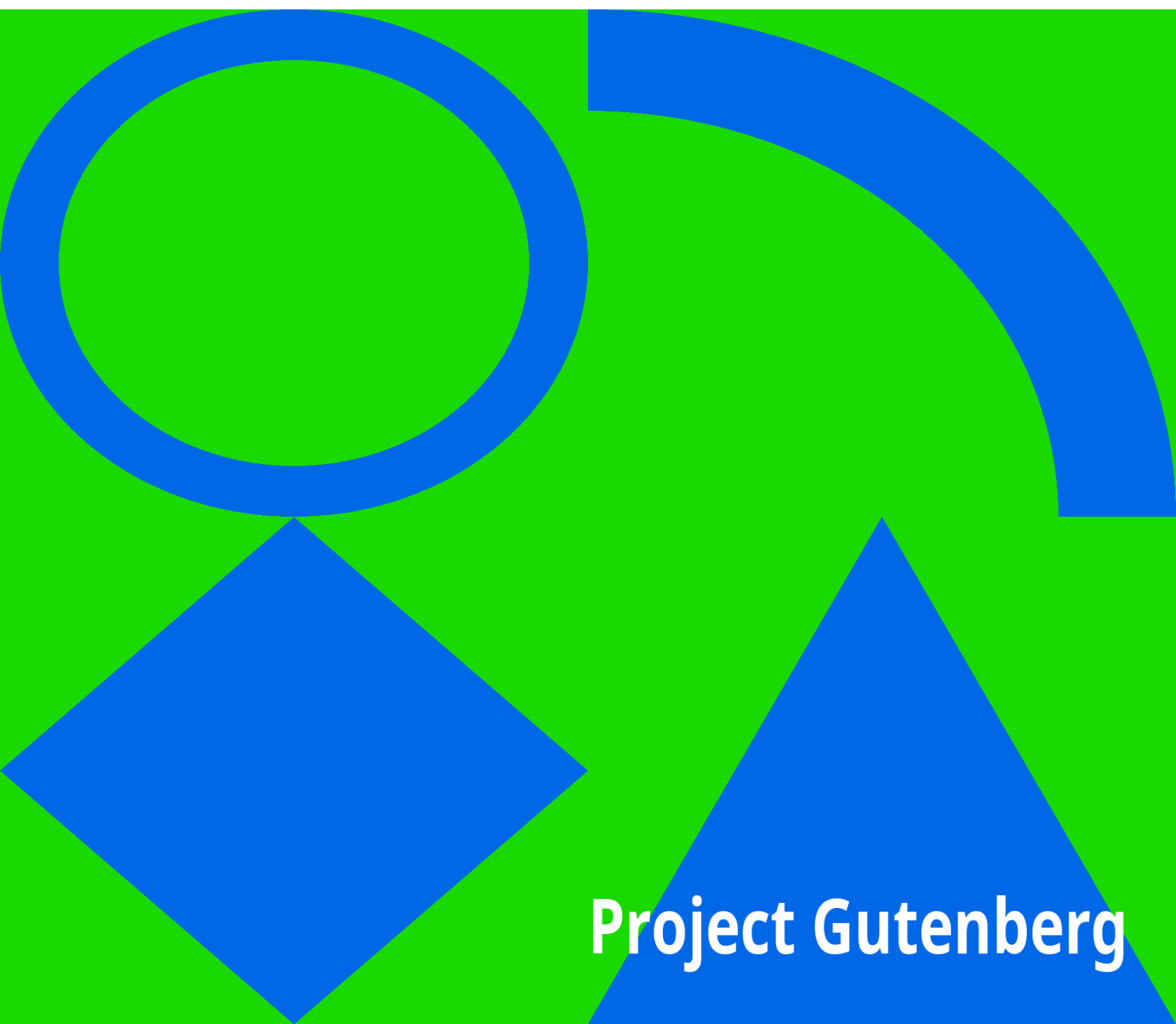


Wizard

Laurence M. Janifer



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WIZARD ***

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WIZARD.

By Larry M. Harris

Although the Masquerade itself, as a necessary protection against non-telepaths, was not fully formulated until the late years of the Seventeenth Century, groups of telepaths-in-hiding existed long before that date. Whether such groups were the results of natural mutations, or whether they came into being due to some other cause, has not yet been fully determined, but that a group did exist in the district of Offenburg, in what is now Prussia, we are quite sure. The activities of the group appear to have begun, approximately, in the year 1594, but it was not until eleven years after that date that they achieved a signal triumph, the first and perhaps the last of its kind until the dissolution of the Masquerade in 2103.

—Excerpt from "A Short History of the Masquerade," by A. Milge, Crystal 704-54-368, Produced 2440.

