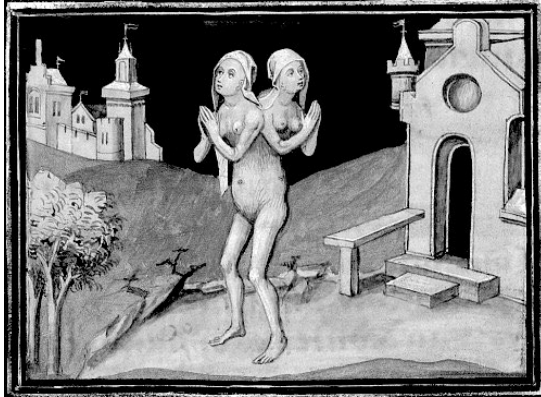


Plague Story

Seraphim was in T—., a walled city in the Maritime Republic of Venice, a land we would know



as Italy and a land Seraphim would know as the Reformed Papal States. The year was 1343 and the plague was ravaging the land with a death rate the world would not see again for one thousand years. Seraphim sat on one of the larger buildings in town

with a flat and sturdy roof. It was more sober than the belfry of a cathedral and more circumspect a choice than a magisterial building where a sentry might be making rounds at night.

From such a high vantage point, Seraphim could see the small copse outside the city walls in which they came into this world. The tiny red globes hanging from the tree branches must have been apples, now almost impossible to see through the approaching dusk that blurred the rough grasses extending from the copse to the city gate into one large mass.

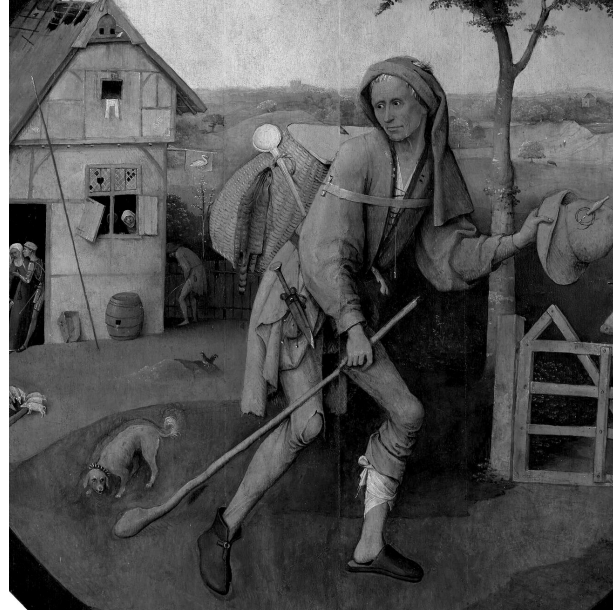
The plague (also known as the Black Death or the Great Mortality) was special insofar as it worked through the body with a remarkable swiftness—death often struck only two days after contraction, like a bullet. Seraphim was frightened. They were immunized, but had never gone this far into the past before where there were no guarantees against death. They read the literature, like the pamphlets given by the agency and the one popular history book they could afford on their own, but myth still surrounded the facts. Did bodies truly travel through the streets stacked on carts? Was death always on the mind?



Did the Grim Reaper or some similar figure really appear on the periphery of the city before the plague struck? Was the plague a manifestation of evil? No one could answer these questions.

By morning, they were fluent in Venetian. Pills provided by their agency aided their learning while making short work of the biological drives—sleeping, eating, defecating, and the like—but the pills also made the body shaky and the heart melancholic and unpredictable. The soul urged to rest, but the chemicals said it was not necessary. Like technology in peasant hands, the effects of the pills on the body were not fully known, and Seraphim suspected their low-wage body was the first field test for some medications.

Seraphim was a detective from the future, sent back in time to solve heinous crimes of murder. Whoever had contacted them was at the other edge of T—. Seraphim pictured a nice, big estate offset from the rest of the city with a large yard, a shoddy medieval fence crafted from sticks and twine, maybe a few goats with milk safe from the plague. They scurried down the side of the building to the winding street below. Their clothing was modeled after *The Wayfarer* by Hieronymus Bosch. It wasn't place or period accurate, but through years of experience



Seraphim learned people cared shockingly little about such things. Each step taken kicked up dust from empty roads.

