

About 4,200 words.

THE LONG APOLOGY

JULIAN PILGRIM'S TRAIL. EN ROUTE TO THE ORACLE.

Night. Cold.

Deke walked behind Melinka, his eyes fixed on her leather-skirted posterior, underneath which the raw backs of her thighs flopped against the mesh of her stockings like sleek pink salmon caught in a net.

“You know, back in the day, when I had my wife, you were all over me. I was just too much of a gentleman to do anything about it.”

“Where’d your wife go, Deke?”

“She disappeared.”

“That’s a real big shock, Deke. Honestly.”

“I’m being serious.”

Melinka stopped but didn’t look back.

“This mission, Deke, you’re not going to like it.”

“Well that I might have guessed.”

“Especially if you’re serious.”

“Won’t you look at me?”

Melinka turned now and in half-light, her features shone dark and beautiful.

“What?”

“There. Hello.”

“Deke, when you let me get my belly eaten by that snow tiger, I hated you but eventually forgave. You know how desperately I was in love with my betrothed, you knew I wanted to have children.”

“Can’t you? Didn’t they sew you up?”

She stared off at a distant snow-capped peak.

“Yes, they did. And it doesn’t matter. Anyways, I’m here for you, Deke. I’m here because you have no other friends.”

“And I appreciate it, I really do.”

“But I have no interest in wasting time standing here in the cold while you fumble for words. Words that could do nothing, really, that time hasn’t already done.”

“Fine. Now, what happened to your suitor?”

“Deke he was a good man. Far better than you’ll ever be.”

“But he didn’t love you?”

“Watch where you trample, old man. I express my anger through violence.”

“So do I. Tell me if I’m so naïve about these matters. Maybe I’d like to hear about a real love.”

“Didn’t you love your wife, Deke?”

“I still do.”

“And yet you would seduce me. Merely because I’m here and irrespective of the reason for it.”

“If I’d have thought I could ever have had you for a second, I wouldn’t be being truthful if I told you I wouldn’t have done it. Or would still like to do it.”

Melinka now turned all the way around to face him.

“There was a time when I might have said yes.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

She smiled broadly, but still from behind a deep curtain of sadness, swishing with the billowing breezes of past painful and unreadably spectral memories.

“You wouldn’t have a clue of what to do with me.”

Deke stumbled. “Oh...”

“You see. You love like a boy.”

“And tell me then, wise woman. How does a man love?”

She clubbed him in the heart with her fist.

“With a fucking woman in there. Not with her ass leading him through pitch cold darkness on the way to a fruitcake oracle to find out where the woman he should love has gone off to.”

“So the gods have sent you to shun and punish.”

Melinka screamed now, in bold defiance of the convention observed by many pilgrims of maintaining a contemplative silence along the old sacred trail.

“You are so blind to the pain of this world. All you see is your own pain, you fool, all of which you caused. Think! Think for just one moment why I might be here.”

“Not because you love me.”

“Yes! Ding ding ding. You win, you old turd. I’m here because I pity you. Even while you let that cat feast on my child-bearing organs, I admired you. Because you’re so lousy. Because you abused me. I figured you knew something.”

“So will we never be?”

“Here we are being, you dumb hop-clogged wonder of a head.”

“Is this love, then?”

“How do you not know?”

“Because it feels like accusations.”

“And how would you become better? If I didn’t point out what a putz you are.”

“And is that the moral of this journey? For Deke the slayer of man and beast to finally become a good decent man?”

“A woman’s love wouldn’t do it. You’ve sent her packing to the undrawn corners of the map.”

Now Deke was fit to scream.

“I still don’t get it. Am I to suffer more? Endlessly? For the rest of my life?”

“You’re lucky! You have me. Who cares for my suffering?”

Deke now stumbled badly, and shut up.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I didn’t know.”

She turned and marched off.

Deke marched behind in silence. In the shadow of his contemplations, the little rocks of the trail lit with a pale amber glow. He looked ahead to alert Melinka to the marvel.