J

Jonas came over the hill whistling as if he had not a care in the world—which was not even approximately true, he reflected happily. The state of complete and utter quiet was both foreign and slightly repugnant to him; he was never more pleased than when he had a job in hand, a job that involved a slight and unavoidable risk.

This time, of course, the risk was more than slight. Why, he thought happily, it was even possible for him to get killed, and most painfully, too! With a great deal of pleasure, he stood for a second at the crest of the hill, his hands on his hips, looking down at the town of Speyer as it baked in the May afternoon sunlight.

"Behold the Tortoise: He maketh no progress unless he sticketh out his neck." But he maketh very little progress unless he pick the right time and place to "sticketh out his neck"—which can be quite a sticky problem for a man in a medieval culture!

Illustrated by Schoenherr

Jonas did not, in spite of his pose, look like the typical hero of folk tale or scribe's tome; he was not seven feet tall, for instance, nor did he have a handsome, lovesome face with flashing blue eyes, or a broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted marvel of a figure. He was, instead, somewhat shorter than the average of men in Europe in 1605 and for some time thereafter. He had small, almost hidden eyes that seemed to see a great deal, but failed completely to make a fuss about the fact. And while his figure was just a trifle dumpy, his face completed the rhyme by being extraordinarily lumpy. The nose, as a matter of strict truth, was hard to distinguish from the other contusions, swellings and marks that covered the head.

Nor, of course, did he carry the sword of a great hero, or a noble. Jonas had no *von* to stick on his name, and he had never thought it worth his while to claim one and accept the tiny risk of disclosure. After all, a noble was only a man like other men.

And, besides, Jonas knew perfectly well that he had no need of a sword.

His adventures, too, were a little out of the common run of tales. Jonas had, he thought regretfully, few duels to look forward to, and he had even fewer to look back on. And, as a maid is won by face, figure and daring, and a wife by riches, position or prospects, there was a notable paucity of lissome ladies in Jonas' career.

All in all, he thought sadly, he was not a *usual* hero.

But he refused to let the thought spoil his enjoyment. After all, he was a hero, though of his own unique kind; there was no denying that. And, in his own way, he had his reward. He took one hand off his hip to scratch at the top of his head, wondering briefly if he had managed to pick up lice in the last town he had visited, and he took another look at the city.

Speyer seemed a lot better, at first glance, than some of the other places Jonas had visited. For one thing, it had a full town hall, built—no less—of honest stone, and probably a relict of the Roman times. There was the parish church, of course, a good solid wooden structure, and a collection of houses strung along the dirt paths of the town. The houses of the rich were, naturally, wooden; the poor built of baked mud. There were a great many baked-mud structures, and only one wooden one, besides the church, that Jonas could see.

The paths were winding, but comparatively free from slop. That was pleasing, he told himself. And the buildings themselves, wood, mud and stone, clustered in the valley below him as if they were afraid, and needed each other's protection.

Which, in a way, they did. Jonas reflected on that a trifle grimly, thinking of the Holy Inquisition with its hierarchy of priests and lay folk, busily working in Speyer just as it worked in every other town throughout Offenburg, and throughout the civilized world.

Ordinarily, he would not have given it a thought, beyond a passing sigh for the ways of the world; he had other business. But now—

He grinned to himself, and the grin turned to a laugh as he started down the hill. The grislier methods of the Inquisitorial process were well-known to him by reputation, and soon he might be testing them out for himself. There was absolutely no way to be sure.

That thought pleased him greatly; after all, he told himself, there was nothing like a little danger to spice the boring business of living. By the time he reached the bottom of the hill, he was whistling loudly.

He stopped at the first house, a mud construction with a badly-carpentered wooden door and a single bare window that looked out on the street. It smelled, but Jonas went up to the door bravely and knocked.

There was no answer. He went on whistling "*Fortuna plango vulnera*" under his breath, and after a time he knocked again.

This time he heard movement inside the house, and nodded to himself in a satisfied fashion. But almost a minute passed before the head of an old woman showed itself at the window. She was really extraordinarily ugly, he thought. She wore a bonnet that did nothing whatever to enhance her doubtful, wrinkled charms, or to conceal them; and besides, it was dirty.

"Nobody's here," she said in the voice of a very venomous toad. "Go away."

Jonas smiled at her. It was an effort. "Madam—" he began politely.

"Nobody's home," she repeated, drawing slightly back from the window. "You go away, now."

"Ah," Jonas said pleasantly. "But you're home, aren't you?"

The old woman frowned at him suspiciously. "Now," she said vaguely. "Well."

"This *is* your house?" he said. "The house where you live?"

"Never saw you before," the old woman said.

"That's right," Jonas said equably.

"You come to turn me out?" she demanded. Her eyebrows—which were almost as big and black as her ancient mustache—came down over glittering little eyes. "I hold this house free and proper," she said in a determined roar, "and nobody can take it from me. It belongs to me, and to my children, and to their children, and to the children of those children—"

The catalogue seemed likely to go on forever. "Exactly," Jonas said hastily.

