## Three Duets for Virgin and Nosehorn

## Tad Williams

Father Joao contemplates the box, a wooden crate taller than the priest himself and as long as two men lying down, lashed with ropes as if to keep its occupant prisoner. Something is hidden inside, something dead yet extraordinary. It is a Wonder, or so he has been told, but it is meant for another and much greater man. Joao must care for it, but he is not allowed to see it. Like Something Else he could name.

Father Joao is weary and sick and full of heretical thoughts.

Rain drums on the deck above his head. The ship pitches forward, descending into a trough between waves, and the ropes that hold the great box in place creak. After a week he is quite accustomed to the ship’s drunken wallowing, and his stomach no longer crawls into his throat at every shudder, but for all of his traveling, he will never feel happy on the sea.

The ship lurches again and he steadies himself against the crate. Something pricks him. He sucks air between his teeth and lifts his hand so he can examine it in the faint candlelight. A thin wooden splinter has lodged in his wrist, a faint dark line running shallowly beneath the skin. A bead of blood trembles like mercury where it has entered. Joao tugs out the splinter and wipes the blood with his sleeve. Pressing to staunch the flow, he stares at the squat, shadowed box and wonders why his God has deserted him.

“You are a pretty one, Marje. Why aren’t you married?”

The girl blushes, but she is secretly irritated. Her masters, the Planckfelts, work her so hard, when does she find even a chance to wash her face, let alone look for a husband? Still, it is nice to be noticed, especially by such a distinguished man as the Artist.

He is famous, this man, and though from Marje’s perspective he is very old—close to fifty, surely—he is handsome, long of face and merry-eyed, and still with all his curly hair. He also has extraordinarily large and capable-looking hands. Marje cannot help but stare at his hands, knowing that they have made pictures that hang on the walls of the greatest buildings in Christendom, that they have clasped the hands of other great men—the Artist is an intimate of archbishops and kings, and even the Holy Roman Emperor himself. And yet he is not proud or snobbish: when she serves him his beer, he smiles sweetly as he thanks her and squeezes her own small hand when he takes the tankard.

“Have you no special friend, then? Surely the young men have noticed a blossom as sweet as you?”

How can she explain? Marje is a healthy, strong girl, quick with a smile and as graceful as a busy servant can afford to be. She has straw-golden hair. (She hides it under her cap, but during the heat and bustle of a long day it begins to work its way free and to dangle in moist curls down the back of her neck.) If her small nose turns up at the end a little more than would be appropriate in a Florentine or Venetian beauty, well, this is not Italy after all, and she is a serving-wench, not a prospect for marriage into a noble family. Marje is quite as beautiful as she needs to be—and yes, as she hurries through the market on her mistress’s errands, she has many admirers.

But she has little time for them. She is a careful girl, and her standards are unfortunately high. The men who would happily marry her have less poetry in their souls than mud on their clogs, and the wealthy and learned ones to whom her master Jobst Planckfelt plays host are not looking for a bride among the linens and crockery, and have no honorable interest in a girl with no money and a drunkard father.

“I am too busy, Sir,” she says. “My lady keeps me very occupied caring for our household and guests. It is a difficult task, running a large house. I am sure your wife would agree with me.”

The Artist’s face darkens a little. Marje is sad to see the smile fade, but not unhappy to have made the point. These flirtatious men! Between the dullards and the rakes, it is hard for an honest girl to make her way. In any case, it never hurts to remind a married man that he is married, especially when his wife is staying in the same house. At the least, it may keep the flirting and pinching to a minimum, and thus save a girl like Marje from unfairly gaining the hatred of a jealous woman.

The Artist’s wife, from what Marje has seen, might prove just such a woman. She is somewhat stern-mouthed, and does not dine with her husband, but instead demands to have her meals brought up to the room where she eats with only her maid for company. Each time Marje has served her, the Artist’s wife has watched her with a disapproving eye, as if the mere existence of pretty girls affronted Godly womanhood. She has also been unstinting in her criticism of what she sees as Marje’s carelessness. The Artist’s wife makes remarks about the Planckfelts, too, suggesting that she is not entirely satisfied with their hospitality, and even complains about Antwerp itself, unfavorable comparisons between its weather and available diversions and those of Nuremberg, where she and the Artist keep their home.

Marje can guess why a cheerful man like this should prefer not to think of his wife when it is not absolutely necessary.

“Well,” the Artist says at last, “I am certain you work very hard, but you must give some thought to the other wonders of our Lord’s creation. Virtue is of course its own reward—but only to a point, after which it becomes Pride, and is as likely to be punished as rewarded. Shall I tell you a story?”

His smile has returned, and it is really a rather marvelous thing, Marje thinks. He looks twenty years younger and rather unfairly handsome.

