

THE FEATHER OF ICARUS

by Joseph Dillon Ford

I.

It is a cold winter's day in the Year of Our Lord 1649, and Joos van Dongen, having just attained the age of twenty-four, has set out on foot from a drear little village situated on the banks of a tributary of the River Maas in the Dutch province of Noord Brabant. With nothing more than a knapsack on his back stuffed with a threadbare change of clothes, a single day's provisions, and a few silver gulden secreted away in a leather purse hanging around his neck, he is headed towards 's-Hertogenbosch in the hope of finding enough work to eke out a living in a city he knows only by reputation where he has neither friend nor relative. Joos has never traveled far beyond the place of his birth, and knows little of the world but fetid grachts, peat bogs, wheat fields, and sheep pastures. Since his father's recent death by dropsy, Joos's mother has persistently reminded her son that the farm is now his to work, but the life of the city promises far more excitement for a young man than the plodding peasants and bleak landscapes of a hamlet not even the brush of a master could readily redeem.

Shivering, tired, and thirsty, Joos wends his way along a narrow, deeply rutted country road trying to avoid slipping on the muddy ice into yet another pile of horse droppings. He pauses for a moment, and turning his gaze upward towards the haloed disc of the Sun, his only companion on this long and lonely trek, he thinks aloud, "Brother, if only you knew my suffering, you would draw closer and rewarm my freezing bones."

Because the ancient gods can still hear the thoughts of men and are not without pity for those in distress seeking their favor, Phoebus is moved by Joos's words. Taking the form of a man in antique dress, with a gleaming silver bow slung over his right shoulder and a quiver filled with golden arrows on his back, he descends to Earth in his solar nimbus and hovers just footsteps in front of the weary traveler. Meanwhile the barren wintry scene is transformed into a vision of vernal hope, as Joos stands trembling in the presence of a radiant being he can only imagine is an angel of light sent by heaven to comfort him in his darkest hour.

"Tell me true, young man," demands Phoebus, "have you ever lain with woman?"

Joos is taken aback by the seeming impertinence of his divine interlocutor, but manages a proper if not entirely truthful reply: "No, Sir, I have not."

"Do you harbor impure thoughts?"

"With the Lord's help. my thoughts are as pure as the driven snow," Joos answers, imagining in spite of himself how like a girl this handsome angel would look if his drapery were rearranged.

"Have you ever broken an oath?"

"I've broken many things in my twenty-four years, but never have I broken my word to God or man," Joos avers, crossing his heart as conveniently as he wished he could now sit and cross his legs.

"Then, Joos van Dongen, I shall bestow on you a gift beyond all measure, but it will require something of even greater value from you in return. Prepare to receive my terms."

So saying, the god draws from his breast a long, luminous white feather whose quill has been cut for use as a writing instrument.

"Remove your gloves and give me your left hand with the palm turned skywards," Phoebus commands.

Joos obeys the god's command and extends his left arm, which Phoebus grasps firmly by the wrist before piercing the young man's open palm so forcefully with the quill that it begins to bleed profusely.

"You will feel some pain, as this is your first duty as my scribe, but take this quill and with the blood that issues from your wound write what I dictate on the parchment I hold before you."

Phoebus now speaks several words in the secret language of the gods—then stops abruptly. "Why do you not write, younker?"

"Forgive me, Sir, but I've not learned how, and even if I had, I have no knowledge of the language you speak."

"What you think you do not possess has already been given to you. Do, then, as I have told you."

Though Joos is perplexed, he feels obliged to attempt the impossible, and to his great surprise, he successfully inscribes on the parchment every word spoken by the god and understands what he has written no worse than if it had been his native tongue.

The exact terms of this document are too many and complex to produce a satisfactory translation, but its contents are intelligible enough to allow for a fair description of Phoebus' gift and what its acceptance requires of Joos in exchange.

