

Chapter 6

Bench tables placed end-to-end lined the periphery of the refectory hall. Behind the tables ran parallel rows of massive pillars with flying buttresses and ribs that spread out against the high vaulted ceiling as ungodly claws. A row of massive iron cauldrons were in the center of the hall, their hellish embers warding off a perpetual chill. Having finished their meals, a handful of monks remained in the hall, whispering the latest rumors surrounding daily confrontations between resident friars, squires and the unwelcome soldiers who stood guard seemingly at every door and in every corner of the abbey. Ivan lifted a bowl of fish stew and bread from the table and left the sparse gathering, stepping outside the refectory as a breathless Friar Odino nearly ran him over.



"Odino! I nearly dropped it, "Ivan scolded him. "Where have you been?!"

Odino followed Ivan's critical gaze down to Ivan's sleeve, which was now soiled with spattered fish stew. Odino caught his breath. "Forgive me, Ivan. We must speak. Now." Odino led him to the outside corner of the building.

"About?"

"The new abbot intends to open the Gatestone!" Odino whispered.

Ivan leaned back, incredulous, his eyes narrowing. "Into the wine a bit early, yes?"

"You must believe me. I speak the truth."

"Odino, we shall leave the Abbey soon enough. I don't require spurring."

"Ivan! I'm not drunk, nor am I spurring you. I overheard his very words to this effect."

Ivan looked sidelong at his friend but dismissed his protestations. "Wonderful. Now perhaps I should bring Lazarus what remains of his food."

Ivan made to leave but Odino grabbed him tightly by the arm. "Ivan!"

"Odino?"

"These soldiers are not papal guards. They are not even from Avignon! Captain Bourne is of the Royal Guard. He takes orders from his Majesty, King Philip. I tell you, I overheard them speak!"

Ivan put a hand to his sleeve. "Kindly, release my arm." Odino complied. "Now share what you've heard," Ivan stated, rubbing his arm.

"I was underneath the bathhouse window. Inside, I heard Abbot Masson and the captain arguing about the provisions remaining to feed the captain's men. The captain threatened to leave the abbey, and thereupon, the Abbot promised that he would soon open the Gatestone. The captain gave him three days more, and the Abbot agreed."

"What?! You're in earnest, aren't you?" Ivan questioned, his face crumpled into a look of fear and astonishment. "Dear God. They've come to..."

Odino shook Ivan's shoulder, demanding his utmost attention. "And there is more! Clodius, Greville, and Grate are going to help him. And you know they are privy to the method for removing the altar slab. They've agreed to do this, Ivan!"

"Why would they agree to this evil act? It makes no sense."

"But it does. Clodius has courted the abbot for our positions in exchange for their service. The abbot has agreed that Clodius and Greville become the new overseers of the catacombs."

"But what use has the cardinal of opening the Gatestone? What good can come from...?"

"To use it as a weapon against the English. From what I heard, it seems as though he intends to summon spirits to send against King Edward's men at Crecy. I gather that even

His Majesty, King Philip, is party to this terrible plan, but I suspect his Holiness knows nothing. It's a nightmare — all of it. It seems so unreal!"

Ivan mused. "Indeed it does. That explains why none of us are permitted to leave the abbey gates — and why there are so many soldiers."

"And the guards seizing the mail," Odino added.

Ivan rubbed his cheek. "Dear God, this is grave, horrible."

"What of Lazarus? He will have to report to Clodius. Remember him with Migual and the hood?"

Ivan recalled how, six years previous, Clodius had commanded Migual to remove his hood in front of the other squires. Abbot Vonig always permitted the deformed boys to wear hoods, but Clodius had taken the matter upon himself. When Ivan learned of it, he had flown into a rage, and if Odino had not been present to restrain his hand, he would have struck Clodius. Ivan had warned Clodius against touching the hoods he stitched for Migual, Thateus, and Lazarus, and bitter feelings remained.

