

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

Chapter 3

Abbaye des Gardiens ~ Auvergne Province ~ Central France

Gardiens Abbey was a walled monastery upon a great stony hill that brooded over the untamed lands of central France. Beneath the abbey, an elaborate labyrinth of catacombs snaked through the bowels of the hill. Friar Ivan Gogu, senior amongst the mendicant brothers of Gardiens, had assumed responsibility for the catacombs with his arrival at the abbey more than a decade before; and in that span of time the vast sepulcher had become a kind of stony penance that weighed heavily upon his heart. His coarse robe whispered in the weaving passages as he hurried, keeping ever straight and traveling ever downward. Most friars rarely ventured to such great depths ~ the sparse array of dry torches wedged into the stony walls revealed evidence of no prior usage. The pitch passage had no branching vessels and the hollow artery plunged into the earth like some black~bricked road to Hell. The sole purpose of the tunnel was to tap into an underground freshwater spring and provide a pure and plentiful supply of water to the abbey catacombs for even the most demanding wine~making seasons. To that end and far beneath the sunny hillside, the tunnel gave onto a single, stone~carved room. The Gardiens monks called this place, the ‘Well Hole.’ A stone~lined trench divided the room, channeling a swift underground spring.

From the darkness of the Well Hole, a whimper echoed up the tunnel. The voice was that of a child and yet, the haunted cry bemoaned the pain of a lifetime of misery. Another sob broke loose yet fell stifled, as though sorrow and pride warred incessantly within a tortured and pitiful breast. Gasping breaths followed the choked sobs, then silence ~ then another outburst of grief. The cycle repeated, echoing in the darkness. It was the lament of a vanquished king and the wailing of an aggrieved widow, together woven into one.

“*Lazarus?*”

The crying ceased.

“*Lazarus? Are you there?*”

“*I am ~ I am here, friar. I am filling the bucket.*”

The pitch darkness surrendered itself to the light of a crackling torch held by the monk

as he entered the room. He was tall, with broad back and deep chest, and the sadness in his deeply blue eyes belied the jovial smile on his lips. The well-groomed crop of silver hair, that crowned his head like the fallen halo of an angel, complemented his clean and close salt-and-pepper beard. A severely hunchbacked boy rose from the spring, a full pail of water at his feet. He wore a similar robe of rough-woven cloth as the friar, however, with a deep hood pulled forward over his head. A mask ~ a face cowl of the same cloth material covered the face of the child. Two circle holes existed where there might have been eyes, and a small flap of cloth covered the mouth. The dirty covering resembled the mask of a leper with a monk's cowl draped about it. The boy was an apprentice, yet his quarters were not with the other abbey squires, aboveground. Lazarus lived here, within the catacombs, in a quaint room that Friar Ivan had appointed for him, replete with a rudely fashioned bed and thick blankets. Although he was thirteen years old, his slight stature and thin limbs made him appear much younger. Unknown to all the Abbey residents, save himself and friars Ivan and Odino, Lazarus was a Gogu ~ the misbegotten child of Ivan Gogu.

“What troubles you, son?”

“Nothing, sir. I have the water now.”

“Are you crying, Lazarus?” The boy pressed his fingers against his face and the cloth beneath his eyeholes darkened with moisture.

“The hood slips and I can not see. I turn my head and it slips. I open my mouth and it slips. I sleep and it slips. It wears my ears and the laces catch my hair.”

“Then we must make you a new hood. I shall double my efforts on it and make it comfortable. Would you like a new hood?”

“This hood has an odor. It shall no longer wash clean. I know how to make the next one better, friar. I can show you.”

“Then you shall. You can help me make the next one.” Ivan stooped and, with his free hand, he hugged Lazarus.

“I have a surprise for you, son.”

“What is it?”

“I have discovered a book of animals in the scriptorium.”

“With birds?”

“Yes, the book is filled with leaves about birds ~ with colorful paintings of them, even.”

“Might I see it this eve, friar?”

“Yes, I shall bring it to you. ‘Tis new ~ from Paris! Yet, I must return it early at first light, lest the others find it missing. You may have the book this eve, yet firstly we must clean.”

Briefly, Lazarus said nothing, and though his features lay concealed, a pensive air

overtook him ~ his shrouded face turned its burlap gaze on the monk.

“Friar, may I ask you something?”

“Pray do.”

“Shall I be ugly when I am grown?”

Ivan sought full attention, resting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Listen to me, son. You are not ugly. You are beautiful. You are not wearing the hood to hide ugliness. You are wearing the hood to hide your beauty from ugliness. Ugliness fears beauty as evil fears the pure heart.” The monk stood abruptly, and, after admonishing the child to remain, he stepped from the room, torch in hand. Blackness enveloped the small, hunched figure. After a moment, cautious footsteps stirred the silence. In the black room, Ivan found the boy and squatted before him.

“Put the pail down, son.”

Ivan felt the floor behind him, found a pebble, and covered it in his fist. He did the same with his other hand; then presented both closed hands to the boy.

Ivan lifted his left hand. “What have I got in my hand, Lazarus?”

“A stone.”

Ivan lifted his right hand. “And in this hand?”

Lazarus answered, “Nothing.”

“Can you be certain, Lazarus?”

“I heard you pick up a stone. And then I heard you do not.”