In brief, the feather belonged to one of a pair of wings ingeniously constructed by Daedalus for his son Icarus, who used them to flee the Island of Crete after being imprisoned there by King Minos. When the boy did not heed his father's warning and flew too close to the sun, the wax binding the wings together melted and Icarus plunged to his death in the sea below. Phoebus, realizing what had happened, regretted that the very life-giving warmth of his fiery solar sphere had been the direct cause of the improvident Icarus' demise, so he endued each feather from Icarus' wings floating on the fatal waters with the power to confer the gift of prophecy and knowledge of all languages on anyone chosen to possess it.

Since that time, all the great prophets in history have secretly received an Icarian feather as a gift from the god of light. Each has sworn in return to use that gift only in the service of others and never to obtain the least personal advantage, and its acceptance requires a written vow constraining the recipient to a life of rigorous self-abnegation, failing which, he must forfeit not only the gift but that which he loves most in the world.

The document details the manner in which the feather must be used. Before retiring at night, he who has received it must indite in his own blood on a slip of parchment any question asked of him by an earnest seeker. The blood is to be drawn from the well that reappears when the quill touches the palm of his left hand. After burning the parchment and inhaling its smoky incense, he must wipe the quill clean and place the feather beneath his pillow. The answer will be revealed in a dream and must be reported orally in the utmost confidence to the original petitioner before noon on the following morning. In compensation for this service, payment in an amount not to exceed the fee of an ordinary scrivener may be accepted, but for the poor the service must be provided at no cost.

The feather confers the ability to traverse both time and space. Its possessor has only to pass the feather over and around his right leg and then, changing hands, over and around his left, describing a figure eight, to awake the next morning on any date and at any destination whose name he has written on a piece of parchment. Upon the death of the scribe, this and all other powers that inhere in the quill are annulled.

Such are the details of the compact that are known and can be related here.

After he obtains Joos's signature, Phoebus touches the bulge where he knows the young Dutchman has hidden his purse.

"Inside you will always find as many *scudi d'oro* as I have just given you. They should be used to maintain yourself in reasonable comfort while you are in Rome. There you will be retained by Donna Olimpia Maidalchini, sister-in-law of Innocent X, but you must demonstrate your true worth by foretelling an event about which she will show the keenest interest. Once she has received you and you are alone in her presence, you will reveal to her that on 29 March of this year a Franciscan friar clandestinely engaged by a foreign power to assist another spy who has infiltrated the Holy Alliance will perish when a fiery stone thrown from heaven strikes him on the thigh just outside the refectory of the Convento di Santa Maria della Pace in Milan. When she asks you whence you came and on

whose authority you speak, you will tell her that you have been sent from your homeland on a divine mission about which you will have more to relate after the event you predicted has come to pass. She will ply you with additional questions, but you must insist that you can tell her nothing more until a personal envoy she dispatches to Milan provides incontrovertible proof that what you have predicted is true. It is imperative that neither you nor she speak of this matter to anyone else before then.

"But why would such a great lady even deign to meet with a poor farm boy in tatters from Brabant?" asks Joos incredulously.

"I will clothe you in such princely vestments, and you will address all those in her household with such eloquence, that she will welcome you even before she knows the reason for which you have called. But before she will grant you an audience, you must convey this to her through her servant."

With these words, Phoebus draws from the air a small swatch of black cloth bearing two red stripes and hands it directly to Joos.

"She will know instantly what this means," Phoebus continues, "and will ask you where and how you obtained it. You will tell her simply that you come as a friend of the Cross and the Sword and will respond to her remaining questions only after what you have prophesied has been fulfilled. You must in turn comply with her request to remain in custody under guard until news reaches her from Milan confirming your prediction. This will require some months, but meanwhile you will be treated well in her household."

"I do not know if I can remember all of this—and what will I say to her once the prophecy has come to pass?" Joos anxiously inquires.

"That will be revealed to you in good time, but now I will convey you to the Palazzo Pamphilj, and there you will do exactly as I have instructed."

II.

Joos cannot explain the strange and precipitous manner of his arrival in the Piazza Navona. He knows only that an angel has sent him to Rome on an important mission, that he is now adorned from head to foot in unimaginably costly and elegant garments, and that his fortunes have taken a dramatic turn for the better. He believes this sudden reversal has come about because God has recognized not only his dire need but also his superior moral worth as a sometimes practicing Christian of exemplary ambition who desires nothing more than to achieve the level of comfort and importance to which his enterprising conduct and several dozen Ave Marias have duly entitled him.

