

VITUS

FEBRUARY 2022

Story by Julian Wayser & Rebecca Dayan

Screenplay by Julian Wayser

Based on "A TIME TO DANCE, A TIME TO DIE" by John Waller

A NOTE ABOUT CAMERA:

The film is loosely divided into 'chapters,' wherein the camera chooses a character & favors their perspective for the duration of the section. Normal coverage, time cuts, etc still apply, but each character will remain largely the focal point of the camera's gaze until it 'disconnects' & chooses another.

Simply put: the camera is a baton, smoothly passed from character to character. A way to give us a cross-section of the culture at large -- a core sample of a distressed society.

*"There is no creation that does not have a radiance."
- Hildegard von Bingen*

*"Freedom is not enough. What I desire doesn't have a name yet."
- Clarice Lispector, Near to the Wild Heart*

EXT. WHEATFIELD -- NIGHT

OPEN WIDE on the land, with the hills rolling gently, such as they do in Western Europe. A MEDIEVAL FARMER (well-built, 30s) is planting seeds in the old way, by the dark of the moon.

He licks each seed before bending to place it in the tilled earth. The work is slow, but the Farmer is unflagging.

Under his breath, he counts the seeds out loud, perhaps to occupy his mind, *perhaps because each one is precious.*

Above his head, cutting a swath through our corner of the sky, is a METEOR. A plume of pure fire barreling at the oblivious Farmer.

As it enters the atmosphere -- seconds from impact -- it FLASHES BRIGHTLY, BREAKING APART, BOOMING & HISSING like CANNONFIRE...

...as The Farmer's head snaps up finally -- transfixed -- a helpless witness as it CRASHES to earth, flattening a pair of sycamores, chewing up the ground, sending the Farmer to his knees. *As though forced into prayer.*

EXT. WHEATFIELD -- DAY

A few hours later. The sun barely up. We are behind the Farmer (hereby referred to as JOSS FRITZ) as he stands over the still-smoldering crater.

By his side: his brother ROWAN (ginger, 20s) & a farmhand WILLIAM (blond, 20s) -- *we do not see their faces.*

In the middle distance, a PRIEST is riding towards them on a bay horse.

JOSS FRITZ

Rowan.

ROWAN

Brother?

JOSS FRITZ

Stop me, if I lose myself & attack
this man.

Rowan snorts a laugh, as the Priest arrives, pulling hard on his bridle.

PRIEST SILUS

Herr Fritz.

JOSS FRITZ

Father.

The Priest dismounts, approaches the crater. His robes are velvet, much nicer than you'd expect.

He kneels, peering past the smoke, towards the BLACK GLEAMING GLASS of the meteor beneath. *Tantalized.*

After a long moment, he looks up, noticing Fritz's men for the first time. His gaze is of open disgust, which is confusing, until we come around to see that Joss's men are LEPERS.

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)

(ignoring it)

How can we be of service to you, my Lord.

The Priest's eyes flicker between the crater & the ruined faces of these farmhands.

PRIEST SILUS

We will bring this *object* to the Cathedral.

JOSS FRITZ

It must weigh a hundred stone.

PRIEST SILUS

Then you must bring more men.
Preferably those less *afflicted*.

Joss can't help himself.

JOSS FRITZ

I have little choice in who to employ at this farm. 3 of every 4 *thalers* bound as they are for the pockets of your robes.

PRIEST SILUS

It was not us who sealed the skies,
who laid the land fallow.

JOSS FRITZ

Perhaps you would have, had you the power.

PRIEST SILUS

It was not us who *borrowed*.

This Priest knows how to hurt. Joss wants to bury him in the hole in front of them. His brother Rowan, attempting diplomacy--

ROWAN

Our labor is of a lesser wage, Father,
& so--

JOSS FRITZ

--Be quiet, Rowan.

A heavy look between all parties, as Joss walks slowly over to the kneeling Priest. The moment hangs -- violence in the air -- until finally--

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)

(standing over him, re:
the meteor)

...What possible use would you have
with such a thing?

The Priest almost smiles as he stands back up, taller than Joss. Gesturing at the crater with a gloved hand--

PRIEST SILUS

It is a tear from God's eye. The
Bishop will want it.

Joss, hearing that name, nods. *No more argument to be had.*

TIME CUT »»

Later. Half a dozen FARMHANDS (all of them lepers) have gathered in & around the crater, their heads now wrapped in dirty cloth. *An attempt to contain their condition.*

Joss, his face unmasked, is down in the hole with them, lashing the meteor with heavy rope, trying to hoist it onto a FIELD WAGON, fronted by a pair of donkeys.

The Priest supervises from atop his horse, his DEACON (choir boy, named Anton) awaiting orders nearby.

The process of unearthing the meteor is excruciating -- the back-breaking work of pyramid-builders. Joss grunting orders, with every man straining beneath their gauze, *all sweat & tendons.*

After a number of mis-fires, they manage to lever it onto the cart. Everybody out of breath now, watching half a ton of celestial stone testing the axels of their humble wagon.

Joss gives one of the MEN a friendly smack on the shoulder.

JOSS FRITZ

Nicely done, William.

The Man turns, indistinguishable beneath his face covering.

MAN

Actually, it's Finneas, sir.

The men snicker at his mistake, as Joss turns to the Priest.

JOSS FRITZ

Well, there you have it. Does your little man there know how to handle a donkey?

PRIEST SILUS

(relishing it)

He does not.

Not only must Joss spend manpower on this errand, Silus is now expecting delivery. Joss, swallowing the indignity--

JOSS FRITZ

Rowan can do it, then. My brother is strong & speaks to horses.

The Priest angles his chin at Rowan.

PRIEST SILUS

This man here?

JOSS FRITZ

...Yes.

PRIEST SILUS

Is this man, by any chance, a *leper*?

JOSS FRITZ

(painfully)

You know that he is.

PRIEST SILUS

It should be obvious then, that our Rowan, *shrouded* or otherwise, will not ever approach inside a furlong of our Lady of Strasbourg.

Rowan, standing in persecution. Joss takes a breath, trying to keep his anger at bay.

The Priest, leaning forward in his saddle--

PRIEST SILUS (CONT'D)

May I offer a suggestion?

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD -- DAY

That afternoon. Predictably, Joss has found himself atop the wagon, self-piloting his ugly donkeys down the dusty path.

The meteor rests precariously in the wagon's bay, with the Priest & his Deacon trotting along nearby, murmuring into the ear of a MESSENGER, who rides off ahead.

Joss, looking to expedite, snaps the reins, pushing the animals into a stiff cantor, wagonboards creaking beneath the strain, &--

EXT. GATES OF STRASBOURG -- DAY

A bustling merchant city, currently blighted by drought, disease, & pestilence. Whores by the gates. Fishmongers, tanners, beggars. *The myriad stench of the Old World.*

TITLE OVER: Strasbourg, Holy Roman Empire. July, 1518.

The entire city is built on an island, encircled by the river Ill.

Joss & his contingent are passing over a six-horse bridge on their way into town, across the threshold of the enormous gates & into--

EXT. STRASBOURG // CENTRAL SQUARE -- DAY

--A boisterous MARKETPLACE, one of the largest on the continent. A rowdy kaleidoscope of medieval commerce: dozens of tongues & temperaments, all chasing their needs of the day.

It should be said: even by 16th-century standards, the denizens of this city are in a truly desperate state. A quiet panic pervades every frame here, as--

»»**Tableaux**»» WHEAT PURVEYORS haggling stubbornly with famished CUSTOMERS... Mothers & Fathers, fighting over moldy bread...

...TRINKET PEDDLERS yelling after SCABEROUS CHILDREN running past with stolen wet linens...

...An APPLE CART, filled with meagre inventory, alongside a trio of skinny GOATS milling by the stocks... as we track Joss et al, passing freely through the babel.

One of the goats has TWO HEADS, sharing an eerie eye.

The Deacon is perturbed, muttering a prayer, but Joss is unbothered. He stops alongside the apple cart, plucks the least-rotten one from the pile.

To the VENDOR -- who can't take his eyes off the meteor--

JOSS FRITZ

The Deacon has your coin.

Facetiously nodding his thanks to the young man, he clicks his tongue, setting the donkeys back into motion, leaving the Deacon fumbling for payment, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL -- DAY

An hour later. Joss, Priest Silus, & the Deacon arrive at the west facade of NOTRE DAME DE STRASBOURG -- a sublimely beautiful structure. *Jewel of the Empire*. 112 meters of ornately carved Gothic limestone, made manifest through twenty generations of consecutive labor.

Even Joss' cynicism is tempered by its beauty, as he cranes his neck to take in the splendor of the basilica.

PRIEST

Have you ever been inside?

JOSS FRITZ

Never. I take my brother, such as he is, to village worship.

PRIEST

(poor bastards)

Of course.

He points towards a complex of buildings adjacent to the cathedral--

PRIEST (CONT'D)

Servants' entrance.

Joss bites his lip. *Fair enough*. Snapping the reins again, steering the wagon carefully across the short bridge, &--

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL // LABYRINTH -- DAY

Later. In the holy bowels of this ancient building, a dozen CLERGYMEN are using a wooden SLEDGE to roll the meteor down a hallway barely wide enough to accommodate it.

It's extremely slow going, with Joss & even the Priest lending their efforts to the cause.

The moment is surreal & oddly captivating: a gigantic obsidian boulder, inching its way through the torch-light. *Like a monolith being born.*

As they proceed, Joss sees

» a **CHAMBER**

Filled with enormous reserves of GRAIN. *The Church's ill-gotten larder, bursting with life-preserving calories.*

Contrasted with the depths of famine we've seen in the market outside, the sight is deeply infuriating to him. A crushing sadness across his face here.

JOSS

(to the nearby clergyman)

...And how many seasons of wheat
lie in yon storeroom?

CLERGYMAN

As many as the farmers who have
leaned upon church gold.

Joss, disgusted at their greed & usury, channels his anger into the task at hand. 'Let's get this over with,' throwing himself anew at the meteor, shoving aside the other men, scraping, straining, &--

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL // CRYPT -- DAY

The next morning. After many long hours, the meteor has finally arrived at its ultimate destination: poised gently on a bed of hay in a stone chamber beneath the cathedral. Joss, the Priest, & the others are exhausted.

Their job done, the Priest tilts his head at the clergymen, who quietly exit.

Now it's just him & Joss, left to stare at the enormous inky stone. Slowly, the Priest strips off one of his gloves.

PRIEST SILUS

Let us consider the debt upon last
year's harvest.

JOSS FRITZ

Gone?

PRIEST SILUS

Halved.

Joss has a mind to negotiate, but the Priest won't look at him. *He wants to be alone with it.*

JOSS FRITZ

A tear from God's eye?

The Priest shrugs.

PRIEST SILUS

Not my words.

(turning)

See, I have borrowed too. I wish
you good day, Herr Fritz.

The Priest, as before, inclines his head towards the door. Dismissing him.

Joss, too tired to argue, makes his way out. One more look at all that GRAIN, & as Joss exits, the CAMERA pans away, smoothly returning to settle on the Priest. ***As though Joss' chapter were 'complete.'***

We hear his footsteps receding down the hall, as the Priest goes to a corner of the room & picks up a small LEATHER CASE.

TIME CUT »»

A minute later. CLOSE on the Priest, tracing an invisible line on the meteor with a bare hand. His other hand comes up with a BRUSH, laden with LIME WHITE pigment.

Carefully following the line, he begins to paint.

TIME CUT »»

Later. WIDE on the room, with the Priest putting the finishing touches on his work --

“xxv July M.CCCCC” (11/7/1518) in neat white lettering across the uneven face of the meteor. The monolith, *named & homed.*

Satisfied, he puts down the brush. Pulling his gloves back on with his teeth, he makes for the door.

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL // CLOISTER -- DAY

We follow the Priest as he strides down the colonnade, where a SERMON can be faintly heard, even from this distance.

The Priest -- *mustn't be late* -- picks up his pace, as he passes into--

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL // CHANCEL -- DAY

--The heart of the Church, a few meters away from the altar, where a HIGH PRIEST is in the midst of a truly vigorous ORATION.

From his perch at the ALTAR, he stands in stark contrast to the Priest we came in with. His robes are of linen, humble & frayed, his spittle lit by sunbeam as the words pour out of him...

This is JOHANN GEILER, one of the greatest preachers of the last 500 years, & he is in no mood for gentleness this morning.

GEILER

--& this is why it does you not one *drop* of goodness to pray here. To be pious only when in witness of this altar... is the same as a man who swears a vow to his wife & then breaks it in the next breath with a whore in the night.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches sight of our Priest, who nods to Geiler, as though signaling '*mission complete.*' Geiler, acknowledging, turns back to his CONGREGATION--

GEILER (CONT'D)

Children of this church, mark this day. You saw what ripe omen blazed across the skies of Strasbourg, did you not?

He steps down from the altar, taking slow steps towards the assembled crowd.

GEILER (CONT'D)

It was the fire of damnation. The seed of hell itself sent down from on high. It was a forewarning. Perhaps our last. It was God himself, weeping.

He approaches the front row, where a HIGH-BORN SYHPHILTIC WOMAN is trying to be invisible beneath her fancy wide-brimmed hat. Taking up her hand--

GEILER (CONT'D)

(almost kindly)

Your flesh is as the flesh of the dead. Would you like to know why?

(louder, to his flock)

The crops bear no harvest because there is no true *vitality* from within us. We must be an example for nature, not a poison to it.

He glances over his shoulder, back towards the first Priest.

GEILER (CONT'D)

Even our own clergy succumb to the trifles of power, of avarice. Our Bishop has bid me to root it out, from within these walls.

(solemnly)

Never before has a darker shadow been cast across this Earth.

CLOSE on Priest Silus, unruffled by the indirect criticism, standing impassive back there in the dark, as the CAMERA MOVES PAST HIM...

...RISING up through the cathedral's brightness, towards the STAINED GLASS windows far above the nave, with Geiler's words driving onward, admonishing them all, clergy & laity & even himself.

GEILER (CONT'D)

I will say this in the simplest of ways: improve thy spirit, or lose it. There is nothing in between. Nothing at all in between an angel's wing & a demon's tooth. Now, let us sing.

A HYMN instantly fills a hundred throats, as the CAMERA passes through the leaded windows of the transept, PUSHING through an exquisite depiction of the Virgin with Child, out into the open air...

EXT. STRASBOURG // ABOVE -- DAY

...& still rising, settling quietly at altitude over the eastern end of the city, with all its life coursing tiny below us. The moment hangs. *This is the world.*

TITLE OVER: VITUS

After a time, the CAMERA descends, dropping vertiginously to the roofline, moving past the RIVER, scummy with lye from generations of washing, accelerating out towards the city's edge, where a LARGE CRUMBLING BUILDING rests behind an old gate.

...this is the ORPHANAGE.

EXT. ORPHANAGE -- SAME

A forlorn place -- hawks in the sky -- hot wind throwing itself against the rough walls, until a door finally opens & a YOUNG WOMAN (26, angular) walks out, stands at the threshold. Wants to look back but doesn't.