"If the cardinal opens the Gatestone, there shall be no catacombs to oversee, or even an Abbey," Ivan pondered aloud. "I must get Lazarus out of here — perhaps on the morrow's eve. Are you coming with us?"

"Yes, but how may we travel?"

"The horse cart is still beside the stables?"

"The captain has guards at the stables since Festoneau's death. We cannot get near the cart. And we would be fortunate to steal even a single horse without the guards giving chase as well."

Ivan stared off into the grounds. "It seems we have no recourse but to leave on foot."

"The nearest village is Murat, and more than an eve's walk. The sun shall rise on Lazarus before we..."

"Remember the cave Friar Nicholas showed us some years ago? Mountain Mouth, he called it."

"Yes, it runs deep!"

Ivan glanced at the sky. "The moon should guide us. I shall ready Lazarus. See what you can scavenge in the kitchens for the three of us. And fetch enough — even a mere army of three travels on its stomach. Make haste, before the guards are served and nothing remains."

"Done."

"And three water bladders, the big ones. Bring it all to the catacombs, and be careful that you are not spotted with the supplies. Conceal them. And Odino, not a word to anyone, for Lazarus' sake. No one must know. I understand what Nicholas means to you, but you must not speak of our departure even to him."

"Not to worry. I know."

They broke away, Ivan marching toward the catacombs and Odino stealing toward the refectory kitchens. Only then did Friar Greville slip out from behind the refectory corner. He turned his beady eyes in each of their directions, and then scurried off to the abbot's office.

Ivan strode down the catacomb corridor and turned into a room. Lazarus stood beside a table, his back to Ivan, wrapping a fresh torch and laying it in a large heap of already prepared torches. "I've nearly all of them, Friar. I need more cloth to finish," Lazarus stated. He turned and faced Ivan. Two blank eyeholes fell on the bowl of stew.

"Leave your work. Come eat," Ivan stated. He turned and left, gesturing that the boy should follow, and Lazarus ran after him. They continued deeper into the catacombs, away from Lazarus' room, where Lazarus always ate.

"Friar, where are we going?"

"Come, son." Lazarus followed him, winding through tunnels. Ivan stopped at the door of the Baston crypt, a tomb dug at the order of, and christened after, Bishop Claire Baston, a former des Gardiens Abbot of three centuries prior. Ivan unlatched the door with a pop and a twist, and both of them stepped inside.



Ivan gave Lazarus the bowl and lit the crypt candles. In the east and south walls, seven high, mummies lay lengthwise in two-foot wall slots. A simple wooden crucifix hung against a smooth west wall. In the center of the room stood a meditation table of rough-hewn wood, and beside the door stood a narrow candle table. Lazarus set the bowl on the table and sat down upon a stool. Ivan approached and sat on a stool opposite him.

"Fish and bread. Yes, mostly bread, but you must eat. Little remains in the refectory."

"Yes, Friar," Lazarus grumbled more to himself than to Ivan. He had grown to dislike bread, the stale abbey staple, intended more to swell a stomach than quench a craving. It wasn't meat. Even a deformed squire boy does not live by bread alone, he mused secretly, adding an irreverent twist to the words of the scripture he knew by rote.

"You may address me as *father* now, Lazarus." Lazarus glanced up and found Ivan's smile. When in private, Ivan always permitted Lazarus to address him as father.

"Yes, father," he complied, plucking at the fish.

"We shall be leaving the abbey on the morrow's eve, son."

A burst of excitement exploded in Lazarus' gut and he searched his father's face to confirm what he heard.

"And yes, Friar Odino comes with us."

Lazarus leapt up, rounded the table, and threw his arms around Ivan. Ivan embraced him and chuckled. "Eat now. We have but little time." Ivan coaxed him back to his bowl. With fresh vigor, Lazarus tore into the fish.

"Fish bones are unforgiving, Lazarus," Ivan preached, as any attentive father might.

"Yes, father." Lazarus slowed and ate carefully, trying to quell the joyous whirlwind of emotions that surged within him, but to little avail.

