

Messenger's Respite

Yes, lost. He finally admitted it. He looked around. He recognized nothing. He saw no one. He cringed beneath the weather, which suddenly grew chill. In the distance the mountain town disappeared into a dark cloud. Or else it was not the town at all, but only a mountain like all the others, thrust equally high by the Earth, but supporting no honeycomb of human life, no bustling commerce, no circulatory system of paved and unpaved roads reaching outposts more desolate at every step.

Such, anyway, was the law of this landscape, and the messenger had obeyed that law, arriving at last to a spot so remote as to confound him completely. He considered abandoning his task as a result. The meadows and valleys took on a placid luster in that frame of mind. Perhaps he could disappear forever into the thick woods ahead, befriend magical ravens and tree sprites, meet the compassionate wife appearing at regular intervals in his dreams as he slept fitfully beside the empty bunks of the other messengers, whose period of work was his rest.

No, that was only the panic speaking. It arose from unknown depths, carrying cryptic banners of war and assailing his senses. He need only shake his head violently once or twice to restore them. Then the land regained a semblance of truth, as he knew it. The birds above were magical only insofar as they knew he was lost, and could potentially carry that news to the kingdom, where the king wanly drew up the orders to behead him should he ever return.

"He'll read my message first," the messenger comforted himself, imagining on the worn parchment in his hot fist some content compelling enough either to discourage the king's initiative against him as a rash thought, rightfully conceived in light of the crucial nature of the news delivered, but no longer binding, again in light of the news; or else, the crucial news would momentarily distract the king, which outcome was enough to let the messenger slip quietly into a resumed anonymity among his fellows, the entirety of whom wore the same goldenrod and red uniform in the same shabby condition with the same failing arches in the same threadbare shoes.

Never did the messenger envision the news as anything but crucial. Nor did he question his poor treatment as its courier as any sign of decline in the kingdom. These thoughts, if followed forward by the messenger, may likely have liberated him. They were

possibly the keys, residing unfathomably in his obedient mind, to the materialization of not only those small fantasies he harbored for a new life as a man of the woods, but also a grander outcome, which would not unfold itself easily. The messenger tasted its summons in the cold, unfamiliar wind. He leaned forward as if to fly on its subtle currents. He stretched his arms wide and lifted onto his toes.

It was no use. The moment of indulgence passed and the messenger returned his attention to his orders, emphasizing their priority by tapping the rolled message with one hand against the palm of the other. In this manner, he slipped first into, then again out of, undivided fidelity to what he was supposed to be doing--namely, delivering the message. He wanted to deliver it, but somehow he couldn't. He wanted to be on the right track, but his feet had misled him. His mind had deserted him. His heart had dug a deep grave for him. His life had passed judgment.

Deeply troubled, the messenger dropped onto the hard earth and sighed. He watched the setting sun pull its final rays from the horizon, as if depriving him especially. He sat a long time without moving and was unable to think. Darkness enveloped him, and eventually revealed stars, which seemed to the messenger as strangely distant as his thoughts. At length, he lay on his back and gazed at the heavens with a sense of silent wonder about what he once was as a messenger for the king and what he once wasn't as a messenger for the king. The message explained all of this. When the messenger unrolled it, he could not help laughing over the elaborate words.