The Pope is celebrating a Jubilee next year, and plans are already afoot for the sweeping architectural transformation of the piazza, which still retains the size and shape of Domitian's storied circus built for public games, horse races, and theatrical spectacles. The Palazzo Pamphilj—the Pontiff's family residence—is situated at the southwest end of the piazza, and now commands attention as it nears completion after six years of renovations, expansion, and redecoration under the watchful supervision of "La Papessa"—Donna Olimpia Maidalchini herself.

Donna Olimpia is a formidable woman without whom Innocent X makes no decision of any consequence. Born simply Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, the Pope knows he owes his rise to power to the wife of his long deceased brother, Pamphilio, for it was through Olimpia's brilliant political maneuvering that he was appointed nuncio to the courts at Naples and Madrid and later attained the dignity of cardinal. He also knows that the streets of Rome have long been abuzz with rumors that Olimpia is his mistress, and that her insatiable craving for status and riches has tarnished his papacy with allegations of nepotism, simony, and prostitution. La Papessa is at once Innocent's most crucial ally and his greatest liability, but he hopes the projects and celebrations for his Jubilee will cast them both in a more favorable light.

Though unattended by so much as a single servant, Joos, now wearing a broad-brimmed hat with high conical crown and a pair of fine leather boots with gilded spurs, is admitted through the imposing arched entrance to the east wing of the palazzo by a liveried footman who courteously takes his cloak and hat and asks his name and the purpose for his visit. As he is conducted up to the piano nobile, the footman apologetically explains that Donna

Olimpia is occupied at the moment with an architect and painter who have come to discuss their latest plans with her, but if Joos has pressing business, it may be possible to arrange a brief meeting.

"My business is of the most pressing kind, indeed," Joos explains, "and is of vital interest to both Donna Olimpia and His Holiness. If you would convey this to her ladyship," he continues, presenting the black cloth with red stripes to the footman, "I am certain she will appreciate the urgency of my visit."

"In that case, Jonkheer van Dongen" replies the footman, "I assure you she will be informed immediately. Please wait here."

Joos has not long to wait as he sits admiring the stunning mythological frescoes and friezes executed by Rome's most gifted artists that surround him on every side. These he takes to be scenes of heaven, though their brilliant, alluring sensuality gives rise to less than quiet thoughts. Never before has his imagination been fired by the presence of so much bare flesh, and even though what he sees are no more than painted images, he scarcely has time to cross his legs before Donna Olimpia, in the company of two female attendants, makes her entry.

Donna Olimpia might have expected him to stand at once and approach her deferentially, kneel on his left knee, then take her right hand and kiss her ring. But instantly enchanted by his appearance and eager to engage him in conversation, she motions for Joos to remain seated while two other servants bring in an imposing *sedia* upholstered in crimson Florentine damask for her convenience and place it a discreet distance away from the young Dutchman.

"You are, then, Jonkheer van Dongen?" she asks in a cordially condescending tone, after being eased into her seat by the two ladies. "Would you be so kind as to inform me whence you have come and to whom I owe the honor of this embassy?" Joos is intimidated by the formal manner and haughtily self-possessed visage of this grande dame in her late fifties wearing a dark hooded dress and bearing in her right hand what appears to be a tightly rolled vellum scroll bound with a black ribbon.

"I come from Holland as a friend of the Cross and Sword, Your Ladyship, and I do have something of great importance to tell you, but—"

"You very likely wish to do so in the strictest confidence. You may leave now," Donna Olimpia informs the two retainers who remain at her side, brushing them away with the long tapering fingers of her right hand while reassuring herself with the left that the sheathed Ottoman dagger she has discreetly concealed in the sleeve of her robe still lies within easy reach. "I believe we will be quite comfortable now. You were saying, Jonkheer van Dongen?"