"I want you to bring up water from the Well Hole after your meal. Your robes and hoods need washing..."

Then a disturbance, like some cold wafting of air, interrupted Lazarus' thoughts. He swung his gaze to the door, in the direction of the origin of the mental chill.

"They should be dry when we... What is it?" Ivan asked when he noticed the boy's inattentiveness, his voice seemingly muffled and distant to Lazarus. Lazarus could feel something outside the door, something quite new yet instinctively familiar. A trance swallowed him, washing away everything but sight, sound, and smell. "Someone comes?" Ivan whispered. Lazarus' suspicions were correct. He heard the door crackle and pop, as if something quite large leaned evermore heavily against it. Ivan walked to the

door and buried his shoulder in it. The door refused to open.

"Who is behind the door, Lazarus?" Ivan whispered.

"The door presses on its own."

"No, Lazarus. Use your ears. How many are out there?"

"There were no steps, no whispering of garments. And I hear no breaths. No one is out there," Lazarus spoke. Ivan huffed. "Father, I must confess a thing," Lazarus whispered.

"What is it?"

"The other eve, when the Gatestone screamed..." Lazarus looked down.

"Out with it, Lazarus."

"I, well...in my mind, I heard the Gatestone. It claimed to be my mother and said that it would come to see me."

"You spoke with it?!"

"Forgive me, Friar. I only wished..."

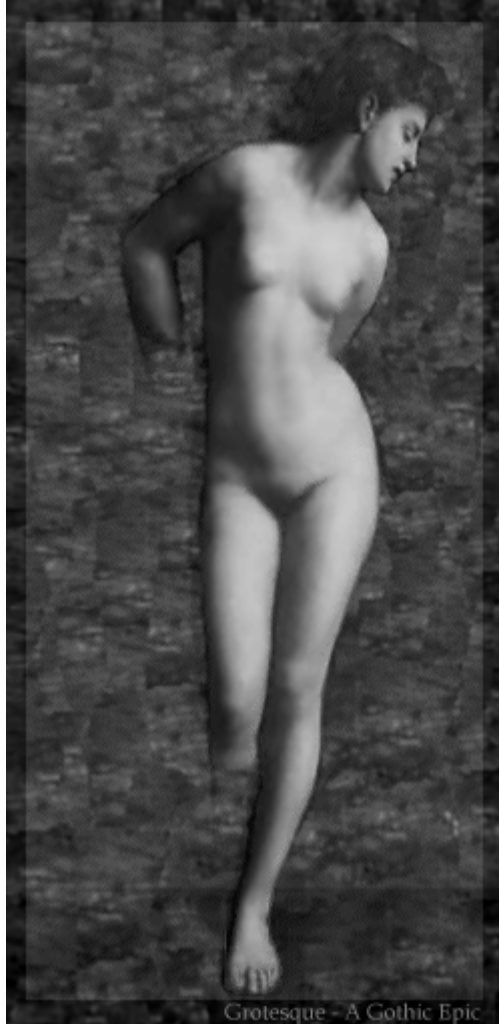
"Mother of God! Lazarus, you have placed us both in great peril." Ivan rubbed his face and paced the room.

"I did not gather any danger there...and you forbade me to speak and so I..."

"Speak no more of it. Clear your mind."

"Yes, Friar."

A buzzing like a locust broke the silence. Father and son both looked about the room. The shrill keening rose in volume to that of ten locusts, then a hundred, growing louder and louder. Lazarus sat down, cupped his hands over his ears, and dropped his head over the table. Ivan's wide eyes darted about the room. On the west wall, beneath the wooden cross, the stones began to bulge like the belly of a woman heavy with child. The cross clattered on the floor. The blocks heaved free of the wall, collecting themselves and gathering into an anatomical form. The aberration then assumed the shape-shifted likeness of a nude woman with flowing red hair and wholly black eyes. The locust-like introduction flew away, and the woman stepped forth with the same heinous grin that transformed Friar Festoneau into a self-mutilating lunatic.



