling)

Perhaps he'll become a knight.

KNIGHT

Let me assure you, that's no pleasure either.

MIA

No, you don't look so happy.

KNIGHT

No.

MIA

Are you tired?

KNIGHT

Yes.

MIA

Why?

KNIGHT

I have dull company.

MIA

Do you mean your squire?

KNIGHT

No, not him.

MIA

Who do you mean, then?

KNIGHT

Myself.

MIA

I understand.

KNIGHT

Do you, really?

MIA

Yes, I understand rather well. I have often wondered why people torture themselves as often as they can. Isn't that so?

She nods energetically and the KNIGHT smiles seriously. Now the shrieks and the noise from the inn become louder. Black figures flicker across the grass mound. Someone collapses, gets up and runs. It is JOF. MIA stretches out her arms and receives him. He holds his hands in front of his face, moaning like a child, and his body sways. He kneels. MIA holds him close to her and sprinkles him with small, anxious questions: What have you done? How are you? What is it? Does it hurt? What can I do? Have they been cruel to you? She runs for a rag, which she dips in water, and carefully bathes her husband's dirty, bloody face.

Eventually a rather sorrowful visage emerges. Blood runs from a bruise on his forehead and his nose, and a tooth has been loosened, but otherwise JOF seems unhurt.

JOF

Ouch, it hurts.

MIA

Why did you have to go there? And of course you drank.

MIA's anxiety has been replaced by a mild anger. She pats him a little harder than necessary.

JOF

Ouch! I didn't drink anything.

MIA

Then I suppose you were boasting about the angels and devils you consort with. People don't like someone who has too many ideas and fantasies.

JOF

I swear to you that I didn't say a word about angels.

MIA

You were, of course, busy singing and dancing. You can never stop being an actor. People also become angry at that, and you know it.

JOF doesn't answer but searches for the armllet. He holds it up in front of MIA with an injured expression.

JOF

Look what I bought for you.

MIA

You couldn't afford it.

JOF

(angry)

But I got it anyhow.

The armllet glitters faintly in the twilight. MIA now pulls it across her wrist. They look at it in silence, and their faces soften. They look at each other, touch each other's hands. JOF puts his head against MIA'S shoulder and sighs.

JOF

Oh, how they beat me.

MIA

Why didn't you beat them back?

JOF

I only become frightened and angry. I never get a chance to hit back. I can get angry, you know that. I roared like a lion.

MIA

Were they frightened?

JOF

No, they just laughed.

Their son MIKAEL crawls over to them. JOF lies down on the ground and pulls his son on top of him. MIA gets down on her hands and knees and playfully sniffs at MIKAEL.

MIA

Do you notice how good he smells?

JOF

And he is so compact to hold. You're a sturdy one. A real acrobat's body.

He lifts MIKAEL up and holds him by the legs. MIA looks up suddenly, remembering the knight's presence.

MIA

Yes, this is my husband, Jof.

JOF

Good evening.

KNIGHT

Good evening.

JOF becomes a little embarrassed and rises. All three of them look at one another silently.

KNIGHT

I have just told your wife that you have a splendid son. He'll bring great joy to you.

JOF

Yes, he's fine.

They become silent again.

JOF

Have we nothing to offer the knight, Mia?

KNIGHT

Thank you, I don't want anything.

MIA

(housewifely)

I picked a basket of wild strawberries this afternoon. And we have a drop of milk fresh from a cow ...

JOF

... that we were allowed to milk. So, if you would like to partake of this humble fare, it would be a great honor.

MIA

Please be seated and I'll bring the food.

They sit down. MIA disappears with MIKAEL.

KNIGHT

Where are you going next?

JOF

Up to the saints' feast at Elsinore.

KNIGHT

I wouldn't advise you to go there.

JOF

Why not, if I may ask?

KNIGHT

The plague has spread in that direction, following the coast line south. It's said that people are dying by the tens of thousands.

JOF

Really! Well, sometimes life is a little hard.

KNIGHT

May I suggest ...

(JOF looks at him,
surprised)

... that you follow me through the forest tonight and stay at my home if you like. Or go along the east coast. You'll probably be safer there.

MIA has returned with a bowl of wild strawberries and the milk, places it between them and gives each of them a spoon.

JOF

I wish you good appetite.

KNIGHT

I humbly thank you.

MIA

These are wild strawberries from the forest. I have never seen such large ones. They grow up there on the hillside. Notice how they smell!

She points with a spoon and smiles. The KNIGHT nods, as if he were pondering some profound thought. JOF eats heartily.

JOF

Your suggestion is good, but I must think it over.

MIA

It might be wise to have company going through the forest. It's said to be full of trolls and ghosts and bandits. That's what I've heard.

JOF

(staunchly)

Yes, I'd say that it's not a bad idea, but I have to think about it. Now that Skat has left, I am responsible for the troupe. After all, I have become director of the whole company.

MIA

(mimics)

After all, I have become director of the whole company.