This is FRAU TROFFEA. She's aiming for stoic here, but her broken breathing gives away the pain she carries. We notice the way her YELLOW SHIRT is torn -- a big swatch missing from the hem, as we push past her, into

INT. ORPHANAGE -- SAME

--the drabness of the old farmhouse, recently converted into an emergency institution for the city's untended.

The place is packed with CHILDREN of all ages. VOLUNTEER NURSES doing their best amid the squalor.

In a corner, we find half a dozen INFANTS swaddled badly, their hungry screams to the rafters, as AN OLDER WOMAN tries in vain to summon milk from her aging body...

...& here we notice one of the INFANTS with a YELLOW SCRAP of fabric tied around her little wrist, *Troffea's anguish clicking with us now,* the child pink & wailing, &--

EXT. ORPHANAGE -- SAME

--Back on Troffea. We can still hear her baby's caterwauling as she walks, faster now. Trying to outpace the sound. Directionless. Tripping over stones in the road.

She crosses the river, descending heavy stairs, into

» AN ALLEY

...Where the dregs of the city are down here boiling. We see

» Rows of SYPHILITICS in COPPER BASINS -- their bodies long-rotten, inhaling noxious MERCURY TREATMENTS...

BATH HOUSES teeming with PLEASURE-SEEKERS -- puffy faces slick with sweat & grime.

Every angle is Purgatory. Poverty. Desire.

As a STARVING BOY runs up to Troffea, pulling at the hem of her dress. His mouth so dry he cannot speak. Toothless gums smacking his need, as Troffea looks down at him. His suffering reminding her of the child she just orphaned.

Something quietly breaking in her, as she pushes past this wreckage of humanity, into--

EXT. STRASBOURG -- DAY

--The Central Square, where earlier we saw Joss eat his breakfast.

It's afternoon now & still busy, but Troffea -- panicking -- takes notice of no one, forcing her way through the crowd, past the market, into a

» QUIET COURTYARD

Where she abruptly stops. Her eyes gone glassy, her hands balled, white & bloodless. *Blinking slowly in grief.*

A NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN who knows her, walking past--

NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN
Are you fine, Frau Troffea?

No answer, as Troffea drops her head, rooted. Just standing there.

The Woman walks up close, puts a hand on her shoulder -- Troffea recoils, jolted.

NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN (CONT'D)
(gently)
What's the matter, lass.

Not a word. She reaches out again, but Troffea -- skittish -- pushes her away. In her current state, human touch is intolerable.

The Woman, out of patience, begins walking away, as Troffea's breath suddenly quickens. Her head rising, eyes locked to the horizon. *Hyperventilating in place.*

The Woman -- almost through the doorway -- stops. The sound of Troffea's distress turning her around... just in time to see it begin.

Troffea's arms & legs, moving in an approximation of rhythm. Awkward footfalls tapping the cobblestones.

The Woman (& we the audience) is confused: Troffea has begun to dance.

It's almost funny at first, her jig from out-of-nowhere. After a moment, though, the mood starts to turn, as Troffea's movements accelerate. Her body gone kinetic in swoops & kicks.

If you didn't know better, you'd think she'd found catharsis.

The Woman, returning--

NEIGHBORHOOD WOMAN (CONT'D)

(very confused)

Is it a happy day or sad, you strange girl.

Troffea has nothing to say -- her expression flat. Her will, replaced by some unknowable instinct. A Dance that begins automatically. **As escapism.**

We HOLD on Troffea for a full minute. She is an extraordinary, awful sight. Helpless but inexhaustible. Her pace never slowing, as sweat begins to drip into her dark eyes, disguising the tears there...

...as the CAMERA arcs around her, the light changing, the night verging, &--

TIME CUT » »

Several hours later. She hasn't stopped. She can't. A small CROWD gathered around her.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND is among them. He's angry, embarrassed at the scene she's causing. Standing there in front of her--

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

End this nonsense, Enne. COME. HOME.

To the people gathered, the situation is laughable -- a young wife, humiliating her spouse, probably for good reason.

A FERRYMAN jokingly elbows the Husband--

FERRYMAN

What have you done, mate, that your woman would scorn you so freely? I hope the pleasure was worth the punishment.

Snickers ripple though the assembled. The husband circling her, trying to understand. His anger turning to fear--

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

Ennelyn. Where's Anna? ENNELYN!!

It begins to rain, dampening the onlookers' enthusiasm, but Troffea shows no signs of stopping, her arms like windmills, feet stamping the ground.

She tilts her head back -- gone -- staring blankly up into the drizzle.

ONLOOKER 1

At least she brought us a bit of rain, this pagan fool.

ONLOOKER 2

Two months ago would have been more fruitful.

Onlooker 1 reaches out past the Husband, grabs Troffea's hand, mockingly dancing with her, to the great amusement of the dispersing crowd.

The Husband getting in between them, roughly pushing the man away--

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

You don't come near her, idiot.

ONLOOKER 1

At her best, she's a demon's whore, no matter--

--as the Husband tackles the man, & now it's a squabble in the rain.

The Onlooker's friend comes in from behind to sucker-punch the husband, with what's left of the crowd shifting over to watch the fight.

Troffea -- still at full tilt -- SCREAMS UNINTELLIGIBLY.

As though in extreme pain. As if trying to escape her own body, she screams & screams -- stopping the fight cold -- before finally collapsing onto the street, battered Husband scrambling towards her, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG // TROFFEA'S HOME

The next morning. She's facedown in front of her own house.

Her husband sitting with his back to a wall. Watching her sleep. Her breathing heavy as she lies there.

A CARRIAGE rolls past, waking her up. She rolls over, tries to sit up. *She hasn't a clue where she is.* Her husband stands.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

Your silence has been a mercy.

She looks at him for a moment, opens her mouth, as if to speak...

...before jumping to her feet & BREAKING BACK into dance.

It's even wilder now -- absolutely full exertion -- & we can see the fear in her -- *the confusion* -- her tiny mother's heart straining to keep up the impossible pace, &--

INT. TROFFEA'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Nightfall. Troffea's tied to the bed now, THICK SAILOR'S KNOTS keeping her still.

Standing in a corner of the well-swept room is her Husband, a BASKET by his feet.

Inside the basket is their CHILD, recuperated from the orphanage.

He's trying not to walk over there & rip her head off, as he listens to her strain against her bonds. *She's still trying to dance.* Such tragic effort in her face.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

Enne... Why would you leave her?

Troffea -- still fighting the urge -- finds a way to respond.

TROFFEA

(with difficulty)

She was... going to... starve.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

I would never have allowed that.

TROFFEA

The choice... was mine.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND

Unjustly. Who has replaced thee inside thine eyes? Where have you--

--as Troffea SCREAMS, interrupting him. Thrashing & convulsing, her ligaments testing the rope.

TROFFEA
(terrified)
My breath is fast & I cannot stop it.

He rushes to her aid, but there's nothing he can do: her pain is tremendous, her cries quickly mirrored by those of their daughter, &--

TIME CUT »»

Hours later. Her husband, up on a ladder, with a BROOMSTICK in his hand. He's about to poke a hole in the thatching of their roof.

Troffea, using her head, is guiding him. Still dancing against the ropes, gritting her teeth, but lucid enough for this. *For some reason, she wants to see the sky. Needs to.*

TROFFEA (CONT'D)
Yes. There.

Her husband -- at his wit's end -- cannot deny her. He jabs the broomstick up through the dried straw, tearing open a small section that reveals the night & two or three stars.

Troffea, glistened with sweat, locks her eyes onto this tiny slice of the firmament.

For a small moment, she finds something like relief.

TROFFEA (CONT'D)
(sleepy)
Thank you, love.

Her husband, looking down at his exhausted wife. Heartsick.

TROFFEA'S HUSBAND
Worry not, Enne. They'll be here soon.

PRELAP »» the heavy staccato of HORSES at full gallop, as--

EXT. FIELDS OUTSIDE STRASBOURG -- THE NEXT MORNING

--we find Troffea HOG-TIED hand & foot, captive across the saddle of a horse.

A HOODED RIDER looms on either side, the three steeds tearing up the grass towards an unknown destination.

Wherever they're going, Troffea is against it, as she struggles to free herself -- a dangerous act at these speeds.

One of the Riders, using his free hand to hold her in place--

RIDER

There will be help for you! BE STILL.

She will not. Even if she wanted to, the impulse to dance is still in every muscle, as she squirms & twists...

--SUDDENLY bucking her legs into the air, almost breaking her own back but catching the Rider full in the chest, knocking him from his horse, as he tumbles across the field--

--his horse running wild now -- reins flapping -- Troffea's remaining escort trying to gain control of his partner's animal, but it's too frantic--

--& here THE CAMERA disconnects from them both -- aligning instead with the runaway horse.

We're LOCKED CLOSE on its hip, muscles rippling as it gallops madly through the open pasture. Putting distance between itself & Troffea's SILHOUETTE, dancing alone now in the fields.

Our horse that races the sky at full pace. *Uncatchable.* Saddle slipping off its back finally, &--

TIME CUT » »

Later. Blue night. Our horse that slowly walks the fields, nosing for loose grain amongst the wheat furrows.

Even at night, we can see that the crops, for acres around, are thin & barren. Leagues outside the city proper, we again find the desperate signs of a famine in the making.

The horse continues on, snapping up what crumbs it can find in the darkness.

From the periphery, we hear footsteps. Careful. *Human.* The horse stiffening, ears pricked. The night quiet & awful.

The footsteps quicken & then settle behind us -- CAMERA PANNING SLOWLY to find the two GIRLS standing there -- 16 at the eldest -- sisters perhaps, faces smudged & dirty.

One of them holds a ROPE, the other a KNIFE. *Hungry above all else.*

Inching towards the horse... trying not to spook it... until one of the girls gets impatient & lunges at it with her rope, spooking the animal, who shakes off the line, galloping away from its attackers, &--

TIME CUT »»

Abject darkness. Hooves against earth. The breath of a creature panting in fear & exhaustion, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG // GATES -- DAY

The next morning. The horse -- utterly spent -- has found itself back near the edge of the city. CLOSE on its still-wild eyes as a rough HAND comes into frame, securing it by the mane, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG // CENTRAL SQUARE -- DAY

Later. Our horse -- leather bit between its teeth -- being led back through the bustle of the market by an UNKNOWN MAN.

In the middle distance: a TANNERY -- greasy hides on racks. Vats of alkaloids. A place where a fresh horse can fetch good silver. *The fate of this animal becoming upsettingly clear, as...*

...A WOMAN, walking past us, reaches out to brush its muzzle, her hands scaly with ammonia salts.

She is a WEAVER named IDA (resilient, middle-aged), & the CAMERA stays with her as she walks back towards the square. A new chapter, &--

TIME CUT »»

Later. Heart of the market. IDA walking deliberately. Attentive to all the sights & sounds, she moves with a sense of hard-fought dignity that belies her age.

Sitting cross-legged in the dust is a VOTIVE PEDDLER -- a downtrodden woman tending a basket of OFFERINGS. *Tiny saints & prayers found in tin & wax.*

As Ida approaches, the Peddler looks up, smiles in recognition.

PEDDLER
Which, today?

IDA
The green.

PEDDLER

Like always.

She gives the Peddler a coin, receives her green WAX MARY.

IDA

Is your mother well?

PEDDLER

(hesitating)

..Thank you, yes.

This rings false, & Ida sees right through it. Reaching into a pocket, she hands her another coin. The Peddler -- too proud to admit her troubles -- is quietly grateful.

PEDDLER (CONT'D)

Almost 8 bells. You'll miss Mass.

IDA

(kindly)

Not likely.

Tipping her head politely, Ida continues on her way: along the river, towards the Cathedral that spires above the roofline.

Most everyone here is walking the same direction -- not many souls dare to skip Church.

Ida, moving quickly through the throngs... until she bumps headlong into a MAN'S BACK. Stopped in his tracks, he (& others around) are staring at something afoot nearby.

Ida follows his gaze, angling for a view, finds one:

--A group of 5 PEASANTS, arms linked, DANCING. A performance in the same mad manner as Troffea, their feet lashing the ground relentlessly. Empty faces lathered in sweat, they've been at this for hours.

One of the peasants pisses himself, urine blooming his trousers. Only one person laughs.

Ida, prodding the man in front of her--

IDA (CONT'D)

What do you reckon they're after?

MAN

God knows. Since last night, they haven't ceased or even slowed.

Ida can't take her eyes off them. Riveted by their mania.
By the pain on their faces. She looks like she wants to
intervene somehow. Doesn't.

Instinctively, she kisses her wax Mary -- small comfort -- as
the CHURCH BELLS pick up nearby, calling her away, &--

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL -- DAY

Minutes later. Full glory of the Church. Immaculate
carvings, ancient relics under Sunday light. The BEJEWLED
SKELETONS of saints, guarding a FERETORY.

Amongst the crowd, we pick out Ida, pausing in front of the
METEOR, which has been positioned behind A WROUGHT IRON CAGE
next to a BAPTISMAL FOUNTAIN. *A truly unsubtle warning
display.*

Next to her, a PAIR OF PEASANTS are whispering
conspiratorially as they make their way into Mass...

PEASANT

(to his friend)

I'm telling ye, she went to dancing
not two day after that thing fell.

Behind the bars, there is an unmistakable energy about the
meteor. Something dark & electric. The other Peasant --
curious -- moves towards it, but a strongly-built PRIEST at
the front intercedes.

PRIEST

Time for Mass.

Ida, not wanting any trouble, crosses the threshold into the
nave, looking for an empty seat in the brimming congregation.

*We get the sense that here, more so than any palace, is the
true seat of power in Strasbourg.*

Passing row after row of enraptured worshippers, Ida sits
down. As is tradition, she kisses the ivory PAX when it's
passed to her. Trying to shake the image of the dancers (&
the meteor) from her head.

Across the aisle, HERR WILHELM (30s, HERR WILHELM, calmly
entitled) catches her eye. *Shit.*

Ida, wishing she hadn't see him, curtsies from her seat, as
PRIEST SILUS slinks up to the ALTAR & begins an INVOCATION--

PRIEST SILUS

Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice &
yours be acceptable to God...

...& so it begins. In a flurry of color, texture, & sound, we are now treated to the utter decadence of a Pre-Reformation Catholic mass, as seen from the perspective of the congregation.

» Holy men. Gilded cloaks. Scepters worth a village. Incense & incantations. An extraordinary sight that mesmerizes (or frightens.)

Ida has her eyes closed. Green Mary melting in her hand as she prays. Held in peace by the choir, in her rightful place at the perfect feet of God.

TIME CUT »»

Later. Ida's in line to participate in the OFFERTORY, 'the Preparation of the Gifts,' with bread, wine, & other ceremonial objects being laid upon the altar.

Herr Wilhelm from before, sidling up--

HERR WILHELM

(in her ear)

I have an errand for you.

IDA

(quietly)

Not in here.

They clearly have history. But this is not a man who likes to be told where or when to speak.

HERR WILHELM

(louder)

A pair of errands, then.

