

Chapter 6 – The Abbey

“Excuse me, are you the abbot?”

Abbot Ruusk had been about to hurl a shovel load of manure over his shoulder, but the words stopped him. He lowered his shovel and squinted at the young man who addressed him.

“Indeed I am,” he said. “And you are...?” The younger man extended his hand, but then thought better of it.

“Call me Eldrich, your...” Eldritch started, then paused, thinking. “Grace?”

“Bah, you needed worry about honorifics,” the abbot said. “I believe they are for those who still cling to vanity, not to the love of our God. Call me Abbot, or Abbot Ruusk, if you like, but I prefer Brother James. Could you step to one side, Eldritch?”

“Certainly,” Eldritch said, stepping in the proper direction to move out of the line of the shovel load of manure as it was hurled across the garden.

“Much thanks,” Abbot Ruusk said, thrusting the shovel in for another load. “Now, how may I help you, young man? I assume that’s is why you wish to see me?”

“Yes,” Eldritch said. “I would like to become a monk. The brother at the main building said I should speak to you about it.”

“I see. Is it for the excitement, or the riches?” Abbot Ruusk asked, still methodically tossing manure. A moist lump of manure slipped from his shovel and plopped heavily onto his boot. “Oh... Bless you!”

“Excuse me?” Eldritch asked, confused.

“Sorry,” Abbot Ruusk said. “My cross to bear is a youth filled with harsh language. I struggle with it even to this day. But I was not serious about excitement or riches, you’ll find neither here. I suppose you just recently decided upon this course of action?”

“Quite recently,” Eldritch said. “My life has taken some unfortunate turns, and I was searching for direction. I... prayed for guidance, asking for a sign. Today, as I approached the town, the first thing I saw was the monastery on the hill. That seemed to be the sign I asked for, so I decided my path lay in the church.”

“Well, then,” Abbot Ruusk said, swinging his shovel onto his shoulder, causing a few stray bits of manure to flay in a wide arc. Eldritch hopped back to dodge the errant muck, but the Abbot didn’t seem to notice. “Pray a lot for things, do you?”

“No, not really,” Eldritch said. “I daresay it was the first time. I haven’t exactly had a religious upbringing.”

“I thought not,” the abbot said, stomping the rest of the manure and dirt from his boots. “I don’t suppose you know what the life of a monk is like?”

“Ur, no,” Eldritch admitted. “I’ve always thought it was a quiet, contemplative life, filled with meditation and prayer. And chanting, too, I suppose. Good for someone who was tired of the struggle of the outside world, and wanted to escape the past.”

“Well, you’re not completely wrong,” the abbot said, cheerfully. “And perhaps there are monasteries where the monks are able to pray all day in quiet contemplation. All sorts of orders, you know. It’s not like one monastery is just like any other. Come, you’re going to help me turn this in.” The older man handed Eldritch a shovel, and moved into the bare area of the garden where he had just tossed the manure. Eldritch gamely followed, and also started bringing up shovels full of dirt to mix in the manure.

“I doubt you really wish to become a monk. What is the young lady’s name?”

“Pardon? Ah, no. I could see how that is a common motivation. A lovesick youth, his heart broken by a damsel who spurns him, decides that the life in the army is too dangerous, so he joins the church to forget. I’m no such lovesick youth,” Eldritch said, stomping the shovel to sink it deep into the earth.

“Naturally,” the abbot said. “Silly of me to think otherwise. Of course, some young men are fleeing gambling debts. Others have committed some crime, and wish to disappear before the reeves take an interest in him. Perhaps you prayed for the salvation of a gravely-ill family member, offering your life in servitude in exchange for their recovery.”

“All fine choices,” Eldritch said. “But no. I have committed no crimes, and flee no one, but if I may, Brother James, I prefer to keep my sorrows to myself.”

“Wise indeed,” Abbot Ruusk said, nodding. “And your reasons for your decision are of no matter, if becoming a monk is truly what you wish to do. I ask because the church is so rarely the proper choice for someone who merely wishes to not be doing something else. Those who make the best monks, if I may say so, are those who were raised in the church and have a calling to further their devotion by taking the vows.”

“I see,” Eldritch said. “Is that how you came to be a monk?”

“No,” the abbot grinned. “But my sorrows are between me and God. As you have no background in the church, I would suggest that you pursue that first, before you seclude yourself away from the world. Being a monk is not an easy thing.” The two dug in silence for a while, raising and turning the ground.