"Well, then," the old woman said, and started to draw back.

Jonas gestured lazily with one hand. "Wait," he said. "I am not going to take your house away from you, madam. I am only here to ask you a question."

"Question?" she said. "You come from Herr Knupf? I'm an old woman but I do no wrong, and there is no one can accuse me of heresy. I am in church every week, and more than once; I keep peace with my neighbors and there's none can say a mystery about me—"

The woman, Jonas thought, was full to the eyebrows with words. Probably, he told himself, trying to be fair, she didn't have anyone to talk to, until a stranger came along.

He sighed briefly. "I do not come from the Inquisitor," he said truthfully, "nor is my question one that should cause you alarm."

The old woman pondered for a minute. She leaned her elbows on the window sill, getting them muddy. But that, Jonas thought, didn't seem to matter to this creature, apparently.

"Ask," she said at last.

Jonas put on his most pleasant expression. "Madam," he said, "I wish to know if there be any family in this town to give room to a wayfarer—understanding, of course, that the wayfarer would insist on paying. Paying well," he added.

The old woman blinked. "You looking for an inn?" she said. "An inn in this town?" The idea appeared to strike her as the very height of idiocy. She covered her face with her hands and shook. After a second Jonas discovered that she was laughing. He waited patiently until the fit had left her.

"Not an inn," he said. "There is no inn here, I know. But a family willing to take in a stranger—"

"Strangers are seldom here," she said. "Herr Knupf watches his flock with zeal."

Which meant, Jonas reflected, that he was in a fair way to get himself burned as a heretic unless he watched his step carefully. "Herr Knupf's fame has reached my own country, far away," he said with some truth. "Nevertheless, a family which—"

"Wait," she said. "You have said that you will pay well. Yet you do not appear rich."

Jonas understood. Fishing in his sewn pocket, he withdrew a single, shiny coin. "I also wish," he said smoothly, "to pay for any help I may receive—such as the answering of an innocent question, a question in which the respected Inquisitor Knupf can have no interest whatever."

The old woman's eyes went to the coin and stayed there. "Well," she said. "It is said that the family called Scharpe has a house too large for them, now that the elder son is gone; there is only the man, his wife and a daughter. It is said that the man is in need of money; he would accept payment, were it generous, in return for sharing room in his house."

"I would be most grateful," Jonas murmured. He passed the coin over; the old woman's hand snatched it and closed on it. "Where might I find this family?" he said.

"It is now late in the afternoon," the old woman said. "Perhaps they are at home. You will see a path which takes you to the left; follow it until you reach the last house. Knock at the door."

"I shall," Jonas said, "and many thanks."

The old woman, still clutching her coin, disappeared from the window as if someone had yanked her back. Jonas turned with relief and got back on the path, but it stank quite as badly as the house had.

He endured the stench—heroically.

Scharpe proved to be a barrel-shaped man who was unaccountably cheerless, as if the inside structure had been carefully removed, and then replaced by sawdust, Jonas thought. Even the offer of seven kroner for a single week's stay failed to produce the delirious joy Jonas had expected.

"The money is needed," Scharpe said in a dour, bass voice, staring off past Jonas' left ear at the darkening sky. "And for the money, you will be

welcome. I must take your word that you are not dangerous; I can only pray that you do not betray that trust."

It was far from a warm welcome, but Jonas was satisfied with it. "I shall work to do you good," he said, "and not evil."

"Stranger," Scharpe said, "work for your own good; do nothing for me. This is an accursed family; there is no good to be done to me, or my wife or child."

Jonas tried to look reassuring. He thought of several things to say about the sunny side of life, and decided on none of them. "My sympathy—" he began.

"Your sympathy may endanger you," Scharpe said. "My son is gone; I pray that there is an end to it."

Jonas peered once into the mind of the man, and recoiled violently; but he had enough, in that one glimpse, to tell him the reason for Scharpe's misery. And it was quite reason enough, he thought.

"Herr Knupf—"

"We do not mention that name," Scharpe said. "My wife has resigned herself to what has happened; I am not so wise."

"I promise you," Jonas said earnestly, "that you will be in no danger from me. No, more: that I will help you out of your difficulties, and ensure your peace."

"Then you are an angel from Heaven," Scharpe said bitterly. "There is no other help, while the Inquisitor remains and our sons become suspect to his rages."

Jonas shook his head. "There is help," he said, "and you will find it. Your son is gone; accused, questioned, confessed and burnt. But there will be no more."

Scharpe looked at him for a long time. "Come with me," he said at last, and led the way into his mud house. Inside, there was only one large room, but it seemed spacious enough for four. Three pallets lay against the far right

wall, a single one against the left. Scharpe went to the back of the house, near the single bed. "This will be yours," he said, "while you are with us. It is poor but it is all we can offer."