Carefully unpinning a SILVER MEDALLION from his waistcoat, he presses it into her hands.

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)

A gift for the church.

Ida, looking down at the medallion--

IDA

(whispering)

I gave this to Agnes.

HERR WILHELM

And she gave it to me.
I'll be outside.

He takes his leave, as Ida finds herself at the front of the line.

Placing her wax Mary on the silk of the altar, she hesitates with the medallion. *Such a cherished thing to give away.*

The ALTAR PRIEST looks at her.

ALTAR PRIEST

Nothing else?

Fuck it. She slaps down the medallion. The Altar Priest admiring it as she stalks away. Not forgetting to cross herself on her way out, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL -- DAY

A minute later. The square filled with the post-Mass mingle, as Ida walks up, looking for Wilhelm. A DRIVER, leaning against a post, clicks his tongue at her.

DRIVER

Oi. Weaver.

IDA

(turning)

Where is he? Oh.

Behind the Driver: a high-end CARRIAGE, curtains drawn. A power play. She's used to it.

IDA (CONT'D)

So what must I do...

(louder, so he can hear)

...For the Young Master?

DRIVER

Gather tools. There's work.

IDA

Where?

DRIVER

Hapsburg house.

Ida sighs. *This is going to take all day.* Ruefully accepting the diversion, she heads towards the carriage.

The Driver clicks again. *Not so fast.*

DRIVER (CONT'D)

He says be there for the morning.

Ida's indignation. *Heirlooms lost, humble servitude, & not even a ride.* She gathers up her cloak, preparing for the long walk home, &--

INT. HUMBLE CARRIAGE -- DAWN [DRIVING]

The next morning. Too early. Piled in the back with a few other TRAVELERS, we're CLOSE on Ida as she tries to sleep, using her weaver's TOOLKIT as a pillow. Impossible.

EXT. HAPSBURG HOUSE -- DAY

Hours later. Rubbing her eyes at the front door of a massive MANOR HOUSE. *Herr Wilhelm's done well for himself.*

Ida knocks, setting off a bustle behind the door. Two VOICES--

VOICE 1 (O.S.)

Let me.

VOICE 2 (O.S.)

You shouldn't.

VOICE 1 (O.S.)

NO. Margaret, I can.

A tiny struggle, & then it opens: a YOUNG WOMAN (17, sublime) standing there in a day gown. A MAID sour in the shadows behind her.

Ida can't help herself, throwing her arms around the Young Woman, who returns the hug with every fibre.

YOUNG WOMAN

Mamma!

A long lovely beat, before Ida lets her go. Noticing the look the Maid is giving her...

IDA

Lady Agnes.

YOUNG WOMAN / AGNES

You don't have to call me that.

Ida about to answer, before--

HERR WILHELM (O.S.)

--Im afraid she does, my darling.

--as he steps in from the parlor. Dressed to the nines at nine in the morning. Truly a sanctimonious asshole.

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)
Best of days, Ida.

An extra-deep curtsy to annoy him.

IDA
M'lord.

HERR WILHELM
Come with me.
(at Agnes)
Her alone.

He walks off down the hallway.

Ida, shrugging off the arrogance, follows, winking at her daughter as she passes her. Their hands brushing in secret tenderness, &--

INT. HAPSBURG HOUSE // GREAT ROOM -- DAY

Moments later. Ida & Wilhelm, facing off in a massive salon. Wilhelm, gesturing to the heights of WHITE LINEN DRAPERY encircling the room--

HERR WILHELM
You are to dye them. All of them.
The white is too... stark.

Ida, surveying the situation, knowing there's more to it.

IDA
A calamity, is it?

Wilhelm sees that she's onto him. Dropping the facade--

HERR WILHELM
(quietly)
There is something quite amiss in my bed. Your daughter finds herself absent from it.

IDA
My daughter is of her own mind & always has been.

HERR WILHELM
...& mouth as well. Now the maids, the nurses, whispering slander.
(MORE)

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)
 Insolence in every corner, all fed
 by my young wife's disloyalty.

IDA
 (sharply)
 I would not call it that.

HERR WILHELM
 What would you call it?

As unwise as it is to antagonize this man, Ida can't help herself.

IDA
 ...Discernment.

He actually finds himself admiring her gall. Leaning in--

HERR WILHELM
 She speaks often of the Church.
 (a dirty word)
 Of *chastity*.

IDA
 No surprise. I raised her at the
 foot of God.

HERR WILHELM
 Then perhaps it's you to blame.

IDA
 It likely is.

HERR WILHELM
 You are lucky she's beautiful.

IDA
 Would she be wearing your dress otherwise?

HERR WILHELM
 ...No. But a dress can be torn off.

A *threat*. Ida looking for a way to tamp this down.

IDA
 She is not high-born. She sees no
 distinction between herself as a
 child of Grace & her new life as a
 Lady of the manor.

HERR WILHELM
 You will help her to see the distinction.

Menace -- *I will ruin you* -- hanging in the air between them.

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)

Thankfully, she is most willing to help with your labors.

(re: the drapery)

Let us make them the color of her eyes.

Ida, defiant. Staring back at him, *unsundered*, &--

INT. HAPSBURG HOUSE // SERVANTS' LEVEL -- DAY

Later. Downstairs in the scullery. KITCHEN MAIDS buzzing the halls. Ida & Agnes on the floor next to a large bucket, drapery piled all around them.

Ida opens her TOOLKIT -- vials of dye, tinctures, shears in all sizes. Calling out to one of the passing MAIDS--

IDA

Would you fetch us a pail of good water, my dear?

The Maid (older, intractable) ignores her, going about her kitchen business, until Agnes intervenes.

AGNES

Please, Lora.

MAID

(without turning around)
Of course, Lady Agnes.

The Maid sets off down the hall. Agnes looks over at her mother. *Sorry about her.*

Ida's unconcerned, quietly organizing the necessary equipment for the task at hand. Passing Agnes a BLUE VIAL...

IDA

You see the power you wield?

AGNES

It is only his name, makes me strong. & only in these walls.

She lifts the vial to her nose. *Sense-memories.*

IDA

(carefully)
It is your name, now.

AGNES

Yes. I accepted him, & I am grateful for our fortune.

A pause. *The weight of the unsaid.* Ida looking calmly at her daughter. Holding space.

AGNES (CONT'D)

But. I wonder, sometimes, if I was meant for wifing.

Big words, not entirely unexpected. A delicate moment.

IDA

I see.

AGNES

You were the same, isn't that--

IDA

--Yes.

So much history in that 'yes'. Ida, looking for the right advice... *Not yet.* She puts her hand on her daughter's knee.

IDA (CONT'D)

(re: the vial)

Half a measure in the pan, Agnes.

Agnes, with a sad smile, pours, as Ida reaches over, unbundling the drapery, &--

TIME CUT »»

Later. ECU on blue dye dilating in bucket water. Vibrance like indigo smoke, Ida up to her wrists in it, kneading & wringing.

Agnes is watching her mother work, humming to herself. A MAID is on her way out of the kitchen, tray in hand. Ida, waiting for her exit, &--

IDA (CONT'D)

If you wanted to leave, I would help you.

Agnes keeps humming. Ida's hands still working the linen, until...

AGNES

...It's not that I am unhappy. He is actually kind to me, & his gold is good for both of us, as--

IDA

--do not for one moment put thy mind on my behalf.

AGNES

But--

IDA

--Not. One. Moment. If you love the church more than him, then say it so, & I will help you.

AGNES

I do not know how to compare.

IDA

Nor did I.

She holds up her left hand. *Conspicuously absent a ring.*

IDA (CONT'D)

Be still, & think, & choose. Not today, but soon.

Agnes nods. *The good daughter.*

AGNES

(re: the indigo)

I've always found joy in watching you do this.

Ida, letting her change the subject...

IDA

Do you remember how long it needs?

AGNES

...ten Hail Marys?

IDA

Twenty-five. Help me say the last few?

AGNES

Of course.

& so they do, the simplest of prayers murmured as a mantra in time, mother & daughter -- castes apart -- dying drapes on the kitchen floor, &--

INT. HAPSBURG HOUSE // SERVANTS' LEVEL -- DAY

The next morning. Ida wakes up, caked in blue, propped up against a wall. In front of her, the entire KITCHEN STAFF, in full uniform...

Dancing madly, just like the people in town. The whole room caught up in it.

Ida's in shock, witness to the perfect unison of these besotted maids... Until one of the YOUNG MAIDS starts laughing.

As the rest of them follow suit, we realize that they were *performing*, mocking the Strasbourg dancers from the safety of their country estate.

Ida is relieved & irritated in equal measure. Beginning to pack up her tools, &--

IDA

...Idiots.

YOUNG MAID

Did you know there are now two dozen in the Strasbourg square, dancing just so.

MAID #3

Is it a curse or a blessing, do you reckon? We'd be happy to dance all day, wouldn't we, girls?

The kitchen titters. Ida's unimpressed.

IDA

If ye princods had seen them there in the yard, pissing themselves, dashing the skin off their feet, you might not find so much cheer in it.

ANOTHER MAID

(piping up)

...You've seen them?

The Young Maid doesn't want to discuss such dourness.

YOUNG MAID

Course she has, friends with Vitus himself she is...

IDA

Saint Vitus died in agony, with his bones enflamed in lead. This isn't the--
(stopping, as--)

--The Young Maid pulls Ida to her feet, tries to coax her up into a morning jig. Ida isn't having it, pushing the girl off, the whole kitchen uproarious now, &--

EXT. HAPSBURG HOUSE // FOYER -- DAY

Later. Ida, standing at the front door, morning sun filling in around her. Watching as Wilhelm drops a few coins in her hand. Agnes at his hip in another new dress.

HERR WILHELM
Until our next occasion.

IDA
Thank you for the work, m'lord.

Just sincere enough to get by.

IDA (CONT'D)
Lady Agnes.

Agnes rushes out to hug her mother. Wilhelm thinks about objecting, but goes inside instead, giving them a moment.

IDA (CONT'D)
...Be careful.

AGNES
(brave face)
What's there to fear, especially
from a man?
(kissing her hand)
Worry not. I know what to do.
Does thee have enough coin?

IDA
(dry)
Nothing but meat & wine has crossed
these lips all the summer long.

A smile between them. *The letting go.* Ida reaching out to fix a flyaway hair at Agnes's cheek.

IDA (CONT'D)
Send word, & I will arrive.

Agnes -- *I love you* -- nods. Ida picks up her toolkit, turns, heads to the waiting CARRIAGE.

THE CAMERA doesn't follow her, staying instead with Agnes.
Quietly watching her mother leave.

Carriage wheeling away, Agnes heads back into the house, into the--

INT. HAPSBURG HOUSE // HALLWAY -- SAME

--tiled HALL, clicking her way past all the portraits & furniture, down towards the » **PARLOR**

--where her husband is waiting for her, at lounge in a velvet chair.

HERR WILHELM

Well. What have we learned?

Ignoring him, Agnes goes to a writing desk, rooting around in a drawer for a STICK OF CHARCOAL. She arranges it next to a sheet of PARCHMENT on the desktop.

Walking over to Wilhelm, she takes his hand, gently brings him to his feet. Leading him to the desk, she sits him down. He's a bit confused but enjoying her confidence.

Sitting at the desk's edge, she picks up a LUTE resting against the wall.

AGNES

Challenge.

HERR WILHELM

Of what sort?

AGNES

The skill in your hands, & the quality of your spirit.

Wilhelm is intrigued. *Her body so warm & close to him.*

HERR WILHELM

Proven, how?

AGNES

(re: the charcoal)

I want a picture of your love for me.

HERR WILHELM

I have no eye for portraiture.

AGNES

I did not ask for a portrait, I asked for a depiction of your love. I will play, & you will draw without thinking.

HERR WILHELM

What does that mean?

She lays her hand seductively at the back of his neck.

AGNES

Once your hand begins to mark the page, it mustn't stop until we're through. There was an Abbess who worked this way & who found it more true than any planned image. You will draw, & I will watch, & we will begin to learn how to be good for each other. Are you ready?

HERR WILHELM

I am not, but I will try.

AGNES

No more could I ever ask.

Leaning down, she gives him the best kiss of his life.

HERR WILHELM

You will have to tell me what she's said to you.

AGNES

(smiling)

I don't know at *all* what you mean.

Standing closely behind him, she begins to play her lute.

He looks over his shoulder at her. *Go on.* Sighing, he begins. His hands across the page -- swirls & shapes -- drawing *automatically*, doing his best -- it's actually not bad -- her breath at his neck, &--

INT. CARRIAGE -- DAY [DRIVING]

Later. Agnes & Herr Wilhelm, heading into town. The two of them decidedly post-coital. Messy hair. Cheeks still flushed. Agnes with a BASKET of DRESS FABRIC in her lap.

Wilhelm sitting there pleased with himself. He reaches out, puts a hand on her knee. She covers it with her own, &--

AGNES

I think perhaps there is hope for us, after all.

The words he wanted. *Oxytocin glow.* Agnes, seizing it--

AGNES (CONT'D)

Has my mother been paid for her labors?

HERR WILHELM

She will be.

With Strasbourg's quotidian hustle rushing towards us, she allows herself a moment of satisfaction, &--

INT. / EXT. CARRIAGE -- DAY

An hour later. Center of town. Wilhelm standing in farewell at the open door. Agnes poised to run errands.

AGNES

Enjoy your 'conclave.'

HERR WILHELM

It is, I assure you, the least enjoyable thing I will do this month.

AGNES

(coy)

...& the most?

HERR WILHELM

(the eye)

You know very well.

Tipping his hat at her, he closes the carriage door, THE CAMERA FOLLOWING HIM as he heads towards the GUILD HALLS.

Mood high, he's dusting up his boots, ignoring the outcropping of BEGGARS that line the street. *Not today*, as he passes into--

INT. GUILD HALL -- DAY

--A series of low-slung buildings, filled with all manner of tradesperson. Blacksmiths, tailors, furriers. Talent & coarseness. Dirty hay on the floor.

Cacophony of business all around him, he nods at familiar faces, approaching a DOOR at the end of the hall.

He knocks twice, then twice again. The door opens, a GUARD at the ready as he steps inside, &--

INT. MEETING CHAMBER -- DAY

A large stone room. Chairs in the round. Almost two dozen MEN already assembled. This is the COUNCIL of 21, the secular governing body of Strasbourg.

Ranging from the aristocrat to the farmer, these magistrates manage the day-to-day concerns of the city... *with mafiosi levels of neglect & corruption.*

Herr Wilhelm takes his seat. Next to him is AMMEISTER DRACHENFELS (40s, well-fed.) This is essentially the Mayor of the city, 'elected' from within the ranks of the Council to serve a one-year term.

Right now, the Ammeister is impatiently listening to a COUNCILMAN meander his way through a bit of local scandal.

COUNCILMAN

& so, the mason, he's hidden himself away in the cloister, much to the chagrin of his driver, who was left chafing outside, with nary a--

The Ammeister, gaveling the table with his knuckles.

AMMEISTER

Enough, please. We have many to hear. In one single phrase, finish thy recounting.