JONS comes walking slowly down the hill, closely followed by the GIRL. MIA points with her spoon.

MIA

Do you want some strawberries?

JOF

This man saved my life. Sit down, my friend, and let us be together.

MIA

(stretches herself)

Oh, how nice this is.

KNIGHT

For a short while.

MIA

Nearly always. One day is like another. There is nothing strange about that. The summer, of course, is better than the winter, because in summer you don't have to be cold. But spring is best of all.

JOF

I have written a poem about the spring. Perhaps you'd like to hear it. I'll run and get my lyre.

He sprints towards the wagon.

MIA

Not now, Jof. Our guests may not be amused by your songs.

JONS

(politely)

By all means. I write little songs myself. For example, I know a very funny song about a wanton fish which I doubt that you've heard yet.

The KNIGHT looks at him.

JONS

You'll not get to hear it either. There are persons here who don't appreciate my art and I don't want to upset anyone. I'm a sensitive soul.

JOF has come out with his lyre, sits on a small, gaudy box and plucks at the instrument, humming quietly, searching for his melody. JONS yawns and lies down.

KNIGHT

People are troubled by so much.

MIA

It's always better when one is two. Have you no one of your own?

KNIGHT

Yes, I think I had someone.

MIA

And what is she doing now?

KNIGHT

I don't know.

MIA

You look so solemn. Was she your beloved?

KNIGHT

We were newly married and we played together. We laughed a great deal. I wrote songs to her eyes, to her nose, to her beautiful little ears. We went hunting together and at night we danced. The house was full of life ...

MIA

Do you want some more strawberries?

KNIGHT

(shakes his head)

Faith is a torment, did you know that? It is like loving someone who is out there in the darkness but never appears, no matter how loudly you call.

MIA

I don't understand what you mean.

KNIGHT

Everything I've said seems meaningless and unreal while I sit here with you and your husband. How unimportant it all becomes suddenly.

He takes the bowl of milk in his hand and drinks deeply from it several times. Then he carefully puts it down and looks up, smiling.

MIA

Now you don't look so solemn.

KNIGHT

I shall remember this moment. The silence, the twilight, the bowls of strawberries and milk, your faces in the evening light. Mikael sleeping, Jof with his lyre. I'll try to remember what we have talked about. I'll carry this memory between my hands as carefully as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk.

He turns his face away and looks out towards the sea and the colorless gray sky.

KNIGHT

And it will be an adequate sign --
it will be enough for me.

He rises, nods to the others and walks down towards the forest. JOF continues to play on his lyre. MIA stretches out on the grass.

The KNIGHT picks up his chess game and carries it towards the beach. It is quiet and deserted; the sea is still.

DEATH

I have been waiting for you.

KNIGHT

Pardon me. I was detained for a few moments.

(MORE)

KNIGHT (CONT'D)

Because I revealed my tactics to you, I'm in retreat. It's your move.

DEATH

Why do you look so satisfied?

KNIGHT

That's my secret.

DEATH

Of course. Now I take your knight.

KNIGHT

You did the right thing.

DEATH

Have you tricked me?

KNIGHT

Of course. You fell right in the trap. Check!

DEATH

What are you laughing at?

KNIGHT

Don't worry about my laughter; save your king instead.

DEATH

You're rather arrogant.

KNIGHT

Our game amuses me.

DEATH

It's your move. Hurry up. I'm a little pressed for time.

KNIGHT

I understand that you've a lot to do, but you can't get out of our game. It takes time.

DEATH is about to answer him but stops and leans over the board. The KNIGHT smiles.

DEATH

Are you going to escort the juggler and his wife through the forest? Those whose names are Jof and Mia and who have a small son?

KNIGHT

Why do you ask?

DEATH

Oh, no reason at all.

The KNIGHT suddenly stops smiling. DEATH looks at him scornfully.

Immediately after sundown, the little company gathers in the yard of the inn. There is the KNIGHT, JONS and the GIRL, JOF and MIA in their wagon. Their son, MIKAEL, is already asleep. JONAS SKAT is still missing.

JONS goes into the inn to get provisions for the night journey and to have a last mug of beer. The inn is now empty and quiet except for a few farmhands and maidens who are eating their evening meal in a corner. At one of the small windows sits a lonely, hunched-over fellow, with a jug of brandy in his hands. His expression is very sad. Once in a while he is shaken by a gigantic sob. It is PLOG, the smith, who sits there and whimpers.

JONS

God in heaven, isn't this Plog, the smith?

PLOG

Good evening.

JONS

Are you sitting here sniveling in loneliness?

PLOG

Yes, yes, look at the smith. He moans like a rabbit.

JONS

If I were in your boots, I'd be happy to get rid of a wife in such an easy way.

JONS pats the smith on the back, quenches his thirst with beer, and sits down by his side.

PLOG

Are you married?

JONS

I! A hundred times and more. I can't keep count of all my wives any longer. But it's often that way when you're a traveling man.