The remainder of his audience with La Papessa proceeds with seamless decorum, as Joos divulges only what his "angel" has directed him to say and Donna Olimpia, much taken with his auburn locks and boyish good looks, listens with the keenest attention. By the end of their exchange, la Papessa is convinced that there is something so disturbing yet irresistible about this enigmatic young Dutchman that, however dubious the pretext for his visit and the outcome of his prophecy, she must thoroughly investigate his background and claims. Reaffirming that what Joos has shared with her will remain a completely private matter, she invites him to remain as her guest in the palazzo.

"Since you have arrived without papers of any kind under a veil of mystery, I must, of course, insist that you be accompanied by a member of my staff for the entire time you remain within these walls, but you are otherwise free to come and go as you wish. You will be heartened to learn that I had already planned to send one of my men to Milan about another matter. He will be there well before March 29, and it will be no difficult matter to devise some means of ensuring that he is present at Santa Maria della Pace on that date to witness what comes to pass. He will return shortly thereafter, and we shall be thankful to God for whatever He, in his infinite wisdom, has chosen to reveal.

Donna Olimpia, of course, is far too shrewd to allow someone so unaccountably familiar with the symbols and purposes of her Black Order to slip away unattended into the city, particularly someone about whom none of the eleven members of the counterespionage arm of the Holy Alliance has ever collected a scrap of intelligence. Joos

will be closely watched day and night, and his every activity and contact minutely scrutinized. La Papessa knows that there are those who will stop at nothing to catch her off guard and undermine her defenses, and not even a face as prepossessing and angelic as that of this dashing young Dutchman will lure her into complacency.

III.

Joos could not be happier about the weeks he has spent in the Palazzo Pamphilj, which serves as an ideal port from which to launch his many pleasurable excursions in and around the Eternal City. When the weather is so inclement that he is confined indoors, he especially enjoys watching the artists transform simple paint and plaster into images of what he imagines are the passionate pastimes and thrilling adventures awaiting believers in the afterlife.

Since he now requires attire appropriate to his new station in life, Joos has purchased a wardrobe of the latest fashions created by Rome's most celebrated designers, drawing liberally upon the inexhaustible supply of *scudi d'oro* his "guardian angel" so presciently provided. Among his purchases is a hat with a broad gold-braided brim he has embellished with the precious white feather of Icarus, which he likes to admire in his fine Venetian hand mirror before exiting the palace of an afternoon to stroll around the Piazza Navona. During his excursions by carriage throughout the city, he glimpses many with careworn faces whose burdens he could lighten with just one of the gold coins from his purse or with the hidden knowledge he could obtain about missing or departed relatives and friends; recovery from disease or debt; or upcoming births, weddings, truces, and peace treaties. But Joos is far too busy adorning and amusing himself to be a seer ministering endlessly to the needs of Rome's dejected, downtrodden, and dispossessed. He will postpone his oracular and ascetic obligations for the time being lest, as he has persuaded himself, his own health and spirits begin to flag for having suffered twenty-four years of unremitting earthly travail.

Observing Joos's fondness for beauty and luxury, Donna Olimpia is reminded of her own son Camillo—before he fell from her good graces, renounced his post as cardinal nephew, and married the Princess of Rossano. Since there is nothing in the young Dutchman's behavior so far to aggravate her suspicions, he is now seen with her at mass and sometimes accompanies her in her coach. In spite of herself, la Papessa fancies making Joos her protégé. Perhaps, she muses, she will take him further into her confidence even if he should prove to be no more than an audaciously delusional idealist from a remote province of her Catholic empire. So few are the joys of one who, disqualified because of her sex from sitting on the throne of that empire, must, nevertheless, vigilantly defend it against the relentless schemes of a reprehensibly absolutist French cardinal, his Austrian whore, and the swelling legions of an international Protestant heresy.

