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opening extract from

Endymion Spring

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ohann Fust arrived on a cold winter's night. While most of the city slept under a mantle of softly falling snow, he bribed the sentries to open the Iron Gate near the river and advanced, unobserved, through the streets. A young man hauled a heavy sledge behind him.

Even in the white-whirling darkness, Fust could see the bulk of the cathedral looming over the other buildings inside the city walls. The turrets, made from rich red sandstone, were an attractive rose colour by day, but by night they formed a vast mountain range, steeped in shadow. He glanced at them through narrowed eyes, but kept his distance, sticking to the walls of the half-timbered houses in which the noble patricians lived.

All around him were heaped-up smells: the fug of wood-smoke, the tang of straw, not to mention the stink of human

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sewage, which even the snow could not mask. Occasionally, pigs squealed as they wrestled for warmth in their pens, but otherwise there was just the slithering sledge behind him.

Fust waited for the boy to catch up.

Peter, dogging his Master's heels, paused to wipe the snow from his brow and mitten his hands under his armpits. He was so cold! Fust might have the luxury of a full-length cloak, thick gloves and laced boots, but his own leggings were too thin to withstand the severe pinch of winter. Worse, his low-cut shoes were no match for the mounting snowdrifts, which sent ice crystals avalanching down to his ankles. All he wanted was a fire to warm his body, food to fill his belly and a bed to rest his weary limbs.

He gazed at the wooden signs hanging above him in the gloom – the stuffed pigs and wheat sheaves suggestive of inns and bakeries – and longed for the journey to be over.

'Not far now, Peter,' said Fust, as if reading his thoughts. 'We're almost there.'

Letting out a long silver breath, Fust cut across an empty square towards the lanes and alleys that criss-crossed behind the market like fractured glass. His footsteps scrunched the snow.

Peter did not move. Each of his muscles was mulishly reliving the agonies of the trip. From Paris, they had tramped to

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Strasbourg and then, not finding what they sought, headed north-east towards Mainz, on the banks of the River Rhine: a journey of almost 400 miles. They had avoided the obvious river routes – the vineyards on the surrounding hills were too exposed, the towns too meddlesome – but kept to the hooded woods and vales, which were nearly impassable this winter. Peter did not believe in spooks or spectres, both of which were rumoured to dwell off the beaten track, but he was disturbed by Fust's constant need for secrecy. What was the man not telling him?

Peter cupped his hands over his mouth and blew into them, hoping to ignite a spark of feeling in his fingertips. Surely they were meant for finer things than this! Little more than a month ago, he had been studying at one of the most distinguished libraries in Europe – the Library of St Victor in Paris – where he was learning the art of calligraphy from the best scribes. He had developed a fine, graceful penmanship and was proud of his achievements, copying missals and other religious books by hand. He liked to think that he wielded the quill with the finesse of a sword – drawing ink, if not blood.

But then Fust had arrived, changing everything.

A ghost from the past, Fust had promised Peter riches, power – anything – so long as he fulfilled a few simple tasks and chose to follow. He even pledged the hand of his daughter,

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Christina, in marriage in return for the boy's allegiance. How could he refuse?

Peter spat on the ground and scowled into the night, rubbing the spots where the blisters had formed on his hands. A rope had been looped around his waist and secured to the sledge behind him, which, like an ox, he had to drag through the snow. It was his yoke, his burden; his part of the agreement. Peter Schoeffer of Gernsheim was no better than a beast.

As if the provisions and blankets weren't heavy enough, there was a formidable chest to lug around. Loathsome monsters were engraved on its wooden panels, scaring away even his inquisitive fingers. Still more frightening were the two snakes, cast from black metal, which twisted round the lip of the lid. Their heads were entwined so as to form an ingenious lock. One false touch, Fust warned, and their fangs would release a poison so venomous it would paralyse him forever.

Peter shuddered. Could this be true?

Fust spoke mostly in riddles, partly to bewitch the boy, but also to safeguard his secret. Inside the chest was a material so rare, so exquisite, he suggested, that it would bring the whole world within the scope of their hands. It held an eye to the future and a tongue to the past. All they required was a means of harnessing it, a way of reading its prophecies in

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the form of a living, breathing book. That was why Fust needed Peter . . .

Peter shook his head. Now they were nearing the end of one journey, and beginning the next, he was having second thoughts. What if this book was a mistake – like Eve's decision to bite the apple, an attempt to gain forbidden knowledge? What if he was putting his very soul in jeopardy? Servitude in life was one thing, but eternal damnation another!

