[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Hey, Snappas, a quick favor. I really want to know what you think about what's happening at Snap, our storytelling and everything. So, we're conducting an audience survey, and I would be super grateful if you could take just a few minutes to share your thoughts. Visit *survey.prx.org/snap* to take the survey today. It's short, I promise. That's *survey.prx.org/snap*. Thanks.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Today on Snap Judgment, get ready to unsheath your broad sword. We join a notorious anarchist organization in the midst of chaos.

**Dan:** So, we were at the edge of a gigantic national park in Pennsylvania. It's such a rustic place. We had planned on just making a big explosion of violence and then leaving town.

[somber music]

**Jazmin:** Malaclypse was part of this violent anarchist group. The group didn't have a name or a purpose. They just wanted to cause chaos. They went from place to place, usually in rural areas, where they could easily rob people and escape into the forest. In the middle of one particular heist, they spotted an old wooden tavern at the edge of the woods where they could hide and regroup.

[door opens]

**Dan:** When we came into the tavern, there were two or three people in there, and it just so happened they're people that had looked at us funny earlier. We had a feeling that there were people after us. We realized that in the tavern right now is our group and these two people that don't like us, and that's it.

**Jazmin:** Malaclypse and his group were on the run and carrying stolen goods. They were on high alert. When other people inside shot them suspicious looks, everything went off the rails fast.

**Dan:** My friend, Don, he just looks at me and he's like, "Okay, now." He just instantly starts throwing poison gases at people. Half of our group looked at him with shock, and the other half jumped in on it and immediately started attacking the other people in the tavern. When we left the tavern, two people had been robbed, and one was dead. So, we've got to kill our way out of town now before anybody realizes what's happening. It's getting dark. It's 5 o' clock in the evening at this point, it's snowing. We're trying to keep our visibility really low. We made it to the edge of town, and we started hiking into the woods.

Most of our group is in this cluster, and we've got one person that's 50ft ahead of us and one person that's 50ft behind us, and they're our front and rear guard. Maybe 40 minutes after we're into the woods, the guy behind us claps twice. [claps twice] They were chasing us. So, Don gets this idea to leave a false trail. He has us all follow each other's footprints, stepping each other's footprints as we go off in one direction. Meanwhile, he leaves footprints in a big circle, and then he cuts off a branch of a pine tree and walks backwards covering his steps as he goes. We're like an hour and a half into this chase and I'm like, "They haven't found us yet. They're not going to find us."

At that moment, we see this guy emerge from the fog ahead of us and he goes, "There they are." We scattered. I ran like a couple hundred feet and I look over my shoulder and somebody has just hit my friend, Sylvia in the back and she falls down. And then all of a sudden, there's six people around her. So, I sprint. I sprint and I panic. [running steps] If these guys find me, they're going to kill me. There's two of them, at least two of them, and there's only one of me. I don't stand a chance.

**Jazmin:** So, Malaclypse has this idea. If he can't run, maybe he can hide.

**Dan:** I laid down on these rocks right next to the river, and I brushed a bunch of snow onto my back, and I let the snow fall on me. I can hear their footsteps. If I look to the side, I can see feet, but not much more. They had just been running, and they were out of breath. I could hear talking about like, "He was just here. Where is he?" I just sit still in the snow. They eventually give up and go away. I look at my watch and I realize two hours has passed, I can leave the game now.

**Jazmin:** He put on a small white headband, and instantly, Malaclypse, the notorious anarchist and thief changed back into being Dan Comstock, a lanky college sophomore with shoulder length blonde hair and a big foam sword. Dan was a LARPer, a live action role player. He'd go on long weekend retreats where everyone played along in these big fantasy come to life games. He had been so committed to it that he found himself alone in the snow in the middle of the night.

**Dan:** The gravity of this situation slowly sinks in. And now I'm just a 19-year-old kid lost in the mountains in Pennsylvania. I realize, I'm really lost. It's now past sunset, and the snow has been falling. So, I've only got like 100ft of footprints and then it's gone. I shout, "Help." I ran and I ran and I ran. I just running and screaming. I just picked a direction and kept going. I start to lose hope. I'm going to use my last bit of energy to climb up this big hill and see if I could see anything from there. I push my way through these thorn bushes, and I make it up to the top of this hill, and it's a big flat field. On the far side of the field, I see a tiny farmhouse. I'm like, "Oh, civilization. I'm saved. I'm out of the woods."