COUNCILMAN

...A nun sarded a brother Mason in confessional day before Easter & now is with child.

A few laughs. No one that surprised to hear it.

AMMEISTER

A happy ending, then. Who has other business?

From here, the meeting gets messier. A litany of complaints. Impatient. Argumentative. *The truly dysfunctional bureaucracy of a city in distress.*

YOUNG COUNCILMAN

The foremost of course is from the East. The Ottoman threat--

COUNCILMAN

--yet another terrible harvest--

COUNCILMAN #4

--Don't forget about the pox. Half the whores in Strasbourg are lousy with it...

COUNCILMAN #3

(sneering)

...Found a crab in your teeth, did you?

The Ammeister, almost to himself, over the cacophony--

AMMEISTER

Thank God I only have a year of this & can go back to my farm.

He hits the table again, casting an eye around the room as they settle.

AMMEISTER (CONT'D)

(finally)

Shall any of you submit to me one single fruitful thing that's gone on in a fortnight?

A decent silence. Wilhelm, piping up--

HERR WILHELM

My holy wife managed to find her human side after a month of achingly quiet matrimony.

AMMEISTER

(hating his job)

We are overcome with joy for your household.

Good-natured ribbing all around. Wilhelm, taking it well. *One more thing.*

HERR WILHELM

(idly)

There is also, of course, the dancing. My maids talk of it unceasingly.

Murmurs of acknowledgment around the room. *Others have heard.*

AMMEISTER

What do you speak of? What celebration?

HERR WILHELM

Not celebration. Compelled. In the streets, they dance beyond rest. They do not take drink, they do not eat.

AMMEISTER

In what manner of world would this news be considered fruitful?

Wilhelm regrets bringing it up. Not wanting a fuss here.

HERR WILHELM

Perhaps it is nothing. The gossip of wenches & mumblecrusts.

AMMEISTER

How many?

HERR WILHELM
No more than two dozen.

Across the table, a low-level MAGISTRATE begs to differ.

MAGISTRATE
Sires.

AMMEISTER
Yes, Thomas?

MAGISTRATE
(gingerly)
Two dozen is not a fair count.

AMMEISTER
...& what is?

The Magistrate, deciding how to tell him. *The hush.* The SOUND of a CROWD in PAIN waiting on the other side of his answer, as--

EXT. STRASBOURG // STREETS -- DAY

Minutes later. WIDE ON a CONVOY OF CARRIAGES, clacking down the river road. City life clogging up the thoroughfare.

Through the window, we see The Ammeister, Herr Wilhelm, & various Councilmen. All of them heading at speed towards the City Center.

Several GUARDS are running alongside the carriages, providing a physical buffer & using their CLUBS to jab passerby out of the way. It's unapologetically martial, peasants scattering, &--

EXT. COURTYARD // CITY CENTER -- DAY

An hour later. Wilhelm, Ammeister, & the gaggle of Councilmen standing there. Sweating beneath their finery in the August sun. Their faces saying it all.

Wilhelm's plugging his ears, as we cut around to his POV, revealing...

--THE SCRUM of more than 100 DANCERS -- peasants all -- overtaking the central square, jiggling & gyrating with crazed abandon. Many of them SCREAMING in pain & confusion.

The tone here has irrevocably turned. All lightness evaporated.

This is now a fully hypnotic, toxic event.

AMMEISTER
(to the Magistrate)
Why did you not mention this earlier?

MAGISTRATE
...I had not yet seen it for myself.

The Ammeister has no words. Stuck staring at his brethren destroying themselves in front of him, as we

» CUT CLOSE on the Dancers. Their bodies uproarious. Arms twisting above their heads at sickening angles. Their rhythm unstoppable.

A YOUNG FEMALE DANCER, near the front, is spinning & spinning. Lost in it, even as nausea overtakes her, even as she VOMITS onto herself.

HERR WILHELM
Dearest God.

Covered in her own filth, she doesn't miss a turn, until a nearby DANCER COLLAPSES, clipping her foot & bringing her down with him.

The two of them, almost instantly TRAMPLED by the blind wildness of their neighbors. Bones broken underfoot. Chaos.

Wilhelm looks around. *Somebody else do something.*

In a corner of the square, he catches sight of his young wife Agnes, standing terrified with her Driver.

He runs to them, pushing through the crowd, &--

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)
(to the Driver)
WHY DO I LOOK UPON MY WIFE IN HELL?
BRING HER AWAY FROM THIS SHITFIELD--

The Driver begging his excuses, as Agnes steps between them--

AGNES
...These poor lost people, thrashed by venom. We must find what they need, & give it to them.

HERR WILHELM
What's needed is for you to be in safety.

AGNES
But how can we do nothing?

Wilhelm shoves her into the Driver's arms--

HERR WILHELM

Take her back. Stop for no one.

AGNES

I thought I married more than this.

Standing in judgement in front of him. Dozens of Dancers in need all around them. *Her face, forcing a choice.*

HERR WILHELM

Go.

(reluctantly)

You married a brave man.

He turns to face the scrum. Guilted into action. Agnes allowing herself to be carried home, as Wilhelm summons himself, JUMPING into the fray...

--Where he's knocked to the ground almost immediately. It's a battle of knees & shins -- trodden on & kicked from all sides.

Down in the dirt with him, he sees a COLLAPSED DANCER. Fighting off everything, he manages to get a hand on her, but it's too late -- her head caved in, a mess of blood.

He stands -- panicking -- lands his gaze on the Ammeister, who's out at the crowd's heaving edge--

AMMEISTER

(screaming)

RETURN THYSELVES FROM THIS MADNESS.

The NEAREST DANCER can't even open his eyes. Guided endlessly on. The Ammeister -- wit's end -- SMACKS the man as hard as he can. Unheard. Unfelt.

He sees Herr Wilhelm. Well-surprised to find him out in the middle of it, the two of them sharing a look... *Where on God's Earth have we found ourselves this day.*

INT. AMMEISTER'S HOUSE -- NIGHT

Hours later. The Ammeister stretched out in his evening chair, his cherubic SON (chubby, 5) plucking at his toenails.

Wilhelm sitting on the floor with a brandy, staring into the fire. His face deeply scratched & gouged.

AMMEISTER

Running out in the midst of them
was heedless.

HERR WILHELM

It was.

The Ammeister sighs. *What a mess.*

AMMEISTER

Would you do it again?

HERR WILHELM

Not without my grieves & mail.
Never have I been in the presence
of such unimpeded lunacy.

(talking hurts)

But something must be done, surely.

Deep in his head, the Ammeister nods. Distractedly feeding a dry BISCUIT to his son. Weighing the responsibility. Wiping crumbs from pink cheeks.

HERR WILHELM (CONT'D)

Your son is well-fed.

AMMEISTER

God has been kind to us.

The platitudes they both barely believe in.

AMMEISTER (CONT'D)

(quietly)

Can it move beyond Strasbourg, do
you reckon?

HERR WILHELM

I could not say. But I worry what
would become the city before it
took wing elsewhere.

A potent concern. The Ammeister chews his lip.

AMMEISTER

You will stay the night?

HERR WILHELM

(shaking his head)

My wife will be missing me.

(re: his face)

& she has wounds to clean.

Another beat. Ammeister looks down at his son, who stares up at him adoringly.

With parental force of habit, he moves the child's arms up into a little dance. The boy laughs, but it's too soon for dancing -- *his youthful movements turned somehow sinister.*

AMMEISTER
(looking up)
Bring armor, on morrow?

HERR WILHELM
Why should I risk my life or my
gold after today's failure?

AMMEISTER
Because you are strong, & they are not.

Wilhelm sips his brandy, stinging his wounds.

HERR WILHELM
I fear I have other business.

AMMEISTER
(fuck)
...I see.

CLOSE on the Ammeister, worry & resignation dueling across his face, &--

EXT. COURTYARD // CITY CENTER -- DAY

The next morning. MATCHING CLOSE on the same stressful look. *Same face, new reason, as » IN THE DISTANCE*

A phalanx of PRIESTS strides towards us. *Reservoir Dogs of the cloth.* Their robes brooming the path, clouds of incense making a big show of things as they approach the courtyard, where--

» » HORDES OF DANCERS ARE EVERYWHERE. Manic. Unquenchable.

The Ammeister, standing with a pair of BAILIFFS, is at a loss. Impotent in front of the clergy. *His city on fire.*

The crowd heaves in dusty throes nearby -- 100 pairs of feet stomping -- the Senior Priest sidling up to him, iron hand at his elbow, &--

SENIOR PRIEST
It appears, Herr Ammeister, that Satan
does indeed *thrive* in your people.

AMMEISTER
...They are your people too.

An early gauntlet. Generations of dissent between them.

SENIOR PRIEST
What plans.

AMMEISTER
To subdue, of course, &--

LOWER PRIEST
--By what means?--

AMMEISTER
--examine the possible causes.

The Senior Priest, surveying the crowd of Dancers--

SENIOR PRIEST
Is there any doubt.

AMMEISTER
My physicians arrive & will have words.

LOWER PRIEST
Useless men.

AMMEISTER
We shall see.
(almost to himself)
It would be such a strange way to
be damned.

SENIOR PRIEST
It is a strange world, Herr Ammeister.

He raises his THURIBLE, still spilling incense.

SENIOR PRIEST (CONT'D)
Go & seek thy fruitless path,
whilst I bring blessing to these
children of God.

He raises his arms & begins CHANTING.

The Ammeister finds himself pushed to the side as ONLOOKERS
rush over to receive Benediction. Hoping to find cure to
their terror.

TIME CUT »»

Moments later. The Ammeister & his Bailiffs, navigating the
swarm of Dancers.

Through the commotion, we can still see the Priest conducting his blessing. *Ineffective thus far.* Onlookers rising from their knees to run away from this madness.

Nearby, we notice another dancer, already familiar to us...

FRAU TROFFEA, her gaunt face almost unrecognizable. *Somehow, she's made it back here.* Lost again -- some eternal return.

She Dances madly, hyperventilating. A few more turns, until we watch her COLLAPSE.

Her fall, catching the Ammeister's eye...

AMMEISTER
(directing his Bailiffs)
That one.

The Bailiffs oblige, picking Troffea up, dragging her out of the crowd. She resists weakly. Fighting for every inch.

TROFFEA
free me free me FREE ME FREE ME!!!!

..& we don't know if she's screaming at the Bailiffs or the sky, her body racked with effort, the CHANTS of the priests RISING over everything, &--

INT. ANTECHAMBER -- DAY

Later. Silence. Not quite a dungeon, but close. The Ammeister standing in a corner, watching a MEDIEVAL PHYSICIAN (50s, impressive) inspect Troffea, who lies on a cot.

He has his ear to her chest, listening to her heartbeat. Neck. Wrists. Attentive to her blood.

She's in a state of near-unconsciousness. Her nervous system shot. Fingers still twitching the dance.

The Physician moves down to her legs. Horribly swollen, the soles of her feet are open wounds. Raw shreds of skin revealing bone beneath.

Soaking a bandage in TINCTURE, he applies it to her feet. She groans feverishly.

The Ammeister, nauseous in his corner, needs to know.

AMMEISTER
Why?

The Physician, intent on his task, doesn't look up.

PHYSICIAN
I need time.

AMMEISTER
Have you seen what befalls the
square outside?

No answer. Physician busy prodding distended calves, peeling
open eyes. Looking for clues.

AMMEISTER (CONT'D)
There are scores of others like
this one. Be quick.

PHYSICIAN
(sharp)
Do you find me lingering?

He holds up her arm to show the Ammeister.

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)
Notice the fingers. They still
hold the rhythm of it. It is
inside her.

AMMEISTER
Like a poison.

PHYSICIAN
Like a command.

AMMEISTER
By whom? Some devil--

PHYSICIAN
--No. Her very blood.

Below him, Troffea begins to move. The dance returning to
her. At this moment, she couldn't even tell you her name.

The Physician begins to bind her in HEAVY BANDAGES. She
thrashes. Murmuring prayers.

Holding her arms down with his knees, The Physician tries to
force a SEDATIVE into her mouth.

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)
(at the hovering Ammeister)
FUCKING HELP.

INT. CHAMBER -- DAY

Later. Much bigger room now. Dusty afternoon light.

Troffea is naked & FULLY BOUND to a chair in the middle of the chamber. Still resisting weakly.

Her head held back by a pair of ATTENDANTS, a CATGUT TUBE trailing from her mouth.

The Physican, standing over her, is funneling litres of CLEAR LIQUID into her body, as we

CUT WIDER to REVEAL the VIEWING GALLERY that has developed...

An assortment of MAGISTRATES, PHYSICIANS, ASTROLOGERS, even a couple of PRIESTS in the wings. *All hovering in anticipation.* Watching poor Troffea's stomach distending from the force-feed.

The Ammeister is among them, unslept & mussed hair. Trying for calm. *Please let this work, as--*

MAGISTRATE

What is thy medicine?

The Physician -- a bit of a performer -- pinches off the tube. Turns to face his audience.

PHYSICIAN

Mere water. For the heat.

Pulling back Troffea's hair, he shows the REDDENED SKIN at the nape of her neck.

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)

Her blood is grossly enflamed.
Water will dampen it, & seed the
bile she needs. It is a
correctable malady.

Sure enough, her struggles begin to peter out. *This bizarre method showing progress.*

The Physician reaches down & slowly extracts the tube from the Troffea's mouth. It's painful. She retches, coughing in fits.

The ASTROLOGER, taking his chance to weigh in--

ASTROLOGER

Whatever be the condition of their
physical form, it is nothing more
than a mirror of the Heavens.

MAGISTRATE IN THE BACK

Hear hear.

Grumbling around the room. Lots of muttered opinions here. The room mired in the age-old tri-rivalry between science, religion, & astrology (which straddles the other two.)

ASTROLOGER

(picking up steam)

Mars has ascended terribly under Capricorn, the Virgin trapped at the 20th degree of Medusa. Jupiter's course gone void. To say it fast: the skies have spelled danger for 3 seasons now. The failed harvest of last year was seen early by some of us, & today...

(trailing off now, as he looks up to find--)

--The Physician, standing right in his face. Nothing unclear about his look. *This is my room.*

PHYSICIAN

This low philosopher will save his maps & charts for another day.

(cocking his head)

Do you hear that?

The CRUSHING NOISE of 200 Dancers outside making its way into the room.

ASTROLOGER

...yes.

PHYSICIAN

Those are lives.

ASTROLOGER

I am most aware of--

SENIOR PRIEST

(from the corner)

--Not lives. Souls.

The Physician whips around. Looking for the voice who said it.

PHYSICIAN

(finding him)

Souls that have suffered gravely in thy custody. Their bodies should be healed before all else.

SENIOR PRIEST

Blasphemy.

The Physician looks to the Ammeister. He may be frazzled, but he's the final word.

PHYSICIAN

Tell this Priest to venture back to his cloister.

Violent whispers now. This is a deeply religious group. The Physician punching well beyond his weight here.

The Ammeister, all too aware of the fragility of his authority, looks to de-escalate.