"I am honored," Jonas said.

"Here we are alone," Scharpe went on, his voice lowering. "My wife and daughter have gone to visit a neighbor, for they have not yet closed us off entirely from all human contact."

He grimaced. Jonas peered into the mind again, very gently, but the mad roiling of pain and memory there was too strong for him, and he returned.

"If you have anything to say to me," Scharpe said, "tell me now. No one can hear us, not Herr Knupf himself."

"To say to you?"

"Regarding your plan," Scharpe said. "Surely you have a plan. And if I may play any part in it—"

Jonas blinked. "Plan?" he said.

"Of course," Scharpe said. "You speak of an end to troubles, an end to the Inquisition and the burnings, an end to the question. And so you must have a plan for ridding us of Herr Knupf; one which you will tell me."

Jonas shook his head. "I have no plan," he said.

"It means danger," Scharpe pressed him. "But I do not mind danger, in such a cause. I am not vengeful, but my son was no wizard. Yet the Inquisitor took him and had a confession from him; you know well the worth of such confessions. And soon there will be others, for when the curse strikes a family it does not stop with one member." He tightened his lips. "It is not for myself I am afraid," he said.

Jonas nodded. "Were there such a plan," he said, "be assured I would tell you."

"But—"

"There is none," Jonas said. "Herr Knupf shall remain, for all that I can do, while the earth remains."

Scharpe opened his mouth, shut it again, and then shrugged. "I see," he said at last. "You do not trust me. Perhaps you are wise. I might talk foolishly; I am an old man; older, in this last month, than in all my other years."

"Believe me," Jonas began. "I—"

"Let it be," Scharpe said quietly. "I believe you. If that is what you want, I believe you." He shrugged again, moving out toward the door of the hut. "And, in any case," he said, "the money is needed. For there are fines to pay, and costs of the Inquisition."

"I understand," Jonas said helplessly.

Scharpe turned and looked him full in the face. In the big man's eyes, bitterness and hopelessness glittered. "I am sure you do," he said, and turned again toward the door.

The others he met only briefly. Frau Scharpe was a little woman with the face of a walnut, who looked as if she had never really been cheerful. Her son's death, he saw when he looked into her mind, had not come as a surprise to her; it was one more unhappy event, in a lifetime in which she had expected nothing else. Unhappiness, she told herself, was her portion in this life; in the Life Above, things would be different.

Jonas had met the type before, and was uninterested in going further. But Ilse Scharpe was something else entirely. She did not say a word to him, coming into the house that evening, a pace behind her mother, like an obedient slave. She was about seventeen, and her mind was as fresh and clean and pretty as her face and figure. Jonas started musing on Heroes again, but he never had the chance to make a move toward her. She had a very nice smile, and from memories in the others' minds he could hear her voice, low and quiet and entirely satisfactory.

Jonas sighed. The job, he told himself sternly, came first. And afterward—

Though, come to think of it, there wouldn't be an afterward.

The evening meal was simple. There was a single dish of meat and some sort of beans; after it had been eaten, and the darkness outside grew to full night, it was time to retire. Jonas went over to his pallet, removed his jerkin and shoes, and lay down. He heard the others readying themselves for sleep, but he did not look into their minds. Soon they were asleep and breathing heavily.

But Jonas stayed awake for a while.

"It's really too bad we can't work this sort of thing at a distance," Claerten's voice said suddenly. "But then, none of us has ever met the man, and you can't read a mind if you haven't had some physical contact with the man who owns it."

"It is too bad," Jonas agreed politely. Five hundred miles away Claerten chuckled, and the linkage of minds transmitted the amusement to Jonas.

"You don't think so, at any rate," the director said. "You're having adventures—and a fine time. It's the sort of thing you like, after all."

Jonas shrugged mentally. "I suppose so," he said. "I like to work on my own, do my own job—"

"And it's got you into trouble before," Claerten said. "But you can't afford any mistakes this time."

"I know the risk perfectly well," Jonas thought back.

Claerten's thought carried a wry echo. "You know the risk to yourself," he told Jonas, "and you've accepted that. You rather like it, as a matter of fact. But you haven't thought of the risk to the rest of us—and to the town you're in."

Jonas sent a thought of uncertainty: "What?"

Claerten transmitted the entire picture in one sudden blow: the chance that Jonas would not be killed immediately, but would be discovered; the chance that the Inquisitor would get from him the secret of the Brotherhood—

"That's impossible," Jonas said.

Claerten sounded resigned. "Nothing's impossible," he said. "And if the secret is let out—why, the Brotherhood is finished. Finished before it's barely started. Because you can read a man's mind doesn't mean you can defeat him, Jonas."

"But you know what he's going to do—"

"And if he's got you in a wooden house and he's going to burn it down, what good does your knowledge do you?"