And so, I walk over to this farmhouse. I was very conscious of that I'm dressed in this ridiculous fantasy outfit. I take off as much of my costume as I can without shivering. I put my foam sword around the corner, and I take off my cloak, and then I took a big breath, and I knocked on the door. [knock on door] It was a Dutch door, and the top half of it opened. [door opens] I saw a woman in a very traditional looking blue dress and bonnet, and she was holding a candle. That took me a little while to process what I was looking at. The first thought in my head is like, "What? Did I wander into another LARP?" And then it hits me that I'm in Amish country.

I was nervous. So, I said, "I'm lost. I'm staying at this campsite near here, and could you just point me back to where I need to go?" She's like, "Oh, my God, you were lost in the woods? That's terrible." She knew I was scared. Let me wake up two of my sons, and they'll give you a ride back. So, Stephen and Levi, two strapping Amish lads about my age, get out of bed, they get on their clothes, they go out to the barn, they wake up the horse, they attach the buggy, they bring it out, and I get in the buggy with them, and we start to go back. It's a little wooden cab with four wheels. They have rubber tires on them, and we were sitting side by side in the front of this buggy, all three of us.

They were wearing brimmed hats, and I'm wearing a black cloak with a hood and leather armor with studs on it. The horse had just been woken up, so he was a little cranky. I think they could tell that I had never been in a horse and buggy before, and they thought that was adorable. They were really polite, and they didn't really let on that they were teasing me, but it was a little pointy. They were like, "I've never been lost in the woods before. Were you scared?" It was really surreal because I'm trying to talk to these Amish people. They're like, "What were you doing in the woods?" I couldn't really explain it. I was like, "Have you ever heard of a Renaissance fair?" "No." "Have you ever heard of Dungeons & Dragons?" "No." And I'm trying not to say like, "Well, we pretend like we don't have technology." Like, "We live in a different time."

It's funny. People talk about Amish people, like, they're these bumpkins, and they talk about us the same way. They're good at things that we're clueless about, like, who am I to judge? I just wandered through the woods with a cape and a film sword. I wasn't really able to explain it to them. And so, they just stopped asking follow up questions at a certain point. So, we pulled up to the campsite into a little fantasy village. There are different groups of people. There are these dark elves. They have pointy ears and they have dark makeup. Wizards who are wearing robes and funny hats, rangers who dress like Robin Hood a lot of the time with the pointed cap.

As soon as I stepped in, my friend, Don and my friend, Alan, who was carrying the treasure chest, they were like, "There he is." Everybody cheered. Everybody was relieved. Everybody was worried about where I had been. They said, "Where were you?" And I said, "Amish country." I thanked Stephen and Levi very warmly. I gave them hugs. They seemed a little bit amused. They were looking around and weren't really sure what they were looking at, but they were happy, I got to where I needed to go. I got that sense too. The next day, they were going to be telling everybody, "We met the weirdest guy last night."

[trumpet blowing]

**Dan:** My name is Malaclypse. I'm a madman, a revolutionary in the world of Tira, on the continent of Avalon, in the kingdom of Evondar, in the duchy of Greyhorn. This is a land of order and chaos. There are liches, and death knights, vampires, werewolves. One of the werewolves is a Baron, and he rules Lord of Greyhorn. [werewolves howling]

**Glynn:** Thank you, Dan Comstock for the fantastical tale. Now Dan's been organizing LARPing events for decades now. Even though, Malaclypse the anarchist is retired, Dan only plays the hero now. Don't get lost chasing anybody, Dan. The original score was by Renzo Gorrio, and that piece was produced by Jazmin Aguilera.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Now then, in just a moment, we're going to a desert to meet a monk who has a secret, when Snap Judgment continues. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. My name is Glynn Washington, and our next story comes to us from Modern Love: The Podcast. It’s a collaboration between The New York Times and WBUR in Boston, where they take pieces from the Modern Love column, and ask actors to perform them. This story is by Stephanie Saldana. When Stephanie was 27 years old, she thought her calling was to become a nun. But at a monastery in the Syrian desert, she met a monk who made her rethink everything. It's read by Linda Cardellini. Snap Judgment.

**Linda:** The first time I saw Frédéric, he was wearing a long monastic habit and carrying a battered teapot. "Would you like some tea?" he asked. When I said yes, he smiled and lifted the teapot high, tipping it slightly, so the tea poured in a long, steaming ark. The man clearly poured a lot of tea. At 27, I had just arrived in Syria on a yearlong fellowship to study the prophet Jesus in Islam. I was living in a dilapidated room in the old city of Damascus with decaying wooden doors, a non-flushing toilet, and a 73-year-old Armenian neighbor.