“I have much to do, Sir. My lady wishes me to clear away the supper things and help Cook with the washing.”

“Ah. Well, I would not interfere with your duties. When do you finish?”

“Finish?” She looks at his eyes and sees merriment there, and something else, something subtly, indefinably sad, which causes her to swallow her sharp reply. “About an hour after sunset.”

“Good. Come to me then, and I will tell you a story about a girl something like you. And I will show you a marvel—something you have never seen before.” He leans back in his chair. “Your master has been kind enough to lend me the spare room down here for my work—during the day, it gets the northern light, such as it has been of late. That is where I will be.”

Marje hesitates. It is not respectable to meet him, surely. On the other hand, he is a famous and much-admired man. When her day’s work is done, why should she (who, wife-like, has served him food and washed his charcoal-smudged shirts) not have a glimpse of the works which have gained him the patronage of great men all over Europe?

“I will...I may be too busy, Sir. But I thank you.”

He grins, this time with all the innocent friendliness of a young boy. “You need not fear me, Marje. But do as you wish. If you can spare a moment, you know where to find me.”

She stands in front of the door for some time, working up her courage. After she knocks there is no answer for long moments. At last the door opens, revealing the darkened silhouette of the Artist.

“Marje. You honor me. Come in.”

She passes through the door, then stops, dumbfounded. The ground-floor room that she has dusted and cleaned so many times has changed out of all recognition, and she finds her fingers straying toward the cross at her throat, as though she were again a child in a dark house listening to her father’s drunken rants about the Devil. The many candles and the single brazier of coals cast long shadows, and from every shadow faces peer. Some are exalted as though with inner joy, others frown or snarl, frozen in fear and despair and even hatred. She sees angels and devils and bearded men in antique costume. Marje feels that she has stepped into some kind of church, but the congregation has been drawn from every corner of the world’s history.

The Artist gestures at the pictures. “I am afraid I have been rather caught up. Do not worry—I will not make more work for you. By the time I leave here, these will all be neatly packed away again.”

Marje is not thinking of cleaning. She is amazed by the gallery of faces. If these are his drawings, the Artist is truly a man gifted by God. She cannot imagine even thinking of such things, let alone rendering them with such masterful skill, making each one perfect in every small detail. She pauses, still full of an almost religious awe, but caught by something familiar amid the gallery of monsters and saints.

“That is Grip! That is Master Planckfelt’s dog!” She laughs in delight. It is Grip, without a doubt, captured in every bristle; she does not need to see the familiar collar with its heavy iron ring, but that is there, too.

The Artist nods. “I cannot go long without drawing, I fear, and each one of God’s creatures offers something in the way of challenge. From the most familiar to the strangest.” He is staring at her. Marje looks up from the picture of the dog to catch him at it, but there is something unusual in his inspection, something deeper than the admiring glances she usually encounters from men of the Artist’s age, and it is she who blushes.

“Have I something on my face?” she asks, trying to make a joke of it.

“No, no.” He reaches out for a candle. As he examines her he moves the light around her head in slow circles, so that for a moment she feels quite dizzy. “Will you sit for me?”

She looks around, but every stool and chair is covered by sheafs of drawings. “Where?”

The Artist laughs and gently wraps a large hand around her arm. Marje feels her skin turn to gooseflesh. “I mean, let me draw you. Your face is lovely and I have a commission for a Saint Barbara that I should finish before leaving the Low Countries.”

She had thought the hand a precursor to other, less genteel intimacies (and she is not quite certain how she feels about that prospect) but instead he is steering her to the door. She passes a line drawing of the Garden of Eden which is like a window into another world, into an innocence Marje cannot afford. “I....you will draw me with my clothes on?”

Again that smile. Is it sad? “It is a bust—a head and shoulders. You may wear what you choose, so long as the line of your graceful neck is not obscured.”

“I thought you were going to tell me a story.”

“I shall, I promise. And show you a great marvel—I have not forgotten. But I will save them until you come back to sit for me. Perhaps we could begin tomorrow morning?”

“Oh, but my lady will...”

“I will speak to her. Fear not, pretty Marje. I can be most persuasive.”

The door shuts behind her. After a moment, she realizes that the corridor is cold and she is shivering.

“Here. Now turn this way. I will soon give you something to look at.”

Marje sits, her head at a slightly uncomfortable angle. She is astonished to discover herself with the morning off. Her mistress had not seemed happy about it, but clearly the Artist was not exaggerating his powers of persuasion. “May I blink my eyes, Sir?”

“As often as you need to. Later I will let you move a little from time to time so you do not get too sore. Once I have made my first sketch, it will be easy to set your pose again.” Satisfied, he takes his hand away from her chin—Marje is surprised to discover how hard and rough his fingers are; can drawing alone cause it?—and straightens. He goes to one of his folios and pulls out another picture, which he props up on a chair before her. At first, blocked by his body, she cannot see it. After he has arranged it to his satisfaction, the Artist steps away.