"But you can transmit false thoughts—"

"And confuse him," Claerten said. "Fine. Fine. If you've ever met the man before. And suppose you haven't? Then you can't transmit a thing to him; you're trapped in the house, remember, and the fire's started. What good's your telepathy?"

"But—"

"It's a sense," Claerten said. "Like any other sense. But it isn't magic any more than your eyes are magic. They're ... given by God, if you like; they grow, they develop. So the ability to read minds, to transmit thought is given by God. No one knows why or how. Fifteen of us have developed it; fifteen who are members of the Brotherhood. But there are others—"

"Of course," Jonas thought impatiently. "I know all that."

"You know a great deal," Claerten said, "which I sometimes find it necessary to bring to your attention."

"I've done all right," Jonas thought sullenly.

Claerten agreed. "Of course you have," he thought, "but you're not the most careful of men; and great care is needed. The Brotherhood must grow. This new sense is of great value; perhaps we can learn to teach it to others in time, though we have had little success with that. But at the least we can maintain our numbers, pass the gift on to our children—"

"If it is possible," Jonas said.

"We must try," Claerten said. "And your job is enormously important."

"I know that," Jonas thought wearily.

"You have accomplished the first step," Claerten said. "Do nothing rash."

"Of course not."

"You will not accept help—"

"I will not," Jonas thought.

"Very well, then," Claerten thought. There was the ghost of another idea; Jonas caught it.

"I know perfectly well that you wouldn't have sent me if there were any other available member," he thought. "There is no need to remind me."

"I'm sorry," Claerten thought. He radiated caution, worry, patience; Jonas turned in the bed and cut off from the director with a grunt. He was tired; long-distance linkages were a drain on the body's energy, even when the person involved was easy to visualize. But Claerten had insisted on intermittent contact.

If there were such a thing as total contact, constant contact over a period of days, Jonas thought, Claerten would use me for a puppet, a veritable Punch among men; he would override me and take me over the way a traveling entertainer rules his jointed dolls.

And that would be a fine thing for a hero, wouldn't it?

He grimaced in the darkness. Constant contact was simply impossible; any reaching out used energy, and linking up for a long period simply burned the body up like a long starvation; it was as bad as a penance.

Jonas was thankful for that.

And for the rest—well, he thought resignedly, what was a hero without a quest? And what was a quest without someone to set it?

But that the someone had to be Claerten, with his caution and his old-woman worry—

Jonas sighed and set about the business of falling asleep.

The days passed slowly, with great boredom. Jonas made contact twice with Claerten, who told him over and over to wait, to do nothing: "The next move is coming soon; do nothing to hurry it. You can only upset the natural course of events."

"Which is unwise," Jonas thought bitterly, "and risky, and very probably impious as well."

"As for the piety," Claerten thought, "I leave that to the priests and the women. But wisdom and caution are my task, Jonas, as they must be yours."

"I—"

"You are a hero, out on an adventure," Claerten thought witheringly. "But set your course with sense, travel it with caution; you will the more certainly arrive."

"Philosophy for a dull plodder," Jonas thought.

"Philosophy for one of the Brotherhood," Claerten thought back. "We are tiny as yet; we have no force. You can add to that force, add greatly; but you must be wise."

"I must be slow, you mean."

"I mean what I have told you," Claerten thought. "And—one more thing, Jonas."

"Yes?"

"The daughter," Claerten thought. "I have seen her in your mind. Ignore the wench. Is she worth what your task is worth?"

"I never—"

"Then my caution is unnecessary," Claerten thought. "But, in the unlikely case that she might tempt you to folly—remember it."

Jonas, who disliked irony, sighed and cut off.

That was the third night. During the days he had done the things he had planned; he did no work with the Scharpes, but let them find him, when they returned to the hut of an evening, reciting strange words. Once he built a small outdoor fire and walked around it, widdershins, for several minutes. Then he put the fire out and went inside. He wasn't sure whether or not anyone was watching him, that time.

But sooner or later it had to happen.

And it happened, as Jonas had suspected it would, through the wife. Mrs. Scharpe came back to the hut early one day, threw a frightened glance at Jonas sitting in a corner doing nothing at all, and left.

He hardly needed to see into her mind to know where she was going.

And twenty minutes later two men came to the hut. They stood in the opened doorway, Mrs. Scharpe behind them twittering like an ancient bird, and Jonas watched them boredly. They were giants, for this part of the world, almost six feet tall, with great hands and jaws. One had black, coarse hair on his head and a stubble about his face; the other was bald as an egg.

"That's him," Mrs. Scharpe said—just a trifle hesitantly. "He's the one. He came to stay with us and we didn't know—"

The man with black hair said: "Uh. Gur."

"Herr Knupf said take him back," the bald one added.