Sensing Fust waiting for him by the mouth of one of the alleys, Peter muttered an oath, strained against his harness and began once more to drag the heavy load behind him. He grunted like a workhorse. There was no turning back. His choice had been made.

The snow, falling more thickly now, swiftly and silently filled their tracks so that no one rising early the next morning could tell from which direction they had come or where they had gone. Instead, the citizens of Mainz opened their eyes to a pristine world: a glittering, snow-covered city that hid the mounds of dung from view. They were too dazzled by the spectacle, the surface of things, to sense the peril that had arrived under the cover of darkness.

Only I knew differently . . .



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As usual I was peering up at the moon from the small casement window in the workshop on the corner of Christophstrasse. Despite the snow, its pocked face shone through the clouds and I watched, mesmerized, while snowflakes fluttered blackly against its luminescence before settling on the ground in drifts of perfect white – a stunning alchemy. Above the rooftops rose the shadow of the cathedral, as watchful as heaven.

My Master had not noticed the dip in temperature nor the diminishing light, but was absorbed in the finicky craft of invention. The other workmen had retired for the night to the dormitory at the top of the house, but he had pulled a stool closer to the fire and was busy tinkering with a complex piece of metal. Using a sharp tool, he scraped away tiny scrolls of brass from the edges of a mould.

A perfectionist, he was making ever more minute alterations to the equipment so that each piece of type he created would transfer exactly the right amount of ink to the paper he had imported from the mills upstream. Barrels of ordinary stock were stored beneath the stairs, while finer reams of rag paper from Italy, which he preferred, were kept alongside the expensive animal skins, which he was going to prepare as vellum.

Each night, he tried to convince me that we were one day closer to our dreams, but I was no longer so sure. The money

he had invested in the printing press – a much-guarded secret – was swiftly running out and what remained of his gold was turning to sand between his fingers. Besides, I was content the way things were. The room crackled with warmth, and the sounds of my Master's industry were all the company I needed. It was a far cry from my past.

Just then, I sensed a bundled-up figure lurking outside the church on the opposite side of the street and pressed my face closer to the glass, trying to distinguish its shape. A lump of shadow had detached itself from the main porch and was staring in my direction.

'Are you moon-gazing again, young Endymion?' said my Master, making me turn round. 'Come, I need your fingers.'

I nodded, then glanced back at the window. The figure had gone. Breathing on the thick swirl of glass, I drew a face in the moon of condensation and turned back to my Master before the smile could fade.

'My hands are too clumsy for this work,' he sighed as I crouched beside him. His fingers were scored with scars and his skin coated in a soft silvery sheen from the metals he used: lead, tin and just a touch of antimony – that most poisonous element, which gave his pieces of type their bite. Black inky blotches had settled on his knuckles like flies.

I took the magnifying lens from the table and held it out

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to him. His face was streaked with dirt and his beard had grown long and grizzled, but I loved him just the same. He studied the mould in his hand for a moment, his eye swimming behind the lens of beryl. Even now he was not satisfied. He held the apparatus closer to the fire and resumed his tinkering.

I liked to think that I could help Herr Gutenberg. He had taken me in as an apprentice two years before, when I was a starving waif on the street. It was the least I could do to repay his kindness -- no, better yet, his confidence.

Mostly, I performed menial tasks in the print room. I rose early to stoke the fire, sweep the floor and dampen the sheets of paper prior to his daily experiments with the printing press: a machine he'd had specially adapted from the wine presses in the region. This latest model consisted of a sturdy, upright wooden frame with a lever and screw that lowered a heavy plate on to an artfully arranged tray of type, which he slid beneath. The inked letters then transferred their message to the paper he inserted, sheet by sheet. We could print multiple copies of a text for as long as the type lasted. Books would no longer have to be copied laboriously by hand; we could print them with this machine. The invention, Herr Gutenberg believed, would change the world.

Sometimes he allowed me to mix the inks. This was a messy

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business that involved blending the soot from our lamps with varnish, with just a splash of urine added in for good measure ('The secret ingredient,' he said with a smile); but what I really enjoyed was composing type. This was my special task – a job reserved for my fingers alone.

For a few hours each day, while the workmen operated the press, I would sit at a low trestle table with hundreds of bits of metal type – a broken alphabet – in front of me. Piece by piece, I would string the letters together to form words, sentences and finally whole passages of text, always mirror images of the examples my Master set before me. Backwards writing, he called it. I excelled at it. Even better, I was learning to read.