AMMEISTER

The Church is our Mother. Well-loved, & well-heard.

The Physician wants to retort. Ammeister fixing him with a glare.

Standing, the Ammeister approaches Troffea, still tied to the chair.

She's semi-conscious at this point, breath shallow, chin resting on her chest.

The Ammeister grazes her arm with a finger.

AMMEISTER (CONT'D)

(to them all)

The heat is strong indeed.

PHYSICIAN

Her blood is tainted.

SENIOR PRIEST

BY SIN.

PHYSICIAN

(allowing it)

Perhaps. No matter the source, it brings with it the urge.

AMMEISTER

What cure, then?

The Physician, with supreme confidence--

PHYSICIAN

They must be allowed to dance freely, to perspire, & to purge, from every nerve & vessel, this filth that has invaded them.

Silence, as his voice echoes off the stone. *Not quite the remedy they were expecting.*

The Ammeister, thinking it through, has reservations.

AMMEISTER

...Freely...?

PHYSICIAN

Yes. They must exhaust themselves.
Perhaps it would be wise to provide music.

Before anyone else can respond, a new VOICE makes itself known.

TROFFEA

(barely)

I already hear music.

All eyes instantly on her. Her head lifting to meet their gaze.

AMMEISTER

Speak again, girl.

Something fascinating about her face as she looks around. Not quite acknowledging the bandages, the men, her body. A liminal state. *As if in a dream.*

TROFFEA

(feverish)

The sound... is red. It fills my ears.

AMMEISTER

Why do you insist to move so dangerously?

TROFFEA

I do not know. I cannot stop it.

She looks down at her water-bloated stomach.

TROFFEA (CONT'D)

I have been accursed by Saint
Vitus. His music. His red.

PHYSICIAN

Peasant's fear. A germ in you, not
a curse.

The Priest sees an opening here. He approaches, brandishing his SCEPTER. Makes the sign of the cross with it above her head.

Troffea basks in his blessing. Staring up to find his eyes--

TROFFEA
Thank you, Father.

She seems genuinely grateful. But the twitching in her hands has never ceased. CLOSE on their persistence.

The Ammeister, not noticing. Hopeful. *Maybe she's saved.*

AMMEISTER
Do you find yourself healed of this grotesquerie?

TROFFEA
(ashamed)
No. I would be dancing, now, were I not bound. My body triumphs.

She weeps. Hot tears on skin. Not even a Priest can help her.

The Physician pushes in close, nudging the Priest out of the way. Feeding her water.

PHYSICIAN
(to the Ammeister)
There is no prayer that makes conquest. They must free themselves.

SENIOR PRIEST
There is no freedom without God.

PHYSICIAN
God is watching.

Equipoise. The two of them, again looking to the Ammeister for his word.

His face ashen. Overwhelmed.

A long beat, until something clicks in him. A choice. His lips parting as the decision arrives, &--

INT. GUILD HALL -- DAY

Later. From behind, we see Troffea standing at the edge of the long hall. Still bandaged up like some living mummy.

Strangely calm for the moment. Her ears PLUGGED with FELT.

The Physician & Ammeister are at her side. The MANIC CRIES of the Dancers outside roiling over them.

AMMEISTER
 (over the din)
 Will we succeed?

The Physician, conducting his final examination of Troffea, is preoccupied.

PHYSICIAN
 (checking her pulse)
 We will, Herr Ammeister. Their
 blood clean by tomorrow's moon.

The Ammeister not entirely convinced. The SOUND of nearby bedlam growing louder.

The Physician pulls the FELT from one of the other Dancer's ears.

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)
 (just for him)
 Your feet summon the thrill of angels.
 Time to dance until you can't.

With an ear free, she hears her fellow Dancers. Writhing against his bonds.

AMMEISTER
 (noticing)
 His body longs to join its brethren.

PHYSICIAN
 And so it shall. We call for music.

It's too late to change tack. The Ammeister turns to the CAMERA, gives a nod down the hall, as we CUT AROUND

to show a BATTALION of MUSICIANS standing at the ready. DRUMS, FLUTES, HARPS, & BELLS. Their faces prepared for battle.

AMMEISTER
 (to the Physician)
 On thy bidding.

PHYSICIAN
 It begins.
 (to the Musicians)
 Follow us, lads.

The Physician picks up Troffea, cradling her in his arms. She's heavy.

AMMEISTER
 I will help you.

The Physician, not wanting to give away a fraction of his newfound responsibility, manages to keep her aloft.

PHYSICIAN

We shant risk your injury. Go back inside, & leave us this work.

The Ammeister glances towards the CROWD of Dancers wilding outside. He's more than happy to stay home.

AMMEISTER

May victory not find us wanting.

The Physician looks at him. Their confidence less than perfect. *See you on the other side.*

With Troffea in his arms, he begins to move down the hall. Towards the frenzy that awaits them.

The Musicians, following cautiously behind him--

PHYSICIAN

(over his shoulder)

We wait for nothing! COMMENCE! COMMENCE!!!

...& so they do. This impromptu marching band, striking up a TRIBAL RHYTHM.

The Ammeister backing away, giving them one last look, the CAMERA breaking from him, back to--

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)

FASTER! IMPROVE THY PACE! BE AS THE HEARTBEAT OF A KING ON FIRE.

The DRUMMERS respond, increasing their tempo. The end of the hall approaching. Sunlight & madness ever closer.

Their pace is perilous, the Physician nodding his approval as they cross out into

EXT. COURTYARD // CITY CENTER -- DAY

--where we find the Dance in a RIOTOUS STATE. Even worse than before. Like something out of Hieronymous Bosch. Whatever level of spectacle you are imagining: double it.

Troffea -- rejoined with the Source -- wriggles out of the Physician's arms, falling hard onto the packed earth.

He drops to his knees, unwrapping her. The bandages slipping away, she jumps back to her feet, all skin & energy.

The Physician, left in the thick of it. He covers his head, trying to protect himself. Defenseless.

Behind him, the band of Musicians gamely try to surround the dancers & establish a perimeter.

The Physician, from the ground, pointing them to a hastily-built wooden STAGE--

PHYSICIAN
GAIN GROUND, LADS!

Pushing their way through the mess, they clamber onto the rickety structure. Arranging themselves in formation. Drumming down onto the crowd.

And for a moment, it appears to be working.

The Dancers, coaxed into unison, aligning with the metre of the band. *Like some mid-90s rave gone medieval.*

It's beautiful, an extraordinary tableau of enthusiasm & hypnotic celebration...

...But it cannot hold. The Dancers drifting out of time. Their individual rhythms veering away. Pain in all their faces. Chaos returning just as suddenly as it left.

We find Troffea again, her head skyward as she spins. The wounds on her feet punished open. She spins & spins -- her staccato heart -- it's all too much. She JOLTS -- some critical artery BURSTING, as she collapses finally, facedown in the dirt.

The Physician watches gravely as Troffea takes her last breath. *Her chapter closed. His mission failing.*

Desperate, he pulls a KNIFE from his belt.

Arcing through the crowd, he finds a MALE DANCER, grabs his wrist, cuts him at the bicep. *A manic attempt to slow down their condition.*

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)
I will lessen thy troubles.

Another layer of spectacle, blood lashing through the air now, as the dancer -- feeling nothing -- continues on unabated.

The Physician, nearing exhaustion, finds another Dancer. Cuts them as well. Another. Slashing. Another.

Crimson dirt. No mercy. *God Save us.*

The few ONLOOKERS left staring on in horror, the Physician's arm growing heavy, as we PAN ACROSS

--to find the exact moment one of the MUSICIANS (black, 20s) is CONVERTED into the Dance.

Dropping his drum, he LEAPS from the stage, compelled to join the very thing he was fighting.

»» **The Dance has become fully contagious.**

The Physician sees it happen. His own man, gone to the crowd. The fight leaching out of him. The battle lost, at least for today, &--

EXT. COURTYARD // CITY CENTER -- NIGHT

Many hours later. Quarter moon. MUSIC barely disguising the groans of Dancers in the night.

We're with the Black Musician, whirling & bounding. Powerful & tireless. His skin slick with sweat & *something else* -- herbs & oil. Some ancient remedy.

We find the Physician nearby, more herbs laid out on a blanket, preparing POULTICES for the other dancers. He's been up all night.

Up on the STAGE, the rest of the musicians are playing on doggedly -- BLINDFOLDED now. Exhausted.

Encircling the courtyard, we see hasty BARRIERS OF FELT have been erected. 3 meters tall: a visual quarantine to shield the Uncontaminated from this awful display.

» CLOSE ON **A GASH IN THE FELT...**

To find THREE FACES we recognize: DEACON ANTON (the same naive teen with us back on page 3) along with JOSS FRITZ & his leprous brother ROWAN (from page 1).

The trio, mesmerized by what's in front of them. *Clearly their first glimpse of the Dance.*

JOSS FRITZ
A cage of fools...

DEACON ANTON
...Fiercely guarded.

They watch as BAILIFFS aggressively maintain a perimeter. Wielding their staves freely, policing the VIGIL that has formed outside the felt -- scores of CITIZENS, draped in CHARMS, praying en masse for their loved ones lost inside.

We're CLOSE on Rowan now. *Fear mingling with fascination.*

ROWAN

I should like to see them face to face.

JOSS FRITZ

Nothing to admire in there, Rowan.

DEACON ANTON

But perhaps aide to be offered.

Ambivalence rising in Joss' face. *Weighing the risks.*

Right in front of them, A MAN escorts an OLDER FEMALE DANCER - - perhaps his mother -- past the felt walls. A nearby Bailiff catches on quickly, descending on the man, pummeling him to the ground.

ROWAN

(screaming)

LEAVE HIM, BAILIFF. He harms NO ONE.

The Bailiff does not take kindly to interference. He raises his staff, lashing out at Rowan's voice behind the felt.

Joss, rising to his brother's defense, kicks the barrier--

JOSS FRITZ

Stay well clear of us, little man.

This Bailiff loves a fight, shoving his way behind the felt, blindsiding Joss with the back of his mailed glove.

Joss falls, as Rowan jumps on the man -- finding a chokehold - - a pas de trois in the dark -- fists & teeth.

These farmers know how to fight. The Deacon looks on as they make quick work of the Bailiff. But they've drawn a lot of attention.

DEACON

(re: the other side of the felt)

It might be safer in there...

Rowan, looking at Joss for permission--

JOSS FRITZ

(sighing)

...Go on.

Rowan almost smiles. *Access granted.* The three of them, slipping »» **BEYOND THE FELT**

We follow as they pick their way through the masses of Dancers. Many are unconscious, sleeping or dead.

Our trio, stepping over them carefully. HOLDING on Joss as he encounters the Dance up close--

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)
They are lost...

DEACON
And so we must search for them.

Nurturing optimism here, as we locate the Physician & his blanket of herbs in the middle distance.

They weave towards him, landing finally at the man's feet--

DEACON ANTON
(kneeling)
Sir.

The Physician, tying a poultice, can't hear him over the din.

DEACON ANTON (CONT'D)
SIR.

PHYSICIAN
(looking up, startled--)
--What be it, Priest.

DEACON ANTON
...Deacon.

The Physician, in the middle of the worst night of his life--

PHYSICIAN
A Priest in the womb, then.
(staring expectantly)

DEACON ANTON
(nervous)
I am here to, um... Offer blessing.

The Physician almost laughs. Gesturing to the Dancers lashing madly all around them...

PHYSICIAN
Well, perform thy best. It is the most sublime fuckery of all my days.

ROWAN

Does the music... give them peace?

PHYSICIAN

They do not hear it. Their eyes
are empty, they barely speak.

He stands, walks over to a MALE DANCER jiggling away. As a demonstration, he puts his boot to the back of the Dancer's knee, forcing him to the ground.

Simultaneously, SEVERAL OTHER DANCERS fall with him. Some kind of hive-mind, almost telepathic energy between them.

The Male Dancer -- no worse for wear -- quickly bounces back up to resume his dance. As do the others.

PHYSICIAN (CONT'D)

You see? Unified in madness. There
is no language that reaches them.

The Deacon goes over to one, feebly attempts a Benediction, is entirely ignored. He has nothing to offer here -- a baby in a war zone.

JOSS FRITZ

(improvising)

We will bring word to his elders.
On the state of things.

PHYSICIAN

Spend time as thy wilt.

Conversation over. Back to his twine & dried leaves. Joss, putting a heavy hand on the Deacon's shoulder--

JOSS FRITZ

Take us to Silus.

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL // RECTORY -- NIGHT

Later. Middle of the night. The Deacon, quietly escorting Joss & Rowan along the stone passage, into the

»» DINING HALL

Where the remains of a large FEAST still litter the long tables. Wine. Boar. Cakes of all seasons.

Joss swigs from a cup, picks a morsel off the table. Sharing it with his brother, &--

JOSS FRITZ
 This clergy lives too well.
 (picking up a cake)
 Do you reckon this was once our
 wheat, Rowan?

Rowan's busy with the boar. The Deacon's quiet embarrassment at the riches of his calling.

DEACON ANTON
 ...Silus' chamber is onwards.

TIME CUT »»

A moment later. The three of them in front of a large door. Joss ventures a knock. Laughter behind the oak.

The door is opened eventually by a CONCUBINE (17, pure trouble.)

CONCUBINE
 (sizing him up)
 Who bid thee invitation?

JOSS FRITZ
 None. But I have news that should
 find a Bishop before morning.

CONCUBINE
 (suggestively)
 This is a night for tongues, not words.

Next to Joss, the Deacon blushes. Beyond virginal. Our trio holding their ground until PRIEST SILUS (the same one from page 2) comes to the door--

PRIEST SILUS
 (surprised but hiding it)
 Fritz the farmer... By what grace
 or gambol do we meet eyes tonight?

Naked as the day he was born. The Deacon averting his eyes.

JOSS FRITZ
 Father Silus. We have news--
 (stopping, as--)

--Silus forcibly pulls them all into his quarters...

INT. SILUS' QUARTERS -- SAME

...where a buffet of hedonistic options is on offer: another PAIR of CONCUBINES, a few barely-dressed CLERGYMEN, & a visibly-hallucinating PEASANT WOMAN.

PRIEST SILUS
 You arrive at a good hour.
 (in the Deacon's ear)
 Especially you, my boy.

A cheerful drunk this evening, he slops a bit of wine into a brass cup. Presses it into Joss's hands.

One of the Concubines tilts her head back in front of Joss, coaxing him to pour. He's awkward. Wine splashes.

CONCUBINE
 Not yet ready for communion, are
 we, love?

In a corner, the Peasant Woman is URINATING into a vase. Our trio is disgusted.

PRIEST SILUS
 (proudly)
 She's dined on naught but tainted
 mushrooms for two days. Her
liquids are a... Gift.

CONCUBINE
 (very high)
 ...A chariot! A path to the living light!

The Deacon can't believe it.

DEACON ANTON
 You all drink of this woman's waste
 for... indulgence? Pot-shotten on *piss*?

CONCUBINE
 Pleasure is a teacher, isn't that
 so, Father?

JOSS FRITZ
 (enough)
 You know of the dancers in the
 Strasbourg square, do you not.