“Catch the stone,” Ivan said suddenly, tossing it through the air. In the dark, he listened for the pebble to clink against the floor. It did not.

“Pray tell, what do you hold, son?”

“The stone.”

“And why might it be in your hand, Lazarus?”

“You commanded that I catch it.”

“What you caught was more than a stone.”

“How is it more?”

“‘Tis a confessor of truth. Now, toss the stone to me.” Ivan felt a small hand in his own and pulled away. “No, son. Throw the stone to me, just as I threw it to you.” Lazarus obediently tossed the stone. There was a clink as the pebble struck the floor.

“Forgive me, friar. I must toss it again.”

“No. Be still, son ~ listen. Why did I not catch the stone?”

“You can not see without light.”

“Indeed. Now, what truth did the stone tell us?”

“It can not speak, friar.” There was the hint of amusement in the child’s voice.

“Yet, it already spoke! When you caught the stone, where I did not, the stone confessed to the whole of the world that you are indeed beautiful. Do you gather my meaning,

son?"

"I do," the boy said slowly.

"Do you?"

"I do, friar. Yet, how much longer?"

Ivan rose to his feet and pulled the child against him. "Soon enough. We leave soon."

"How soon?"

"We shall be living in Burgundy before the end of year and you shall never wear the hood again. However, the moment, we shall stitch you the best one yet. It shall be the last."

"Can Migual and Thateus have new hoods as well? Theirs also slip. They have told me so."

Both Migual and Thateus were severely deformed squire boys and yet unlike Lazarus, they found themselves abandoned on the abbey steps to be taken in, and reared by the Gardiens monks. However, like Lazarus, they too wore full leper~like hoods with eyeholes to conceal unsightly disfigurements. In that way, all three boys shared a common bond in having identical outward appearances ~ together and fully cloaked, they might have resembled a trio of little burlap ghosts. Frequently Ivan would summon Migual and Thateus to the catacombs to work alongside Lazarus and, as Lazarus had always been confined to the catacombs, doing this brought Ivan as much if not more joy than it did Lazarus. For the three boys, giant Friar Ivan was the maker of their masks ~ a savior and face~saver. And for Ivan, when these ghost~like children were together and Lazarus burst into laughter ~ rare enough laughter, there in the catacombs, the unexpected and memorable merriment invariably served to still his troubled soul.

"We shall stitch them new hoods as well. You can give them their new hoods yourself, son. Would you like that?"

"I would."

"Very well, then you shall."

"Can they come with us?"

Ivan took a deep breath before he spoke. "They must remain here, Lazarus. The abbey is their home. The abbey is good for them."

"Can Friar Odino come?"

Ivan threw his head back and laughed. "Lazarus, really! If we left without Friar Odino, he would chase after us and beat us with a goat." The child laughed, now. "Do you wish him to beat us with a goat? No son; of course Friar Odino shall come with us."

"Yet, where shall we go?"

"Far, far away from here, Lazarus. Now, hand me the pail. We have much to do."

“I shall carry the pail, friar.”

“No. Give me the pail, Lazarus. You may carry the next.”

Ivan had retrieved the torch and now held it out to the boy. “You lead the way.”

“The pail is heavy, friar. I must carry it.”

“Take the torch. Lead. I have the pail. Lead the way, son.”

Reluctantly, the boy took the torch and lit the way, feeling awkward that Ivan walked behind him.

Nearly an hour had elapsed as Lazarus scrubbed down ornate wall carvings in the main corridor, which were blackened by years of torch oil fumes and soot. In that span of time, the brimming pail of pristine water had become half a pail of darkened soup as viscous as India ink. Another trip to the well hole was in order. Lazarus lifted the pail and started down the corridor, yet stopped dead upon seeing a black rat race down along the base of the wall beside him. Friar Clodius bumped into the boy from behind, jarring the bucket and spattering a good deal of the filthy slop on the front of the boy’s robe. “Move out of the way,” he snarled. He continued passed Lazarus, chasing the rat with a long wooden rod.

“Forgive me, friar,” Lazarus mumbled, continuing down the corridor, looking down at the mess on his robe. He caught up with Clodius, who had the rat cornered between the wall and a wall column, “I have you now,” Clodius spoke to the petrified rat. Lazarus stopped behind the friar to catch a glimpse of the rat. Unaware that Lazarus stood behind him, Clodius raised the rod slowly, intending to ram the rat into the corner and kill it.

Abruptly, Lazarus dropped the pail of water, tipping it and sloshing the substance upon the floor, which flushed the condemned rat out from the crevice. The dirty water splashed over Friar Clodius’ feet and up his robe. Startled, he yelled and turned as the rat, now drenched, scurried around a corner and to safety.

“You! You did that intentionally!” he scolded Lazarus.

“Forgive me friar, Lazarus replied. He turned the bucket upright, dropped to his knees and hastily sopped up the water around the monk’s sandals. Clodius raised the rod at him, and Lazarus braced himself for the blow.

“Clodius!” Friar Ivan, came storming up the hallway. Clodius hastily lowered the stick and addressed him; “He threw a pail of filthy water on me!”

“What?” Ivan stopped before them. He studied the mess on both Lazarus’ and Clodius’ robes.

“I cornered a rat and he threw foul water on me to protect it! I demand an apology and punishment issued at once!”

“Lazarus,” Ivan asked him, “Is this true?”