"Herr Knupf?" Jonas said, entering the conversation with a light, pleasant tone.

"He's the ... the—" Mrs. Scharpe tried to get the word out, and then pushed by the two men and came into the hut. "I didn't want to but there's something strange, and we can't afford any suspicion, and—"

Jonas realized slowly that she was crying as she looked at him. "It's all right," he said uncomfortably.

"You're—"

"I'll be perfectly all right," Jonas said. He stood up. "This Herr Knupf," he said. "He wants to see me?"

"He said bring you along," the bald man told him.

The black-haired man nodded very slowly. "Gur," he said.

Jonas sighed and went forward to meet the two big men, leaving Mrs. Scharpe sobbing in the background. The poor woman felt terrible, he knew; but there was nothing he could do about that. "Then let us go," he said, and marched off. Feeling that one more effect wouldn't hurt, he led the way to the Town Hall; let them figure out how he had known just where to go, he thought.

Their minds were very, very boring, and quite blank. Herr Knupf, Jonas reflected, might be a definite relief.

First there was the cell, which was in the basement of the Town Hall. It was damp and the air was not too good, but there were compensations. Rats, for instance. Jonas told himself, after the first couple of hours, that he simply wouldn't have known what to do without the rats. Trying to trap and kill them, with no weapons beyond his bare hands—even an eating knife he had carried in his jerkin had been taken away, leaving him to the uncomfortable reflection that he was going to have to dine with his fingers—was a pastime that occupied him for several hours on the first day.

On the second day, the rats began to bore him. By that evening, they were annoying him, and when the third day dawned bright and warm—as near as he could tell from the tiny slip of window at the top of his cell—Jonas was telling himself that any move at all was a move in the right direction.

He set up a shout for one of the guards. The bald one had brought his meals every day, but the black-haired one was the man who checked his cell at night. For once, Jonas thought, he was lucky; the bald man appeared, after some fifteen minutes of screaming and cursing. Jonas was not at all sure whether the black-haired man understood language: there was little trace of it in his mind, and virtually nothing that might be called intelligence. With the bald man, at least, he could communicate.

"What's wanted?" the guard said sourly, staring through the bars.

Jonas smiled softly. "You know why I'm here, don't you?" he said in a voice as close to silky as he could make it.

"You?" the bald man said. "You're here. In a cell."

"That's right," Jonas said patiently. He rubbed at his face. "Do you know why I was put here?"

"You—cast spells. You make things happen."

"That's right," Jonas said, smiling again. "I'm a wizard. A warlock. That's what they say, isn't it?"

"You—make things happen," the bald man said.

But he had the basic idea; Jonas checked that in his mind. "Very well," he said. "Now, I wish to see Herr Knupf."

"The Inquisitor calls you when he wants you," the bald man said.

"Now," Jonas said.

"When he wants—"

"If I am a wizard," Jonas said, "I have powers. Strange powers. I could make you—" He reflected for a minute. "I could make you into a beetle, and squash you underfoot. As a matter of fact, I think I will." He gazed reflectively at the bald man, who gulped and turned a little pale.

"You ... you are in a cell," he said at last. "Locked up."

"Do you think that will stop me?" Jonas said. He came to the barred door, still smiling.

"You would not dare—"

"Why not?" Jonas asked. "What have I got to lose?"

He raised one hand, clawing the fingers slightly. He took a deep breath, as if he were about to spit out an incantation. His eyes glittered. The smile broadened.

A long second passed.

"I will tell the Inquisitor you wish to see him," the bald guard said.

Jonas relaxed and stepped back. "I shall be most grateful," he said formally. The guard turned and started to walk away. Five paces down the corridor, the walk turned into a run. Jonas watched him go, and then sat down on his louse-infested cot to await developments.

The minutes ticked by endlessly. He thought of trying to reach Claerten, but decided, not entirely with regret, that the contact would use up too much energy. And he needed all the energy he could conserve now. The second step had been taken—the fact that he sat in a cell in prison was proof of that.

The third step—the all-important final step—was about to begin.

Georg Knupf was a tall man with skin the color and apparent texture of good leather. He had a face like an eagle, and his eyes were ice-blue. He moved his thin, strong hands gently back and forth on the table that held his papers, inkstand and pen, and said in a voice like audible sandpaper: "You wanted to see me."

"True," Jonas said pleasantly. Knupf was sitting behind the table. Jonas had not been asked to sit; he remained standing, and he was reasonably sure that his feet were going to hurt in a minute. He tried not to let the thought disturb him.

The man's mind was like his office in the Town Hall: sparsely furnished, almost austere, but with all the necessities laid out for easy access. Underneath the strength and iron of the mind Jonas caught the spark glowing, and nearly smiled. In spite of the reports, in spite of logic, there had been a chance the Brotherhood had guessed wrongly about this man.