He then saw with dumbfounded amazement that her feet were glowing with the same dim gold glow. On the edge of her cheek beyond her raven hair bobbing back and forth in time with the metronomic regularity of her backside, were little yellow beads caught in the light. Tears which seemed like little worshippers of the cold night stars and moon.

I’ve been blind, he thought. To all beauty.

You are being led.

“Who was that?” he shouted.

“What? What did you hear?”

“Did you just talk? Into my head?”

“If you heard a voice, Deke. It wasn’t mine.”

“Well then who was it?”

“What did it say?”

“That I was being led.”

“Well, then it’s a rather painfully obvious demon who likes making redundant observations to amuse himself. Or it’s Death. They say he stalks this trail, close to the mountains.”

“And what does he mean to say then? Besides cryptic things.”

“He probably just likes to talk. Everyone gets lonely, Deke. If you don’t want to hear from him, then just stop thinking. Should be easy enough for you.”

“And is that how you do it?”

“No. I hum. You see those trees.”

Deke saw trees swaying in the near distance, to the right of the trail, conifers with little pale glowing orange needles, like sun-tinged frost had settled on them, causing them to sparkle in the bitter autumn night.

“They hum too.”

“Fuck,” said Deke.

“That’s what a clear conscience can do.”

“If only I were more like a tree, or a woman.”

But he hummed anyway.

They slept under a thick of quieter trees behind a wind-break of crudely piled ferns. Deke enclosed Melinka with his arms; it was a chaste embrace even though a slight smile etched its way across her sleeping face.

For Deke, it was without passion or reciprocity. Even if he loved a woman, he realized, if she didn’t desire him, then he was still cold. All night he held her without

sleeping. Finally light crept up into a window between the gnarled swirling branches surrounding them. Melinka stirred.

“Good morning,” she said at last.

Deke laughed but a change had come over him.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

“And you’ve always been a smooth talker.”

“Why don’t you believe me?”

“I told you last night I thought. I’m not here to believe or disbelieve.”

There’s no winning, he realized.

Hi.

“Fuck off, Death,” muttered Deke under his breath.

“What?” said Melinka.

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

They marched all day with nothing to eat. The ground was redder with strewn leaves. The slopes fell more gently to either side, and rippled into valleys until the horizons distantly swallowed them.

Their wordless peace was on a much stabler footing now, and reminded Deke of their prior days of zen camaraderie in the dangerous bestial wilds of the land.

“I never thought we’d make such a journey together.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know. An interior journey. With feelings and shit.”

Melinka laughed. “They were always there. You just ignored them.”

“And you didn’t?”

“No. How could I have? What do you think I was talking about all the time? Don’t you remember?”

“No. Honestly I wasn’t listening. And now you don’t speak until spoken to. It would be nice to have just a little bit of mindless chatter. If you please.”

“Fine,” said Melinka. “So there’s this woman in my village who races slugs.”

“She races slugs? What on earth for? Where does she race them?”

“Doesn’t matter. She always wins.”

Deke had never laughed so hard, it seemed, once it finally began.

“Where’d you hear that one?”

“At Fairlodgings, long ago.”

“Yes, we had some good lads back then. Not excluding the present company.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve never regretted becoming a warrior.”

“There’s few enough of them around anymore.”

“It’s a different world.”

“So it is. Still, it never hurts to know how to fight.”

“But how do you win without fighting, Deke? That’s what most people are concerned with nowadays.”

“If I knew that dear, you’d have got my ring on your finger, and...”

“And?”

“Nothing.”

“What about Jax, Deke? Your son.”

“I did the right thing by that boy finally. He is with Henry, in Lumiare.”

“Yes, he is on the same path of unknowledge that you followed for so many years.”

“Well, then I wish I had the benefit of your wisdom a week ago. And I wish you had it all those years ago.”

“Deke, all of us Jolians know perfectly well what is best for others. So few are receptive to hear it though. Think of how low you had to fall to even entertain a word I said that didn’t start with, ‘Hey bro.’”

“I think I’ve got the hang of this. Everything I say is dumb or wrong, and because I shouldn’t even be talking in the first place, I’m to view your every pronouncement as if it is a proverb chipped into marble.”