PLOG

I can assure you that one wife is worse than a hundred, or else I've had worse luck than any poor wretch

(MORE)

PLOG (CONT'D)

in this miserable world, which isn't impossible.

JONS

Yes, it's hell with women and hell without them. So, however you look at it, it's still best to kill them off while it's most amusing.

PLOG

Women's nagging, the shrieking of children and wet diapers, sharp nails and sharp words, blows and pokes, and the devil's aunt for a mother-in-law. And then, when one wants to sleep after a long day, there's a new song -- tears, whining and moans loud enough to wake the dead.

JONS nods delightedly. He has drunk deeply and talks with an old woman's voice.

JONS

Why don't you kiss me good night?

PLOG

(in the same way)

Why don't you sing a song for me?

JONS

Why don't you love me the way you did when we first met?

PLOG

Why don't you look at my new slip?

JONS

You only turn your back and snore.

PLOG

Oh hell!

JONS

Oh hell. And now she's gone. Rejoice!

PLOG

(furious)

I'll snip their noses with pliers, I'll bash in their chests with a small hammer, I'll tap their heads ever so lightly with a sledge.

PLOG begins to cry loudly and his whole body sways in an enormous attack of sorrow. JONS looks at him with interest.

JONS

Look how he howls again.

PLOG

Maybe I love her.

JONS

So, maybe you love her! Then, you poor misguided ham shank, I'll tell you that love is another word for lust, plus lust, plus lust and a damn lot of cheating, falseness, lies and all kinds of other fooling around.

PLOG

Yes, but it hurts anyway.

JONS

Of course. Love is the blackest of all plagues, and if one could die of it, there would be some pleasure in love. But you almost always get over it.

PLOG

No, no, not me.

JONS

Yes, you too. There are only a couple of poor wretches who die of love once in a while. Love is as contagious as a cold in the nose. It eats away at your strength, your independence, your morale, if you have any. If everything is imperfect in this imperfect world, love is most perfect in its perfect imperfection.

PLOG

You're happy, you with your oily words, and, besides, you believe your own drivel.

JONS

Believe! Who said that I believed it? But I love to give good advice. If you ask me for advice you'll get two pieces for the price of one, because after all I really am an educated man.

JONS gets up from the table and strokes his face with his hands. PLOG becomes very unhappy and grabs his belt.

PLOG

Listen, Jons. May I go with you through the forest? I'm so lonely and don't want to go home because everyone will laugh at me.

JONS

Only if you don't whimper all the time, because in that case we'll all have to avoid you.

PLOG gets up and embraces JONS. Slightly drunk, the two new friends walk towards the door.

When they come out in the yard, JOF immediately catches sight of them, becomes angry and yells a warning to JONS.

JOF

Jons! Watch out. That one wants to fight all the time. He's not quite sane.

JONS

Yes, but now he's just sniveling.

PLOG steps up to JOF, who blanches with fear. PLOG offers his hand.

PLOG

I'm really sorry if I hurt you. But I have such a hell of a temper, you know. Shake hands.

JOF gingerly proffers a frightened hand and gets it thoroughly shaken and squeezed. While JOF tries to straighten out his fingers, PLOG is seized by great good will and opens his arms.

PLOG

Come in my arms, little brother.

JOF

Thank you, thank you, perhaps later. But now we're really in a hurry.

JOF climbs up on the wagon seat quickly and clucks at the horse.

The small company is on its way towards the forest and the night.

It is dark in the forest.

First comes the KNIGHT on his large horse. Then JOF and MIA follow, sitting close to each other in the juggler's wagon. MIA holds her son in her arms. JONS follows them with his heavily laden horse. He has the smith in tow.

The GIRL sits on top of the load on the horse's back, hunched over as if asleep.

The footsteps, the horses' heavy tramp on the soft path, the human breathing -- yet it is quiet.

Then the moon sails out of the clouds. The forest suddenly becomes alive with the night's unreality. The dazzling light pours through the thick foliage of the beech trees, a moving, quivering world of light and shadow.

The wanderers stop. Their eyes are dark with anxiety and foreboding. Their faces are pale and unreal in the floating light. It is very quiet.

PLOG

Now the moon has come out of the clouds.

JONS

That's good. Now we can see the road better.

MIA

I don't like the moon tonight.

JOF

The trees stand so still.

JONS

That's because there's no wind.

PLOG

I guess he means that they stand very still.

JOF

It's completely quiet.

JONS

If one could hear a fox at least.

JOF

Or an owl.

JONS

Or a human voice besides one's own.

GIRL

They say it's dangerous to remain standing in moonlight.

Suddenly, out of the silence and the dim light falling across the forest road, a ghostlike cart emerges. It is the WITCH being taken to the place where she will be burned. Next to her eight soldiers shuffle along tiredly, carrying their lances on their backs.

The girl sits in the cart, bound with iron chains around her throat and arms. She stares fixedly into the moonlight.