Such are her thoughts when, on 15 April 1650, a special messenger from Cesare Monti, the Archbishop of Milan, arrives at the Palazzo Pamphilj with some astonishing news. It comes in the form of a letter from the Archbishop in which His Grace deeply regrets to inform Donna Olimpia Midalchini that her envoy, the Franciscan friar Federigo Neri, was killed on 29 March when a flaming object the size of a large melon, hurtling down from the sky in full view of at least a dozen witnesses outside the refectory at the Convento di Santa Maria della Pace, struck his right thigh with so much force that he was knocked unconscious to the ground. His wound and burns were of such severity that death occurred almost instantly.

The Archbishop further regrets to inform Donna Olimpia Midalchini that the papers bundled with the present missive, which were found among the personal effects of said Federigo Neri subsequent to this extraordinary event, provide evidence that the friar was suborned by an as yet unidentified party to assist in the illicit transmission of documents bearing the papal seal to the offices of the Chief Minister of France.

"Mazarin, you will pay for this!" Donna Olimpia exclaims, as her keen eye discerns that each of the purloined papal documents has been addressed to the Chief Minister in a distinctive second hand she recognizes as that of the Genovese priest Alberto Mercati, an expert in French affairs employed in the offices of the Vatican's secretariat of state. This is particularly troubling because Mercati is a trusted member of the circle of Cardinal Panciroli, and it was upon her recommendation that Panciroli was appointed by Innocent X as both secretary of state and supervisor of the Holy Alliance. But now she holds in her own hands all the evidence required to prove Mercati is a spy, and that her trusted envoy Federigo Neri was a link in an insidious chain with which Mazarin hoped to shackle the papacy.

There is something more that is equally distressing in the papers forwarded to Donna Olimpia by the Archbishop of Milan. At her written request, His Grace dispatched his own envoy to Holland to make discreet inquiries among local clerics about a certain Joos van Dongen, which envoy scrupulously recorded all such facts as they could provide about the family background and circumstances of the individual in question. The pious, richly attired young gentleman who appeared unexpectedly and without documentation, servants, or baggage several months ago, who is fluent in both Italian and Latin, and who exhibits such a marked appreciation for the amenities and decor of her magnificent Palazzo Pamphilj, could not possibly be the same person as the uneducated farmer's son who, as described by the Archbishop's envoy, "abandoned his impoverished widowed mother last winter and has not since been seen in Dongen or any of the neighboring villages." On the contrary, reasons Donna Olimpia, the person bearing this despicable peasant's name who now resides as a guest under her roof must be an impostor whose intentions are not merely far different from what they seemed but are actually inimical to the papacy and her own person.

"Fetch me Jonkheer van Dongen at once!" demands la Papessa, flushed with indignation. "I will have some answers!"

Donna Olimpia's guard does not have long or far to look, for Joos is watching an artist retouch the image of a dove on the Pamphilj coat of arms above the arched window at the end of the long gallery overlooking the Piazza Navona.

"Pietro, there is something I just do not understand. Why would such a great and wealthy family as the Pamphilj have you decorate their walls with the commonest of birds?" Joos asks.

"The dove is no ordinary pigeon but a symbol of peace, the Holy Spirit, and God's covenant with man. But just between you and me, Jonkheer van Dongen, she also makes good eating. My cousin in Tivoli keeps a small dovecote, and only a few mated pairs of these little pigeons can produce about fifty squabs a year. Absolutely delicious—though their eggs make very tiny omelets!

"They are such small weak creatures I doubt they could even survive on their own," opines Joos.

"You are quite right. In fact a hawk attacked the dovecote and left most of my cousin's birds dead or maimed."

"Jonkheer van Dongen, you will come with me," interrupted la Papessa's private guard. "The Lady requires your presence immediately."

"What? Is there some problem?"

"Come with me," repeated the guard emphatically.

"We shall speak later, Pietro," Joos hastily proposes as he is escorted to the stairway.

"Yes. Perhaps, Jonkheer van Dongen," replies Pietro. "Perhaps."

IV.

Olimpia's face is a mask of fury. She feels deeply betrayed and, worst of all, bitterly deceived by her own growing emotional attachment to the young Dutchman. This is worse than Camillo's renunciation of the cardinalate and defiant marriage to Olimpia Aldobrandini. This is far worse than last Christmas Eve when her nineteen-year-old nephew, Cardinal Francesco Mardalchini, got in a violent brawl at Santa Maria Maggiore when he tried to take personal possession of a box of Jubilee medals. This Joos van Dongen has not merely tried to steal her heart; he has stolen her trust, and that is unforgivable.