“I think you’re learning then, old man.”

“Well it’s incredibly frustrating, and...”

“Yes I know, you’re getting aroused again.”

“DAMMIT, WOMAN.”

“Wait until we have to schmooze those priests at the Oracle. You think you’re fumbling for words now?”

“I’ll just kill them all!” shouted Deke.

“Well that’ll just solve everything. Maybe I should do the talking.”

“Yes, then, why don’t you?”

“They won’t listen to me, I’m a woman.”

“So you keep saying.”

“And a Jolie. It is time to start wording your question. You’ll only have one.”

The Oracle was in the center of a large plain. Strategically it had no plan for defense.

It was used to large armies surrounding it. It was used to being an island bobbing up, its ghostly walls protected by a dream ocean of blood.

The Jolian Pilgrim’s Trail hugged the mountains until the very end, when it descended sharply from the ridge and beamed like a light to the off-white heap.

Melinka coached Deke, who had regained some size and stature, mainly as a result of just breathing the hearty air.

But Melinka had withered. Her face was drawn, her clothes hung limp on her malnourished frame.

Yet her face still shone with an intense light. Her eyes sparkled, and it was clear some joy had returned to live in her.

Duty and purpose perhaps. For Deke these were residual facets of his heritage. His long-slumbering nobility was also perhaps rousing at long last.

“The Oracle will not want to reveal a secret of this magnitude. It will ponder your question not as a whole, but part by part, so that it can successfully mislead you. It’s greatest hope will be to send you to your death.”

“Ah, but life is dear when it has a purpose.”

“Right. The Oracle is not evil, but it is suspicious. And it will seek to test you. To determine if you are a worthy agent.”

“And you believe I am? The gods believe this, too?”

“The gods believe that you are tough. But I believe you are capable of more than toughness. I hope to see you redeemed.”

“Why are you buttering me up? Why do you appeal to my soft underbelly? You know what it stirs in me.”

“Yes. Your soft underbelly, as you call it, has always been coddled. Never tested. You have behaved terribly because others have allowed you to do it. It is a weakness of your character, and a testament to others’ cowardice, that you used your powers of intimidation to frighten everyone.”

“So I am to fight it then? These urges coming to life.”

“Much will come out, if not all. That is the nature of this particular quest.”

“And when will all the killing take place?”

“You joke. And sex, too, when will that happen?”

“Yes.”

“Who knows? Do you ever get bored by the prospect of orgies and death?”

“No.”

Melinka bent over with a cramp. “I’m so hungry. I’ll die soon if I don’t have a meal.”

Then she turned fiercely on Deke, who was looking especially calm and pine-fresh in the crisp air.

“Do you think that I am so chaste? That I wouldn’t want the love of a man? So what keeps me from throwing myself at you, giving you what most people would say is a tremendous body? It’s disgust. The thought of you drooling over me, scratching me with that scaly beard, using me up, throwing me away, and then bragging about it to your good-time buddies. I think I’ll pass.”

Deke laughed. “You know how many times I’ve heard crap like that. Let me find something for you to eat. My dear, I like a challenge, too. I would not dream of taking advantage of you. Among all the lasses I’ve ever met, you I like. I respect.”

This seemed to at least mollify her electric rage.

Deke left Melinka sitting grumpily under a tree and took off alone into a cleft to look for small game.

Soon Melinka was asleep. She dreamed of a great bloody war. Deke was slain, she believed herself to be long dead. And she saw a boy wearing a golden helm striding through a snarling sea of battle, approaching a malevolent inky blot in the heart of the enemy ranks. She had a sense that this boy with the golden helm was Deke’s son Jax. She awoke with a start, and forgot the whole thing.

It was dark. And she was alone.

It was also very cold now; she had awoken in violent shivers.

She gathered sticks for a fire, and rummaged through her bag for the flint. When Deke returned hours later, a good-sized fire was roaring. Melinka's face shown pale and drawn, white even in the amber glow of the flames.

Deke grinned.

"I wasn't gonna come back with nothing."

"What do you have? A rat? A gopher?"

"No. I have. This."