“I dropped the pail, friar.”

“Intentionally?”

“I did, Friar.” Lazarus lowered his head.

“There! You see! I knew it,” Clodius yelled.

“Lazarus? Why?” Ivan asked him.

“Thou shalt not kill, friar,” Lazarus softly stated. Clodius huffed and rolled his eyes in disgust.

Ivan continued, “Yet that rule applies only to men ~ not rats, yes?”

Lazarus shifted his feet and, after a pause, he answered, “I know, friar, yet ~”

Ivan interrupted him, “Then I gather that you might owe the good friar an apology.”

“Forgive me, Friar Clodius. I wish to be corrected now.” Lazarus humbled himself.

Clodius raised his stick again when Ivan stepped between them and addressed Lazarus.

“Your penitence shall be this: to fetch a fresh pail of water and clean the engraved walls. Now, move along.”

“Indeed, friar.” Lazarus bowed hastily and scurried away with the pail.

Clodius’ mouth dropped. “You since had him cleaning the walls!”

Ivan, a full head taller than Clodius, stepped close to his face and growled, “What affairs do you claim in my catacombs, save chasing rats? Hear me well ~ you oversee the abbey grounds and I oversee what is beneath them. You correct your squires and I shall correct mine! Now, take your leave at once, Clodius!”

The scolded friar retreated, storming up the corridor, shouting and murmuring echoes in hasty departure. “I shall see the boy corrected, Ivan! I now take it to the Abbot!”

“Kindly do! And share with him that you chase rats in my catacombs, stead of tending to your own,” Ivan shouted back. Clodius refused to reply, disappearing in the gloom. Ivan turned away, finally revealing a concealed grin. He threw back his shoulders and clasped his hands behind his back like a condemned yet proud prisoner, bound for a march into Hell ~ and he descended deeper into the catacombs as the darkness swallowed him up.

Clodius was a bitter man. Even the Abbot had little tolerance for him. Fortunately for Ivan, Abbot Vonig looked upon him as the son he never had. In the eyes of the Abbot, Ivan could do no wrong. And all the monks of the abbey knew it. Naturally, to befriend Ivan was to befriend the Abbot, and of course, the wine cellar of the catacombs.

Conversely, the surest way to anger Ivan was to mistreat Lazarus, Migual, or Thateus ~ those fragile squires damned by deformity.

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Lazarus had long since finished his chores. Ivan tore him from a book of painted birds and saw him to bed, extinguished the few burning catacomb torches, and retired to the dormitory for the eve. Most all of the monks of Gardiens had long since sought their sleep.

Friar Delon Odino left the monks' dormitory through a small side door and stole across the mist~covered courtyard for his nightly indulgence. He struck a torch only after he entered the catacomb stairwell. Several goblets later, he was joined in the wine cellar by a sleepy Lazarus. For both, this was quite a routine practice. They enjoyed the suspense of it, the thrill of the illicit ~ Lazarus knew that he was not to leave his room after Ivan's departure, and Odino, whose weakness for the fruit of the vine was not the best~kept secret of the abbey, had been warned to stay away from the catacombs after nightfall.

Now, Odino sat atop a workbench, slumped against the cellar wall with his legs spread out before him. Vats of aged wine and kegs of dregs filled the room around him. The air was heavy with the sticky and pungent odor of fermented fruit.

"Ah, Lazarus, my boy. I presumed that you lay sleeping. Come in! Speak!" Odino grinned, waving a half~empty goblet.

Aside from Ivan, Odino was the only other monk of the abbey who truly knew the boy. In many ways, the fat, rosy~cheeked friar was like an uncle to Lazarus ~ uncle and a friend.

"You did not gather that I was coming?" Odino asked him, the words spilling sloppily from his wine~wetted lips.

"What?" Lazarus asked sleepily.

"With you and Ivan ~ out of the Abbey."

"I did not know."

"And if you leave without me, I shall chase after the both of you and beat you with a goat." They chuckled together. "In an odd way, I shall miss this abbey."

"And the wine?" Lazarus asked. Odino cast a disapproving eye at him.

Lazarus paced around the room, touching every thing as he went and heading nowhere but around again, in child's play.

At length, Odino again spoke, “I have noticed a fire burning in you the past days ~ your blood is hot. You wish to be free of these catacombs, yes?”

“I wish to see the world ~ outside of books. And birds ~ live ones ~ *flying*. Not like the dead one you brought me.”

Odino burst forth with a hardy laugh. “You still have that thing?”

“I opened its wings ~ it fell to pieces. I wrapped and laid it in one of the crypts. Did Friar Ivan tell you when we shall leave for Burgundy?”

“Soon enough, boy. Soon enough.”

After a short pause, Lazarus asked, “Friar, may I ask you something?”

“Indeed.”

“Are you a bit concerned of leaving the Abbey?” Lazarus searched his face for more than words.

“The routine has grown stale. I can not keep up with the days.”

“What shall we do, then ~ without the abbey?”

“Well, for one thing, we shan’t have to live the order of the day. Does that not please you?”

“I suppose ~ I do not know.” Lazarus lowered his hooded head.

“Of course, you do not. ‘Tis all you know ~ these catacomb walls and the same dreary routine. Yet, you shall see, soon enough. You do not belong down here ~ your father knows it well. He sees what I have seen for some time, now ~ a bird fluttering in its cage.”