So far, we had experimented with basic Latin primers for the law students who thronged the city, but my Master had recently set his sights on greater, bolder initiatives: Bibles. This was where the real money lay. There were always people hungry for the Word of God. All we needed was additional backing from our investors and a chance to prove that our books were every bit as beautiful and accurate as those produced by the most accomplished scribes.

Unbeknownst to my Master, I was also practising the art of printing on my own. Already, I had put my name on a little toolkit he had given me on my first anniversary: a soft leather

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pouch containing my picks, awls and chisels. One by one, I added the letters in my composing stick, and then punched them into the leather with the utmost care, gradually assuming my new identity: E-n-d-y-m-i-o-n S-p-r-i-n-g. The letters were a little crooked, but the name stuck.

I knew that my skill impressed him. Herr Gutenberg said that I had swift fingers, but an even swifter mind. I was growing into a fine apprentice. 'A real printer's devil,' he said half-jokingly, dislodging my cap and mussing my hair.

I wanted to tell him that he was growing into a fine father, too, but I didn't. I couldn't. My voice, like everything else, had been taken from me at birth.



At this moment the door downstairs blew open and I got up to shut it.

No sooner had I reached the top stair than I stopped. A figure had entered the house and was rapidly ascending the steps towards me. A gust of snow raged in behind him. I rushed back to rejoin my Master by the fire.

Within moments a bullish man had appeared on the threshold of the room. Red welts streaked his cheeks, where the frost had nipped him, and he breathed through flared nostrils. His eyes roamed round the workshop, knocking over

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tables and equipment, until they settled on my Master, who had looked up in surprise.

'Fust,' he said, recognizing the stranger. There was little warmth in his voice.

The intruder bit back a smile. 'Gutenberg,' he replied.

Fust noticed my look of disapproval.

'And who is this urchin?' he asked, flicking the snow from his shoulders and advancing towards the fire. A short, round-shouldered man, he was dressed in a heavy, fur-trimmed cloak with chains and medallions draped across his chest – a sure sign of his wealth. The boards creaked under his weight.

He brought a surge of cold air into the room and I shivered.

'His name is Endymion,' said my Master. 'My apprentice.'

I glowed to hear those words, but Fust snorted derisively. He tore off his gloves and slapped them on the table, making me flinch. Then he reached out and grasped my chin between his ring-encrusted fingers. Turning my face from left to right, he inspected me with hard, flinty eyes, which flashed in the firelight. He had thick, reddish-brown hair and a fox-coloured beard that divided at the base to form two distinct points.

'Endymion, eh?' He tasted my name, then spat it out. 'What is he? A dreamer?'

My Master said nothing. He had often told me the legend

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of Endymion, the Greek shepherd boy who was loved by the moon and granted eternal youth. He said the name suited the way I gazed into the distance, dreaming of other things.

‘Johann, what are you doing?’ said Fust, finally letting me go. ‘Just look at him. He’s a runt! Too puny even to pick up a piece of type, let alone turn the screw. What use is he to you?’

I opened my mouth to protest, but no sound emerged.

‘And a mute, too,’ said Fust, amused, smothering me in a foul-smelling laugh. ‘Tell me, Johann. Where did you find him?’

I willed my Master not to answer. I didn’t want him mentioning the time I had reached for his purse in the crowded market-place, only to encounter a pouch full of type and a firm hand fettered round my wrist.

Luckily, he chose to ignore the insult.

‘I see you have an apprentice of your own,’ he said, glancing at the young man who had entered behind Fust. ‘Peter Schoeffer, if I’m not mistaken, back in Mainz at last.’

I turned to stare at the newcomer, who stood at the top of the stairs, ill at ease. Dressed in rags that were hardly suited to the weather, Peter inched closer to the hearth, trying to steal whatever warmth he could from the room.

A furtive look from Fust warned him to remain still.

My Master, noticing the young man’s discomfort, addressed

him directly. 'Tell me, Peter, where have you been?'

'Never you mind,' snapped Fust, but Peter had already opened his mouth to speak.

'Paris,' he mumbled, looking down at his soiled shoes. His leggings were patched with mud and holes gaped in his jacket. 'The Library of St Victor.'

My Master's eyes widened with approval. 'The Library of St Victor! Why, move closer to the fire, boy, and tell me all about it! Is it as remarkable as they say?'