A black figure sits next to her, a monk with his hood pulled down over his head.

JONS

Where are you going?

SOLDIER

To the place of execution.

JONS

Yes, now I can see. It's the girl who has done it with the Black One. The witch?

The SOLDIER nods sourly. Hesitantly, the travelers follow. The KNIGHT guides his horse over to the side of the cart. The WITCH seems to be half-conscious, but her eyes are wide open.

KNIGHT

I see that they have hurt your hands.

The WITCH'S pale, childish face turns towards the KNIGHT and she shakes her head.

KNIGHT

I have a potion that will stop your pain.

She shakes her head again.

JONS

Why do you burn her at this time of night? People have so few diversions these days.

SOLDIER

Saints preserve us, be quiet! It's said that she brings the Devil with her wherever she goes.

JONS

You are eight brave men, then.

SOLDIER

Well, we've been paid. And this is a volunteer job.

The SOLDIER speaks in whispers while glancing anxiously at the WITCH.

KNIGHT

(to the WITCH)

What's your name?

TYAN

My name is Tyan, my lord.

KNIGHT

How old are you?

TYAN

Fourteen, my lord.

KNIGHT

And is it true that you have been in league with the Devil?

TYAN nods quietly and looks away. Now they arrive at the parish border. At the foot of the nearby hills lies a crossroads. The pyre has already been stacked in the center of the forest clearing. The travelers remain there, hesitant and curious.

The soldiers have tied up the cart horse and bring out two long wooden beams. They nail rungs across the beams so that it looks like a ladder. TYAN will be bound to this like an eelskin stretched out to dry.

The sound of the hammering echoes through the forest. The KNIGHT has dismounted and walks closer to the cart. Again he tries to catch TYAN'S eyes, touches her very lightly as if to waken her. Slowly she turns her face towards him.

KNIGHT

They say that you have been in league with the Devil.

TYAN

Why do you ask?

KNIGHT

Not out of curiosity, but for very personal reasons. I too want to meet him.

TYAN

Why?

KNIGHT

I want to ask him about God. He, if anyone, must know.

TYAN

You can see him anytime.

KNIGHT

How?

TYAN

You must do as I tell you.

The KNIGHT grips the wooden rail of the cart so tightly that his knuckles whiten. TYAN leans forward and joins her gaze with his.

TYAN
Look into my eyes.

The KNIGHT meets her gaze. They stare at each other for a long time.

TYAN
What do you see? Do you see him?

KNIGHT
I see fear in your eyes, an empty,
numb fear. But nothing else.

He falls silent. The soldiers work at the stakes; their hammering echoes in the forest.

TYAN
No one, nothing, no one?

KNIGHT
(shakes his head)
No.

TYAN
Can't you see him behind your back?

KNIGHT
(looks around)
No, there is no one there.

TYAN
But he is with me everywhere. I only
have to stretch out my hand and I
can feel his hand. He is with me now
too. The fire won't hurt me. He will
protect me from everything evil.

KNIGHT
Has he told you this?

TYAN
I know it.

KNIGHT
Has he said it?

TYAN
I know it, I know it. You must see
him somewhere, you must. The priests
had no difficulty seeing him, nor
did the soldiers. They are so afraid
of him that they don't even dare
touch me.

The sounds of the hammers stops. The soldiers stand like black shadows rooted in the moss. They fumble with the chains and pull at the neck iron. TYAN moans weakly, as if she were far away.

KNIGHT

Why have you crushed her hands?

SOLDIER

(surly)

We didn't do it.

KNIGHT

Who did?

SOLDIER

Ask the monk.

The soldiers pull the iron and the chains. TYAN'S shaven head sways, gleaming in the moonlight. Her blackened mouth opens as if to scream, but no sound emerges. They take her down from the cart and lead her towards the ladder and the stake. The KNIGHT turns to the MONK, who remains seated in the cart.

KNIGHT

What have you done with the child?

DEATH turns around and looks at him.

DEATH

Don't you ever stop asking questions?

KNIGHT

No, I'll never stop.

The soldiers chain TYAN to the rungs of the ladder. She submits resignedly, moans weakly like an animal and tries to ease her body into position.

When they have fastened her, they walk over to light the pyre. The KNIGHT steps up and leans over her.

JONS

For a moment I thought of killing the soldiers, but it would do no good. She's nearly dead already.

One of the soldiers approaches. Thick smoke wells down from the pyre and sweeps over the quiet shadows near the crossroads and the hill.

SOLDIER

I've told you to be careful. Don't go too close to her.

The KNIGHT doesn't heed this warning. He cups his hand, fills it with water from the skin and gives it to TYAN. Then he gives her a potion.

KNIGHT

Take this and it will stop the pain.

Smoke billows down over them and they begin to cough. The soldiers step forward and raise the ladder against a nearby fir tree. TYAN hangs there motionlessly, her eyes wide open.

The KNIGHT straightens up and stands immobile. JONS is behind him, his voice nearly choked with rage.