“Great God!” she says, then immediately regrets her blasphemy. The image before her looks something like a pig, but it is covered in intricate armor and has a great spike growing upwards from its muzzle. “What is it? A demon?”

“No demon, but one of God’s living creatures. It is called ‘Rhinocerus,’ which is Latin for ‘nose-horn.’ He is huge, this fellow—bigger than a bull, I am told.”

“You have not seen one? But did you not...?”

“I drew the picture, yes. But it was made from another artist’s drawing—and the creature he drew was not even alive, but stuffed with straw and standing in the Pope’s garden of wonders. No one in Europe, I think, has ever seen this monster alive, although some have said he is the model for the fabled unicorn. Our Rhinocerus is a very rare creature, you see, and lives only at the farthest ends of the world. This one came from a land called Cambodia, somewhere near Cathay.”

“I should be terrified to meet him.” Marje finds she is shivering again. The Artist is standing behind her, his fingers delicately touching the nape of her neck as he pulls up her hair and knots it atop her head.

“There. Now I can see the line cleanly. Yes, you might indeed be afraid if you met this fellow, young Marje. But you might be glad of it all the same. I promised you a tale, did I not?”

“About a girl, you said. Like me.”

“Ah, yes. About a fair maiden. And a monster.”

“A monster? Is that...that Nosehorn in this tale?”

She is still looking at the picture, intrigued by the complexity of the beast’s scales, but even more by the almost mournful expression in its small eyes. By now she knows the Artist’s voice well enough to hear him smiling as he speaks.

“The Nosehorn is indeed part of this tale. But you should never decide too soon which is the monster. Some of God’s fairest creations bear foul seemings. And vice-versa, of course.” She hears him rustling his paper, then the near-silent scraping of his pencil. “Yes, there is both Maiden and Monster in this tale...”

Her name is Red Flower—in full it is Delicate-Red-Flower-the-Color-of-Blood, but since her childhood only the priests who read the lists of blessings have used that name. Her father Jayavarman is a king, but not the king: the Universal Monarch, as all know, has been promised for generations but is still awaited. In the interim, her father has been content to eat well, enjoy his hunting and his elephants, and intercede daily with the nak ta—the ancestors—on his people’s behalf, all in the comfortable belief that the Universal Monarch will probably not arrive during his lifetime.

In fact, it is his own lack of ambition that has made Red Flower’s father a powerful man. Jayavarman knows that although he has no thought of declaring himself the devaraja, or god-king, others are not so modest. As the power of one of the other kings—for the land has many—rises, Jayavarman lends his own prestige (and, in a pinch, his war elephants) to one of the upstart’s stronger rivals. When the proud one has been brought low, Red Flower’s father withdraws his support from the victor, lest that one too should begin to harbor dreams of universal kingship. Jayavarman then returns to his round of feasting and hunting, and waits to see which other tall bamboo may next seek to steal the sun from its neighbors. By this practice his kingdom of Angkor, which nestles south of the Kulen hills, has maintained its independence, and even an eminence which outstrips many of its more aggressive rivals.

But Red Flower cares little about her plump, patient father’s machinations. She is not yet fourteen, and by tradition isolated from the true workings of power. As a virgin and Jayavarman’s youngest daughter, her purpose (as her father and his counselors see it) is to remain a pure and sealed repository for the royal blood. As her sisters were in their turn, Red Flower will be a gift to some young man Jayavarman favors, or whose own blood—and the family it represents— offers a connection which favors his careful strategies.

Red Flower, though, does not feel like a vessel. She is a young woman (just), and this night she feels herself as wild and unsettled as one of her father’s hawks newly unhooded.

In truth, her sire’s intricate and continuous strategies are somewhat to blame for her unrest. There are strangers outside the palace tonight, a ragtag army camped around the walls. They are fewer than Jayavarman’s own force, badly armored, carrying no weapons more advanced than scythes and daggers, and they own no elephants at all, but there is something in their eyes which make even the king’s most hardened veterans uneasy. The sentries along the wall do not allow their spears to dip, and they watch the strangers’ campfires carefully, as though looking into sacred flames for some sign from the gods.

The leader of this tattered band is a young man named Kaundinya who has proclaimed himself king of a small region beyond the hills, and who has come to Red Flower’s father hoping for support in a dispute with another chieftain. Red Flower understands little of what is under discussion, since she is not permitted to listen to the men’s conversation, but she has seen her father’s eyes during the three days of the visitors’ stay and knows that he is troubled. No one thinks he will lend his aid—neither of the two quarreling parties are powerful enough to cause Jayavarman to support the other. But nevertheless, others beside Red Flower can see that something is causing the king unrest.