“What bird?” Lazarus looked about the cellar. “Where?”

“You are the bird and the abbey is the cage,” Odino stated matter~of~factly.

Lazarus leaned against the table, beside Odino. “Does the wine taste as it smells, friar?”

“Even better.” The monk smiled and toasted the boy with a flourish before drinking deeply from the rough wooden cup.

“It smells bad. It must taste so, as well.”

“After a few cups, one does not dwell upon taste.” Odino wiped a sleeve across his grin and held the empty vessel out to the boy. “Help a fat and tired fool, my boy.” Lazarus took the cup.

“Why do you drink the wine more than the other monks, friar?” Lazarus asked, approaching a wine keg.

“First Timothy, 23 of 5?” Odino quickly questioned.

The boy did not hesitate. “No longer be drinking water, but a little wine be using, because of thy stomach and of thine often infirmities.”

“Once more ~ this time, in Latin!”

Lazarus replied obediently, “*Noli adhuc aquam bibere sed vino modico utere propter stomachum tuum, et frequentes tuas infirmitates.*”

Odino laughed, stopped abruptly, and snapped his fingers. “Not that barrel! This one, boy,” Odino stated, pointing to another keg. Lazarus moved to a nearer keg and carefully filled the cup. “’Tis all the same, I gathered? Why, this barrel, friar?”

After Lazarus returned and gave the goblet to Odino, the monk asked him, “Luke, 39 of 5?”

Again, the boy did not hesitate. “And no one, having drunk old, doth immediately wish new, for he saith, The old is better.”

Odino rolled with such a hearty laugh that he sloshed wine all over the cellar floor. Like a confused dog, Lazarus cocked his head to one side and froze as a statue whilst Odino collected himself.

Then Lazarus asked, “What is it? I speak it correct.”

“Indeed, you do ~ as you always do, Lazarus. Yet, now I have discovered the secret of it,” the monk sputtered, still shaking with restrained jollity. “As I see it, you have a small scriptorium of very tiny books beneath that mask of yours. And you turn their leaves with your nose.”

“I have no tiny books, friar,” Lazarus plainly replied.

Odino laughed at his earnest reply. “Yet, how do you do it, boy ~ recite every word as you do?”

“I can read.”

“Yet, words do not remain in the minds of others as they do in yours. How might you read something only once and know it forever? None in this abbey can do it ~ in all of my days, I know of none, save you. Tell me the magic of it.”

“I only recall it, friar.”

“Of course you do, boy.” Odino sighed. “And only the Lord knows the *depths* of such an uncommon blessing as yours.” Again, he toasted Lazarus before gulping the last of the wine from his cup. Then he thrust the goblet toward Lazarus, for refilling, but found him turned away and facing the cellar entryway.

Lazarus turned back to Odino. “Friar, someone approaches! Perhaps three, I gather.”

Odino scooted off the workbench as if his ass were aflame. He waddled to the back wall and hid his goblet behind a vat. Lazarus moved to the other wall, pulled the torch from its bracket, dipped it in the oil pot, and extinguished every feature in the cellar ~ the room fell black as pitch.

In the darkness, Odino searched with arms waving in the direction where he last saw

Lazarus. "Come here, boy. Lead me," Odino whispered.

"Lead you where, friar?"

"Shush ~ mind your tongue. Lead me out of here. I can not see," Odino hissed impatiently, feeling through the air for Lazarus.

"Where do you wish to go?" Lazarus asked, gently taking Odino's hand.

"Blazes of Angels! Anywhere, boy! Get me out of here!"

"To a crypt, then?"

"Yes, a crypt! At once!" Odino hissed.

Lazarus led Odino out of the wine cellar and down the black passage. "Here, friar," he whispered, guiding Odino's hand to a thick iron handle. The monk pulled open the heavy door, gesturing in the darkness where he had last heard the voice of the boy.

"Inside! Make haste!"

"I am in here, friar." The voice came from behind him now, inside the sepulcher.

"Lazarus," Odino whispered, pushing the door closed, "How can you know so much, and yet gather so little?"

"I do not gather your meaning, friar."

"Of course not. You can read from pages in your mind, yet you do not see my meaning?"

"I did not know where you wished to go, friar."

"Ah! Then, you do gather me."

"You did not tell me where you ~"

The catacomb doors opened and Odino cut him short, "*Shush*, boy. They are coming."

Three monks marched a bit down the tunnel to fetch torches and a pail of oil. Just as quickly, they left again. After hearing the catacomb door close, both Lazarus and Odino slipped from the crypt. Lazarus returned to his room, and Odino, still drunk, followed the walls out of the catacombs and returned to his dormitory quarters.

Elsewhere, in a quaint second-story cell of the monks' dormitory, Ivan lay fast asleep. Through a narrow open window, a swelled moon revealed the sparse contents of the room: a bed with a wooden cross upon the wall above it, a writing desk lined with books, and small crate of Ivan's worldly belongings. Silence was all.

A flapping of wings broke the dark stillness and a luminous raven shone atop the windowsill, its cold eye frozen on Ivan. The room chilled such that on Ivan's breath churned a fog. At once, the raven leapt into the room before transforming into a nude woman who strode her bare feet across the floor.