In Seraphim's time, the roads were canals that wound around the tops of the taller buildings and church spires, whereas the lower buildings and huts were swallowed by water altogether. How forgotten were the shacks and stands, the little ones selling textiles, spices, and food like cured meats, onions, and garlic.

Seraphim happily came upon a shop just like that as they turned the corner. A good sign!

There was no shopkeeper to guard the salami hanging temptingly from waxed rope, twisting with the breeze. It would be so nice to take a thick slice of that salami, pair it with some crusty bread and some cheese tended from a friendly cow—it had been so long since Seraphim had a snack like that. If only these poor, suffering folk knew how lucky they were to have such luxuries in an otherwise miserable time. But, as Seraphim leant in to chomp the salami right from the rope like some



carnival game, they saw the meat's backside was a forest of mold: black, green, white, and soft like a pillow. Had they not opened their eyes, the turned flesh would be sliding down their gullet as they made their merry way through the city. The pills must have been clouding their judgment.

Such an unsanitary and conspicuous thing done in a public square would be grounds for dismissal or worse, not to mention the unstudied effects of 14th century pig on 35th century stomach—the plague doctors would think the disease was spreading in strange new directions. Stumbling away, Seraphim now saw the onions were soft like children's skulls, the garlic growing tendrils to grow from food back into plant. They smoothed their clothing, looking to see if anyone was around to see such a strange reaction. But no, the streets were still empty and all was still.

A younger, stupider Seraphim would have checked to see if it was a Sunday or a feast day, but they now knew the danger of optimistic or upbeat assumptions in their line of work: Ireland had been worse, China had been worse, Sudan had been worse, early America had been worse, New York had been worse, ancient Mexico has been worse—the list, it must be said, goes on.

A small digression—the murders Seraphim solved were committed during times of famine and pestilence. The Meek Council of the Reformed Papal States conditioned a small portion of the nation’s time traveling resources be committed to such a noble, thankless task after a Cardinal was caught using recreational time travel to do unspeakable things. Was Seraphim a prisoner paying penance by playing detective? Or just a low-wage worker? Sometimes, the boundary between the two seemed non-existent, blurred like the grasses that led from the copse to the gate as dusk approached.



Eventually, Seraphim pushed through the membrane of silence into a liquid of dull moaning as they got closer to the city center. At first, they suspected it might be coming from the seven bodies spilled out the door of a nearby tavern, all dressed in shabby clothing like vagrants, but those seven bodies were corpses. Wild dogs munched the arms and fingers. Leaning over the bodies, afraid to touch them, but doing so anyway, Seraphim saw some of them had characteristic symptoms of the plague: swollen lymph nodes and a foul smell, but not all of them did—

they were dead as dead, just as the plague victims, but they showed no signs of trauma, either. How odd.

Not far away was a patch of grass nestled in between two buildings, maybe the result of fire, but the neighboring walls were not charred black. Seraphim began digging seven quick and clean graves for the seven earthly forms. It took no time at all, given their grotesquely enhanced muscles. In fact, shooing the dogs away and saying a brief word of peace over each mound took longer than the digging.

After the bodies were buried, the streets were still as Seraphim walked toward the city center, though the moaning remained. It grew louder as it reverberated off slanted roofs, echoed in empty homes, bounced off windows, played off shacks, rebounded from corners, disappeared down alleys, and struck Seraphim's own head.

The source of the moaning was a piazza up ahead. In the center was a Marian column, either as thanks for the passing of a previous plague or meant to prevent this one. Around the column were three people, two men and one woman, locked into stockades. Seraphim was surprised there were only three, given the choral and cacophonous sound of the moan. The



prisoners were alone with no guardsman, so Seraphim had no trouble at all looking into the eyes of the most lucid one and asking in perfect Venetian what was going on, even as the use of

Venetian caused a part of Seraphim's brain to throb and burn, an unknown sensation and one surely no good.

"You see.....sir," said the man, "we three are Jewish and thought to cause the great passing plague by the city. I myself was perfectly fine when they put us here days ago, but now, as you can see, my groin is swelling and I fear the worst."