JONS

What does she see? Can you tell me?

KNIGHT

(shakes his head)

She feels no more pain.

JONS

You don't answer my question. Who watches over that child? Is it the angels, or God, or the Devil, or only the emptiness? Emptiness, my lord!

KNIGHT

This cannot be.

JONS

Look at her eyes, my lord. Her poor brain has just made a discovery. Emptiness under the moon.

KNIGHT

No.

JONS

We stand powerless, our arms hanging at our sides, because we see what she sees, and our terror and hers are the same.

(an outburst)

That poor little child. I can't stand it, I can't stand it ...

His voice sticks in his throat and he suddenly walks away. The KNIGHT mounts his horse. The travelers depart from the crossroads. TYAN finally closes her eyes.

The forest is now very dark. The road winds between the trees. The wagon squeaks and rattles over stones and roots. A bird suddenly shrieks.

JOF lifts his head and wakes up. He has been asleep with his arms around MIA's shoulders. The KNIGHT is sharply silhouetted against the tree trunks.

His silence makes him seem almost unreal. JONS and PLOG are slightly drunk and support each other. Suddenly PLOG has to sit down. He puts his hands over his face and howls piteously.

PLOG

Oh, now it came over me again!

JONS

Don't scream. What came over you?

PLOG

My wife, damn it. She is so beautiful. She is so beautiful that she can't be described without the accompaniment of a lyre.

JONS

Now it starts again.

PLOG

Her smile is like brandy. Her eyes like blackberries ...

PLOG searches for beautiful words. He gestures gropingly with his large hands.

JONS

(sighs)

Get up, you tear-drenched pig. We'll lose the others.

PLOG

Yes, of course, of course. Her nose is like a little pink potato; her behind is like a juicy pear -- yes, the whole woman is like a strawberry patch. I can see her in front of me, with arms like wonderful cucumbers.

JONS

Saints almighty, stop! You're a very bad poet, despite the fact that you're drunk. And your vegetable garden bores me.

They walk across an open meadow. Here it is a little brighter and the moon shimmers behind a thin sky. Suddenly PLOG points a large finger towards the edge of the forest.

PLOG

Look there.

JONS

Do you see something?

PLOG

There, over there!

JONS

I don't see anything.

PLOG

Hang on to something, my friends.
The hour is near! Who is that at the
edge of the forest if not my own
dearly beloved, with actor attached?

The two lovers discover PLOG and it's too late. They cannot retreat. SKAT immediately takes to his heels. PLOG chases him, swinging his sledge and bellowing like a wild boar.

For a few confusing moments the two rivals stumble among the stones and bushes in the gray gloom of the forest. The duel begins to look senseless, because both of them are equally frightened.

The travelers silently observe this confused performance. LISA screams once in a while, more out of duty than out of impulse.

SKAT

(panting)

You miserable stubbleheaded bastard
of seven scurvy bitches, if I were
in your lousy rags I would be stricken
with such eternal shame about my
breath, my voice, my arms and legs --
in short, about my whole body --that
I would immediately rid nature of my
own embarrassing self.

PLOG

(angry)

Watch out, you perfumed slob, that I
don't fart on you and immediately
blow you down to the actor's own red-
hot hell, where you can sit and recite
monologues to each other until the
dust comes out of the Devil's ears.

Then LISA throws herself around her husband's neck.

LISA

Forgive me, dear little husband,
I'll never do it again. I am so sorry
and you can't imagine how terribly
that man over there betrayed me.

PLOG

I'll kill him anyway.

LISA

Yes, do that, just kill him. He isn't even a human being.

JONS

Hell, he's an actor.

LISA

He is only a false beard, false teeth, false smiles, rehearsed lines, and he's as empty as a jug. Just kill him.

LISA sobs with excitement and sorrow. PLOG looks around, a little confused. SKAT uses this opportunity. He pulls out a dagger and places the point against his breast.

SKAT

She's right. Just kill me. If you thought that I was going to apologize for being what I am, you are mistaken.

LISA

Look how sickening he is. How he makes a fool of himself, how he puts on an act. Dear Plog, kill him.

SKAT

My friends, you have only to push, and my unreality will soon be transformed into a new, solid reality. An absolutely tangible corpse.

LISA

Do something then. Kill him.

PLOG

(embarrassed)

He has to fight me, otherwise I can't kill him.

SKAT

Your life's thread now hangs by a very ragged shred. Idiot, your day is short.

PLOG

You'll have to irritate me a little more to get me as angry as before.

SKAT looks at the travelers with a pained expression and then lifts his eyes towards the night sky.

SKAT

I forgive all of you. Pray for me
sometimes.

SKAT sinks the dagger into his breast and slowly falls to the ground. The travelers stand confused. PLOG rushes forward and begins to pull at SKAT'S hands.

PLOG

Oh dear, dear, I didn't mean it that way! Look, there's no life left in him. I was beginning to like him, and in my opinion Lisa was much too spiteful.