Now that chance was gone, and the Brotherhood was right again.

"Not many ask to see me," Knupf said in the same voice. He went on looking at his hands. There was bitterness in his mind, bitterness that had changed to hate. "Their pleas tend to be exactly the opposite."

"I did not plead," Jonas pointed out. "It was necessary that I come to see you."

The question was, he told himself, exactly what were the Inquisitor's real beliefs? His public professions were well-known; Jonas searched and found the answer. Knupf was an honest man.

That, of course, made matters simpler.

"Necessary?" Knupf said, looking up for the first time. His gaze stabbed like a sword. He was uneasy, Jonas knew; with another mind probing his, he could not help but be uneasy. But he could not find a cause; it would never occur to him. And he controlled his feelings superbly.

"You believe that I am a wizard," Jonas said.

Knupf waited a bare second, and then nodded.

"I can do many things," Jonas went on. "It was necessary that I bring these to your attention—and prove to you that they are not wizardry, or magic."

"Many have told me," Knupf muttered, "that their feats were natural. It is a common defense."

"So I have heard," Jonas said easily. "But I shall prove what I say."

"I am under no compulsion to listen to you," Knupf said after a pause.

Jonas shrugged. His feet *were* beginning to hurt, he realized; he sighed briefly, but there was no time or attention to spare for them. "I could only see you by having myself accused of witchcraft," he said. "In that way, you would be forced to listen to me. You may listen now, or later at a full hearing of the Inquisitor's Court."

"And I am to take my choice?" Knupf said. He smiled briefly; his face remained cold. The strong hands moved on the tabletop.

"It is a matter of indifference to me," Jonas said. "But the wait becomes boring, after a time."

Knupf's eyebrows went up. "Boring is—hardly the word others would use."

"I am not like others," Jonas said. He wished for Claerten suddenly, but there was no way to reach him safely. He had to make his move alone.

Well, he told himself, that was what he had wanted.

"I can tell you what is in your mind," he said.

The words hung in the air of the room for a long time. At last Knupf nodded. "The Devil grants to many his power of seeing the minds of men," he said quietly.

"This is not Devil's work—as I shall prove," Jonas said. He shifted his feet. "But let me establish one point at a time, in the most scholastic manner; if you will permit."

"I permit," Knupf said. There was interest in his mind, overlaid with skepticism, of course, but interest all the same. That, Jonas thought, was a better sign than he had dared to hope for.

"Very well," he said. "Think of a word. Think of any single word. I shall tell it to you."

"As any wizard might do, who had the help of his lord the Devil," Knupf muttered. "Do you expect this to prove—"

"One thing at a time," Jonas said.

Knupf nodded. A second passed.

Jonas licked his lips. The possibilities paraded before him; on one hand, success. On the other there was the torture and death of the Inquisition. Jonas took a deep breath; there was no way to back out now. Heroism looked a little empty, though.

He closed his eyes. "Cabbages," he said.

Knupf neither applauded, nor looked surprised. "As I have said," he murmured, "that which the Devil can grant—" He paused and looked down at his hands. "Am I to take this as a confession?" he said. "Do you wish to hurry your own death?"

"I am no wizard," Jonas said.

"A stranger," Knupf said, "who enters a small city, is seen at mysterious undertakings, plucks words out of the center of a man's mind ... why, the picture is a classic one. Del Rio himself, Holzinger or any of the others could not describe a better."

"Yet all this was done to draw your attention, to fix it on what I have to tell you," Jonas said, shifting his feet again. "I am no wizard, but a man who may do certain things. And here is my proof: you may do the same yourself."

The silence was a long one, and at the end of it Knupf rose. He walked to the door of the room and opened it, and the bald-headed guard came in. "He has tried to tempt me to pact with Satan," the Inquisitor said.

"But—"

"Take him away."

Some day, Jonas thought, back in his cell, there would be a method of controlling minds that did not require the willing co-operation of the two parties. Some day the man who reads minds would be more than a passive onlooker.

But the talent was new; it needed practice, it needed training.

The cell grew dark as night came, and the dampness seemed to increase. Jonas heard squeaking and thought of the rats, but he couldn't even summon up enough energy to try for them. He sat crosslegged in a corner of the cell and closed his eyes.

He sighed once, deeply. This was what a hero came to, he told himself. This was the end of heroics and playing a lone hand. Why, if he had it to do over again, he would—

"You would do exactly the same thing," Claerten's voice said.

Jonas grinned suddenly, and sat straighter. "I should have known you'd be getting into contact sooner or later," he thought.

"I try to keep track of all our men," Claerten thought. "In a case like yours, I try harder."

"My foolishness," Jonas thought, "sometimes works to my benefit."

Claerten's thought was wry. "If you hadn't got impatient and tried to hurry things," his voice said in Jonas' mind, "you wouldn't be back in your cell now. There is a time and a place for your disclosure—"

"Another day in here would have driven me out of my wits," Jonas thought.