A beat. Silus's shameless distraction. Toying with her corset.

DEACON
 Father. It is most--

PRIEST SILUS

--Yes. I have heard tell. Hordes
of damned peasants at play beneath
Satan's cloak.

JOSS FRITZ

It is not play. It is a plague that
spreads, & the city too goes with it.
There is need of your Church.

PRIEST SILUS

In this shameful affair, the Ammeister
leads the charge. We, humble
clergymen, keep about our daily work &
await the Bishop's will.

He slurps his wine. Patronizing. Not an ounce of urgency.

DEACON ANTON

Where is Father Geilar?

PRIEST SILUS

On a carriage gone West.
(scornfully)
His traveling sermons.

JOSS FRITZ

So you do nothing?

PRIEST SILUS

On the contrary. We take close
study of the condition, so as to
better understand its workings.

Finally. Progress.

JOSS FRITZ

We shall help thee. I will make
plain to the other farmers -- two
dozen more hands for thy efforts.

PRIEST SILUS

And what would you ask in return
for this aide? A favor against thy
debt, perhaps?

Joss can't deny that it's crossed his mind.

JOSS FRITZ

...Perhaps.

Silus is quiet. Wielding his position. Ambling towards the
Concubine...

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)

(pressing)

Let us away, Father -- the square
is overrun, even now.

PRIEST SILUS

The rectory is itself opportune for study.
(grabbing the Concubine's hand)
...This most unsound creature will
allow herself to be taken by dance,
& we will witness, & give *sacrament*
where required.

The Deacon, from the corner, is angry now. Stepping out of
his shell--

DEACON

FATHER. I INSIST WE MOVE--

PRIEST SILUS

(dangerous)

--No. You do not speak again.
(to the other Clergymen)
Help him sit down.

The Clergymen rise drunkenly from their lounges, leading the
Deacon to a chair. Joss & Rowan make to help him, but burly
Priests block their path. *Outnumbered.*

PRIEST SILUS (CONT'D)

Your offer is kind, Fritz, but
unnecessary. I bid thee & thy
unfortunate brother good morrow.

Joss wants to push back, but Rowan's look slows him down.

Silus, relishing his advantage, gestures to the Peasant Woman
& her vase in the corner...

PRIEST SILUS (CONT'D)

Now let's get the boy something to drink.

EXT. MONASTERY -- NIGHT

Moments later. Joss watching Rowan pacing anxiously by the
gates. Their horse tied to a post nearby. Mid-conversation
here--

JOSS FRITZ

We've done what can--

ROWAN

--Which adds to nothing--

JOSS FRITZ

--So it goes. What else would you do, Rowan?

ROWAN

I would stay, & stand amongst forsaken dancers...

JOSS FRITZ

It would be a waste of your days.

ROWAN

Mine to waste, though, brother.

JOSS FRITZ

(furious)

Indeed.

He's climbing onto his horse now, looking down at Rowan--

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)

You know well where your home is.

ROWAN

I do.

Joss -- foolish boy -- rides off without another word.

Rowan's face heavy in the moonlight. *His choice made*, as he turns, scrambling back up over the outer walls of the rectory, &--

EXT. RECTORY // GARDENS -- DAWN

A few hours later. Birdsong. Rosy light on ivy.

The Deacon, nauseously counting his sins from the night before, takes his tea at a small table. The morning business of the rectory unfolding around him.

Nearby sits TINY STONE HOUSE with no door. Darkness beyond its cruciform windows. CLOSE on its cruciform windows. A FACE presses itself to the window's edge. AN ANCIENT WOMAN blinking sun from her eyes. This is THE ANCHORESS (*In the 16th Century, these voluntary shut-ins were regarded essentially as LIVING SAINTS.*)

She begins to SING. *A raspy, pass-me-down peasant's hymn that breaks your heart.*

The Deacon, closing his eyes, relishing the simple pleasure of a human voice, as--

ROWAN (O.S.)
 Pardon me for leaving thee.

The Deacon turns to find a groggy Rowan at his shoulder.
Having spent the night hiding God-knows-where on the property. A monastic stowaway.

DEACON ANTON
 (sipping his tea)
 It couldn't be helped.

Not wanting to get into details here. BRUISES around his wrists from Silus' mistreatment.

DEACON ANTON (CONT'D)
 Where did you sleep?

ROWAN
 (grinning)
 With the pigs.

DEACON ANTON
 And so what would you have us do now, Rowan Fritz?

ROWAN
 Take Mass, & then back to center Strasbourg.

Rowan, despite his restless night, is anxious to help.

DEACON ANTON
 I believe I find myself too imperfect for service this morning.

ROWAN
 Nonsense. What are thy offenses?

DEACON ANTON
 There's no time for the folly of deacons.
 (deeper)
 I do not know what help we can be, Fritz.

ROWAN
 Well, their pain today is quick,
 and we cannot find a Priest to move with us...

DEACON ANTON
 Half these men are undeserving of that name.

ROWAN
 Are you?

His enthusiasm catching. *Let's ride.*

DEACON ANTON

Perhaps we must be enough to lend blessing...

ROWAN

Let us find out. My mother said that none who walks in charity is alone.

The Deacon nods. Liking those words.

DEACON ANTON

(standing)

I will bring you a horse.

EXT. STREETSIDE -- DAY

Later. The Deacon & Rowan, on horseback, barreling towards town. *Trying to make themselves useful.*

At pace alongside the river, they pass an ENCAMPMENT. Shoddy fabric tents, HUDDLED MASSES around weak fires.

Suddenly, A MAN (gaunt, 20s) runs onto the road. Standing directly in the path of the Deacon's horse. Holding a cloth BUNDLE.

GAUNT MAN

(screaming)

PRIEST!!!! PRIEST!!!!!!

The Deacon, yanking at the bridle, chokes his horse to a stop.

The Man -- no concern for himself -- is in anguish. As he approaches, we see that his bundle is in fact the CORPSE of an infant, swaddled in rags.

The poor thing hasn't been dead long. Tiny blue hands. Dry blue mouth. And somehow: soaking wet. A searing, unbearable sight, as--

GAUNT MAN (CONT'D)

(shoving the child up
towards us)

You must take my boy. Speak his Last Rites. Lay him to rest, so his soul be safe unto Heaven.

Rowan & the Deacon, staring down from their horses...

DEACON ANTON
 (noticing)
 Why is he wet?

There has never been more shame in a human's face than in this man at this moment. Sucking down air. Willing himself towards confession.

GAUNT MAN
 ...I had nothing to feed him.

Holy God. The Deacon holds quiet, but Rowan is destroyed. Looking behind the Man, towards the gray river. Towards the drowning place.

Something breaking inside him. *The world on fire.*

The Man, still holding up the dead weight of his baby. Guilt in every atom.

DEACON ANTON
 (carefully)
 There can be no Rites given after death.

GAUNT MAN
 ...I did not know.

He lowers the bundle. Deflated. Cradling it to his chest. No Grace for his boy.

The Deacon makes a timid cross over the corpse.

DEACON ANTON
 I am sorry. Truly.

GAUNT MAN
 Forgive me.

Rowan, straightening in his saddle. Pulling a crust of BREAD from the pockets of his robes. The least he can do.

The man stares at the gift, as the Rowan bows his head, & rides off. The Deacon follows, leaving the man to the horror of his decisions, &--

EXT. STRASBOURG // CENTRAL SQUARE -- NIGHT

Hours later. A windy night, dust swirling the square. Back in the irredeemable chaos of the Dance.

It's more awful than ever. Mad dancers, giving it their all. Skinless feet. Pouring sweat & groaning. BODIES littering the ground.

The FELT BARRIERS still in place around the square. The whole place devolved into a war zone.

TRACKING ACROSS the destruction -- Rowan in the middle of it, absorbing all the kicks & scratches. Utterly overwhelmed.

The Deacon's nearby, helping a COLLAPSED DANCER eat a bowl of soup.

A brief moment of lucidity, as--

COLLAPSED DANCER
(soup falling from her mouth)
Let me die.

DEACON ANTON
...No.

TIME CUT »»

Hours later. Rowan & the Deacon are flagging. Doing their best amongst the throngs. A two-man medic team.

Rowan, in particular, looks very weak. The trauma of others made flesh in him.

Nearby, BAILIFFS are loading BODIES into WAGONS. At their backs -- the Ammeister. His vest & trousers still crisp from pressing.

Just the sight of the man sparks anger in the Deacon. *So much to do & with so little help.* Stalking over, kicking past a Bailiff, he grabs the Ammeister by the lapel, &--

DEACON ANTON (CONT'D)
(furious)
This chaos that persists... What method have thee for curing it? I see no plan in you. Just a dross-picker in fine clothes--

AMMEISTER
Perhaps if the rubbish had more love of Heaven...

Such an awful indictment. He can't even finish the sentence. The Deacon, seeing through it--

DEACON ANTON
You do not believe that.

The two of them, standing in the dust. Knowing each other.

AMMEISTER

No. I do not.

Real pathos about him here. He wants to be a good man. He just doesn't quite know how.

DEACON ANTON

Is the Bishop aware?

AMMEISTER

(it's complicated)

...Yes.

DEACON ANTON

Why do you not allow his Priests to come? My own brothers have not seen fit to visit.

(fools)

They enjoy their nights while we stand talking.

The Ammeister, saddled with bureaucracy--

AMMEISTER

The city is hard enough to manage with King & a Pope in Rome. The Bishop's eye is an *intrusion*.

DEACON ANTON

You speak of tithes & taxes, do you not.

AMMEISTER

(caught)

An apple can only be so far divided.

The utter ridiculousness of it all. Mad dancers in the street, consumed by malady, & these two are here talking about money.

The Deacon, half-disgusted. The Ammeister, watching a Dancer CRAWLING, rolling & spinning along the ground. Her arms & knees scraped to ribbons.

AMMEISTER (CONT'D)

So intent are these folk to ruin their bodies through movement...

DEACON ANTON

The ruin will be ours.

(leaning in)

Make word to the Bishop. Grant him entry. Bring aide.

(re: the Dancers around them)

They need more than you & I.

The Ammeister looks at him. Not a bad show for a Deacon.

AMMEISTER
(nodding)
My man will ride at first light.

DEACON ANTON
...Do not wait.

EXT. STRASBOURG // ALLEYS -- NIGHT

Later. Away from the central square, the Dance has spread -- spilling through the felt. A MOB of Dancers unleashed down the tiny streets.

CITIZENS, looking down on the tumult from windows & doorways...

We find Rowan & the Deacon at full tilt here, trying to contain this new eruption. Rowan can barely stand up.

A nearby Dancer grabs him, arms tight around his body. Moving him into the rhythm of it. As though coaxing him into the Dance.

In his exhausted state, Rowan cannot resist. His tired feet picking up the pace. Losing himself in real time.

The Deacon turns, sees the danger his friend is in. Rushing over, pulling him away...

...But it's too late. The Dance has rooted. Rowan's body -- ungoverned by reason -- moving on its own now.

ROWAN
(lost)
Would that I was as good as thee....

The Deacon face to face with the tragedy. Paralyzed.

At his back, suddenly... a FACE we know well. Joss Fritz, back to collect his wayward brother.

JOSS FRITZ
(at the Deacon)
What shepherd you are to this vileness.

DEACON ANTON
He was... fine...

He's heartbroken, as Joss grabs his brother roughly--

JOSS FRITZ
DO NOT BE A FOOL, ROWAN. COME
HOME. COME AWAY FROM THIS.

Rowan's eyes. That horrible blankness. Lost.

ROWAN
(deliriously)
I am useless...

A swarm of Dancers is coursing up the tiny alley towards them. ONLOOKERS pushed & squeezed. This riot quickly becoming a stampede.

DEACON ANTON
(to a trio of YOUNG WOMEN)
Do not gaze upon them! GO BACK INSIDE!

The situation veering out of control, the crowd enveloping him, knocking The Deacon to his knees...

Joss -- pure instinct -- reaches down to pull him up. Can't reach him.

DEACON ANTON (CONT'D)
(surrendering)
...It is just fear.

Joss watching helplessly as the Deacon is overwhelmed, stomped to pieces right there in front of him. Everything he could have been, left in blood on the cobblestones.

Joss is SLAMMED into a wall. Narrowly making it out of the wave of Dancers, as they continue to claim territory. *Rowan's face lost in the wash.*

Bailiffs -- laying about with clubs -- try to contain things, closing off the path. Barely holding the line.

Joss, stuck staring at the HUMAN WALL of Bailiffs between him & his brother.

JOSS FRITZ
LET ME PAST. MY BROTHER--
(silenced, as--)

--A Bailiff's CUDGEL smashes him in the face. No discussion to be had. Joss, reeling back, &--

TIME CUT » »

A minute later. His nose trailing blood, Joss is pushing upstream now, away from the riot, all those screams fresh in his ears, &--

TIME CUT »»

Moments later. Joss has found a quiet street. Dragging his feet -- wounded & half-broken.

In front of him, in an alcove, we see a SOLITARY DANCER, slowly spinning. *Perhaps some remnant that's strayed from the herd.*

But we will recognize him as the GAUNT MAN from the river.

A man who drowned his child this morning, currently smiling wildly at us with the confidence of a schizophrenic.

As Joss carefully steps past him--

GAUNT MAN

Are you thirsty? I'm thirsty.

He speaks normally. *Eyes clear as bell.* Joss stops -- something different about this one.

GAUNT MAN (CONT'D)

If you dance, they give you bread.
And soup, besides. I couldn't eat
my boy. But others did.

His smile cracking. Trauma like wire around his heart.

He stops dancing, leans in to Joss.

GAUNT MAN (CONT'D)

All those others, you see, are
fucked. They of weak spirit. Whilst
I stamp these feet all evening &
receive their inheritance.

JOSS FRITZ

...You dance by choice?

GAUNT MAN

Yes. No.

He makes little sense, but one thing is clear: the Gaunt Man is faking the Dance. Pantomiming the affliction for a simple meal. *Imagine the desperation it takes for such a thing.*

Joss, as it clicks in him, is devastated. Seeing the Dance for what it is: a physical reaction to suffering. *A bodily protest of the impoverished class.*

JOSS FRITZ

You are worse than a beggar, but you
have taught me something this night.

The Gaunt Man sneers, resuming his performance. Joss looking back. Shaken as he walks off. *This fucking curse.*

EXT. TAVERN -- NIGHT

Later. The other side of town. Joss adrift in the night. The tavern door in front of him. He opens it--

INT. TAVERN -- SAME

--Stepping into a surprisingly peaceful room. A good fire in the hearth. CUSTOMERS sipping tamely at ale. In a corner of the tavern sits a quartet of NUNS. PEARLS at their necks -- a luxurious bunch.

Joss walks to the bar, manned by an INNKEEPER.

INNKEEPER
(re: Joss' appearance)
Been among them, have you?

JOSS
(ignoring him)
Gruit.

The Innkeeper looks at him. Doesn't move a muscle until Joss flicks a coin across the table. Bending down, ladle into keg, into cup, slopped into Joss' hand.