JOF leans over his colleague.

JOF

He's dead, totally, enormously dead. In fact, I've never seen such a dead actor.

LISA

Come on, let's go. This is nothing to mourn over. He has only himself to blame.

PLOG

And I have to be married to her.

JONS

We must go on.

SKAT lies in the grass and keeps the dagger pressed tightly to his breast. The travelers depart and soon they have disappeared into the dark forest on the other side of the meadow. When SKAT is sure that no one can see him, he sits up and lifts the dagger from his breast. It is a stage dagger with a blade that pushes into the handle. SKAT laughs to himself.

SKAT

Now that was a good scene. I'm really a good actor. After all, why shouldn't I be a little pleased with myself? But where shall I go? I'll wait until it becomes light and then I'll find the easiest way out of the forest. I'll climb up a tree for the time being so that no bears, wolves or ghosts can get at me.

He soon finds a likely tree and climbs up into its thick foliage. He sits down as comfortably as possible and reaches for his food pouch.

SKAT

(yawns)

Tomorrow I'll find Jof and Mia and
then we'll go to the saints' feast
in Elsinore. We'll make lots of money
there.

(yawns)

Now, I'll sing a little song to
myself:

(sings)

I am a little bird
Who sings whate'er he will,
And when I am in danger
I fling out a pissing trill
As in the carnal thrill.

(speaks)

It's boring to be alone in the forest
tonight.

(sings)

The terrible night doesn't frighten
me ...

He interrupts himself and listens. The sound of industrious
sawing is heard through the silence.

SKAT

Workmen in the forest. Oh, well!

(sings)

The terrible night doesn't frighten
me ...

(speaks)

Hey, what the devil ... it's my tree
they're cutting down.

He peers through the foliage. Below him stands a dark figure
diligently sawing away at the base of the tree. SKAT becomes
frightened and angry.

SKAT

Hey, you! Do you hear me, you tricky
bastard? What are you doing with my
tree?

The sawing continues without a pause. SKAT becomes more
frightened.

SKAT

Can't you at least answer me?
Politeness costs so little. Who are
you?

DEATH straightens his back and squints up at him. SKAT cries
out in terror.

DEATH

I'm sawing down your tree because
your time is up.

SKAT

It won't do. I haven't got time.

DEATH

So you haven't got time.

SKAT

No, I have my performance.

DEATH

Then it's canceled because of death.

SKAT

My contract.

DEATH

Your contract is terminated.

SKAT

My children, my family.

DEATH

Shame on you, Skat!

SKAT

Yes, I'm ashamed.

DEATH begins to saw again. The tree creaks.

SKAT

Isn't there any way to get off? Aren't there any special rules for actors?

DEATH

No, not in this case.

SKAT

No loopholes, no exceptions?

DEATH saws.

SKAT

Perhaps you'll take a bribe.

DEATH saws.

SKAT

Help!

DEATH saws.

SKAT

Help! Help!

The tree falls. The forest becomes silent again.

Night and then dawn.

The travelers have come to a sort of clearing and have collapsed on the moss. They lie quietly and listen to their own breathing, their heartbeats, and the wind in the tree tops. Here the forest is wild and impenetrable. Huge boulders stick up out of the ground like the heads of black giants. A fallen tree lies like a mighty barrier between light and shadow.

MIA, JOF and their child have sat down apart from the others. They look at the light of the moon, which is no longer full and dead but mysterious and unstable. The KNIGHT sits bent over his chess game. LISA cries quietly behind PLOG'S back. JONS lies on the ground and looks up at the heavens.

JONS

Soon dawn will come, but the heat continues to hang over us like a smothering blanket.

LISA

I'm so frightened.

PLOG

We feel that something is going to happen to us, but we don't know what.

JONS

Maybe it's the day of judgment.

PLOG

The day of judgment ...

Now, something moves behind the fallen tree. There is a rustling sound and a moaning cry that seems to come from a wounded animal. Everyone listens intently, all faces turned towards the sound. A voice comes out of the darkness.

RAVAL

Do you have some water?

RAVAL'S perspiring face soon becomes visible. He disappears in the darkness, but his voice is heard again.

RAVAL

Can't you give me a little water?

(pause)

I have the plague.

JONS

Don't come here. If you do I'll slit your throat. Keep to the other side of the tree.

RAVAL

I'm afraid of death.

No one answers. There is complete silence. RAVAL gasps heavily for air. The dry leaves rustle with his movements.

RAVAL

I don't want to die! I don't want to!

No one answers. RAVAL'S face appears suddenly at the base of the tree. His eyes bulge wildly and his mouth is ringed with foam.

RAVAL

Can't you have pity on me? Help me!
At least talk to me.

No one answers. The trees sigh. RAVAL begins to cry.

RAVAL

I am going to die. I. I. I! What will happen to me! Can no one console me? Haven't you any compassion? Can't you see that I ...

His words are choked off by a gurgling sound. He disappears in the darkness behind the fallen tree. It becomes quiet for a few moments.