It was true, Seraphim could indeed see the man's thighs and the rest of him, too—all three were stripped naked. The skin near his groin was white and purple, emitting a heat that Seraphim could feel even through their thick clothing.

Dear Lord, what could be done? The man said all he wanted was a swift death. This was a new request for Seraphim and likely forbidden by the agency.

"I'm sorry," Seraphim said. "All I can do is give you water and set you free." They broke the lock and lifted the stockade. The woman in the group fell to the ground in a slump, as she was dead. The two men staggered to their feet before dropping to their knees, begging Seraphim to kill them.

"I cannot!" Seraphim shouted, wanting to cry and tell the men it put Seraphim's job at risk, but what an insensitive thing that would have been to say. Seraphim dropped to their knees with them, bringing them in closer with an urgent embrace meant to say to the men that it was okay; suicide would be forgiven by their creator.



But Seraphim did not dare say that. They rose to their feet and looked away. The two men crawled off, ducking into a nearby hovel to do only God knows what.

There was a curious thing Seraphim noticed over the years—those

in the past always felt something was askew about Seraphim and held them with greater reverence, weight, and fear, even if the past folk did not know why this was so. This always caused Seraphim guilt, for only they knew how dumb they really were, their intelligence and wisdom the chicanery of pharmaceuticals. The two who scurried off were no exception, looking back upon Seraphim like a savior.

In any event, the woman needed to be buried. Seraphim tossed her over their shoulder with less respect than she deserved and made way for the plot with the other bodies.

“Woof!”

Seraphim turned around not to see a dog, but a man. Why had he woofed?

“Why did you woof?” Seraphim asked. The use of Venetian momentarily weakened their bovine muscles and the body of the woman dropped.

“What the hell are you doing with that Jew?” The Woofing-Man asked.

“I did not know she was one, I simply saw her lying there.”

“Well, indeed she is. Her and the others brought the plague to this city, a miasma which has slowed considerably since they have been locked up!”

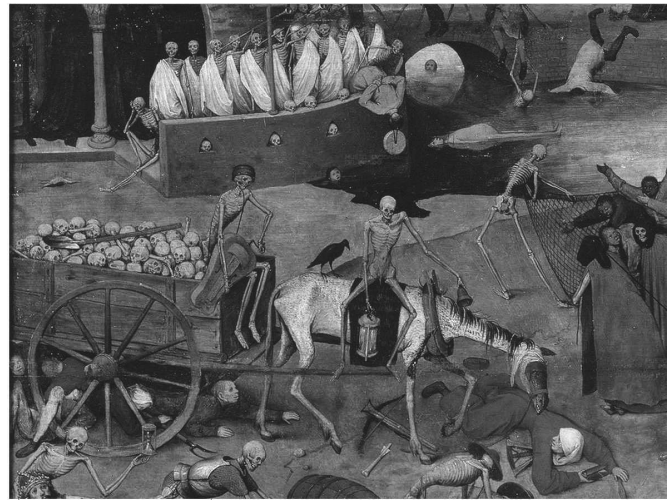
“Is that true?”

“No, but now we will never find out, since the others have escaped. We will find them, but for now we must burn her corpse.”

“Yes, sir,” Seraphim said with reluctance. The Woofing-Man whistled and into view came a burly man driving an ox-drawn cart loaded with bodies. The burly man jumped off the cart and tossed the woman’s body over his shoulder with even less respect than Seraphim had shown. He wore a black, oily leather apron, probably meant to protect him from contracting the plague. He

dumped the body on top of the others in the cart before following the Woofing-Man away from the scene, leaving the piazza opposite the alley Seraphim came in from.

Following from a short distance, Seraphim could see not every body on the cart was a corpse. Some looked up with pleading eyes, mouthing something impossible to understand, wrists tied together with twine. The bodies on the cart were loaded heavier toward the front end closest to the driver. It didn't take long to figure those still alive when tossed onto the cart early on would die suffocating under the weight of so many others.



The cart moved at a much slower pace than the Woofing-Man in front of it—he was busy dashing in and out of houses. After entering one home, he whistled in a way similar to before and the burly man cracked a whip. Seraphim used this opportunity to slip down a narrow side street, but they could not resist turning their head and looking into the glassy eyes of the dead Jewish woman as the cart hurried away.