Red Flower is unsettled for quite different reasons. As excited as any of her slaves by gossip and novelty, she has twice slipped the clutches of her aged nurse to steal a look at the visitors. The first time, she turned up her nose at the peasant garb the strangers wear, as affronted by their raggedness as her maids had been. The second time, she saw Kaundinya himself.

He is barely twenty years old, this bandit chief, but as both Red Flower and her father have recognized (to different effect, however) there is something in his eyes, something cold and hard and knowing, that belies his age. He carries himself like a warrior, but more importantly, he carries himself like a true king, the flash of his eyes telling all who watch that if they have not yet had cause to bow down before him, they soon will. And he is handsome, too: on a man slightly less stern, his fine features and flowing black hair would be almost womanishly beautiful.

And while she peered out at him from behind a curtain, Kaundinya turned and saw Red Flower, and this is what she cannot forget. The heat of his gaze was like Siva’s lightning leaping between Mount Mo-Tam and the sky. For a moment, she felt sure that his eyes, like a demon’s, had caught at her soul and would steal it out of her body. Then her old nurse caught her and yanked her away, swatting at her ineffectually with swollen-jointed hands. All the way back to the women’s wing the nurse shrilly criticized her wickedness and immodesty, but Red Flower, thinking of Kaundinya’s stern mouth and impatient eyes, did not hear her.

And now the evening has fallen and the palace is quiet. The old woman is curled on a mat beside the bed, wheezing in her sleep and wrinkling her nose at some dream-affrontery. A warm wind rattles the bamboo and carries the smell of cardamom leaves through the palace like music. The monsoon season has ended, the moon and the jungle flowers alike are blooming, all the night is alive, alive. The king’s youngest daughter practically trembles with sweet discontent.

She pads quietly past her snoring nurse and out into the corridor. It is only a few steps to the door that leads to the vast palace gardens. Red Flower wishes to feel the moon on her skin and the wind in her hair.

As she makes her way down into the darkened garden, she does not see the shadow-form that follows her, and does not hear it either, for it moves as silently as death...

“And there I must stop.” The Artist stands and stretches his back.

“But...but what happened? Was it the horned monster in the picture that followed her?”

“I have not finished, I have merely halted for the day. Your mistress is expecting you to go back to work, Marje. I will continue the story when you return to me tomorrow.”

She hesitates, unwilling to let go of the morning’s novelty, of her happiness at being admired and spoken to as an equal. “May I see what you have drawn?”

“No.” His voice is perhaps harsher than he had wished. When he speaks again he uses a softer tone. “I will show you when I am finished, not before. Go along, you. Let an old man rest his fingers and his tongue.”

He does not look old. The gray morning light streams through the window behind him, gleaming at the edges of his curly hair. He seems very tall.

Marje curtseys and leaves him, pulling the door closed behind her as quietly as she can. All day, as she sweeps out the house’s dusty corners and hauls water from the well, she will think of the smell of spice trees and of a young man with cold, confident eyes.

Even on deck, wrapped in a heavy hooded cloak against the unseasonable squall, Father Joao is painfully aware of the dark, silent box in the hold. A present from King John to the newly elected Pope, it would be a valuable cargo simply as a significator of the deep, almost familial relationship between the Portuguese throne and the Holy See. But as a reminder of the wealth that Portugal can bring back to Mother Church from the New World and elsewhere (and as such to prompt the Holy Father toward favoring Portugal’s expanding interests) its worth is incalculable. In Anno Domini 1492, all of the world seems in reach of Christendom’s ships, and it is a world whose spoils the Pope will divide. The bishop who is the king’s ambassador (and Father Joao’s superior), the man who will present the pontiff with this splendid gift, is delighted with the honor bestowed upon him.

Thus, Father Joao is a soldier in a good cause, and with no greater responsibility than to make sure the Wonder arrives in good condition. Why then is he so unhappy?

It was the months spent with his family, he knows, after being so long abroad. Mother Church offers balm against the fear of age and death; seeing his parents so changed since he had last visited them, so feeble, was merely painful and did not remotely trouble his faith. But the spectacle of his brother Ruy as happy father, his laughing, tumbling brood about him, was for some reason more difficult to stomach. Father Joao has disputed with himself about this. His younger brother has children, and someday will have grandchildren to be the warmth of his old age, but Joao has dedicated his own life and chastity to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest and most sacred of callings. Surely the brotherhood of his fellow priests is family enough?

But most insidious of all the things that cause him doubt, something that still troubles him after a week at sea, despite all his prayers and sleepless nights searching for God’s peace, even despite the lashes of his own self-hatred, is the beauty of his brother’s wife, Maria.