This was six years ago, when refugees from the war in Iraq were flooding the city and my Arabic studies were progressing at a painfully slow pace. The cacophony of Damascus life exhausted me, not to mention the stream of admonitions from my neighbor. "What? Are you wearing that outside? People can see your legs." "What? You're from Texas? Do you know George Bush?" By the end of the week, I was ready to escape to the desert.

[contemplating music]

**Linda:** The monastery of Deir Mar Musa is perched atop a mountain, and it can be reached only by climbing 350 stairs. The monastery been built into the cliff some 1,500 years before, and the building occupies a space that appears to be nestled exactly between Earth and sky.

[contemplating music]

**Linda:** Soon, I was visiting the monastery almost every weekend. Whenever I arrived in the courtyard, that young French novice monk would appear asking me if I would like some tea. I soon learned that Frédéric was in his third and final year of novitiate, having arrived on a journey through the Middle East several years before, and more or less staying put. In that time, he had come to look exactly as one might imagine a desert monk to look. He possessed a mane of wild curly hair, the requisite leather belt and sandals, and hands often swollen from beekeeping.

Beyond offering and accepting tea, he and I didn't speak much. He seemed too otherworldly for me, and I had just had my heart broken by a man in Boston, leaving me suspicious of men in general, even novice monks. We became friends only when I decided to become a nun.

Two months after I arrived in Damascus, I left the city for the monastery to undergo the month-long Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. I spent weeks in silence. I prayed. In my afternoons on top of the desert mountains, I wrestled with a difficult family past, a history of depression and the feeling of helplessness I experienced when confronting the chaos of a region I had come to love. Finally, I chose to offer up my life to God. In the words of my childhood religion teacher, I decided to help carry the cross.

[pensive music]

I never knew if God accepted my offer. My body didn't. A few weeks after I decided to become a nun, I grew so sick that it hurt to breathe. I spent two weeks in my bed in Damascus, waiting to die, allowing my 73-year-old neighbor to ply me with 7UP which he insisted could cure any malady from flu to cancer. My neighbors referred to my illness as “The sickness of sadness.” When I finally returned to the monastery, Frédéric found me sitting alone in the chapel, weak and overwhelmed. He approached quietly and sat near me for a long time.

Finally, I began to speak about my month in the desert, about my confusion regarding my decision to become a nun. He listened. Getting up to leave, he said, "I never really thought you should become a nun." "Why?" "Because you don't believe in resurrection." He didn't say it cruelly. In fact, he sounded sad. "What do you mean?" "It's simple, Stephanie. You don't love your life." And I didn't. Not the life I had left behind in America and not the life I had assumed in Syria. But I wanted to start.

That February in Damascus, I set out in search of beauty. I studied the Quran, pausing to hear the music hidden in the verses. I watched children playing at the Umayyad Mosque at dusk, their bodies glowing golden as the sun set on the marble tiles. I began to speak Arabic, delighting in the cadence of the Syrian dialect. Then on Thursday nights, I traveled to the monastery, where I prayed, walked in the desert, and talked to Frédéric.

In the beginning, we spoke mostly about God, but we recognized something familiar in each other. Before long he was telling me about his childhood in Brittany, about his travels in Canada, the Far East, and throughout the Arab world. I told him about sailing the Nile and walking across Spain. One Saturday morning, we sang every Beatles song that we could think of while we washed the dishes. Then we returned to the life of angels, the monastic day, that is siphoned off by bells and prayers. That evening, after the meditation, when Frédéric picked up his guitar to play the hymn before Mass, instead of *Hallelujah*, he played The Beatles *Blackbird*. I knew he was telling me a secret. There is no graceful way to fall in love with a man already engaged to God.

By April, Frédéric and I knew that our relationship had passed the border of friendship. I blamed myself. "Was I trying to compete with the divine? Was I temptation embodied, like those evil women who seduce monks in the legends of the desert fathers?" For his part, Frédéric tried to make sense of our relationship from the world in which he lived. "Remember, Stephanie, this is a spiritual love. Like the love between St. Francis and St. Clare. But Clare never daydreamed about retiring to a farmhouse in the French Alps with Francis and having three children.