'It's wonderful,' said Peter, his face brightening for the first time. 'The library must contain a thousand volumes. I've read half the books in the world!'

Fust interrupted. 'Peter, aren't you forgetting something? In fact, why don't you take this opportunity to fetch my things and get this' - he eyed me up and down - '... boy ... to help you? There's no point delaying the purpose of our visit.'

He pressed a hand to my back and shoved me towards the stairs. I checked with my Master to make sure I was not needed, but he was staring at the lens in his fingers, apparently under the impression that the meeting could not be avoided.

'Now then, let's talk business,' I heard Fust say as I followed Peter down the stairs.



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Snow had drifted against the side of the house, nearly obliterating the sledge Peter had dragged up to the door. White peaks crowned the surrounding roofs and reared against the neighbouring buildings like a frozen sea, spangling timbers and frosting shutters.

I started bundling the heavy, snow-caked blankets into my hands, wondering how long our guests were planning to stay – it looked like a long time – when Peter stopped me.

‘Not those,’ he grumbled. ‘This.’

With a flourish, he ripped off the remaining covers to reveal a monstrous chest buried beneath the mound of blankets. I stared at it, appalled. The casket seemed to suck the very night into it: it was laden with shadow. A chill wind whipped the loose snow round my legs and I hugged myself to keep warm.

‘Here, take that end,’ Peter bossed me, evidently in a hurry to return to the fireside, ‘and be careful not to drop it.’

I took the iron handle in both hands and attempted to lift it. It was extremely heavy. Fortunately Peter bore the brunt of the weight in his strong arms and slowly, stopping every few steps, we managed to heave the chest into the house. The icy metal bit into my skin.

As we climbed the stairs, the light from the workshop began to pick out shapes from the sides of the box. Lumpy knobs

revealed themselves as hideous beasts I had never seen before. Scaly monsters and frightening demons leered at me, as if from the pits of Hell. They had scabby cheeks and savage teeth and eyes like burnt umber. But it was only once we re-entered the room, half-kicking and half-sliding the chest across the floor, that I noticed the two snakes coiled tightly round the lid, their heads interlocked. Peter eyed them with obvious distrust, but I was fascinated. They seemed to draw me towards them.

'I wouldn't touch those if I were you,' Fust advised me suddenly, catching my hands straying closer to the snakes. 'They just might bite.'

My hands whipped back to my sides. Something about the way he said this made me believe him. Perhaps they were venomous? Fust was regarding me down the length of his nose, his dark eyes glinting. Obediently, I backed away.

Fust turned his attention to my Master, who was staring at the fire, as though the future were held in its flames. He seemed to have aged in the interval.

'So, Gutenberg, what do you say?'

There was a heap of gold and silver next to the discarded lens on the table – more gulden than I had seen since the start of the year.

'I fear,' said my Master slowly, 'I shall have to sleep on it.'

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‘Pish! You know you cannot resist.’

‘Yes, but what you propose is –’

My Master paused, unable to come up with an appropriate word.

‘Perfectly reasonable,’ suggested Fust.

‘Preposterous,’ retorted my Master.

Fust spat with scorn. ‘Johann, you know not what you are saying! With your machine and my cunning, we can achieve . . . everything! There will be no end to our wealth or influence.’

‘Yes, but at what cost?’ asked my Master warily, rubbing his eyes and smearing a daub of ink across his face. ‘It is not exactly the kind of influence I was hoping for. I will have none of it.’

‘Come, where is the merciless desire that once fired your spirit?’

Fust surveyed the room. Surrounding the press were numerous benches and ink-splattered tables, covered with crucibles, iron frames and padded ink balls – the tools of our trade. Folded sheets of paper hung from the rafters like birds.

‘I have put those times behind me,’ said Herr Gutenberg moodily.

‘Nonsense! I can see that even now you’re engaged on some new enterprise.’ Fust patted the handle of the press like a pack animal. ‘What is it this time? Almanacs? Indulgences?’

Herr Gutenberg glanced up. 'Well, I was thinking of printing a Bible,' he said diffidently. 'A huge and potentially lucrative undertaking.'

Fust spotted his opportunity. He snaked his way behind my Master and laid a jewelled hand on his shoulder.

'Allow me, then, to fan the flames. Another 800 gulden, effective immediately, to help you launch this latest venture. Just think of what you'll achieve. Wealth befitting a patrician of the city! Books impressed with your name throughout the Empire! You will be spoken of with awe and adulation for generations to come!'