The mere witnessing of such a creature troubled chastity, but to live in her company for weeks was an almost impossible trial. Maria was dark-eyed and slender of waist despite the roundness of her limbs. She had thick black curly hair which (mocking all pins and ribbons) constantly worked itself free to hang luxuriously down her back and sway as she walked, hiding and accentuating at the same moment, like the veils of Salome.

Joao is no stranger to temptation. In his travels he has seen nearly every sort of woman God has made, young and old, dark-skinned and light. But all of them, even the greatest beauties, have been merely shadows against the light of his belief. Joao has always reminded himself that he observed only the outer garments of life, that it was the souls within that mattered. Seeing after those souls is his sacred task, and his virginity has been a kind of armor, warding off the demands of the flesh. He has always managed to comfort himself with this thought.

But living in the same house with Ruy and his young wife was different. To see Maria’s slim fingers toying with his brother’s beard, stroking that face so much like his own, or to watch her clutch one of their children against her sloping hip, forced Joao to wonder what possible value there could be in chastity.

At first her earthiness repelled him, and he welcomed that repulsion. A glimpse of her bare feet or the cleavage of her full breasts, and his own corrupted urge to stare at such things, made him rage inwardly. She was a woman, the repository of sin, the Devil’s tool. She and each of her kind were at best happy destroyers of a man’s innocence, at worst deadly traps that yawned, waiting to draw God’s elect down into darkness.

But Joao lived with Ruy and Maria for too long, and began to lose his comprehension of evil. For his brother’s wife was not a wanton, not a temptress or whore. She was a wife and mother, an honorable, pious woman raising her children in the faith, good to her husband and kind to his aging parents. If she found pleasure in the flesh God had given her, if she enjoyed her man’s arms around her, or the sun on her ankles as she prepared her family’s dinner in the tiny courtyard, how was that a sin?

With this question, Joao’s armor had begun to come apart. If enjoyment of the body were not sinful, then how could denial of the body be somehow blessed? Could it be so much worse in God’s eyes, his brother Ruy’s life? If there were no sin in having a beautiful and loving wife to share your bed, in having children and a hearth, then why has Joao himself renounced these things? And if God made mankind fruitful, then commanded his most faithful servants not to partake of that fruitfulness, and in fact to despise it as a hindrance to holiness, then what kind of wise and loving God was He?

Father Joao has not slept well since leaving Lisbon, the ceaseless movement of the ocean mirroring his own unquiet soul. Everything seems in doubt here, everything suspended, the sea a place neither of God nor the Devil, but forever between the two. Even the sailors, who with their dangerous lives might seem most in need of God’s protection, mistrust priests.

In the night, in his tiny cabin, Joao can hear the ropes that bind the crate stretching and squeaking, as though something inside it stirs restlessly.

His superior the bishop has been no help, and Joao’s few attempts to seek the man’s counsel have yielded only uncomprehending homilies. Unlike Father Joao, he is long past the age when the fleshly sins are the most tempting. If His Excellency’s soul is in danger, Joao thinks with some irritation, it is from Pride: the bishop is puffed like a sleeping owl with the honor of his position—liaison between king and pope, bringer of a mighty gift, securer of the Church’s blessing on Portugal’s conquests across the heathen world.

If the bishop is the ambassador, Father Joao wonders, then what is he? An insomniac priest. A celibate tortured by his own flesh. A man who will accompany a great gift, but only as far as Italy’s shores before he turns to go home again.

Now the rain is thumping on the deck overhead, and he can no longer hear noises in the hold. His head hurts, he is cold beneath his thin blanket and he is tired of thinking.

He is only a porter bearing a box of dead Wonder, Joao decides with a kind of cold satisfaction—a Wonder of which he himself is not even to be vouchsafed a glimpse.

Marje has been looking at the Nosehorn so long that even when the Artist commands her to close her eyes she sees it still, printed against the darkness of her eyelids. She knows she will dream of it for months, the powerful body, the tiny, almost hidden eyes, the thrust of horn lifting from its snout.

“You said you would tell me more about the girl. The flower girl.”

“So I shall, Marje. Let me only light another candle. There is less light today. I am like one of those savage peoples who worship the sky, always turning in search of the sun.”

“Will it be finished soon?”

“Tale or picture?”

“Both.” She needs to know. Yesterday and today have been a magical time, but she remembers magic from other stories and knows it does not last. She is sad her time at the center of the world is passing, but underneath everything she is a realistic girl. If it is to end today she can make her peace, but she needs to know.

“I do not think I will finish either this morning, unless I keep you long enough to make your mistress forget I am a guest and lose her temper. So we will have more work tomorrow. Now be quiet, girl. I am drawing your mouth.”