Lucifael slung her long hair and halted at the foot of Ivan's bed. With pitch eyes and a

coy grin, she ogled him. "Fate joins us again," she whispered. She swept a black fingernail over him, "Stay sleeping, my love." Ivan grimaced, now encased within a sensuous dreamscape. "And this time our seed shall mend history ~ corrupting you in the same," She eased aside his coverings, undid his garments and caressed his paler parts. "And I shan't lie below you." He groaned. Condition presentable, she mounted and rode the bare horse. The fog of Ivan's breath quickened like the snorts of a galloping steed, his eyes rolling wildly beneath lids locked in sin. And in that short space of devil-sown lust, just as a hundred monks suffered since, yet another Gardiens friar fell from grace.

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Nonetheless, first light came as it always did ~ too soon for several of the senior friars of the abbey and even sooner for Friar Odino after an eve's pilgrimage to the wine cellar. Long before most of the dormitory woke, the senior monks fell into their routine tasks ~ care for the horses, preparation of morning meals, and various other duties, which required them to be the first to start the day. A senior friar, Ivan's predawn call-to-arms was breathing life back into the abbey catacombs. He would be joined by his permanent catacomb squire, Lazarus, who proved himself by making and replacing, lighting and extinguishing, the many catacomb torches. Between the two, the tunnels remained in pristine condition for the heavy monk-and-squire traffic that each day offered.

Troubled, yet unaware of the previous visit of the raven spirit, Ivan embraced his daily routine. From beneath his bed, he retrieved a wooden bowl draped with a cloth ~ his untouched meal from the prior eve. With a flaming torch and the food bowl, he left the dormitory, crossed the dark abbey grounds, and entered a long building, which held the catacomb entryway. He strode down its corridor, turned a corner, swung open a wooden door, and descended a stone staircase with torch on high. His stride was long and deliberate as he entered the catacombs, his rough robe flickering in the torchlight like a homespun curtain dancing in the breeze of an opened window.

As the monk drifted deeper into the ancient winding tunnels, arched recesses appeared along one wall between fluted columns of carved stone. The walls of the recesses consisted of elaborately carved grotesque figures. The strange tableaux stood, blackened with centuries of torch smoke, depicting hideous combinations of humans and beasts. There were knights with the heads of birds or dogs; demons and beasts of prey with human faces; creatures with horrific features and fur-covered, humanoid limbs. In all the hundreds of figures, there was a single constant ~ each bore a pair of bony wings,

like those of bats. The ghastly wall sculptures were an aggregation of aberrations that only the damned and demented might appreciate.

Further down still, the carvings gave way to smooth walls in which were embedded a series of wooden doors: these were entrances to crypt rooms housing the mummified remains of privileged papal dignitaries ~ former abbots, friars of the Lower Council, even a few bishops and other nobility. The friar took to the right at one fork and at another to the left. Now, the catacomb opened into a maze of tunnels, twisting away in every direction. Ivan wove a familiar path through the labyrinth of stone blocks and chiseled subterranean rock, though his deep blue eyes were distant, drowned in a dark and troubled sea.

After a time, he stopped beside a narrow entryway. Securing the torch in a niche in the wall, he leaned into the darkness and spoke, “Lazarus, I bring more food. First you eat, then we light the torches.” From a pocket in his robe, he retrieved a slender wax wick, lighting it on the torch. He slipped into the room and applied the wick to an oil lamp resting on an upturned oak keg. Dim light filled the tiny room, exposing a small plank bed set against the wall. On it sat a sleepy Lazarus, his hood off, his fists rubbing his eyes. The boy yawned, exposing a set of canine fangs, thick and blunt.

His facial features resembled those of any boy his age, save his teeth and ears ~ ears better resembling those, in a combined form, of a hairless dog's and an elf's, than those of a boy. He sported a thick and tangled mat of straight black hair. Heavy dark eyebrows arched over a pair of piercing indigo~blue eyes. Oddly, with his mouth shut and ears covered, perhaps he might easily be mistaken for any other boy. Lazarus' appearance was more strange than revolting, presenting the boy with an almost mystical, feral~but~gentle and somewhat attractive nature. A loose~fitting robe sprawled over the boy's thin shoulders, eventually gathering about his ankles. Course burlap socks wrapped his feet, the bottoms of them frayed and caked black with grime trampled from the tunnel floors.

Ivan stood frozen for an instant; eyes wide ~ then stepped toward the plank bed so forcefully that the sleep~dazed boy cringed back against the wall. “Put it back on,” the monk ordered harshly. “This very moment!” Ivan set the bowl down with a clatter and searched the room. “Where is it? You are to wear the cowl always, boy! Do you hear me? Always!” The monk's distracted gaze was gone; in its place now was a tortured expression that Lazarus thought must be anger, though it was not.

Ivan's stern scolding awoke him fully and the boy obeyed, reaching behind himself to

retrieve the hood from the bed, complaining as he slipped the mask over his head, “Friar, I can not sleep. The cowl turns and covers my breath.”

Ivan sat beside him and Lazarus turned his head so that Ivan could tighten the laces on the back of the hood. “No matter. You must wear it always. Turn up the cloth flap over your mouth, if you must, yet leave the face~cowl on.”

“Might I wear the new cowl, friar?”

“‘Tis not ready. I am stitching it, still.” Ivan worked his fingers down the leather laces, periodically tightening them, whilst Lazarus aligned the holes with his eyes.