From behind his back he produced a wrapped bundle and a jug of beer.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Did you find a shop in a tree? Do you now shit out bonbons and booze in addition to good fortune?"

Deke laughed. "I found a caravan about 8 miles behind us. Chatty types. Jolians. I mentioned you were with us, and they gladly gave me these. I don't think they were pilgrims though. I think it's a duty shipment for the priests."

"Most likely," she said. "Ah well. You said I was here? I guess what's done is done."

They ate in silence, and Deke drank.

Melinka regarded him skeptically after he had finished the entire jug.

"Are you sure that was wise? Drinking the whole thing?" she asked.

"It improves your company slightly," said Deke.

Melinka expelled a short raft of air and looked away with wounded disapproval.

"I'm sorry," said Deke. "I'm a fun guy."

"Don't you try anything. I'll stab you, swear to the gods I will."

"I would never. So are we ready for bed then?"

They curled together near the fire. Deke was soon snoring. Melinka said her thanks to the gods for their good fortune in the wilderness, and soon fell asleep, and was troubled by the exact same dream.

When Deke awoke Melinka was already up. He stretched and creaked and rubbed at his forehead. "I'm thirsty," he said.

Melinka had restored the fire to its height. “Deke,” she said. “I don’t feel one bit sorry for you.”

“Honey. You have no idea how hard my life has been. As fond as you are of making judgments, and as right as you often are, you should know that not every bad thing which has happened has been my fault.”

“I know,” said Melinka. “Perhaps we could have avoided a lot of pain, if we’d have known each other better.”

“But we’d never have made it here. My dear, no matter what happens down there in that valley, and what may come which would drive us apart again, I want you to know that these two days walking this old dusty trail, cold as a couple of dead penguins, with you, it’s been the best times of my life, maybe since last we quested.”

Melinka smiled. “I don’t know if I could say the same for sure, and yet, hearing you say that does fix a thing or two between us.”

“Water,” he said. “Best thing for a hangover, or an outbreak of sentimentality.”

This was another feature of Deke’s personality which Melinka suddenly remembered. In the depths of privation, mortal terror; in the shadow of death and dismemberment, even; is when Deke’s bare humanity and an endearing humor surfaced.

She knew better than to bank on it, but she knew she could trust it, until things got complicated again.

And there was nothing more complicated than an Oracle question.

Well here goes, she thought.

“Have you given any more thought to the question you’ll ask?”

Deke grumbled and groused.

“Let’s just live up here. Wait for that caravan. Every month or so, eat like kings and queens. I’ll come up with something.”

“Time is not our friend in these matters.”

“Fine, then. Where is my wife?”

“And are you ready to hear the answer?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I fear, nay I know, that she is dead.”

Deke looked away now. Shame reddened his face.

Melinka sat beside him and put her arm around his neck. “We do not know that for sure. Even the gods do not know.”

“And yet, I dreamed of her. And though she did not know it, I knew it.”

Melinka shuddered and wisps of her own dream now set upon her.

“I will ask,” he said. “What I must do. Who I must kill, or what. To claim justice.”

Melinka nodded. “Now there’s a quest,” she said. “Which will astonish the Oracle.”

“Will you give everything for this purpose?” Melinka asked, after they had resumed their march, with much less joy and bounce, and she had thought about the question more.

“No,” said Deke without thinking. “But I would for you.”

Melinka huffed. “But I don’t love you, Deke.”

“Well then let us avoid the Oracle. Or you go on. Why should I devote what remains of my days to a chore like this?”

Melinka did not have a good answer to this, and she fell back into deep thought.

“If I were to love you,” she finally said. “What reason would you have to ask your question? To go after Starzanna.”

“You know, this has been a puzzle to me since the beginning. Why are we going after her? Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say.”

“Well then there are some things I must tell you, it would seem. The gods might have fervently hoped you would seek after your missing wife out of a sense of husbandly duty. Alas, they knew better, and so did I. So they sent me, to see if I could stir something in your heart. And alas, I have failed, too.”