Lazarus uncovered his ears and raised his head. Before him stood Mother Lucifael, and he could feel the truth being told. Lazarus found himself looking at the crimson circles of her breasts. And they stared back at him like wide and horrified eyes.

"Turn away, Lazarus!" Ivan commanded. Lazarus threw his head down upon the table again.

"Now really, Ivan. Am I so ugly? Have I not pleased you, my dear?" she asked in a voice of many women.

"Leaves us. Do not accost me here."

"Did you not tell the Eljo about his mother?"

"Have you no respect? He is but a boy. In the name of God, woman, be gone."

"Must you greet me so? Look at what I have given you?" They both glanced at Lazarus and then back at one another again.

"He belongs to God."

She smiled, bent over, and opened her arms in the boy's direction. "Now, now. Come to your mother, Lazarus. You called upon me, and here I am, for you. Embrace your mother, son." Lazarus eased his head up and found her breasts again, suspended loosely and full and swinging gracefully beneath her.

"Lazarus!" Ivan scolded him.

Lazarus dropped his head and spoke to the food bowl. "She enters my mind, Friar. I feel her. She is not breathing — not alive."

"I beg you, stop," Ivan pleaded with Lucifael.

Lazarus shook his head and addressed the bowl again. "Why are you doing this?"

"Leave him be! He is but a boy!" Ivan bellowed.

Lucifael rose and countered Ivan. "You command nothing, beast. Hold your tongue, lest it forever lick out your eyes."

Ivan stepped in front of Lazarus and spat, "And you command nothing without Almighty God."

She turned her black eyes at him as if she would burn holes right through his body. "Do not test me, beast."

Lazarus looked up again, looked past Ivan where he could see half of her nakedness. Like the grotesque, she had no navel. His eyes rolled down her pale belly and dropped between her thighs. She turned a bit, allowing him a full frontal display. Sin warmed him. His veins burned with it. She grinned.

"Unclean servant, in the name of Christ our Lord who binds you, be gone!"

Lucifael laughed. "Servant? Bound? Hear wisdom, beast. It was *I* who bound your Christ, I who tried and flogged him. It was *I* who drove the spikes into his hands and feet. It was *I* who split open his side, mocked him, and crowned him king with brittle thorns. It was *I* who tested him, and it was he who attested to my power. It was *I* who crushed him like a hapless insect into the pages of eternity, giving you the very faith you now claim. I am no bound servant, dear holy man. Attest to my power as Jesus did — as Lazarus does."

Ivan followed her gaze and found Lazarus staring at her again. "Lazarus!" Ivan scolded him and further blocked his view. Lazarus threw down his head, his hands over his mask.

Lucifael raised her face to the ceiling and filled the room with a thousand ghoulish laughs. Then she spoke. "My Eljo is far more a man than you, and he's no man at all."

"I command you, devil, in the name of the most holy Lord and Christ, leave this place of God!" Ivan yelled.

She then changed her voice, speaking as Ivan. "I am no more a man of God than a stone in these walls. Lazarus is but a product of my imprisoned lust — the sin of my unfaithful and deserting loin."

"Lazarus, cover your ears!" Ivan yelled over his copied voice. Lazarus did.

She continued to speak for him. "He reminds me daily, without words. Lazarus is drowning in my own guilt. When I see him, I see only myself. I force my faith on him, not for him, but for me. He shall suffer the pains of righteousness as my guilt should suffer them. In time, Lazarus shall drown completely, washing away my sins, and I shall be cleansed."

"Enough! In the name of God, be gone from us," Ivan bellowed.

Lucifael restored her voice to the chorus of female voices speaking at once. "Perhaps you should drown in your own guilt and leave Lazarus to drown in his."

From the mummy slots, from behind every corpse, a tide of rats washed into the room. Hundreds of them poured out of the holes, a boiling sea of black fur. A stench rose from their greasy diseased hair and sucked the breathable air from the room. The candle surrendered its flame and the crypt fell black. Lazarus' pupils flew wide and peeled away the layers of shadows only to discover his mother beaming at him, her shining black eyes even blacker than the darkness between them.