“I understand,” Eldritch said, finally. “It just seemed to make sense, and with my prayer being answered so quickly...”

“Not an unreasonable assumption,” Abbot Ruusk said. “And I do not wish to sway your mind away from the calling if it is truly what you wish. I suspect that your image of a monk’s life would suffer greatly by the reality. I am abbot here, but I spend my time in the garden, turning the soil, planting, and harvesting the crops, just as the other monks do. We also make our own wine and ale. The upkeep of the abbey is solely on us, and we must work hard to keep it in good condition, cook our food, tend to our livestock, and see to our prayers and rites as well.”

“I never realized the life of a monk was so industrious,” Eldritch said. The abbot sighed.

“Few realize what it takes,” he said. “As abbot, I must represent us with the bishops of the church, they are always telling us how we should do things different. And then there are the people from the town, I am the one who must hear their complaints. We have a ghost in the wine cellar that is turning last year’s batch to vinegar and an ongoing argument among the monks about the proper way to make bread.”

“Ghost?” Eldritch said. “Really?” The abbot sighed.

“Yes, unfortunately so. I probably shouldn’t mention it, if you tell the townsfolk, they’re apt to demand that it be exorcised. Aside from the wine, it seems harmless.”

“I ask because I have some experience in such matters,” Eldritch said. “Perhaps I could help lay it to rest, and save the remainder of your wine.”

“That would be a blessing,” the abbot said. “Half the monks refuse to enter the cellar for fear that they will encounter the spirit. Even if it is merely the soul of a child of God, it’s a nuisance.”

That night, Eldritch descended into the musty basement. The candle he carried barely pushed back the dark, and the flickering light made shadows leap and dance about the dark cellar. He carried only a book along with the light. Setting the candle on top of a barrel, he sat on a smaller keg, opened the book, and began reading.

The candle was half burned down to the brass lip of the candleholder when a sudden gust of chill air ruffled the pages of his book and made the tiny flame whip about. The air, none too warm to begin with, dropped several degrees of temperature in moments. Eldritch glanced up, to see a pale shimmer in the air before him. Like a man-shaped cloud of faint mist, the spirit merely stood, observing him.

“Evening,” Eldritch said, and returned to his book. The man and specter held this tableau. Despite being nearly featureless, the ghost appeared to be uncertain what to do next. As Eldritch read, a low moan rose from the glowing form, which trailed off to a despondent echo.

Eldritch continued reading. Another minute passed, and the ghost wailed, louder. No response. A long, desperate keening came from the ghost, like the mournful cry of a lost soul wandering the far reaches of barren moors. Eldritch looked up from his book.

“See here,” he began. “If you’ve got something to say, please do so. Just stop this wailing and moaning, it’s really doing neither of us any good. He glared at the glowing mist again, and turned back to his reading.

“Woooooooooooo!” the ghost wailed. “Woe and sadnesssssssssssss....”

“All right then,” Eldritch said, setting down his book. “Tell me about it.”

“Beeeeeeeeetraaaaaaayeeeee!” the ghost moaned, then paused. Then he repeated this again, as he launched into this wail for the third time, Eldritch interrupted.

“Yes, I get the idea, you were betrayed,” he said. “Look, this candle isn’t going to last that much longer, and I’m getting cold. If you’ve got something to tell me, just say it. You really don’t need to go through all the theatrics.” If a glowing mass of ectoplasm could glower, the ghost was definitely doing so.

“If that’s it then,” Eldritch said, reaching for the candle.

“My friends betrayed me,” the ghost said in a faint, whispering voice, sounding more like a person with laryngitis than a howling specter.

“I’ve gathered that much,” Eldritch said. “But I appreciate the effort. So, who were they and what did they do?”

“In life, I was a thief,” the ghost whispered. “I traveled with a band of thieves, we would steal from all those who had anything of worth. Woe! Would that we had not followed such a path. Woe upon us all!”

“Certainly,” Eldritch said. “But let’s not lose focus. How did they betray you?”

“We were pursued by the king’s guard,” the ghost continued. “In fear for our lives, we hid the gold we carried and fled. Some of our number were caught, and justice was done.”

“I can imagine,” Eldritch said. “But back to the betrayal?”

“I returned to collect the gold,” the ghost said. “Two others hid here, waiting for the rest to return. As I came to take my share, they stabbed me. Woe!”

“Please, enough with the ‘Woe is me!’” Eldritch said. “Assuming that you were only going to take your share, and not all of the treasure, what else happened? Or was that it; you came back, they stabbed you, and you died?”