"It's clear, we're meant to be together," he insisted. "But I've already been called to be a monk. Maybe this is God's way of telling you that you should be a nun after all." But if there was anything that I was certain of now, it was that I was not meant to be a nun. For months, I had agonized over whether or not I had a calling. Yet, from the moment I fell in love with Frédéric, I had never questioned the truth of my emotions. I knew for the first time in my life that a calling felt like this. So, I tried to stay away from the monastery. I tried not to influence Frédéric in his choice. I even bought him a new monastic belt as if donating to his aesthetic wardrobe would somehow render me guiltless. He called me most evenings. And though we spoke of little other than studies and prayers, we knew that we did not want a day to pass without hearing from each other.

One afternoon, he asked me to teach him the Quran. That night, I sat down and opened my Quran to the story of the Prophet Joseph. A mystic, a stranger, he was so beautiful that women who saw him became distracted from their work and cut their hands. His life was suffused with the memory of a night in his childhood when his brothers abandoned him at the bottom of the well. In the moment he lost hope, he received a message telling him the meaning of life.

I could not tell Frédéric I thought he was beautiful. I could not tell him that sometimes the secrets of our lives do not belong to us, but instead are given in the moment, we feel abandoned at the bottom of the well. Instead, I sent him the passages on Prophet Joseph. I added a note saying that it contained the story of a beautiful young man exiled far from his family, who dreamed great dreams, and through those dreams understood the world. It was the first love letter I ever sent him.

For the next two months, Frédéric and I courted each other through Quranic love letters. I hoped he would learn about me through the stories that I loved. I waited, I lighted candles, and then felt terrible about asking God for this favor. I tried to study. Most of all, I wrestled with the uncomfortable fact that Frédéric was a novice monk who believed deeply in his vocation. But he was also in love with me. It was as though he told me, he had been given two callings and then asked to do the impossible, choose between love and love. He decided to ask God to send him a sign.

My lasting memory of that summer is of me in a crumbling room in the ancient city and Frédéric in the desert, both looking out our windows for signs. For a few weeks, everything became miraculous, ceramic tiles on an old building, children holding hands. On one of my last days in Syria, Frédéric passed me on the stairs of the monastery and handed me a note. "Maybe God finally spoke. I met you."

I returned to America as planned, and the next month Frédéric traveled to India to make a choice far from the influence of abbots, monks, and me. He wished to be invisible, so he wore his ordinary clothes.

In a crowded train station in Mumbai, he boarded a train to Kerala. Soon, the countryside was flying past. He wrote in his notebook, "I can feel a miracle coming." The train slowed at the next station and two elderly nuns boarded, followed by a young Indian girl. "How strange to see them here," he thought. They looked for the number on their ticket. It was next to his seat. The two nuns approached him, "Are you going to Cochin?" they asked. "Yes." "Then can you please take care of her? She's traveling alone." Frédéric nodded. It was quiet for a long time.

When the train started moving, the girl glanced at him. "Where are you going?" he asked her. "I was a novice in a Carmelite Monastery for three years," she said. "And now, I've decided to leave and return to my family." He looked at her in disbelief for a moment and then smiled. "Me too," he said. "And now we are a family."

[soft music]

**Glynn:** That's Linda Cardellini reading Stephanie Saldana's piece, *Signs, Wonders and Fates Fulfilled*. There's a lot more to this story, including a deeper interview with author Stephanie Saldana, and an interview with Linda Cardellini, the actor who performed the story. If you want to hear more, go and check out the Modern Love podcast, where you can hear Stephanie recount this story in her own voice.

**Stephanie:** Both of us were drawn to the monastic life, and there can be a kind of perfection which can come with the monastic life to live like the angels, they would say.

**Glynn:** Check it out, and subscribe to Modern Love: The Podcast on our website *snapjudgment.org*. The sound design was by John Perotti. That piece was produced by Caitlin O’Keefe.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** If you missed even a moment, Snappas, don't just sit there and passively accept your sorry fate. No. The world is yours. And more Snap Judgment awaits your listening pleasure. Change your life, the amazing Snap judgment podcast, *snapjudgment.org*. Snap is brought to you by the team that believes nothing and everything at the same time. Please throw large denomination bills at the uber producer, Mark Ristich. Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Shaina Shealy, Renzo Gorrio, Eliza Smith, Nancy López, Adizah Eghan, Liz Mak, Leon Morimoto, Teo Ducot, and Jazmin Aguilera.

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