The rats spilled forth in droves. Beady eyes, gnashing cramped teeth, needle-claws and whipping gray tails covered every inch of floor space. Their filthy claws ticked and tacked across the floor like the clicking legs of a million scorpions. Their screeches melded as one as they writhed in a rabid mass. The rodents swarmed Ivan's sandals and climbed the inside of his robe. They clawed and gnawed at him. Ivan screamed, raking away whole clusters. He crumpled to the floor and the black ocean of pestilence drowned him, washing away his flesh.

In a flash, the room fell silent with Ivan thrashing about on an empty floor. The woman stood over him, laughing. The illusion had vanished but the engulfing pain of tattered flesh remained with him. Lazarus struggled to help Ivan off the floor. Ivan rolled on his side and vomited. Lazarus rose and ripped away his mask. He stepped over Ivan and defied her, hissing, his ears laid back and his thick canines exposed. Her brow crumpled and she cocked her head at an angle, like a confused dog. Then she leapt forth, growling, and slapped Lazarus away, sending him crashing into one of the mummy slots in an unconscious heap.

She bent down and jerked his head up by a fist of hair. She whispered in Ivan's ear in the voice of many women, "Know to whom to attest your devotion. Heed this: In a field that is mine, the stone is not yours to wonder upon. I am not yours to wonder upon. The Eljo

is not yours to wonder upon. And him that passeth by and meddleth with destinies not his is akin to one that taketh a dragon by the tail."

She dropped his head, stood up and continued her blasphemies. "Verily, attest your devotion to me, attest to my power, as did Jesus. I am Lucifael, Angel of angels, leader of legions, and with rightful claim to that which you can never understand. Were you not already mine, I would finish you here and now. Stay out of my affairs, beast." Ivan heaved and then spiraled into unconsciousness.

Lucifael turned, and in the hum of a thousand locusts, she melted through the wall. A silence lingered over the pitch-dark room, a deathly quiet befitting of any crypt.

Friar Odino shuffled across the courtyard with all the feigned nonchalance he could muster after stashing stolen provisions for roughly five days back in the monks' dormitory. He slipped into the side entrance of the building that housed the catacomb entrance. Down the main corridor, he heard soldiers enter the front entrance.

The voice of Captain Bourne barked hoarsely over the tramp of marching feet and clanking metal armor, "All three: the tall one, the fat one, and the squire with the mask! Search every tunnel, every crypt! If you find them, secure them in the bathhouse and inform me immediately!"

"Aye, Captain," a voice replied.

"Now, to the dormitory. You men, come with me."

Odino sank into the shadows of a deep arch as the soldiers split ranks. One column marched down a corridor leading to the catacombs. Bourne turned away with the remainder, who marched straight for Odino. Odino sucked in his gut, pressed himself into a corner, and held his breath. Soldier after soldier after soldier swept past him nearly close enough to count hairs and exited the building.



Odino scrambled away from them and slipped out of the side entrance, his eyes searching everywhere around him. He felt naked, or more precisely, like a shining swine walled in with two hundred hungry wolves. He stole into the night and secreted himself behind a line of evergreen shrubs directly adjacent to the abbey's outer wall, peering out from the tangle of branches at small patrols of soldiers that crisscrossed the courtyard. Panting, his breath forming a fog in the crisp air, Odino leaned against the wall stones and gathered his nerve as he struggled to still his weak knees. He had to find Ivan before the captain's men could capture him, and he had to keep Lazarus' hood on, but headmost, he had to catch a fat man's breath. It was a striking and even sobering notion — he was outnumbered and without cover and certainly out of time to do anything but huff and puff over what seemed a swiftly unfolding, full-blown tragedy.