“Nonsense. I will still go after my wife, as long as I have you by my side. I will go to hell itself and let her put the kiss of death on me. But if I am to live, it’s going to be as a puppy at your feet. I’ll slay a thousand men, but I’m done wondering what this devil of a heart is for. I trust you, you alone, amongst all the creatures of this world, and my

heart is in your keeping, to do with as you like. Spurn it, betray it, I have no use for it. For me it is a blot of pain on a tear-stained bar napkin.”

Melinka stopped on her own this time. She had not expected to encounter the conquered lamb of her former tormentor on the trail, much less a feeling she might enjoy, and definitely not a sense of mastery.

Deke’s face was open, pure, boyish.

“Are you being serious?” she asked.

“As a heart attack,” he said.

“Well then,” she said, “in that case, it appears I have even more explaining to do. And I can hear the gods laughing at me right now for my pride. You must be wondering then, if you’re being serious and I can never tell, if you don’t care about your missing wife, then why should I and why should the gods?”

“Yes,” said Deke, sparking to some interest, “the thought had crossed my mind. I just assumed you’d tell me eventually.”

“The idea that I might pity you, and be interested in your redemption. That possibility is lost, but it was not completely wrong. I did indeed feel those things I said, I just had no idea that by saying them, or even by my coming here, that I would be responsible for a change in you.”

“Just like a woman,” said Deke, but even he wasn’t sure what he meant by it.

“Starzanna stole something long ago, which she shouldn’t have. It gave her too much knowledge, knowledge which drove her mad. And now she’s taken this knowledge and threatened to give it over to this world’s enemies.”

“And where do you come into this my dear? I haven’t seen you in 20 years, when our quests were for pure piss and terror on a windy day. Just what have you been up to this whole time? You weren’t married. Have you just been communing with the gods then?”

“I have been at my father’s home.”

“Look, I will help you. I owe you that. You don’t even have to tell me why. But please, no more games. I don’t know this woman who matches wits with Oracles and gods, I don’t know much but enough to know that I shouldn’t even try. But I also know

since you've come you've restored my trust in a good thing or two, so I believe you, I'll follow you. But you need to trust me, or we're both gonna end up dead before too long."

"I know," said Melinka. "I have learned a thing or two about myself, so far. The gods are enjoying their fun, so who am I to fight it? There will be enough fighting soon enough."

Deke smiled. "I think I'm better with an army in front of me than a sword nowadays."

Melinka smiled. "There you go being grandiose again."

"I've smelt the gods' at work in their kitchen before. They're not usually so concerned with the movements of two old sinners like ourselves. They've most likely got a whole lot of other pots boiling too."

"Yes," said Melinka. "Doubtless."

"There," said Deke. "Doesn't it feel better to live in the truth?"

"I don't know," said Melinka. "My purposes are still mysterious to myself."

"Let go of it honey. Give in. I'll not let you down."

Melinka smiled again. "Dammit, Deke, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you were charming."

"There it is. Some truth. Let it in. Let it fill you."

Melinka laughed. "Wow, I must be crazy. You're actually making some sense."

"Oh come on," he said. "Don't be afraid to tell me something really nice now."

"Very well, then. The man I think you could be, given the chance, is better than anything I ever could have dreamed of before. I have some hope this quest might succeed finally."

"And..."

"And," she said. "That's it. I'm still having trouble believing it completely."

"Very well," said Deke now. "That's fair. Very fair and well said."

"And..."

"I will be delighted with the opportunity of proving it to you. Again and again and again."

Melinka could not fail to see in Deke's beaming expression that he meant it, that he fully intended to be true, and not terrible.

But Deke's terribleness could be equally sincere, and what's more it was destructive and without mercy when it destroyed the good things in its care, and reversed its former proclamations.

Melinka reached into her chaotic traveling bag and removed a tissue.

She dropped it to the ground, and turned on her heels. "Pick it up," she said, "and I shall let you be my knight for now."

Deke watched it slowly ignite with a soft yellow tinge where it sat on the cold hard mud of the trail. A token. He grabbed it up and it immediately felt as if part of his heart had been returned. But returned better for having spent a short time in a better breast.

One small little healed part of a heart now beat inside him.