"Have you searched him thoroughly, Bruno?" queries La Papessa.

"Yes, Your Ladyship," replies the guard.

"Then you will seat the prisoner over there and remain here with me," she declaims.

"Prisoner!" exclaims Joos. Have I committed some crime?"

"That is what I am about to determine, young man," she retorts, wiping her hands and forehead with a lace handkerchief which is already moist with tears none but she knows have been shed. "I am certain that you know what has happened. The Franciscan friar died exactly as you predicted. I had come to trust Fra Federigo as I had hoped I could come to trust you, but he proved false and is now beyond punishment. You, however, are not."

"What have I done to deserve punishment?" Joos asks apprehensively. "I do not understand any of this."

"First, I want to know what weapon was used to assassinate Neri, where it was concealed, and who fired it with such deadly precision."

"Weapon? What weapon?"

"Would you have me believe that God Himself told you He was going to terminate the life of Fra Federigo on a date certain by hurling a meteor down from heaven and striking him to the ground?"

"It was not God but an angel who told me what would come to pass and sent me here to forewarn you."

"Do you take me for a fool? Can you possibly believe what you have just said? Tell me why one of our Lord's bright messengers would have chosen you, an untutored peasant farmer who abandoned his widowed mother, to undertake such a mission? But you are not that Joos van Dongen, are you? You are a highly trained linguist and beguiling impostor sent here to win my trust by a foreign power willing to sacrifice at least two of its best spies in the erroneous belief that I, a devout woman and servant of God, would be taken in by your preposterous charade. Well, young man, I am neither too old nor too ingenuous to fall prey to such an absurd plot. Who are you working for? Who is paying you to indulge and disport yourself as you have been doing these past several months? Is it Mazarin? Or the Queen Harlot herself, Anne d'Autriche? Or do you sleep with that abominable *Staten Bijbel* under your pillow? Answer me, boy, or the consequences will be even greater than you can possibly imagine."

"I have nothing under my pillow," insists Joos, suddenly aware of the irony of his words, "or up my sleeve." I am truly Joos van Dongen as anyone in Brabant who knows me can attest. The fine clothing and *scudi d'oro* with which I arrived were gifts from my guardian angel, who also conferred on me the gift of prophecy and knowledge of foreign tongues."

"And did your angel also transport you to Italy high above the Alps on a silver cloud and tell you every secret about the Black Order, whose emblems you so brazenly mocked? My patience is at an end. I will give you the remainder of the day to reflect on your situation, and if you are as wise as you think you are clever, tomorrow you will give me credible answers to all my questions. Meanwhile you will remain here in your rooms under continuous guard and will not be permitted to move elsewhere inside or outside of the palace."

V.

Donna Olimpia's complete transformation from maternal patroness to hostile interrogator has left Joos reeling and feverish. Although he allowed her to believe that his fine clothing and linguistic abilities bespoke the status of an aristocrat, he had not knowingly lied to her about his "angel" and the purpose for which he had been sent to her. But la Papessa will brook no further attempts on his part to tell the truth, and he is unlikely to be spared severe punishment even if he confesses to treacherous crimes he never committed. Though she may hold the actual reins of papal power and profess her Catholic faith in the most forceful and grandiloquent terms, Donna Olimpia is too pragmatic and skeptical to believe in modern prophets and miracles. And she has been bitterly disillusioned far too often by young men close to her to abide any threat of deceit, let alone treasonous acts such as those of which she has already accused Joos.