As she steps into the circle of moss-covered stones at the garden’s center, something moves in the darkness beneath the trees. Red Flower turns her face away from the moon.

“Who is there?” Her voice is a low whisper. Even though she is the king’s daughter, tonight she feels like a trespasser within her own gardens.

Thunder rumbles quietly in the distance. The monsoon is ended but the skies are still unsettled. He steps out of the trees, naked to the waist, moonlight gleaming on his muscle-knotted arms. “I am. And who is there? Ah, it’s the old dragon’s daughter.”

She feels her breath catch in her throat. She is alone, in the dark. There is danger here. But there is also something in Kaundinya’s gaze that keeps her fixed to the spot as he approaches.

“You should not be here,” she says at last.

“What is your name? You came to spy on me the other day, didn’t you?”

“I am...” She still finds it hard to speak. “I am Red Flower. My father will kill you if you do not go away.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Your father is afraid of me.”

Her strange lethargy is at last dispelled by anger. “That is a lie! He is afraid of no one! He is a great king, not a bandit like you with your ragged men!”

Kaundinya laughs, genuinely amused, and Red Flower is suddenly unsure again. “Your father is a king, little girl, but he will never be Ultimate Monarch, never the devaraja. I will be, though, and he knows it. He is no fool. He sees what is inside me.”

“You are mad.” She takes a few steps back. “My father will destroy you.”

“He would have done it when he first met me if he dared. But I have come to him in peace and am a guest in his house and he cannot touch me. Still, he will not give me his support. He thinks to send me away with empty hands while he considers how he might ruin me before my power grows too great.”

The stranger abruptly strides forward and catches her arm, pulling her close until she can smell the betel nut on his breath. His eyes, mirroring the moon, seem very bright. “But perhaps I will not go away with empty hands after all. It seems the gods have brought you to me, alone and unguarded. I have learned to trust the gods—it is they who have promised me that I shall be king over all of Kambuja-desa.”

Red Flower struggles, but he is very strong and she is only a slender young girl. Before she can call for her father’s soldiers, he covers her mouth with his own and pinions her with his strong arms. His deep, sharp smell surrounds her and she feels herself weakening. The moon seems to disappear, as though it has fallen into shadow. It is a little like drowning, this surrender. Kaundinya frees one hand to hold her face, then slides that hand down her neck, sending shivers through her like ripples across a pond. Then his hand moves again, and, as his other hand gathers up her sari, it pushes roughly between her legs. Red Flower gasps and kicks, smashing her heel down on his bare foot.

Laughing and cursing at the same time, he loosens his grip. She pulls free and runs across the garden, but she has gone only a few steps before he leaps into pursuit.

She should scream, but for some reason she cannot. The blind fear of the hunted is upon her: all she can do is run like a deer, run like a rabbit, hunting for a dark hole and escape. He has done something to her with his touch and his cold eyes. A spell has enwrapped her.

She finds a gate in the encircling garden wall. Beyond is the temple, and on a hill above it the great dark shadow of the Sivalingam, the holy pillar reaching toward heaven. Past that is only jungle on one side, on the other open country and the watchfires of Kaundinya’s army. Red Flower races toward the hill sacred to Siva, Lord of Lightnings.

The pillar is a finger pointing toward the moon. Thunder growls, closer now. She stumbles and falls to her knees, then begins crawling uphill, silently weeping. Something hisses like a serpent in the grass behind her, then a hand curls in her hair and yanks her back. She tumbles and lies at Kaundinya’s feet, staring up. His eyes are wild, his mouth twisted with fury, but his voice, when it comes, is terrifyingly calm.

“You are the first of your father’s possessions that I will take and use.”

“But you cannot stop there, Sir! That is terrible! What happened to the girl?”

The Artist is putting away his drawing materials, but without his usual care. He seems almost angry. Marje is afraid she has offended him in some way.

“I will finish the tale tomorrow. Only a little more work is needed on the drawing, but I am tired now.”

She gets up, tugging the sleeves of her dress back over her shoulders. He opens the door and stands beside it, as though impatient for her to leave.

“I will not sleep tonight for worrying about the flower girl,” she says, trying to make him smile. He closes his eyes for a moment, as though he too is thinking about Red Flower.

“I will miss you, Marje,” he says when she is outside. Then he shuts the door.

The storm-handled ship bobs on the water like a wooden cup. In his cabin, Father Joao glares into the darkness. Somewhere below, ropes creak like the damned distantly at play.

The thought of the box and its forbidden contents torments him. Coward, doubter, near-eunuch, false priest—with these names he also tortures himself. In the blackness before his eyes he sees visions of his brother’s wife Maria, smiling, clothes undone, warm and rounded and hateful. Would she touch him with the heedless fondness with which she rubs Ruy’s back, kisses his neck and ear? Could she understand that at this awful moment Joao would give his immortal soul for just such animal comfort? What would she think of him? What would any of those whose souls are in his care think of him?