Because it was narrow and the buildings crowded together, the street was much darker than the road Seraphim was on before, so dark that those who lived along the alleyway needed to light candles indoors, even though it was hardly past noon. Seraphim crouched and stayed close to the wall as they made way to the next opening—it was admittedly scary in the dark, a sense of doom and anxiety welled up that no pill could combat. Seraphim could get sick and die here. The immunization was promised to prevent this, but they had to die somewhere, sometime.

They peeked into the windows as they passed each home and saw tiny burning candles, some being carried, some stationary on stands or mantles. People sat at their tables, huddled together in silence or whispering to each other like they were sharing secrets. Able to hear further than you or I, Seraphim strained their ears and suffered rapid jaw vibration to collect a sample from the homes:

“We must hide them under thick blankets.” “Did the Woofing-Man say he would come this way today?” “Why has God abandoned us?” “I heard if you make small incisions in your jowls, it will let out.” “It spreads through meat.” “It is the Jews, actually.” “Poor



Francisco will never know a life without this.” “It is punishment, you know.” “There is nothing left to eat.” “I think I may have it.”

Unexpectedly, at the 60th house they passed, Seraphim saw something rather tender. An old man brought his stricken wife a glass of water as she reclined like Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy. Transfixed, Seraphim stood there as the man delicately opened his wife’s lips for her and motioned to pour the water, though it was not clear whether she was breathing or not.

Seraphim watched this with such intensity, they did not notice someone sneaking up behind them until it was too late.

A tap on the shoulder and they whisked around to see a woman, not old.

“Are you for me?” she asked.

“Yes. I am who you sent for.”

The woman grabbed Seraphim’s hand and led them away from the sadness, down a path somehow even narrower than before. One turn here and another there and soon the other side of the city wall began looming over the two. But the houses, if you could call them that, were getting smaller, not bigger. What the hell. Where were the goats? The yard? The medieval fences?

The woman led them through a makeshift doorway to a sorry hut. Six people were sitting circular on the dirt floor, their legs pulled close to their chests and their heads resting on their knees. A pot of liquid was in the middle of the circle. The woman wanted Seraphim to go the back of the squalor, but they stopped her right there. How did she contact them? Through the flyer? How did she get it? It was stuck in a doorjamb? Put underneath a rock by the door? Her son saw it fall from a man on a horse? Unfortunately, the woman could not fully answer these or any of the others Seraphim asked her.

This was a problem. Under an odd and partially hidden provision set by the Reformed Papal States, only the upper crust were eligible to receive detective work. Perhaps it was because decedents of the upper crust made considerable contributions to the Reformed Papal States. Or perhaps the provision was only meant to give some sense of order and reason to this chaotic funny business. It felt unfair, yes, but you could not pay rent or eat with altruism.



All of this was unexplainable to the woman who made contact, as all she knew of Seraphim was they were a member of the court who would only come when a piece of paper was folded in a strange way. It's not as if the advertisement said "no poors," but it was never meant to be seen by poors! This case may need to be sat out.

However, the woman grew frantic, tugging Seraphim with force toward what she wanted to show him: a bed tucked away in a corner. On the bed was the body of a small boy, his hands folded, his head propped up by pillows in a charade of peace. He looked to have the textbook symptoms of the plague—black fingers, blood running from the lip, open sores on the neck. Upon closer scrutiny, though, these symptoms crumbled.

The black skin on the fingers and face? A makeup that rubbed off when Seraphim ran their hands over the boy. The open sores on the neck? Crudely implemented by gouging the skin was a sort of knife, evident from the regular marking and depth. And the blood dripping from the lip? Well, the blood was real, but it was clearly put there via some external instrument, as fine and delicate the line was.

"Who murdered this child?" Seraphim asked. They did not know. If they had, they would have had no need of their services, of course. The miserable six near the door made their way over to Seraphim, amazed by their lack of hesitation at caressing a plague victim. One of them was the father of the boy, who was named Ignatius. He said Ignatius had been for three days, the plague symptoms were there the morning they found him dead, but the blood had appeared on his lip only the night before Seraphim arrived.