“It shall be ready soon,” Ivan said, his voice losing some of its hardness. “Now, keep these laces drawn tightly, and this one shan’t turn so. Ah, I see. Your hair is a bit too full. We shall thin it when I finish the new hood.” Tying the cords off firmly, the monk rose from the bed. “There ~ tight again. If you remove it again, then be certain I shall discipline you for it, Lazarus. Now, here; eat.” Ivan retrieved the bowl and set it in Lazarus’s hands.

The monk moved over to the doorway and leaned against it. Now and again, he peered out of the room and back at Lazarus, as if keeping guard over the boy. He watched as bits of bread soaked in goat’s milk disappeared under the hood. Shortly, Ivan pulled the torch from the wall. “I shall prepare the torch wrappings. Meet me in the wine cellar when you have finished,” Ivan stated, stepping out of the doorway.

Lazarus called to him, “Friar, may I ask you a question?”

Ivan returned “What is it, son?”

“Why does the gatestone scream?”

“Scream? Why do you think it screams?”

“It feels louder, as if it were in my very room.”

“I do not wish for you to think about that ~ thing, Lazarus. Leave it alone. You are not to know it exists. Think of something else ~ perhaps birds, trees, or the big rolling rivers of which I have told you. Consider even angels ~ pure enough. Can you do that for me?”

“I shall, friar.”

Ivan went to leave when the boy called after him again.

“Can birds fly as high as angels? To Heaven, even?”

“No, Lazarus.” Now, the monk sounded only tired. “Heaven is for Man, not for the beasts of the earth or the fowls of the air.” Then he added, “Do not mention the gatestone again. Not to anyone.”

“Friar ~ am I *Man*?”

“You are still a boy. You have much to learn ~ one day. Enough questions. Eat. And remember what I speak of the gatestone ~ do you gather me?”

“I do, friar.” Lazarus turned back to his food as Ivan disappeared.

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Aboveground, in the empty cathedral, a black beetle emerged from a hollow and scurried across the stone floor toward the sanctuary. It crossed the chancel, through the last light of a morning moon and ran against the slab upon which the altar sat. Between the floor and the slab ran a thin crevice and the beetle searched for an entrance roomy enough for its winged and hunched back. At once, its motion ceased. Frozen, it flipped onto its back. The insect had found not an entrance, but an exit ~ and seeping from that crevice was a living darkness.

The curious beetle fell swallowed in the pitch shade that radiated from far below; spreading up and straight through the flagstones like light ~ yet this was the antithesis of light. Where it fell there was nothingness, and even shadows of the moon seemed bright in comparison.

As this most unholy darkness reached the edge of the sanctuary, a blast of dust accompanied the noise of a steady hiss that originated from beneath the altar stone, altogether, blowing like a volcanic vent. An acrid, sulfurous substance corrupted the air. A pale gas ebbed from the crevice and began to gather form, roiling whilst growing increasingly dense. The shifting mass bolted upward, weaving and spiraling through flying buttress columns and circling the ceiling like a trapped housefly. Then it dived, strafing the sanctuary with tendrils of oily, noisome cloud before disappearing down a corridor of clergy dressing rooms.

In a corner of a dressing room, heavy against the floor, the cloud gurgled as the mist thinned, revealing a darkening mass that grew within. Bone, ligament, tissue, and skin congealed, ending with a hawk~like screech that ripped through the silent corridors of the cathedral. It happened again, just like hundreds of times before. Another grotesque was born ~ another Eljo offspring now delivered through the Gardiens monolith. The child was of an ancient and beastly breed, old even as the dawn of Hell, and spawned only from the carnal union of Man and an angel wicked enough to deliver such an aberration of Creation. The grotesque was a female, nearly human in form, and comparable with a girl of six or seven years in size and stature. Aside from silver hair, her appearance was a perfect mirror image of the squire boy, Lazarus.

~*~

From the eye view of a bird in flight, the cathedral abbey formed a shape of a cross, with a vertical main hall intersected by a pair of spreading wings. There were three sets of external double doors: the main entrance, positioned at the base of the cross, and others at the outermost of each wing. The sanctuary lay at the heart of the cross, atop the monolith. The confessionals and the penitence and flogging rooms lined the head of the cross. The sacristy, vestry, and practical rooms stood housed in the left arm of the cross, and an oratory of terraced seats formed the right arm.

The dark hours of predawn flew by and steady clangings haunted the countryside as the bell tower ushered forth another day of *ora et labora* ~ prayer and work. In the dim light of dawn, long formations of monks drifted through a thin mist toward the oratory wing of the cathedral. A clinking noise of outer door latches shattered the crypt~like peace within the church. Leading the holy procession, an acolyte cleared a path with a smoking censer, swinging the perforated metal ball to and fro like a pendulum. Long rows of terraced wooden seats faced one another across a wide center aisle. The foremost of seats were flush with the floor, whilst the rear rows pressed against the walls. Each seat belonged to but one monk, save designated guest seats nearest the back walls. The columns of priests broke apart, and each man found his way to his respective seat.