Joss tilts his head back, draining it.

JOSS FRITZ
Again.

The Innkeeper, waiting for a fresh schilling.

JOSS
Next time.

The Innkeeper sighs. *Another customer on credit.* Another ladleful of warm brown beer.

Heading to a nearby table, Joss sits. He drinks, staring at the Nuns. They take no heed of him.

Another cup drained, he raises his hand for another, &--

TIME CUT » »

Later. CLOSE on Joss' drunken face. Well in his cups by now.

Nearby, the Nuns are feeling no pain either. One of them risks a smile at Joss, & that does it.

Standing, he walks over. Sits down uninvited at the empty chair at their table. Parked there in silence for a beat. It's heavy. The nuns sharing a look, &--

JOSS FRITZ
(re: their pearl necklaces)
Do you know how pearls are born?

The nun who smiled at him, trying to lighten the mood--

NUN
From good fortune. Gentle gifts
for upright ladies.

JOSS FRITZ
It begins in a creature's belly. A
bit of sand that made its way inside
the shell. The animal, from within,
licks it with pearl. Lacquering the
wound. Turning annoyance into
treasure for rich nuns. And then
there's nothing gentle about the
oyster farmer's knife. A dozen lives
around thy neck, by my count.

The nun, looking at Joss' field clothes. The dirt under his
nails.

NUN
You seem the type of man who
commands a flock. What of your
knife that digs such blood from
spring lambs?

JOSS FRITZ
Lambs are for eating.

NUN #2
(snarky)
Our favorite.

JOSS FRITZ
No doubt. Would that I could make
thee taste a pearl. Thy hunger
would please me.

He's drunk. Angry. The nuns, safe in their habits, are
bored of it.

NUN #2

Your anger is pointed falsely. We
have not wronged thee.

JOSS FRITZ

Your very presence wrongs me.

Bitter. Unloading on them.

NUN

Time to take leave, kind farmer.

Joss stands up, jostling the table. Cups clattering badly,
as he calls out to the OTHER CUSTOMERS--

JOSS FRITZ

Is it not strange that in the
terror of the dancers, it is only
peasants who be afflicted. NOT
ONE Highborn son, noble, or nun.
IS THAT NOT STRANGE.

NUN

We live to help all neighbors, no
matter their rank in life.

JOSS FRITZ

THIS CURSE IS YOUR DOING.

A wild accusation. But one he seems to genuinely believe.
The nuns, instantly defensive--

NUN

We live to bring His word. Evil is
our enemy, the same as yours.

The Innkeeper, from across the bar, holds up an admonishing
hand at Joss. *No more trouble.*

Joss, calming, actually wants to explain himself to them.

JOSS FRITZ

Do you not see? These poor souls...
They dance for lack of luxury. Some
verily, & some in jest.

NUN

It is St. Vitus who damns the unclean.

JOSS FRITZ

No. I saw a man tonight pantomime
the curse for a crust of bread.
Damned by his need to eat.

This hits home. The roomful of TAVERN-GOERS murmuring now. Impossible not to see the agreement in their faces.

The nuns, by now, would rather be elsewhere.

JOSS FRITZ (CONT'D)

(relentless)

My own brother, who owes your church 10 seasons of grain, who is not unclean, is this night out in the alleys, bursting his heart with legs who plot against him, with arms who seek his end. He dances in protest of his own life.

NUN

He is not *my* brother. Perhaps you should have--

JOSS FRITZ

--DO NOT PLACE A SINGLE WORD UPON MY HEAD, DAMN YOU.

SCREAMING now. The Innkeeper, striding over, has had enough--

INNKEEPER

Go home, Farmer. I shant ask again.

Joss, nodding. Backing down. Time to go.

NUN #2

(as Joss turns)

We are easy to blame.

JOSS FRITZ

Perhaps for good reason.

Joss, lurching his way towards the door. Behind him, one of the Nuns unclasps her necklace.

Standing & catching up to Joss, she places it in his hand.

NUN

I am sorry for your brother.

Joss doesn't even bother to look at the token in hand.

JOSS FRITZ

Rowan. Face like mine, but ginger. A good boy.

(almost breaking)

If you see him, tell him he's fine & that God loves him. Perhaps he'll believe you.

The nun has no words. Joss giving her one last look before cracking the door & letting the night in. The CRIES of distant dancers immediately upon us, &--

EXT. TAVERN -- SAME

Moments later. Joss weaving down the empty street. Glad to have spoken truth to that tavern.

On a whim, he coils, reels back, & THROWS the necklace high into the air...

...& THE CAMERA GOES WITH IT »»»

Following his strange offering as it reaches apex & descends, falling out of frame, the CAMERA continuing on over the rooftops -- on its own trajectory -- arcing down now past the guildhalls, towards the...

EXT. STRASBOURG // CENTRAL SQUARE -- NIGHT (SAME)

...Courtyard where it began. Back towards the epicenter of the Dance.

The CAMERA landing in the middle of the Square, coming to rest on the hard-packed earth.

Holding a WIDE ANGLE of the square, it stays there for NINE DAYS -- an epic TIME-LAPSE, a symphonic bustle of DANCERS, BAILIFFS, & PASSERBY.

»»» A STALK OF WHEAT grows up through the center of the frame to mark time. Perhaps a signal of better days, as the CAMERA smoothly awakens, rising back up to head height, locating...

...A PRIEST. *But not like any we have seen thus far.* This one in PURPLE robes, finer & more elaborate than the ones of Strasbourg.

This Priest comes from Saverne, from the Bishop's cathedral.

As we re-enter REAL TIME, we see that he's at the tail end of a conversation with the Physician (same as before.)

The Physician is beleaguered, wilting under the Priest's words, &--

SAVERNE PRIEST

--Enough. You will do as you've been told.

PHYSICIAN

I do not have the men, nor the horses, to follow your advice.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Speak to thy Ammeister. The wagons are already arranged.

PHYSICIAN

...It will be an expensive business.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Less costly than burying them all.

PHYSICIAN

Perhaps.

SAVERNE PRIEST

You speak as though your permission is required. If it not be you it will be another.

This Priest that talks more like a baron. The Physician finding himself inclined to obey.

PHYSICIAN

I will prepare them for travel. Shall bring thee word when ready.

SAVERNE PRIEST

This is the last time we will share voices. Too many souls in Heaven who know thy name.

The Physician isn't sure if he's about to be executed here.

PHYSICIAN

I made every effort to keep it otherwise, my lord.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Fare thee well, Emperic.

Dismissed. The Physician -- terrified -- backing away, & before he's even out of sight... the Saverne Priest signals a fresh Bailiff.

BAILIFF

(scurrying over)
Your Grace?

SAVERNE PRIEST

Bring me to the tanneries.

EXT. GUILD HALL // TANNERY -- DAY.

Later. An enormous open-air workroom. Dozens of TANNERY LABORERS plying their trade.

Knives scraping fat & hair from horsehides. Kilometers of flesh soaking in the most odiferous baths.

The Saverne Priest is off in a corner, inspecting a rack of hides, fresh from the vats. He's speaking to a clearly overwhelmed TANNER.

SAVERNE PRIEST

--Yes, red. Crimson. Whichever the word, make them properly. Such that they could be seen from a great distance. From hell itself.

TANNER

How soon, & how many pairs, your Grace?

SAVERNE PRIEST

Why, one for each of them.

We presume he means a pair for each of the Dancers, which at this point, is close to 500 strong. An enormous task.

He looks expectantly at the overwhelmed Tanner.

TANNER

...Of course.

SAVERNE PRIEST

(detecting his panic)

Do you have need of more hands?

TANNER

(immediately)

Yes, m'lord.

No surprise. The Saverne Priest gesturing behind him to his GUARD, who approaches.

SAVERNE PRIEST

(to the Tanner)

Bring to this place, every single tanner within forty leagues who owns half a skill.

The Saverne Priest spits on the ground between his feet.

SAVERNE PRIEST (CONT'D)
 (gesturing with his foot
 at the spit mark)
 ...right here. Pay them as required.

The Tanner's gratitude mingling with resentment. *A lot of money going into someone else's pockets.*

TANNER
 Many thanks.

SAVERNE PRIEST
 Is five days enough?

TANNER
 God made the world in seven, isn't
 that so, Father.

His joke badly timed. The Saverne Priest unimpressed.

Turning to pull a COIN PURSE from his Guard's belt, the Priest retrieves a GOLD FLORIN, lays it on the table in front of them.

SAVERNE PRIEST
 Work quickly.

TANNER
 (scooping it up)
 Of course, m'lord. A pleasure to--

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
 --"Drive, & go forward; slack not thy
 riding for me, except I bid thee."

Some Scripture from the wings. The Saverne Priest looking up to find...

IDA. *One of our favorites.* (The devout & feisty tanner from p. 17 + Agnes's mother.)

She's ignoring the coin in her colleague's hands. Just agaze at the Priest. *Perhaps the highest-ranking one she's ever been this close to.* A little embarrassed to have interrupted them.

IDA
 Pardon me, Father.

SAVERNE PRIEST
 (noticing)
 I enjoy thy voice. And the bit of scripture that came with it.

Ida, bowing her head. Hiding the flush.

IDA
A most unlovely song. My voice, that
is. Not the passage from 'Kings.'

SAVERNE PRIEST
(amused)
Of course.

TANNER
Yea, you should hear her do the hymns.
Sonorous as an angel's arsehole after
Christmas feast. A true--
(instantly choking, as--)

--Ida CHOPS him in the throat with the flat of her hand. His
reward for an ugly tongue.

IDA
Not in front of a Priest.

The Tanner sits down hard, clutching for air. The Saverne
Priest, enjoying her vigor--

SAVERNE PRIEST
Perhaps thou art God's own hands.
(smiling)
Go now, & work bravely, but not proudly.

IDA
...Little danger of either.

Her shyness barely masking the strength beneath, &--

EXT. TANNING YARDS -- DAY

Later. The Tanner & Ida, working over a steaming VAT of RED-
DYED LEATHER.

The Tanner, still sore from Ida's 'attack,' gives her a wide
berth. Stealing angry looks at her as she calmly adds
various ESOTERIC INGREDIENTS to the vat. A truly foul-
looking stew, &--

IDA
Do we know why it must be the red?

The Tanner doesn't answer, coughing a little. Really milking
his injury for sympathy here.

IDA (CONT'D)
 (finally)
 I'm sorry you forced me to strike thee.

Her version of an apology. *It'll have to do.*

TANNER
 I asked. He said that the colour
 had been told by 'one who knows.'

IDA
 Strange.

TANNER
 Perhaps it was the Bishop himself
 who said "let tanner Ida make
 tenscore pairs of carmine shoes for
 every cunting Dancer..."--

Ida, up to her forearms in the dye, whips her hand in front
 of the Tanner's face, who flinches. *Don't hit me again.*

IDA
 Rough words from a soft head. Have
 you been to the square & seen them?

TANNER
 Their ghoulish cries reach my bed.

IDA
 Yes. Their humble pain unwelcome
 in thy ears. And the Bishop's
 Priest says this can help. He has
 paid us for the work, has he not?

TANNER
 He has.

IDA
 Then it is a fine bargain. Now
 pass me the fix.

She's headstrong but logical. The Tanner has no argument to
 make, reaching for the jar of FIXING LIQUID, &--

TIME CUT »»

Later. DOZENS of hands, skilled in the minutiae of shoe-
 making. Lovely little details of a cobbler's work --
 snipping, threading. Wet leather bent over wooden LASTS.

Dozens & dozens of red leather slippers taking form in front
 of us. Their purpose not yet clear to us, &--

TIME CUT »»

Days later. Ida, underfed, splattered with dye, is taking a break by the fringes of the tanning yards.

In the near distance, a truly odd sight is unfolding...

An ENORMOUS WAX VOTIVE is being constructed, presided over by a number of CLERGYMEN & DAY LABORERS.

The Saverne Priest is presiding over the work, issuing commands & CHANTING over a HUGE CAULDRON of MOLTEN WAX.

Ida is fascinated, as hundreds of pounds of wax are poured into a CYLINDRICAL MOLD. *Essentially, they're making a giant candle.*

Everyone around is deadly serious. We are witness to a ceremony -- the creation of a sacred object.

Ida approaches curiously.

Standing near the Saverne Priest, she waits for him to finish his prayer. Watching the wax settling across the top of the mold. Red. Just like the shoes.

IDA (CONT'D)
(finally)
A votive...?

SAVERNE PRIEST
(staring at it)
Yes.

IDA
The biggest I've seen.

SAVERNE PRIEST
Sometimes Christ needs more than a whisper.

IDA
It matches the shoes.

SAVERNE PRIEST
St. Vitus speaks in red, they say.

IDA
(a little abruptly)
Who says?

The Saverne Priest almost corrects her for pressing him, then changes his mind. He knows she means well.

SAVERNE PRIEST
 Tomorrow, all go to Saverne.
 (a thought)
 Would you join us?

IDA
 What lives in Saverne?

SAVERNE PRIEST
 A cure. We hope.

Ida, considering the invitation. Watching the Laborers throwing ropes around the Votive, preparing to load it onto a WAGON. *How can she say no to a Priest.*

EXT. GATES OF STRASBOURG -- DAWN

The next morning. Teaming endlessly through the gates, like some traveling circus, is THE PROCESSION.

Up front is the Votive, its wagon pulled by four horses. Following closely behind: several cartfuls of the mysterious RED SHOES. Waxed & freshly gleaming.

Next up, of course, are the Dancers. Scores of them -- a mad *PARADE in single file.*

Twisting & twirling down the path, many of them are incredibly weak by now. Their bodies still compelled.

The Dancers are being forced into order by a large number of ESCORTS -- volunteer townspeople dedicated to ending this plague once & for all. Strasbourg's selfless march.

Some of them have blindfolded themselves, to avoid being taken. Now it's the blind leading the damned.

Walking alongside the Ammeister, we find Ida, humming to herself, leading a small donkey. She's lent her saddle to a Dancer, giving his RUINED FEET a break.

If we look carefully, we'll find her daughter Agnes down at the back of the line. Her fine clothes exchanged for simple robes.

They do not notice each other, but we do. The disparate threads of all these lives coalescing together here, on the road. *On a journey towards remedy.*

EXT. VILLAGE -- NIGHT

Later. An unassuming township between here & there. The procession tucking in for the evening. No tents, just a mass of bodies sitting in the dirt, warmed by small fires.

The volunteers have arranged themselves around the Dancers, encircling them protectively. Their limbs still uncontrollable, but quieter. *A calmness growing in them.*

Ida sits off to one side. A CLOAKED FIGURE walks up, hands her a bowl of thin gruel. Ida grateful for the hot meal.

IDA

Bless thee.

CLOAKED FIGURE

(in a voice we'll recognize)

Save thy blessings for those in
your care.

Ida has known that voice since the day it was born. The Cloaked Figure kneeling, revealing herself -- It's Agnes. Who else.

Ida's not sure whether to hug her daughter, or send her home.

IDA

How is that I was unaware--

AGNES

--I could not risk your protest.