He drags himself from the bed and stands on trembling legs, swaying as the ship sways. Far above, thunder fills the sky like the voices of God and Satan contesting. Joao pulls his cassock over his undershirt and fumbles for his flints. When the candle springs alight, the walls and roof of his small sanctuary press closer than he had remembered, threatening to squeeze him breathless.

Father Joao lurches toward the cargo hold, his head full of voices. As he climbs down a slippery ladder, he loses his footing and nearly falls. He waves his free arm for balance and the candle goes out. For a moment he struggles just to maintain his grip, wavering in empty darkness with unknown depths beneath him. At last he rights himself, but now he is without light. Somewhere above, the storm proclaims its power, mocking human enterprise. A part of him wonders what he is doing up, what he is doing in this of all places. Surely, that quiet voice suggests, he should at least go back to light his candle again. But that gentle voice is only one of many. Joao reaches down with his foot, finds the next rung, and continues his descent.

Even in utter blackness he knows his way. Every day of the voyage he has passed back and forth through this great empty space, like exiled Jonah. His hands encounter familiar things, his ears are full of the quiet complaining of the fettered crate. He knows his way.

He feels its presence even before his fingers touch it, and stops, blind and half-crazed. For a moment he is tempted to go down on his knees, but God can see even in darkness, and some last vestige of devout fear holds him back. Instead he lays his ear against the rough wood and listens, as a father might listen to the child growing in his wife’s belly. Something is inside. It is still and dead, but somehow in Father Joao’s mind it is full of terrible life.

He pulls at the box, desperate to open it, knowing even without sight that he is bloodying his fingers, but it is too well-constructed. He falls back at last, sobbing. The crate mocks him with its impenetrability. He lowers himself to the floor of the hold and crawls, searching for something that will serve where flesh has failed. Each time he strikes his head on an unseen impediment the muffled thunder seems to grow louder, as though something huge and secret is laughing at him.

At last he finds an iron rod, then feels his way back to the waiting box. He finds a crack beneath the lid and pushes the bar in, then throws his weight on it, pulling downward. It gives, but only slightly. Mouthing a prayer whose words even he does not know, Joao heaves at the bar again, struggling until more tears come to his eyes. Then, with a screeching of nails ripped from their holes, the lid lifts away and Joao falls to the floor.

The ship’s hold suddenly fills with an odor he has never smelled, a strong scent of dry musk and mysterious spices. He staggers upright and leans over the box, drinking in this exhalation of pure Wonder. Slowly, half-reverent and half-terrified, he lowers his hands into the box.

A cloud of dense-packed straw is already rising from its confinement, crackling beneath his fingers, which feel acute as eyes. What waits for him? Punishment for his doubts? Or a shrouded Nothing, a final blow to shatter all faith?

For a moment he does not understand what he is feeling. It is so smooth and cold that for several heartbeats he is not certain he is touching anything at all. Then, as his hands slide down its gradually widening length, he knows it for what it is. A horn.

Swifter and swifter his fingers move, digging through the straw, following the horn’s curve down to the snout, then the wide rough brow, the glass-hard eyes, the ears. The Wonder inside the box has but a single horn. The thing beneath Joao’s fingers is dead, but there is no doubt that it once lived. It is real. Real! Father Joao hears a noise in the empty hold and realizes that he himself is making it. He is laughing.

God does not need to smite doubters, not when He can instead show them their folly with a loving jest. The Lord has proved to faithless Joao that divine love is no mere myth, and that He does not merely honor chastity, He defends it. All through this long nightmare voyage, Joao has been the unwitting guardian of Virtue’s greatest protector.

Down on his knees now in the blind darkness, but with his head full of light, the priest gives thanks over and over.

Kaundinya stands above her in the moon-thrown shadow of the pillar. He holds the delicate fabric of her sari in his hands. Already it has begun to part between his strong fingers.

Red Flower cannot awaken from this dream. The warm night is shelter no longer. Even the faint rumble of thunder has vanished, as though the gods themselves have turned their backs on her. She closes her eyes as one of Kaundinya’s hands cups her face. As his mouth descends on hers, he lowers his knee between her thighs, spreading her. For a long moment, nothing happens. She hears the bandit youth take a long and surprisingly unsteady breath.

Red Flower opens her eyes. The pillar, the nearby temple, all seem oddly flat, as though they have been painted on cloth. At the base of the hill, only a few paces from where she sits tumbled on the grass, a huge pale form has appeared.

Kaundinya’s eyes are opened wide in superstitious dread. He lets go of Red Flower’s sari and lifts himself from her.