“I suspected them,” the ghost said, in a near-normal voice. “I wore armor beneath my cloak. I was able to fight back, and I killed them before I fell myself.”

“Interesting,” Eldritch said. “So they stab you, you kill them, you die. Did any others of your gang come looking?”

“I was the last,” the ghost said sadly. “We could have lived well for years if we each had taken a third of the gold, but no. We had to fight over it, and none of us had any pleasure from what we took.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard of that happening,” Eldritch said. “So did the others become ghosts, too?”

“No,” the ghost sighed. “I am alone. For a hundred years I have been trapped in this dank cellar.”

“Well, your communication skills haven’t been so good,” Eldritch said. “Wailing at monks tends to scare them off, rather than interesting them in lending aid. Or do you want to stay here for eternity?”

“NO!” ghost cried. “I would rather descend into hell than continue here another day.”

“I’m told being dead teaches you patience, even if you didn’t want to learn,” Eldritch said. “Usually a ghost may be released from the place of haunting by reconciling a past wrong, or putting the body to rest. Were you buried?”

“Yes,” the ghost said. “Behind the monastery.” Eldritch nodded.

“So that’s probably not the problem,” he said. “How about the gold? Has it been found?”

“No,” the ghost said mournfully. “It remains in its hiding place, waiting for those who will never come for it.”

“That may be your problem,” Eldritch said. “Perhaps if we remove the gold, your soul will be allowed to move on from this plane.”

“Do you think?” the ghost asked, hopefully.

“It seems reasonable,” Eldritch said. “Unfortunately the original owners are probably long dead, too, so giving it back to them is out. It should go to someone who could use it. Someone who has little in this world, and would be grateful for such wealth. Let’s see, who should benefit from your release from the earthly bonds that trap you here?”

The next morning, the abbot was going from the hall where he had lead the morning prayers to feed the goats, when Eldritch met him just outside the monastery’s doors. He was dressed for travel, his knapsack on his back and a heavy leather satchel in each hand.

“Good morning, my son,” the abbot said. “Care to help me with the goats?”

“No, thank you,” Eldritch said. “I’m on my way. I just wanted to let you know that your ghost shouldn’t trouble you any more.”

“Splendid,” the abbot said. “The brothers will be quite relieved. So you’ve decided not to join our order?” Eldritch shook his head.

“Not today,” he said. “I thought about what you said, and you’re right. I didn’t want to join because I wanted to be a monk, I just didn’t want to be what I was before. I’ve seen too many friends and companions die, and I thought that here I could escape that.” The abbot poured a bucket of grain into the trough in the goat’s pen.

“I can tell you that Death walks here as well,” the abbot said. “But if you return to the outside world, I would guess that you will see others die. It is a part of God’s plan.”

“I know. But I think my path is to search out a new life in a city. I may not escape death, but I can find a life where it is not such a prominent feature.”

“I wish you luck,” the abbot said. “And I hope you find what you are looking for. May God bless you and your path.”

“Thank you,” Eldritch said. “But before I go, these are yours. Well, it was in the monastery’s cellar and those who put it there are long dead. I think it best that it goes to support your order.” Eldritch set the two satchels down with a heavy ‘clank!’, and flipped open the top of one. The abbot’s eyebrows shot up when he saw the mass of gold coins contained within the bags.

“God in Heaven!” he said. “Was this the cause of the restless spirit?”

“I believe so,” Eldritch said. “He could not claim it, nor could rest until it was unearthed.”

“Such wealth,” the abbot said, almost to himself. “We can repair the roof, buy more animals! We could have a bell tower!” His bright mood darkened, and he shook his head.

“No, it is too much,” he said. “We are but men. The temptations of this much gold can only lead to covetousness and pride. You should take it. Well, all but a small amount for the roof.”

“You are too kind,” Eldritch said. “I think you are wise enough to manage this without falling to greed. And I cannot carry so much with me. It is for you to take.”

“Very well,” Abbot Ruusk said. “A man of your character will do well in this world. Your name will be inscribed in the sanctuary, and you will always be welcome here. Blessings rain upon you!” Eldritch laughed, and allowed his hand to be vigorously shaken by the excited abbot, and took his leave. Despite the recent loss of his friends, he felt quite cheerful. It was not every day he could give a fortune to a church. And if anyone notice the clink of coins coming from a bulging pouch in his knapsack, they could hardly fault him for a lack of generosity.