Together friars Ivan and Odino stepped up and shuffled down the same aisle. Only a few seats down, Ivan stopped and whispered over friars Clodius and Greville, “Find any more rats, Clodius?” Clodius replied with a defiant glare. Ivan smirked and moved on as Odino stopped and patted the top of Greville’s head. “He has managed to find Greville, here!” The sour monk slapped Odino’s hand away. Odino chuckled and followed Ivan as Greville growled after him, “Your day comes soon enough, Odino!” “Pay them no mind,” Clodius consoled Greville with high chin and stiffened lip, “Even without the Abbot we shall see both of them humbled.”

Several seats down, he sat. Noticing the occupied seat below him, Ivan broke into a grin, “Nicholas!” A hearty sun~tanned young friar looked up and smiled at him. Absent from the abbey for several months, Friar Nicholas remained stationed as the town priest of the nearby village of Murat. Nicholas spoke, “The prodigal monk returns!” Ivan chuckled and asked, “How fare the good people of Murat?” “They are in sore need of guidance.” Ivan nodded in confirmation. Odino approached and, spotting Nicholas, he halted abruptly. “Do my eyes deceive me?” Odino rushed forward, Nicholas arose, and the two monks embraced. “Tis good to see you again,” Nicholas replied.

Odino whispered mischievously in his ear, “And how fares the shoe~maker’s widow?” Nicholas sighed and shook his head at the floor. “She tries my faith, brother.” They snickered as nearby heads turned to reveal faces worthy of expressed constipation. The two friars collected themselves and sat. The bell of the abbey tower tolled and the assemblage fell quiet.

From a front row seat, a young friar rose and stepped toward a podium that centered in the aisle. Atop the podium sat an over~sized open binding of the Holy Scriptures. He rounded the prop, bowed respectfully, and kissed the book. He cleared his throat, rested a pointing finger in its pages and read aloud, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who ~”

“**SCREECH!**” The priest grabbed the podium and turned about; searching intensely for the origins of the horrid voice which pierced the air. More than a hundred pairs of wide eyes darted passed him and toward the Sanctuary. Mouths dropped. Nearly all of the monks had heard that sound before, yet they wore identical expressions of confusion.

Abbot Vonig leapt to his feet, scowling. All eyes directed upon him. “I expect all but the Lower Council to return to the dormitory. At once!” Nicholas and a hundred other frightened monks jumped to their feet and found their way to the door. The Abbot called after them, “*Prostrate* yourselves in your cells and repeat your acts of contrition, ‘til I bid otherwise!” Thirty~three senior monks remained, including Ivan, Odino, Clodius and Greville.

When the last priest had exited and closed the cathedral door, Vonig turned to scrutinize the remainder of the congregation of astonished faces; his own countenance glowed with anger, twisted in disgust. More screeches echoed. As Vonig’s burning eyes swept across the rows of monks, craning heads drooped and curious eyes dropped hastily to the floor.

“Which of you is responsible? Confess yourself!” No priest confessed. Vonig turned and stormed to the podium. “Very well, then; take your positions!” Instantly, they obeyed, knowing the routine that followed: With each new grotesque born, all paid the price ~ they always did, and they would now, as they would many times to come. As one, the Lower Council friars rose, stepped down from the terraced rows, and gathered in the center aisle. Each dropped to his knees, clasping his hands in the small of his back.

Before the Sanctuary, the three investigators braced themselves and swung open its door

~ nothing. The monks stepped carefully into its dim interior. Save a few robe~draped statues, pedestals, and other religious artifacts, the room stood empty.

“**Hiss!**” Their heads pop up to discover the grotesque with wings spread and wild silver hair, baring fangs and perching on a stony ledge near the ceiling. She let fly a torrent of angry sounding words, strange and exotic to the ear ~ the language of angels.

Glaring over the podium at the shaved crowns of heads humbly bowed, the Abbot turned his attention to the book before him. He flipped through its pages, his neck and ears glowing red in anger as screeches and foreign tongue still rumbled. One of the six investigators returned, clasping a flesh wound on his jaw. Blood seeped between his fingers and dotted the floor.

“Leave us,” the Abbot responded. “Tend your wound.” The monk bowed and left a considerable trail of sprinkling toward the cathedral door whilst shouts and screeches attested to the continued struggle in the Sanctuary.

Shortly, his two companions approached, wrestling with a struggling grotesque wrapped in a monk’s robe. The Abbot stopped them at the podium and they held her against the floor. Muffled yet insistent, she continued her running harangue of angelic condemnations.

Vonig stabbed a finger onto the scriptures and screamed over her and his congregation, “And the Lord said, Go, get thee down; for thy people have corrupted themselves!” His rage thundered through the flying buttresses of the ceiling. The Abbot stole a glimpse of the priests’ long faces. A seemingly strange calm fell over him; his features changing in tune with an altogether different mindset. Gently, he closed the book, patted its cover, and stared at it.

He heaved the book from the podium, raised it high, and hurled it ~ the book crashed to the floor between the monks. Leaning over the podium, he bellowed as the protestations of the grotesque punctuated his tirade, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me! Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the heavens, in the earth, or in the waters beneath the earth! Thou shalt neither bow down nor serve them, for I am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that *hate* me!”

Vonig beheld them intently, but as a father to his wayward sons, trying to convince himself that these were not evil men. As their Abbot, their failure was his failure; their guilt was his guilt. Nevertheless, men are men, holy or not, the Abbot told himself. Even

as Adam desired a woman's loins ~ lust is lust, in wicked heart or pure, even as a writhing snake knew Adam's loins. From monkey to monk, desires of the flesh lay seared into the blueprint of Creation. This new grotesque confirmed Vonig's belief ~ that Man would continue to obey the Laws of Creation, even at the expense of his own laws of faith.