Nearly thirty feet beneath Odino's sandals and deep within the catacombs, the door to the Baston Crypt was forced open. A wafting torch probed the darkness. "We have them! In this one," the torchbearer cried down the corridor. Lying on the floor, Ivan stirred as a stampede of boots converged. Soldiers poured into the crypt. Two guards hoisted Ivan up.

"Where is the fat friar — Odino?" a soldier questioned him. Another discovered Lazarus' mask on the floor and gave it to the man questioning Ivan. Behind them, Lazarus peered from the burial crevice in the wall, peered over the corpse that was its tenant.

"Where is the boy? This is his mask, yes?" the soldier asked him. Quiet as a crypt mouse, Lazarus lowered his head and eased excess robe over his head.

Several men passed their torches over the room and found it empty, save for rows of mummies slotted in the walls. Ivan spotted a bit of fresh robe behind the mummy — Lazarus' robe — and saw it shift slightly. He silently thanked God that the boy was unharmed.

"I must have fallen. Do I bleed? Tell me, do I?" Ivan questioned them, drawing their torches back on him.

"No. Why are you in this tomb?"

Ivan rubbed his face and stumbled to the door. Two men clasped his arms. "I came to pray but fell instead. I could not find my way. It is unholy dark down here."

"What of this mask? Where is the boy?"

Ivan took the mask from the soldier and examined it before commenting, "Oh, he has many masks. That one is used up, a rag now." He tossed the mask near the wall where Lazarus hid. "Lazarus is confined to his quarters." Then he pushed his way through the soldiers as he walked to the door. "I beg you, I must get some air." The men stole one last glimpse around the crypt and reluctantly followed him out.

"Where is the boy's quarters?" the soldier asked.

"Down this corridor, veer right, and his will be the first room on the left."

"And where is Friar Odino?"

"He was in his cell, in the dormitory, last I saw him. I must check on Lazarus." Ivan pulled himself away from the soldiers. They grabbed him harder.

"My orders are to place you under arrest, Friar. You are to come with me."

"What?! Arrest me? And for what?" Ivan asked incredulously.

The soldier addressed the others, "All of you, continue the search. To the boy's quarters first." He turned to Ivan and spoke. "I find this as difficult as you do, Friar, but I follow my orders. Come peaceably and let's be done with it." Ivan willingly agreed.

The man's voice ebbed like a distant echo as Lazarus lay petrified behind an equally petrified priest, the corpse of the former Abbot Clairese Baston, the very priest who sealed Naramsin in the Benion tunnel, hoping forever to bury the language and secrets of the Gatestone.

The sun rose and fell once more, and dusk again bathed the Abbey grounds. Two soldiers stood outside the front entrance of the bathhouse. Inside, Ivan paced in circles. He looked at the windows again. A boy could squeeze through them but not a man of Ivan's build. He sat on the edge of a stone bath and surveyed the guarded entrance, but there was clearly no ready means of escape.

One of the men entered the bathhouse and passed him by. He stopped at a raised platform at the rear corner of the building, shoved a wood cover aside and relieved himself. Over his shoulder, he questioned Ivan, "So why have you been arrested?"

Ivan snapped sarcastically, "I refused to hear your captain's confessions."

The guard chuckled, replaced the block over the hole, and returned to his post outside the door. He mumbled to the other guard who peered in at Ivan and laughed.

"*P-s-s-s-t!*" A hiss came from the back wall window. Odino's head filled the narrow hole.

Ivan rushed to the window. "Praise God. Odino, where is Lazarus?"

"Still in the catacombs, I gather. The guards have yet to find us."

"Odino, listen to me. Bring plenty of robes — arms full."

"Are you cold?"

"Do it, Odino. Quickly."

Odino disappeared and returned shortly, squeezing the cloth mass through the window.

"I'm behind the west wall shrubs," Odino hissed.

"Good enough! Go!" Odino slipped away.