As these thoughts revolve in his mind, Joos catches sight of a hat graced by a long white feather resting atop a piece of parchment on a walnut bureau by a window overlooking the piazza. As he fixes his gaze on the feather, a smile breaks unexpectedly across his face, and he approaches the bureau. Plucking the feather from his hat, he plunges the quill into his left palm, and with the blood that issues from the well that presently appears he inscribes "s-Hertogenbosch, 21 June 2050" on the smooth white rectangular surface before him. Next he passes the feather over and around his right thigh and, changing hands, similarly encircles his left thigh before wiping the quill on his rust-red silk *pourpoint*. At last, he removes the blood-stained doublet, puts on a fresh linen shirt and simple black jacket, and retrieving a large pillow from his bed, places the feather beneath it on the bureau, reclines comfortably in his seat, and falls quickly and soundly asleep.

Not long after he has closed his eyes, Joos begins to dream. He is floating high over the Alps on a shining cloud, marveling at the sight of the snow-capped peaks, verdant valleys, and sparkling lakes below. His feather emerges from under the cloud and, now tickling the inside of his legs, grows suddenly into a great translucent wing, out of which unfolds another of equal size, strength, and luminosity. Between this splendid pair of wings appear the back, nape, and crown of a great bird of prey, and to his astonishment, Joos is astride an enormous eagle in pursuit of two curious winged creatures, a man and a boy. They are oblivious to his approach, and the youth, exhilarated by his flight, weaves back and forth executing a fluid series of figure eights in the clear unclouded sky. His elder calls out, warning him not to trespass into Phoebus' fiery domain, but it is already too late, the young man's waxen wings fail, and he plummets into the deadly waters below.

"Did you recognize that boy?" asks the eagle. "Did you see his face?"

"You can speak!" exclaims Joos. "But are you not a bird?"

"They called him Icarus. Such a lovely boy! I would have made him my prophet, but he was heedless and disobedient, and tried to rise far above his proper place."

"Then is it you—my angel?"

"Men were never meant to fly in the same manner as birds. His father was at fault, knowing how easily wax melts with just a little heat."

"You speak as if I were not here!" protests Joos.

"They should have remained where they were, on Crete. I would have found him there and borne him away, just as Zeus took Ganymede—"

"Will you not listen?" Joos shouts, beside himself.

"It is you, Joos van Dongen, who will not listen. In spite of your lies, I came to your aid and gave you the greatest gifts any man can receive. But like she in whose service you were placed, you invoked the name of heaven only to pursue the pleasures of wealth and the privileges of power. You were immune to the suffering and needs of others. You were averse to the simplest of truths if they posed any obstacle to your own immovable thoughts and desires. Because you have broken our compact, the gifts you received are now annulled, and you will surrender to me immediately that which you love most in the world."

"I love nothing so much in the world as you, my good angel!" Joos cries.

"You love nothing so much in the world as yourself. And though it grieves me to reclaim the soul of one so young and hale to power my solar sphere, those like you, so completely puffed up and full of themselves, have always made the best fuel. So come now, into this flask with you. Only the husk I leave behind."

VI.

There is a small but highly regarded psychiatric hospital in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Dutch city perhaps best known as the birthplace of Hieronymus Bosch, whose apocalyptic visions of hell are among the most fantastic and terrifying scenes ever painted by a human hand. Nearby, within plain view of the residents of this facility, are the historic Bolwoningen Houses, whose gigantic globular forms, incubating in what might be described as a three-dimensional recreation of a Bosch landscape, are counted among the oddest buildings in the world. Across the surreal tableau of these fifty densely clustered egg-like habitats, from which a species of bipedal hatchlings continuously emerge, rove the vacant eyes of one Joos van Dongen, Classical scholar and emeritus professor of Theology at the University of Utrecht, who at the height of his career unaccountably leaped from a boat into the chill, murky waters of the nearby River Maas. After an endless series of scans and other tests using the best equipped laboratories and state-of-the-art technology, the specific cause of his sudden and virtually complete memory loss remains an unsolved mystery. The only clue to the distinguished professor's condition seems to come from his compulsive but involuntary repetition of a single phrase whose authorship has been ascribed to various ancient sages, including Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Thales of Miletus, or, as some believe, the legendary poetess and priestess Pheomonoe. Juvenal asserts that the phrase, once inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, descended from heaven itself. It consists of just two words whose significance remains contentiously elusive:

GNOTHI SEAUTON

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