The parents didn't suspect any of the strange men who lived in the house, for they all loved dear sweet Ignatius, so young and so full of life, the boy who loved playing with the small

wooden trinkets the men crafted in their free time. All those around wept when the mother said



the part about the trinkets, the father the loudest of all.

Seraphim still had the men line up to question them individually,

experience demanding so. They were brought into a small alcove near

the house's kitchen and Seraphim spent considerable time with each

one. By the end, Seraphim did all their talking lying supine on a bench,

the excessive use of Venetian causing spins, dizziness, nausea, and fear.

Indeed, all of the men loved the boy dearly, admitting so while withholding eye contact, an aversion due to some mixture of grief and humility, not guilt, Seraphim suspected. More than

one of them pointed a finger, so to speak, at the Woofing-Man

Seraphim ran into earlier. In this neighborhood, he was known as the

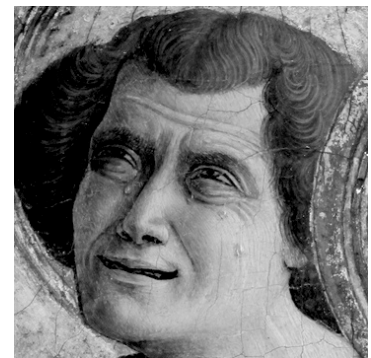
Clucking-Man. In another, the Gurgling-Man and in another still, the

Purring-Man. No one was sure of what he did besides check for the

dead, but no one had any idea why he did so—he was not paid by the

city or the church. That said, he had no reason to kill Ignatius, an innocent boy. But no one else

did, either!



As an act of service, Seraphim offered to bury the body for the family. The father envisioned a small path of grass Ignatius played in and adored as the final resting place for his son. He would take Seraphim there, he would help with the burial.

Slung over the shoulder, the boy was significantly lighter than the woman from earlier.

Seraphim positioned the boy so Ignatius's head was between neck and shoulder and draped a

cloak over the body, so while Seraphim looked a bit stranger than usual and the cloak was uncomfortable like a cilice, the body was concealed. The father ushered them out of the house, declining to take the torch his wife urged him to, even though it was far into the night by now, or at least it was on this edge of the city, so close to the towering walls.

Outside, it was louder than it was that afternoon and the noise was colored with mirth and good cheer. The tiny candles inside the homes had been replaced by roaring fires roasting animals, boiling tasty stews, and warming hearty bread. The father looked hungry, quite obviously wanting to poke through the windows of the homes preparing dinner and ask for a bite, but declining to do so in order to honor and mourn his son more properly. Were it permitted, Seraphim would have gladly fed him, but continuing with this case was risky enough and no further jeopardy could be afforded.

The further away they moved from the city wall, the wealthier things looked. The homes grew in size, but they were not as robust—no smells wafting out from kitchens, fewer fires glowing, even a few boarded up doors and windows! The father made the sign of the cross as he passed one, something he had not done with any of the earlier homes which struck Seraphim as a bit spooky. When they finally reached what looked to be a main thoroughfare, the father suddenly stopped and unsuccessfully tried to hide himself against a wall, his knees shaking and sweat pouring from his forehead. Seraphim craned their neck to see the source of such fear and laid eyes upon the terror of the flagellants.

The flagellants were a ghastly sort—they wore white robes tinged red with blood, whipped themselves with chains and ropes, wore crowns of thorns, crucified themselves upside down like



Peter, carried skulls, and chanted with a low humming drone in Latin. Within a few decades, this ritual of penance would be deemed heretical, thus the agency absolutely forbid Seraphim interacting with them. They were scary, haunting, powerful, and somehow beautiful even as they screamed in agony and vomited from pain.

The flagellants marched at a slow pace. Ignatius’s father stayed pinned against the wall, eyes closed tight and lips moving silently. Against better judgment, Seraphim took a step toward the procession. Back at home, or maybe in New York in 1989, they had seen a movie titled *The Seventh Seal*. In the movie, flagellants came to town, interrupting a joyous performance to remind the audience of their inevitable death in no uncertain terms. Everyone looked either annoyed by the flagellants or as if they were injected with a sudden profundity. But no one had looked scared, like Ignatius’s father did now.