Ivan draped one of the robes half in and half out of the small window. Then he opened one of the robes and stuffed its cavity, sleeves, and hood with the remainder of them. He untied his rope belt and fastened it as a belt around the dummy. He propped it up with its back to the guards, and then he strode to the rear of the bathhouse, where he slipped the wooden cover off the latrine and tilted back the entire platform. He crawled down into the foul earthen hole and eased the platform back over him, careful to reposition the wood block over the opening.

Moments later, he heard footsteps and the voice of the second guard questioning the makeshift mannequin, "So you refused to hear the captain's confession?" The soldier laughed. The guard lifted the wooden block off the latrine, and Ivan leaned back, peering through the hole as the guard prepared himself. Then Ivan grimaced as the front of his robe became warm and wet. "The soldier continued, glancing over his shoulder and back at the dummy, "Even the devil would never..." The stream stopped, and momentarily the guard jumped back. "Aye! He's gone! The friar is gone!" The first guard came running. The second pointed to the robe in the window. "He's escaped!"

"It's too small! He's hiding!"

They scoured the bathhouse, tearing it apart as the guard who had discovered Ivan's absence spoke. "I tell you he's escaped! The captain is already of a mind to see heads roll with those other two still at large! We waste time here!" Together, they bolted out the door and around the building. Ivan threw back the wooden latrine, heaved himself out of the hole and fled.

Shortly, Ivan found Odino waving him into the bushes. Odino greeted him with a sour face. "What have you done. He cupped his nose and mouth. "Blazes! Did you have a mishap."

"Not the time, Odino. And yes, I've had many already." Their breaths fogged in the chilly dusk air.

"I should say you have."

"Would *you* like a mishap?" Ivan growled.

"Ahem. No." Odino straightened his face like a corrected pupil.

"What do you know, Odino? Tell me all."

"Ah, yes. The Abbot intends to open the Gatestone this eve. He is in the cathedral with Clodius, Greville, and Grate now. He has ordered the monks and squires sealed in the dormitory, and the captain has doubled the guards on all the entrances."

"Lazarus cannot be here when they open it. Who knows what should happen to him? Are you coming?"

"Indeed!"

"Then we leave for Mountain's Mouth tonight. The food and water — did you get them?"

"Ivan, the provisions are in my cell. I cannot get past the guards."

"Then we go without provisions," Ivan stated, looking up at the stars. "I shall fetch Lazarus."

"Perhaps the Well Hole. He would hide in..." Odino began.

"He's in the Baston crypt. Remain here." Ivan shuffled past him, stepped through the bushes, and darted to the side entrance of the building that housed the catacomb entrance.

Odino then heard irate screams coming from the far side of the building and peered through the thick screen of shrubs to observe the commotion at hand. Captain Bourne and many torch-carrying guards blazed around the corner. Bourne pointed everywhere, giving

directions as he yelled. "Seal off the building! You four, over there! This group, around the other side! The six of you remain here! Secure all doors and windows! The rest of you come with me! Move!" Then the captain added, still yelling, but now more to himself, "You allowed his escape! Inept bastards!" A swarming mass of soldiers invaded the front entrance of the building while others secured the side entrance where Ivan had but recently himself entered the building.

Odino threw his head back against the wall, closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and beat his fist against the stones. This was a tragedy complete.



Ivan sprinted down the main corridor, yelling for Lazarus. Almost instantly, Lazarus rounded the tunnel corner that led to the Baston Crypt. They clasped one another in open arms in spite of Ivan's soiled robes and the stink they carried.

Ivan tore Lazarus off and shook him by the shoulders. "Hear me, Lazarus! Do what I say! Do you understand?"

"Yes, father."

"We leave now! Don't stop and don't speak! Make haste and stay close to me!" Ivan released him, turned and raced back up the tunnel, with Lazarus shadowing close behind like a dwarf hunchbacked ghost. They rounded the corner to the stairwell corridor and came to an abrupt halt.

Before them, Captain Bourne descended the stairs with a mass of soldiers close behind. "Enough. The chase is over, priest."