“Lord Siva,” he says, and throws himself prostrate before the vast white beast. The rough skin of its back seems to give off as much light as the moon itself; and it turns its wide head to regard him, horn lowered like a spear, like the threat of lightning. Kaundinya speaks into the dirt. “Lord Siva, I am your slave.”

Red Flower stares at the beast, then at her attacker, who is caught up in something like a slow fit, his muscles rippling and trembling, his face contorted. The Nosehorn snorts once, then turns and lumbers away toward the distant trees, strangely silent. Red Flower cannot move. She cannot even shiver. The world has grown tracklessly large and she is but a single, small thing.

At last Kaundinya stands. His fine features are childish with shock, as though something large has picked him up by the neck and shaken him.

“The Lord of all the Gods has spoken to me,” he whispers. He does not look at Red Flower, but at the place where the beast has vanished into the jungle. “I am not to dishonor you, but to marry you. I will be the devaraja and you will be my queen. This place, Angkor, will be the heart of my kingdom. Siva has told me this.”

He extends a hand. Red Flower stares at it. He is offering to help her up. She struggles to her feet without assistance, holding the torn part of her gown together. Suddenly she is cold.

“You know your father will give you to me,” he calls after her as she stumbles back toward the palace. “He recognizes what I am, what I will be. It is the only solution. He will see that.”

She does not want to hear him, does not want to think about what he is saying. But she does, of course. She is not sure what has happened tonight, but she knows that he is speaking the truth.

Marje is silent for a long time after the Artist has finished. The grayness of the day outside the north-facing window is suddenly dreary.

“And is that it? She had to marry him?”

The Artist is concentrating deeply, squinting at the drawing-board. He does not reply immediately. “At least it was an honorable marriage,” he says at last. “That is something better than rape, is it not?”

“But what happened to her afterward?”

“I am not entirely sure. It is only a story, after all. But I imagine she bore the bandit king many sons, so that when he died his line lived on. The man who told me the tale said that there were kings in that place for seven hundred years. The rhinocerus you see in that drawing was the last of a long line of sacred beasts, a symbol to the royal family. But the kings of Cambodia have left Angkor now, so perhaps it no longer means anything to them. In any case, they gave that one to the king of Portugal, and Portugal gave its stuffed body to the Pope after it died.” The Artist shakes his head. “I am sorry I could not see it when it breathed and walked God’s earth.”

Marje stares at the picture of the Nosehorn, wondering at its strange journey. What would it think, this jungle titan whose ancestor was a heathen god, to find itself, or at least its image, propped on a chair in Antwerp?

The Artist stirs. “You may move now, Marje. I am finished.”

She thinks she hears something of her own unhappiness in his voice. What does it mean? She gets up slowly, untwisting sore muscles, and walks to his side. She must lean against him to see the drawing properly; she feels his small, swift movement, almost a twitch, as she presses against his arm.

“Oh. It’s...it’s beautiful.”

“As you are beautiful,” he says softly.

The picture is Marje, but also not Marje. The girl before her has her eyes closed and wears a look of battered innocence. The long line of her neck is lovely but fragile.

“Saint Barbara was taken onto a mountain by her father and killed,” the Artist says, gently tracing the neck of the false Marje, the more-than-Marje, with his finger. “Perhaps he was jealous of the love she had found in Jesus. She is the martyr who protects us from sudden death... and from lightning.”

“Your gift is from God, Master Dürer.” She is more than a little overwhelmed. “So are we finished now?”

Marje is still leaning against his arm, staring at the picture, her breasts touching his shoulder. When he does not reply, she glances up. The Artist is looking at her closely. From this close she can see the lines that web his face, but also the depth of his eyes, the bright, tragic eyes of a much younger man. “We must be,” he says. “I have finished the drawing and told you the tale.” His voice is carefully flat, but something moves beneath it, a kind of yearning.

For a moment she hesitates, feels herself tilting as though out of balance in a high place. Then, uncomfortable with his regard, her eyes stray to the picture of the mighty Nosehorn, which seems to watch them from its place on the chair, small eyes solemn beneath the rending horn. She takes a breath.

“Yes,” she finally says, “you have and you have. And now there are many things I must do. Mistress will be very anxious at how I have let my work go. She will think I am trying to rise above my station.”

The Artist reaches up and briefly squeezes her hand, then lifts himself from his chair and leads her toward the door.

“When I have made my print, I will send you a copy, pretty Marje.”

“I would like that very much.”

“I have enjoyed our time together. I wish there could be more.”

She drops him a curtsey, and for a moment allows herself to smile. “God gives us but one life, Sir. We must preserve what He gives us and make of it what we can.”

He nods, returning her smile, though his is more reserved, more pained.

“Very true. You are a wise girl.”

The Artist shuts the door behind her.