It was hard to get any information from the group—Seraphim couldn’t identify anything



like a leader and every time they tried to talk to a flagellant, they kept walking and whipping themselves or weeping under a crown of thorns. When they walked further into the procession, Seraphim saw six small flagellants carrying a bed like pallbearers. On the bed was a dead girl with exaggerated plague symptoms, similar to Ignatius.

Seraphim clenched the boy’s body closer to their chest and leaned in to hear what this particular group was chanting.

“Repent. Repent. Repent. Consequence. Repent. Repent. Repent.”

Now, this didn't sound right. They moved past Seraphim, only to be followed by what looked like 12 other groups just like theirs, each with a body on a bed. And at the end of it all (though Seraphim could not see this) was the Woofing-Man, his cart empty and lurking.

The father was no longer there. It was the same alley and the same hiding wall, but it was empty now. Had he run on ahead? Turned back around? Joined the flagellants? All things were possible, but there was not enough time to figure it out. The body of Ignatius was beginning to smell and feel damp, so Seraphim continued on, hopefully toward the beloved park. With the flagellants gone, it was once again entirely empty and eerie on the streets. Fabrics flapping out of windows could be mistaken for robes. This could be where they lived and abided.

The central plot of *The Seventh Seal* was a knight questioning whether God existed or not while he delayed his death by challenging Death (the figure) to a game of chess. His faith wavered because he returned from a Crusade to find his home country ravaged by the plague. The knight never finds an answer before Death takes him. Seraphim hadn't thought of this movie in years, but now it came rushing back—the flagellants spurred it, maybe, but it was the knight they were concerned with now.

Horrors altered Seraphim, too. In Ireland, a family delirious from hunger boiled an infant because it looked like a potato. In New England, a young bride at the altar coughed and found a speck of red on her wedding glove. In China, a daughter killed her father only to unearth his body for food weeks later. In London, the young abandoned the elderly once they became infected, leaving them to die alone.

At each yearly review, Seraphim recited every necessary creed and assured all superiors of faith and conviction, but everyone at the agency knew the bar the detectives drank at and what they talked about while drinking.

The street eventually opened up to a park. It was small—maybe a few trees, a shrub or two, a place easy to imagine Ignatius in, running around with some primitive leather ball or stick, being lifted up by his father and father, all smiling and laughing. Oh, dear. Seraphim began to tear up, weakening not only their extra-muscular capabilities, but what would be considered their normal strength too. They dropped to their knees with pain and the body of Ignatius spilled out of their cloak. The heat of Seraphim’s body washed away any remaining makeup the murderer had applied, so Ignatius looked normal and sleeping, the mutilated sores on his neck the only indications of unspeakable cruelty.

How sad, how hard to bear. Seraphim did not usually feel this maudlin. They had once in Ethiopia while they were chasing a murderer that turned out to be a lion. They saw a mother give up her food to feed her children and a day later the mother died from starvation. Two days after that, the children died in the ongoing civil war. That was sad and hard to bear.



They would have loved to sit forever in the moonlight with the body of Ignatius, but they needed to start digging a grave before getting back to detective work. In addition to decomposition, Seraphim had their own time limit to worry about. It wasn’t safe to stay in the

past for long. With maybe one foot dug into the earth and their muscles beginning to recover, Seraphim heard a haunting noise come from behind them: “Woof!”

Him again.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“He is not Jewish, sir. I have checked with his family.”

“Maybe not, but what an example of what the Jews have brought upon us!”

“He does not have the plague, sir.”