'And your demands?' said my Master, tasting temptation. He looked up into the other man's face like a captivated child.

'Why, an interest in your business, of course,' responded Fust, rubbing his hands together. 'And a right to use your equipment, if and when I see fit.'

Once again his eyes landed on me, as though I were one more of my Master's possessions. I squirmed.

'And that chest?' My Master nodded towards the wooden box, which lay hidden, but not forgotten, near the hearth. In the firelight, I could see the ugly faces jeering and scowling at me. Drops of melted snow, tinted red by the fire, glinted on the snakes' fangs.

'A special kind of paper, that is all,' said Fust, 'part of my

own invention. As you say, it need not concern you. Peter, I am sure, will safeguard it in my absence.'

Peter and I exchanged looks.

'In fact, he may as well assist you by learning the tricks of your trade.'

A downward curl to Peter's lips suggested he was not altogether thrilled to have his services volunteered in this way. No doubt he had been looking forward to more salubrious accommodation at his Master's house. He clenched his swollen fingers, as though gripping an imaginary sword.

'So, Gutenberg, what do you say?' said Fust, indicating the time had come for a decision.

My Master glanced at the heap of coins on the table and then at me. Warily and with misgivings, he nodded.

'Excellent!' said the visitor. He spat on his palm and extended it towards my Master, who took it rather more hesitantly in his own.

They shook.

'I shall get Helmasperger, the notary, to draft an agreement in the morning. Until then, I bid you farewell.'

Peter took a few steps to waylay him, but Fust was impatient to be off. 'I am sure that Gutenberg will have some bread and beer for you,' he snapped. 'After all, he is no longer quite the . . . pauper . . . he was.'

Peter appealed, but to no avail. Without another word, Fust swept out of the house, while my Master, overcome by sudden tiredness, asked me to see that our guest was fed and made to feel at home. There was not enough room in the dormitory upstairs, so Peter would have to make do, like me, by bedding down before the fire. Herr Gutenberg bade us both goodnight and retired to his private bedchamber, with the mound of gold stacked heavily in his hand.



While I prepared my cot, Peter strutted around the workshop, picking up pieces of equipment from the surrounding benches and testing their weights in his hand. He then gave the handle of the press a forcible yank, scraping the flat wooden plate against its marble bed.

Finally, he contented himself with the mirrors along the walls. Muttering to himself, he paced back and forth like a peacock, admiring his reflection. He had a handsome face – penetrating brown eyes, thick brows and the makings of a beard. He obviously took pride in his appearance, for among the hand-copied books and writing instruments we carried in from the sledge were several pouches and horns full of ointment and dried herbs. He ran a finger across his teeth with a paste of powdered sage and pinched a few spots

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before settling down on a bed of blankets by the fire. Almost immediately, he was asleep.

I watched and waited and then, when I was certain he would not stir, padded lightly over to the chest and knelt beside it. The remaining firelight picked out yet more ghoulish shapes from its sides. Red shadows flickered over the two snakes, which courted and kissed, coming together in a seductive embrace.

Detecting a vague rustling movement inside the box, I placed my head closer to the lid. Something was alive within it! A soft sound, like a breeze, whispered in my ears.

Cautiously, I ran my fingers along the bumps and warts of wood until my hands collided with the snakes. My heart, a cannon of excitement, drowned out Fust's previous warning and I coiled my fingers round the cool metal domes of their heads. Carefully, I tried to prise them apart -- avoiding the fangs, which looked sharp enough to bite.

Nothing happened.

There were no catches or springs to release the locking mechanism. The lid was clamped shut. There was no way in.

All the same, I could hear the faint hissing sound inside, beckoning me closer.

The fire snapped suddenly beside me and I jumped.

The movement must have disturbed Peter, for he murmured

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in his sleep and reached out a slumbering hand to catch me . . . but it was the name 'Christina' on his lips and not mine, and he was quickly asleep again. His breathing deepened into a pig-like grunt.

Nevertheless, I could not risk incurring the wrath of Fust so soon. His presence seemed to linger in the house like a menacing shadow, a suspicion I couldn't shake off. Remembering the strange way he had looked at me, as though I and not Herr Gutenberg were now the object of his quest, I returned to my cot and lay for some hours awake, my mind full of restless, moving thoughts.

What, I wondered, lay inside the chest?

Finally, the thief of sleep overtook me and, like the snow falling outside, dreams began to settle.