RAVAL

(whispers)

Can't anyone ... only a little water.

Suddenly the GIRL gets up with a quick movement, snatches JONS'S water bag and runs a few steps. JONS grabs her and holds her fast.

JONS

It's no use. It's no use. I know that it's no use. It's meaningless. It's totally meaningless. I tell you that it's meaningless. Can't you hear that I'm consoling you?

RAVAL

Help me, help me!

No one answers, no one moves. RAVAL'S sobs are dry and convulsive, like a frightened child's. His sudden scream is cut off in the middle. Then it becomes quiet.

The GIRL sinks down and hides her face in her hands. JONS places his hand on her shoulder.

The KNIGHT is no longer alone. DEATH has come to him and he raises his hand.

DEATH

Shall we play our game to the end?

KNIGHT

Your move!

DEATH raises his hand and strikes the KNIGHT'S queen. Antonius Block looks at DEATH.

DEATH

Now I take your queen.

KNIGHT

I didn't notice that.

The KNIGHT leans over the game. The moonlight moves over the chess pieces, which seem to have a life of their own.

JOF has dozed off for a few moments, but suddenly he awakens. Then he sees the KNIGHT and DEATH together. He becomes very frightened and awakens MIA.

JOF

Mia!

MIA

Yes, what is it?

JOF

I see something terrible. Something I almost can't talk about.

MIA

What do you see?

JOF

The knight is sitting over there playing chess.

MIA

Yes, I can see that too and I don't think it's so terrible.

JOF

But do you see who he's playing with?

MIA

He is alone. You mustn't frighten me this way.

JOF

No, no, he isn't alone.

MIA

Who is it, then?

JOF

Death. He is sitting there playing chess with Death himself.

MIA

You mustn't say that.

JOF

We must try to escape.

MIA

One can't do that.

JOF

We must try. They are so occupied with their game that if we move very quietly, they won't notice us.

JOF gets up carefully and disappears into the darkness behind the trees. MIA remains standing, as if paralyzed by fear. She stares fixedly at the KNIGHT and the chess game. She holds her son in her arms. Now JOF returns.

JOF

I have harnessed the horse. The wagon is standing near the big tree. You go first and I'll follow you with the packs. See that Mikael doesn't wake up.

MIA does what JOF has told her. At the same moment, the KNIGHT looks up from his game.

DEATH

It is your move, Antonius Block.

The KNIGHT remains silent. He sees MIA go through the moonlight towards the wagon. JOF bends down to pick up the pack and follows at a distance.

DEATH

Have you lost interest in our game?

The KNIGHT'S eyes become alarmed. DEATH looks at him intently.

KNIGHT

Lost interest? On the contrary.

DEATH

You seem anxious. Are you hiding anything?

KNIGHT

Nothing escapes you -- or does it?

DEATH

Nothing escapes me. No one escapes from me.

KNIGHT

It's true that I'm worried.

He pretends to be clumsy and knocks the chess pieces over with the hem of his coat. He looks up at DEATH.

KNIGHT

I've forgotten how the pieces stood.

DEATH

(laughs contentedly)

But I have not forgotten. You can't get away that easily.

DEATH leans over the board and rearranges the pieces. The KNIGHT looks past him towards the road. MIA has just climbed up on the wagon. JOF takes the horse by the bridle and leads it down the road. DEATH notices nothing; he is completely occupied with reconstructing the game.

DEATH

Now I see something interesting.

KNIGHT

What do you see?

DEATH

You are mated on the next move, Antonius Block.

KNIGHT

That's true.

DEATH

Did you enjoy your reprieve?

KNIGHT

Yes, I did.

DEATH

I'm happy to hear that. Now I'll be leaving you. When we meet again, you and your companions' time will be up.

KNIGHT

And you will divulge your secrets.

DEATH

I have no secrets.

KNIGHT

So you know nothing.

DEATH

I have nothing to tell.

The KNIGHT wants to answer, but DEATH is already gone.

A murmur is heard in the tree tops. Dawn comes, a flickering light without life, making the forest seem threatening and evil. JOF drives over the twisting road. MIA sits beside him.

MIA

What a strange light.

JOF

I guess it's the thunderstorm which comes with dawn.

MIA

No, it's something else. Something terrible. Do you hear the roar in the forest?

JOF

It's probably rain.

MIA

No, it isn't rain. He has seen us and he's following us. He has overtaken us; he's coming towards us.

JOF

Not yet, Mia. In any case, not yet.

MIA

I'm so afraid. I'm so afraid.

The wagon rattles over roots and stones; it sways and creaks. Now the horse stops with his ears flat against his head. The forest sighs and stirs ponderously.

JOF

Get into the wagon, Mia. Crawl in quickly. We'll lie down, Mia, with Mikael between us.

They crawl into the wagon and crouch around the sleeping child.

JOF

It is the Angel of Death that's passing over us, Mia. It's the Angel of Death. The Angel of Death, and he's very big.