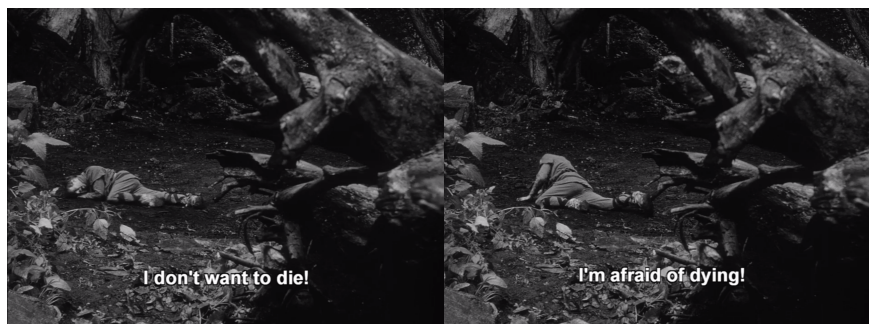
“To hell he does not!” The Woofing-Man turned over Ignatius and, to his surprise, the body was clean. “Well, it seems their black magic is getting more sophisticated. How intriguing.”

Seraphim stepped out of the grave. “The plague is not caused by Jews, sir.”

The Woofing-Man yipped and the burly man with his oxen wheeled into view. “Of course. I should have known you, stranger, to be a Jew. I was perplexed by your strange garb and your round, featureless face.”

“I am from the future, sir. In two thousand years, we will have learned the plague stems from lice on the backs of rats and is spread through the air. It started in Asia, a place east of here. Furthermore, in the future people like you are held in contempt and are called evil.”

The Woofing-Man frothed at the mouth, unable to form any word in reply to this swift rebuke. It made no sense to him. He raised his hand in a peculiar gesture and the cart groaned toward them.



Seraphim shot them both with a tiny future gun they kept on them. It was clear the Woofing-Man or the brutish, oafish burly man murdered Ignatius, or at least had orchestrated it, which may have been worse. Even as villains, the two men were still obliged to be buried, so Seraphim dug two graves, adrenaline easing their muscles and the thought of weapons discharge paperwork distracting their mind. Now and then, they glanced over toward the body of Ignatius, still looking so peaceful, almost happy to be in his favorite park. It was hard not to tear up again.

Patting the soil after the last shovelful, Seraphim grabbed the body of Ignatius to move him to the far end of the park, away from these monsters, when they heard a sound coming from the alley more haunting than a woof: chanting.

The torches from the flagellants exaggerated their shadows on the wall as they moved through the alley. At the front, there was a bed larger than the others before it. On it was the body of Ignatius's father, as dead as he would ever be. In lieu of marking his corpse up like a plague victim, it was left as it was, but the skin was ash white, like his blood had been drained from him in a comical expression of fear. Seraphim hid the body of Ignatius in a barrel and ran up to one of the flagellants carrying the body of the father, knocking them over and causing the entire cohort to fall.

“Did you kill him?” Seraphim shouted while grabbing the flagellant by the collar.

No answer. The others continued muttering in Latin and whipping themselves.

“Did you kill him?”

Still nothing. Frustrated and maybe upset from the chemicals coursing through their body, Seraphim executed the flagellant point blank in an unprecedented move. However, nothing

changed. The other flagellants did not attempt to disarm Seraphim, they did not stop self-abusing, they did not stop chanting, they did not even look afraid. What the hell.

Seraphim stood there, panting, waiting for action. One of the flagellants from the back left their whip behind and came to the front to take the place of the one Seraphim just killed, grasping a handle on the side of the bed. Once grasped, the procession moved on. It was larger than it had been earlier when Seraphim first saw them and now there were more bodies on beds. All of them marched past Seraphim chanting and agonizing, but not acknowledging.

Once the flagellants were gone to some unknown part of the city, things felt empty once more and for the last time. Seraphim had not noticed the city wall right there in front of them when they arrived at the park, but they did now. They must have mistaken it for the night sky before.

Seraphim took the body of Ignatius out of the barrel and brought him underneath their cloak, this time cradling instead of balancing. They climbed the city wall. At the top, they could see the copse in which they came into this world. Behind them, it may have been possible to see the flagellants parading around, but Seraphim did not look. They were no longer wary of shocking anyone with their strange body, so they leapt from the wall and bounded over to the copse. They would bury Ignatius here, away from the strange and dark hell inside the city.

Seraphim needed to leave this world soon, too, but they needed to rest first—traveling through time was tougher on the body than any language learning, any grave digging. Their head was throbbing now from the drugs, the guilt, and the thought of returning home. What questions would need to be answered!