IDA

And your husband allowed thee from
his grip?

AGNES

...He was well-persuaded. And if
he had kept me, I would be ashamed
to share a life with him.

Ida sips her gruel.

IDA

(smiling)

Willful girl.

AGNES

How is thy soup?

IDA

Not fit for thy lips.

Agnes, who hasn't eaten peasant food in a year, ventures a try. Politely choking it down.

IDA (CONT'D)

That is the true taste of the world.

Agnes, in her simple robes, tries it again.

AGNES

I remember.

EXT. THE VILLAGE WELL

Later that night. The Saverne Priest is sitting with his Guards, drinking mulled wine.

Ida & Agnes walking up, &--

IDA

Father, this is my daughter, Agnes.

A very proper curtsy. Saverne Priest noticing her manners.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Well met, Lady Agnes. You are here to lend aid, or keep your mother safe from roving Priests?

He giggles, a little drunk. Agnes knowing exactly how to deal with him.

AGNES

I serve at the pleasure of necessity, Father.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Indeed. God's first gift was to destroy uselessness. You are a very rare thing: I believe it runs in your family.

He genuinely admires them. Ida, too humble for his praise--

IDA

The Dancers seem calmer in thy presence, Reverence.

SAVERNE PRIEST

It has naught to do with me.
...Saverne is near.
(patting the dirt)
Come join us for some wine.

IDA

It's almost Sunday. We shall take
no drink near the Lord's day.

She says it gently. Not as a judgement. The Saverne Priest
appreciating her evermore.

SAVERNE PRIEST

Holier than I am, she is.

(then)

Rest well then, Weaver. Tomorrow
shall be complicated.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE -- DAY

The next morning. The sun floating up over the hillside.
The procession inching its way up the steep country path
towards SAVERNE, a town at the foot of the Vosges mountains.

Many of the Dancers -- already past the point of exhaustion --
collapse in the summer heat, & have to be loaded into wagons.
Or carried. Or left behind.

Perched on top of the hill, we see » **THE SHRINE OF SAVERNE**

A series of chambers carved out of the mountainside. In
front of the shrine... a freshly-constructed ALTAR, awaiting
its first pilgrims.

At the base of the altar, in the most outrageous robes
imaginable, is THE BISHOP.

Ida, maneuvering her donkey up alongside the Saverne Priest--

IDA

(awestruck)

That is a Bishop.

SAVERNE PRIEST

He is both more, & less, than you
would expect.

Ida wants to scold him. The Saverne Priest, knowing her well
enough by now--

SAVERNE PRIEST (CONT'D)

It is not blasphemy if it is true.

EXT. SHRINE -- DAY

Moments later. The Bishop there to greet the Procession. Standing stiffly, sweating into his robes & mitre, as the Saverne Priest approaches. Ida & Agnes trailing behind at a safe distance.

SAVERNE PRIEST
Your Excellency.

BISHOP
I have been here some hours.

SAVERNE PRIEST
Many pardons, Your Grace. The roads proved difficult, & in their condition...

BISHOP
Yes. Quite.

Nudging the Saverne Priest out of the way, the Bishop takes his first look at the Dancers gathered in front of him -- Several hundred men & women in various states of distress.

BISHOP (CONT'D)
I did not realize there would be so many.

SAVERNE PRIEST
As many as you see here, already seed the ground back in Strasbourg.

BISHOP
Perhaps something will finally deign to grow there, after such vigorous planting.

A truly cruel thing to say. The Saverne Priest giving Ida a look. *I told you.*

BISHOP (CONT'D)
(still staring at the Dancers)
I hope your man in there proves worthy of the task.

SAVERNE PRIEST
My faith tells me he has. Shall we begin?

For the Bishop, it's his moment to shine. His time to become the Face of the Cure.

Walking up to the first Dancer in front of him, halfheartedly folding him into embrace, &--

BISHOP
Come, you poor soul. Let us give
you peace.

INT. SHRINE -- DAY

Later. Within the shrine's outer chamber, all have gathered. A hundred pairs of the red slippers close at hand.

An unruly line of Dancers piles into the foyer, minded by escorts. The crowd of them, writhing, filling the entrance.

The Dancers, perhaps triggered by their proximity to the shrine, are especially wild -- *ripping their hair, scratching at their skin*, as they move to their unheard music.

The Saverne Priest, looking for the Bishop to lead--

SAVERNE PRIEST
...Your Excellency?

The Bishop is skittish. Bending down, he picks up a pair of the slippers. Calling out to one of the volunteers--

BISHOP
(re: the first Dancer in line)
Bring him.

A Volunteer drags him over to the Bishop, who kneels -- robes in the dirt -- & attempts to wedge a shoe onto the Dancer's bloody foot.

The Dancer resists. Twisting & screaming--

DANCER
Leave me!! LEAVE ME!!! IT BURNS!!
WHAT INFERNO AGAINST MY SKIN!!
(his legs kicking away--)

--& catching the Bishop clean in the jaw.

The Bishop reels, clutching his face. Guards dive to his aid. The situation devolving quickly. The Dancers' resistance spreading to the others. *It's pandemonium.*

BISHOP
(to the Saverne Priest)
What am I to do? It doesn't work.

The Saverne Priest hasn't a clue, as Ida, in a fit of quick thinking, pulls the goatskin flask from around her neck, rushes over, SPLASHES water on the Dancer's face.

...& somehow, it works.

This Dancer shocked into stillness. Just for a moment.

He looks at her strangely, even as the Dance begins to return to his limbs.

Ida, quickly seizing her chance--

IDA
(pouring more water)
You are fine, you are safe.

Using her shirt as a cloth. Bathing him. And him, fighting the urge, letting her do it.

The Bishop, looking up from the floor--

BISHOP
Holy water?

IDA
River.

The Bishop & The Saverne Priest share a look. Whatever she's doing, it's succeeding.

Ignoring everyone, Ida kneels, & slips the red shoes onto the feet of the quieting Dancer. *Some kind of nurturing magic.*

The Bishop crawls over & BLESSES the top of the shoe & its sole. The Dancer looking down at him gratefully.

DANCER
I feel it, Father.

BISHOP
(to the Saverne Priest)
Bring him in, & fetch us the next.

The Saverne Priest does as he's told, leading the Dancer down towards the INNER SANCTUM, a tiny enclave at the end of the room. INCENSE pouring out of it. The two of them, vanishing into the smoke, &--

TIME CUT »»

An hour later. A PROCESS is unfolding -- bathing, the shoes, the blessing. So many still to do.

Ida -- a machine -- deftly slips the shirt off the Dancer in front of her, applies the water, lends a human touch that tranquilizes.

She's taught Agnes & the other volunteers how to do it -- little BATHING STATIONS set up around the foyer.

The shrine showing us its true purpose -- it is, above all else, a place to be cared for.

Shoes on. Blessing given. Yet another Dancer escorted back to the (still mysterious) sanctum.

Someone hands Ida a fresh goatskin. She sips from it, waits for the next. The room, thick with incense. She coughs.

TIME CUT »»

Later. Another Dancer is led in, & this time, he will be satisfyingly familiar -- it's Rowan, Joss' brother, & he will not give up his madness easily. Salty tear tracks carved into his cheeks from days of weeping.

Agnes applies the water to him, washing his face.

AGNES

Take blessing from Saverne. You are safe. You are redeemed.

The words he needed to hear. Her gentle touch. His breathing beginning to slow, his eyes clearing--

ROWAN

I cannot feel my legs.

IDA

(standing him up)
Let us bring him to the sanctum...

AGNES

(sotto)
...If we're allowed...

IDA

Today, we are all priests.

INT. INNER SANCTUM -- DAY

Moments later. Ida & Agnes supporting Rowan through a small passageway -- through the smoke -- into the very heart of the shrine.

A WOOD FIRE burns by the entrance. The place like a sauna. All of them, instantly sweating.

The GIANT Votive has been placed in the center of the room. Its wick burning brightly. Red wax molten down the sides.

Sitting on his knees by the Votive is a SURPRISINGLY YOUNG MAN. A devotee of this shrine & nothing else.

This is 'the Man' the Bishop & his Priest were discussing. The key to their cure. This is THE HERMIT.

The Bishop stands next to him in his underclothes, robes in a pile by his feet. This has been the longest day of his life.

Quietly catching Ida's gaze, he gestures them forward.

BISHOP
(to the Hermit, re: Ida)
She has been useful.

The Hermit doesn't care who she is. His eyes shut tightly. *In some kind of trance.*

BISHOP (CONT'D)
(to Rowan Fritz)
Kneel.

Rowan, little fits of Dance still in him, needs Agnes's help to get to the ground.

The Hermit, with a silver SPOON, collects some hot wax from the side of the votive. Averting his gaze from Rowan's leprous face, he turns the young man's palms upward, dripping wax into the center of each of them.

HERMIT
(murmuring)
God's word, in my hands. And in thine.

Dripping more wax. It burns. Rowan tries to pull his arms away, but the Hermit holds him fast.

HERMIT (CONT'D)
Vitus forgives thee. Christ
forgives thee.

Rowan's body begins shaking. *Trauma shivering its way out of him. He weeps with the pain of it.* The Hermit's firm hands around his wrists, holding him as he seizes, until...

Stillness. Serenity. Finally. Rowan's face, awash in it.

AGNES
(can't help herself)
Why does it work?

The Bishop grabs Agnes' head, turns it to face a corner of the shrine -- where we find half a dozen DEAD BODIES laid out on the ground.

BISHOP

It does not always. Some cannot survive such blessing.

As the Hermit removes his hands from Rowan Fritz. The sacrament complete, as Rowan looks around the room in a daze. If it was a spell, it has been lifted.

HERMIT

We succeed because the bell of Christ rings inside them. If their hearts be strong enough for the song.

Agnes glances over at Ida. A little suspicious of the explanation. She wants to say something. Ida, shaking her head. *Don't stick your neck out.*

ROWAN

(not knowing who to thank)
My life to thee. ...Where is my brother?

His humble gratitude. His mind returned to him. A cure.

Ida & Agnes take little pleasure in it, can't stop staring at the BODIES in the corner, as Rowan looks down at his hands, at the RED VOTIVE WAX still smeared across them, &--

HARD CUT TO:

INT. STRASBOURG CATHEDRAL -- DAY

Days later. HOLDING CLOSE on another pair of hands. (The first true hard cut between characters in this film.) Instead of wax, these hands are smeared with dirt. A Farmer's hands.

Offscreen, we hear the familiar bellowing of PRIEST GEILAR (the messianic preacher from page 8.)

GEILAR (O.S.)

--& I have kissed the Pope's ring & seen the glow of him. God alive in the air around us...

As we TILT up from the dirty hands, to REVEAL: **Joss Fritz.** Brother of Rowan. Purveyor of meteors. Shamer of nuns.

PULLING BACK, we see that Joss sits in the back row of a fully packed Church. Rowan -- himself again -- aside him in a LEPER'S SHROUD.

We see that the CONGREGATION is largely made up of many RECOVERED DANCERS, still weak & weary. Still wearing their RED SHOES.

In the front row, we find Ida & Agnes, their fingers entwined. Returned to the Chapel to endure Geilar's sermonizing--

GEILAR (CONT'D)

(rising)

And in that instant I saw purely
the power of this church, the same
power which has brought us peace &
quelled the troubles that befell
us. Perhaps their suffering
brought them best to Christ. SUCH
IS GRACE. SUCH WAS THE WILL OF
THIS BISHOP.

Looming behind Geilar, we see THE METEOR, resting gently on a wooden plinth. Beside him: the Bishop himself. Come to stand in front of the monolith & reap praise for the cure.

We see now how the Meteor has become *an instrument of intimidation*. A symbol of control.

AGNES

(whispering to her mother)

I think it was you who brought cure
as much as him.

Ida, squeezing her hand quiet.

GEILAR

But I swear to you all, the very
future lies in ashes if change is
not found here at Strasbourg. You
as a congregation must do better,
else we fall prey to devastation,
else you lose that which you should
value most.

His words laid heavily over the solemn faces of the congregation.

For Joss Fritz, it's *a moment of clarity*.

Disregarding the occasion, he stands. Stopping Geilar's speech in its tracks.

JOSS FRITZ

Say it again, Herr Geilar.

GEILAR

You stand unrequested during High Mass.

JOSS FRITZ

Say it again. Who 'must do better?'

Geilar, unused to such disobedience, looks for a way to spin the moment in his favor--

GEILAR

You & those weak of spirit are the very reason this Church is doomed.

JOSS FRITZ

...I agree. The weak spirit is yours, & it feeds no one.

GEILAR

(screaming)

SIT DOWN.

The Bishop standing there affronted. Geilar with the accusatory finger, spit flying from his mouth, as

Joss, with half a smile, starts to dance. Slowly, calmly.

Not because he has to. *Just because he can.*

The congregation around him shocked & murmuring. Discontent from this season of upheaval still simmering.

Ida, watching him. Not knowing how to feel.

GEILAR (CONT'D)

(sputtering)

A mockery in my service. You demean yourself.

Joss -- pausing his dance -- steps out from the pews. Begins to approach the altar. *Rowan's eyes from beneath his shroud.*

Joss passes RECOVERED DANCERS, haunted & thin. He kneels in front of Ida -- holding a grateful look for her efforts with his brother.

Ida lays her hand on his head -- a blessing. *Keep going.*

Joss, rising back to his feet, has become the voice of the voiceless -- pushing onward, moving towards the precarious Bishop & Old Geilar the doomsayer.

GEILAR (CONT'D)

All of thee, at once. LET US SING.

...But no one does. The time for obedient song has passed.

Geilar & Bishop, from their perch, haven't a clue what to do. Just rooted there, fearing this upstart, as Joss -- threshold crossed -- steps up onto the altar.

The Bishop's nerve fails him. He backs away, leaving Geilar alone as Joss arrives finally in front of the meteor. *All roads having led us here.*

Joss -- inches from the monolith -- reaches out to make contact, his dirty hands closing the distance, &--

GEILAR (CONT'D)
Do not touch it.

JOSS FRITZ
(pausing)
...I saw it first.

We know he's right, but Geilar doesn't. The High Orator of Strasbourg, made small by the Farmer who could break his back at this range.

GEILAR
(risking it)
This is an obscenity.

Joss ignoring him, his hands reaching, &... laying his fingers gently on the meteor's face.

The ground does not tremble. The cathedral does not crumble.

But in the silence that follows, five hundred years of the yoke falls quietly free. The shining faces of the Dancers, looking on at Strasbourg's own private reformation that begins today, &--

JOSS FRITZ
A tear from God's eye.
(with wonder)
...Still warm.

Geilar, perhaps for the first time in his life, with nothing to say, as Joss takes a breath. Vital. Tranquil.

As we FINALLY CLOSE on Ida's face. Her lifeworn eyes & mouth. As she tries to balance the rules of Church & the rules of earth. It is difficult. It is the end of the beginning.

CUT TO BLACK

TITLE OVER: 10 months later, 400 miles from Strasbourg, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther published his Ninety-Five Theses, a document that would set in motion a reckoning now known as the Reformation.