MIA

Do you feel how cold it is? I'm freezing. I'm terribly cold.

She shivers as if she had a fever. They pull the blankets over them and lie closely together. The wagon canvas flutters and beats in the wind.

The roar outside is like a giant bellowing.

The castle is silhouetted like a black boulder against the heavy dawn. Now the storm moves there, throwing itself powerfully against walls and abutments. The sky darkens; it is almost like night.

Antonius Block has brought his companions with him to the castle. But it seems deserted. They walk from room to room. There is only emptiness and quiet echoes. Outside, the rain is heard roaring noisily.

Suddenly the KNIGHT stands face to face with his wife. They look at each other quietly.

KARIN

I heard from people who came from the crusade that you were on your way home. I've been waiting for you here. All the others have fled from the plague.

The KNIGHT is silent. He looks at her.

KARIN

Don't you recognize me any more?

The KNIGHT nods, silent.

KARIN

You also have changed.

She walks closer and looks searchingly into his face. The smile lingers in her eyes and she touches his hand lightly.

KARIN

Now I can see that it's you. Somewhere in your eyes, somewhere in your face, but hidden and frightened, is that boy who went away so many years ago.

KNIGHT

It's over now and I'm a little tired.

KARIN

I see that you're tired.

KNIGHT

Over there stand my friends.

KARIN

Ask them in. They will break the fast with us.

They all sit down at the table in the room, which is lit by torches on the walls. Silently they eat the hard bread and the salt-darkened meat.

KARIN sits at the head of the table and reads aloud from a thick book.

KARIN

"And when the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stood before God; and to them were given seven trumpets. And another ..."

Three mighty knocks sound on the large portal. KARIN interrupts her reading and looks up from the book. JONS rises quickly and goes to open the door.

KARIN

"The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and the third part of the trees was burnt up and all the green grass was burnt up."

Now the rain becomes quiet. There is suddenly an immense, frightening silence in the large, murky room where the burning torches throw uneasy shadows over the ceiling and the walls. Everyone listens tensely to the stillness.

KARIN

"And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and a third part of the sea became blood ..."

Steps are heard on the stairs. JONS returns and sits down silently at his place but does not continue to eat.

KNIGHT

Was someone there?

JONS

No, my lord. I saw no one.

KARIN lifts her head for a moment but once again leans over the large book.

KARIN

"And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a torch, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood ..."

They all lift their heads, and when they see who is coming towards them through the twilight of the large room, they rise from the table and stand close together.

KNIGHT

Good morning, noble lord.

KARIN

I am Karin, the knight's wife, and welcome you courteously to my house.

PLOG

I am a smith by profession and rather good at my trade, if I say so myself. My wife Lisa -- curtsy for the great lord, Lisa. She's a little difficult to handle once in a while and we had a little spat, so to speak, but no worse than most people.

The KNIGHT hides his face in his hands.

KNIGHT

From our darkness, we call out to Thee, Lord. Have mercy on us because we are small and frightened and ignorant.

JONS

(bitterly)

In the darkness where You are supposed to be, where all of us probably are.... In the darkness You will find no one to listen to Your cries or be touched by Your sufferings. Wash Your tears and mirror Yourself in Your indifference.

KNIGHT

God, You who are somewhere, who must be somewhere, have mercy upon us.

JONS

I could have given you an herb to purge you of your worries about eternity. Now it seems to be too late. But in any case, feel the immense triumph of this last minute when you can still roll your eyes and move your toes.

KARIN

Quiet, quiet.

JONS

I shall be silent, but under protest.

GIRL
(on her knees)
It is the end.

JOF and MIA sit close together and listen to the rain tapping lightly on the wagon canvas, a sound which diminishes until finally there are only single drops.

They crawl out of their hiding place. The wagon stands on a height above a slope, protected by an enormous tree. They look across ridges, forests, the wide plains, and the sea, which glistens in the sunlight breaking through the clouds.

JOF stretches his arms and legs. MIA dries the wagon seat and sits down next to her husband. MIKAEL crawls between JOF'S knees.

A lone bird tests its voice after the storm. The trees and bushes drip. From the sea comes a strong and fragrant wind.

JOF points to the dark, retreating sky where summer lightning glitters like silver needles over the horizon.

JOF
I see them, Mia! I see them! Over there against the dark, stormy sky. They are all there. The smith and Lisa and the knight and Raval and Jons and Skat. And Death, the severe master, invites them to dance. He tells them to hold each other's hands and then they must tread the dance in a long row. And first goes the master with his scythe and hourglass, but Skat dangles at the end with his lyre. They dance away from the dawn and it's a solemn dance towards the dark lands, while the rain washes their faces and cleans the salt of the tears from their cheeks.

He is silent. He lowers his hand. His son, MIKAEL, has listened to his words. Now, he crawls up to MIA and sits down in her lap.

MIA
(smiling)
You with your visions and dreams.

THE END