

**A
GOD
IN
NEED
OF
HELP**

**A play in two acts
(or five, if you think about it)**

Sean Dixon

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ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

(Venice, Summer 1606. Council chambers in the Doge's castle. A judge – Renier Zen – presides. Beside him stands a man in the robes of a prelate: Federico Borromeo, Cardinal Archbishop of Milan. Next to them stands a mounted canvas, covered in a sheet. Venetian guards are posted at the doors. Four seeming prisoners are led to the centre and the cloaks removed from their heads, revealing them to be three powerfully built men – Dolfin, Marco, Cocco – and one seventeen-year-old boy – Rafal. A Landsknecht Captain is also present, cruelly bound. His uniform is dirty and torn, but one can still perceive the improvised ostentation characteristic of his mercenary brotherhood. Zen is consulting some papers.)

ZEN: Gentlemen, you have been called before the magistrate for the Republic of Venice, granted the authority to represent the Council in matters of state security. I believe you all know why you're here. However, formality dictates a review.

MARCO: I am a ... simple ...

ZEN: But first you must swear an oath never to reveal what took place here, or even that you were here at all.

MARCO: But I ...

ZEN: Marco Chodeschino, oarmaker, strongman, swear!

MARCO: I swear!

ZEN: Pompeo Dolfin, actor, alchemist-assistant, snake-handler, strongman, swear!

DOLFIN: I swear!

ZEN: Benasuto Cocco, soldier, assassin, strongman, swear.

COCCO: I s-s–

ZEN: Yes, yes.

COCCO: I s–

ZEN: Boy named Rafal, no last name given and I refuse to call him a strongman when he's barely of age, there's much that is funny about him and he's a scrawny –

MARCO: Leave the boy alone.

ZEN: – he's a scrawny little foreigner to boot –

MARCO: I said LEAVE THE BOY ALONE!

(It takes all the guards to restrain him. Finally, the boy puts his hand on Marco's shoulder and calms him.)

ZEN: Rafal, boy, swear.

RAFAL: I swear.

ZEN: *(to the fettered Captain)* And the Landsknecht Captain, who accompanied them, who was supposed to guard them.

CAPTAIN: *(mumbles something)*

ZEN: Very well. It's a shameful moment for the Republic of Venice when a distinguished foreign monarch asks us to perform a simple task and we bungle it.

COCCO: With resp-pect, C-c-c-ouncillor, the t-t-t-task was n-not simple.

ZEN: If only because the wrong men were chosen for the job.

COCCO: B-b-b-b–?

ZEN: In the name of all that is serene and noble in our city, would you please close your mouth and keep it closed? Must our dignity endure the stammering of an imbecile?

It has become clear, however, that this is no longer the simple blunder that I perceive with such painful acuity. Fifty-six people

have sworn that a miracle has taken place, somewhere in the middle of the Alps – the village of Pusterwald. Since I do not believe in miracles, I have little choice but to recuse myself in favour of a representative from the Roman Church: Federico Borromeo, Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, learned art historian and –

MARCO: (*makes the sign of the cross, quietly murmuring the Latin*)
In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti, amen.

ZEN: – While it is true the cardinal curtsies before the bishop of Rome, I can assure all present that his investigation will be conducted with a most Venetian serenity. This is no Spanish Inquisition. Do I have that correct, Cardinal Archbishop?

BORROMEO: Yes, you do.

ZEN: Discover the painting.

(The mounted painting is unveiled: The Brotherhood of the Rosary, by Albrecht Dürer, circa 1506. It's huge.)

ZEN: In the month of April in this, the year of our Lord 1606, his Imperial Majesty Rudolf the Second, Holy Roman Emperor, being a great lover and patron of the arts, purchased from the Church of St. Bartolomeo, here in Venice, a painting by one Albrecht Dürer, a northern artist of the last century. *The Brotherhood of the Rosary*. His instructions were for the painting to be swaddled with cloth sealed in wax. And then the four strongest men in Venice should be got – this same honour to be determined in an open competition – to raise the protected painting above their heads and carry it to the imperial residence in Prague, Bohemia, (*pointing*) that way, thus preventing any injury that might be inflicted from its transport in a cart.

A simple task. How I wish it had been completed. How I wish the Venetian army had not been required to retrieve it; how I wish the Captain charged to chaperone had done his job –

CAPTAIN: (*grunts*)

ZEN: How I wish news of a miracle had not leapt from mountaintop to mountaintop, or that the church had not caught wind of it, or that the emperor had not caught wind of it. He's mad, you know. Raving. Spends all his time consulting with astrologers and magicians. But he has been kind enough to allow us to question his errant mercenary and to extend our holding of his canvas, if only because he is keen to establish the veracity of this alleged miracle. I am confident that our prelate is made of sterner stuff and will arrive at the truth.

And so, without further ado, I will ask you all to make your way through that door there, all but (*brief consultation with the Archbishop*) the oarmaker, Marco Chodeschino.

(Everyone clears the room with the exception of Borromeo, Zen and Marco. Rafal lingers for a moment, his hand on Marco's shoulder. When he releases, Marco makes the sign of the cross.)