Ivan stepped in front of Lazarus. It was hopeless. He dropped his shoulders. "We shall go peaceably." Ivan forced a smile, bowed and clasped his hands like a good friar.

"Indeed you shall. Now where is the fat one?"

"Friar Odino?"

"The same."

"I do not know of his whereabouts."

Bourne leaned into Ivan's face. "I should be with your abbot now. However, I find myself chasing two misfit monks and a hunchbacked squire about the abbey. You've come to annoy me. Now, since all the priests are in the dormitory, all accounted for save the fat one, and since I know that there were no priestly robes in the bathhouse before your arrest, I shall ask you once more. Where is he? I expect an answer."

"As I told you, I do not know where..."

Bourne turned slightly away, then spun back swiftly and slammed his fist into Ivan's jaw. Lazarus hissed.

"Lazarus!" Ivan stopped him. Ivan lunged forth, distracting all with a ball-fisted retort to the captain's jaw. The guards restrained Ivan while Bourne took the measure of his pains.

"Ah, a priest with fire in him." Bourne swiped blood from his curled lip. He ordered his men, "Move him aside. The boy sounds more like an animal." The guards pushed a struggling Ivan back. Lazarus stepped back, blank eyeholes staring up at Bourne.

"I said we shall go peaceably," Ivan spat. "Only don't harm the boy! He is diseased!" Several guards retreated.

But standing resolute, the captain muttered, "I would like see his face." He commanded his nearest guard, "You. Remove his mask."

"No! You mustn't," Ivan yelled, heaving about.

The soldier grabbed Lazarus' hood and ripped it away. Horrified soldiers fanned out with a clatter of drawn weapons. "*Hissss!!*" Lazarus hissed at a retreating Bourne as his blue eyes went wide, his black hair flying about wild as snakes, his long ears pressed flat, and his threatening fangs daring any of them to step nearer.

"A devil boy!" one cried. Others muttered in awe.

"No!!" Ivan broke free and slammed the nearest guard against the wall. Several guards swarmed him, and he tossed them about like a giant gone mad. With the room in chaos, Bourne rushed Ivan and sunk a white-handled dagger beneath his ribs. Ivan heaved and stumbled back. He gasped aloud, "Run Lazarus! Quickly!!"

Lazarus witnessed the knife, the blood, and something terrible in Ivan's eyes. "Screeeech!!" Lazarus' hawk-like scream sliced the air. Deafened soldiers stood dumbfounded.

Ivan crumpled to the floor and moaned, "Run, boy! Now!" The catacomb entrance thoroughly sealed, Lazarus spun and flew down the main corridor and deep into the tunnels like a specter set ablaze.

The soldiers halted abruptly, lowering their weapons and exchanging dumbstruck glances amongst themselves. Some gawked at Ivan and Bourne. To Bourne, Ivan groaned, "He means no harm. His heart is with God. I beg you, leave him go." Then he rolled his head, sighed and cast a sleepy hollow stare toward nothing at all but a crack in the wall.

In the ensuing silence, Bourne lifted his gaze to find his men studying the dagger in his hand, its blade stained with the priest's blood. Quickly he wiped it clean, sheathed it, and arrested the silence. "Moving along." He turned and marched up the stairs, his men giving way like a parting dead sea. He stopped and addressed them. "Arrest the creature, and use no swords. I want that devil boy unharmed." His men stood about him, still as statues. "Now!"

His sergeant responded, "You heard the captain! Move!!" He took off into the catacombs. Soldiers retired their swords and poured in after him. The sergeant's echoing commands faded down the tunnel. "You three, down that way! Check those doors! You two, in there! Search every crack and crevice!"

On the stairwell, Bourne mumbled to himself. "No proper priest protects a beast." He summoned six of his soldiers. "You men, come with me. I trust you readied my troops in the courtyard."

"Aye, Captain," one of them affirmed. "One hundred men await your command."

Bourne glanced over his shoulder at Ivan's corpse, narrowed his eyes and stormed up the stairs. "Let us be done with it."