"Better out of your wits than dead," Claerten thought.

Jonas sighed.

"However," Claerten went on, "there is still a way out for you. I have read the situation in your mind, and your next move will have to be rather more spectacular than usual."

"So long as it works," Jonas said, "I will be satisfied."

"It will work," Claerten said. "At least—I think it will."

Another day dragged by. Jonas put in his time alternately going over the new plan and feeling more frightened than he had ever believed possible. Claerten reached him once, but the contact was weak and fleeting; the director hadn't enough strength to reach him again, at least not for a day or so. Jonas was exactly where he'd wanted to be: on his own.

He hated the idea.

Time passed, somehow. When morning dawned, Jonas awoke to find the door of his cell being unlocked. The bald man and the black-haired man were both there. He looked up at them with distaste.

Then he saw what was in their minds, and the distaste changed to fear.

"You have confessed," the bald one said. "It is necessary that you ratify your confession. Come with us."

Jonas knew what that meant: ratification of a free confession took place under torture. He wiped his face with one hand, but he hardly thought of escaping.

He had to go through with the plan.

The two guards came into the cell and gripped his arms. Jonas allowed himself to be carried out into the corridor, and down it to a great wooden door. The guards opened it, and dragged him through.

The torture chamber was brightly lit, with torches in brackets along the walls that gave off, by a small fraction, more light than smoke. In one corner the rack itself stood, and there were other tools of the trade scattered around the room.

Jonas found that he was sweating.

The guards brought him to the center of the room. Knupf was standing near him, a perfectly blank expression on his face. His voice was the same rough rasp, but it seemed almost mechanical.

"You have confessed to me," he said, "your heresy. Now, you will be made to ratify your confession. That done, your penalty will be exacted."

And the penalty, of course, would be death—death at the stake.

He forced himself to remain calm. Now was the time for his play. He took a deep breath and felt the strength in him gather to a single point and flow outward. The two men suddenly seemed to stagger; there was a second of

confusion and they had let him go. He stood alone in the room. He turned and walked to the door, but he did not open it. Instead, he leaned against it.

He forced his voice into the patterns of calmness and ease. "Your men cannot touch me," he said.

"Wizard—"

"No," Jonas said. The confusion he was broadcasting kept the men from doing anything that required even a simple plan, but he couldn't keep it up for long. "A man like yourself, a man with a particular talent, given by God."

"The name of God—"

"I can say that name," Jonas told the Inquisitor. "No wizard may say it."

"It is a trick," Knupf said.

Jonas shook his head. "Not at all. I will ask you to do nothing against the Faith; I will merely ask you to test for yourself what I say."

"You are a heretic," Knupf said stubbornly. "I can not—"

"You can pray," Jonas said.

Knupf blinked. "Pray?" he said.

"Meditate on a prayer," Jonas said. "Keep your mind open, keep yourself ready for the gift of God. It will descend on you."

Knupf shook his head. "It is a trick—" he began.

"A trick?" Jonas said. "With the prayers of God and His Church?"

And that was the unanswerable question. For no wizard could use the name of God, no wizard could pray. So the Inquisition said; so Knupf said, so Knupf had to say, and so he had to believe.

Slowly, his mind opened and became receptive. The prayer hung in the air of the smoky room. Jonas slipped in—

"Now," he said quietly.

His control slipped. The two guards came toward him, overpowered and held him in a brief second—

"Wait," the Inquisitor said heavily. "Wait. Release him."

"And so," Claerten thought, "the job was accomplished."

"Naturally," Jonas thought.

Claerten's thought had an overtone of weariness. "There is no need to be smug," he told Jonas. "After all, you did not do the job yourself."

"Unimportant," Jonas thought. "The man is convinced; he can be trained further and join the Brotherhood."

"It will take time," Claerten said. "A few years, perhaps. But in the meantime there will be no trials in Speyer."

"No trials?" Jonas thought. "But ... oh. I see."

"Of course," Claerten thought. "Any man who considers himself a wizard will have his mind seen by the Inquisitor. And since there are no wizards—at least, none we have discovered—"

"The trials will cease," Jonas finished.

"And the Brotherhood has gained a new member," Claerten said. "A member with influence and power. It is an important step forward, Jonas."

"Of course," Jonas thought disinterestedly.

"Yet you seem bored by the matter," Claerten thought, puzzled. "I don't see ... oh. I see the woman in your mind. The daughter. And—"

"Now, stop it," Jonas thought. "Stop it. Cut off. After all," he finished, "there are times when even a hero wants a little privacy."

Postscript:

In 1605-1606 (in Offenburg) there were no executions....

—H. C. Lea, "Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft," Vol. III, p. 1148.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WIZARD ***

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