The Abbot rounded the podium and strode amongst them. "You," he kicked a monk, "What shall I do with the thing?"

The startled priest responded, "I know not, Abbot. 'Tis not mine."

"All of them are yours," Vonig scolded him. "You are a Council Friar!" He moved to another, "You! Where shan't I go with it?"

The second replied, "Atop the church?"

"And why not?" The Abbot matter~of~factly questioned.

"'Tis full."

"Indeed. 'Tis so."

"Perhaps the Notre Dame?"

"Oh, but they desire no more."

A third monk spoke up, "Abbot, I know of holy ground to the north ~ a new cathedral. Might we send the gift to ~"

Vonig spun about and cut him off, "*NO!* No more of them leave the grounds of the Council monasteries! We have every order of the Holy See convinced that Gardiens and Cancellio are filled only with master stonemasons, sculpting these ~ these *gifts!* Would that we might master ourselves. No, not gifts. Sins! Yours ~ sealed in stone! Enough!" The monk broke his gaze from Vonig's piercing glare. Vonig turned and paced between them, "Gather this much. The statues are but timeless records of your sins ~ records in stone that shall earn you a just claim to Hell. And this woman spirit of the gatestone ~"

Immediately, a flood of carnal images flashed through Ivan's mind ~ perverse mental pictures of his dreamed union with Lucifael. And he discovered that the midnight tryst had been no dream as he had first fancied.

"She is alluring, is she not? Ripe and willing? And oh, so eager to please ~"

Ivan's eyes flew wide to the bound and struggling grotesque, and to the full realization of the unwitting part he had played in its creation.

"And when you earn damnation, perhaps this mistress of your lust shall greet you in hell and comfort you as she once did. Yet, since she shall no more have need to tempt you

with her lurid charms to see you fall, perhaps she might comfort you in her true form ~ like that of a hideous serpent or a dragon. And if the woman~spirit is really the Devil himself? Oh, indeed, perhaps he might comfort you in ways you can not even gather. Perhaps he can defile your body whilst you scream ~ have his way with you ~ forever. Oh the imaginative ways that he might do so ~ the many torments. Can you even count them ~ the infinite ways that shall make even the hardest man weep the tears of a frail girl ~ all the whilst, burning ~ forever screaming in the fires of Hell?" Vonig scowled over the lot of them. He retrieved the Scriptures from the floor, kissed it, and strode back to the podium. He slammed it down, his wrath echoing throughout the cathedral.

Ivan knew that his confession would only jeopardize Lazarus' safety and, as any righteous and protective parent would do, he obeyed his instincts and offered nothing.

The Abbot slapped the sweat from his forehead and bellowed, "There are idle hands amongst us. I shall see them busy again ~ building a new bell tower for the Abbey!" He raised his head and searched the dim upper regions of the cathedral wing. He clasped his hands and, in a composed voice, he shared his vision with them, "It shall be taller and deeper. It shall be larger at the base than the top and shall have terraces enough to hold a thousand grotesques. First, sunlight; the tower shall rise high enough into the heavens that the sun never sets on these stone demons. If need be, the tower shall pierce the clouds. Secondly, hallowed ground; one of you shall be locked inside the tower, praying at all times and you shall toll the bell as penitence for the remainder of your days. In that way, the tower shall become more hallowed even than our cathedral. Lastly, for warding off Evil, we shall make the tower be round, that your abominations face every direction. The Devil shall see your stone grotesques from every hill and valley on earth and shall fear these grounds. Now, you might say to me that erection of such a tower is not possible. If so, my reply to you is simple: You shall show me why it is not possible ~ by *building* it. Pray, what say you now?"

"Screech!" The grotesque thrashed about as the two friars wrestled with it. Ivan clenched his jaw.

"Rise," Vonig yelled. The monks stood as one.

"This grotesque shall be exposed to the sun at first light and so, be made into stone. Then I shall have it transported to Italy ~ to Umbria's Cancelli ~ for placement. With it, I shall send a letter to Abbot Domingus, directing that any grotesque born in *his* monastery shall be sent *here*. From this time onward we shall bear our sins *and* those of our brothers."

"To the bathhouse," Vonig barked. "Bind it to one of the bathing pool columns, and place it under close guard until the morrow," With a curt wave of the hand, he dismissed the two monks and they carried the straining grotesque out of the church. He turned his attention back to the monks, "As you are well aware, since we found the grotesque this morn; this carnal union certainly occurred sometime last eve. If none of you fathered it, I expect each of you to speak with the priests and squires who serve under you. If one of you discovers who fathered this demon, I expect you to inform me immediately. And I need not remind you that this meeting is for Lower Council Friars only. Speaking of Council matters or mentioning the gatestone is punishable by death." Vonig pounded the podium, "I shall have my Abbey back! Now, leave my sight!" As one, the Council Friars turned and filed toward the door. With that, the Abbot lowered his head and rubbed his temple.

Last in line, Ivan stepped through the door when Vonig called after him, "Friar Ivan!" Ivan stiffened and turned slowly, his heart in his mouth.

"Yes Abbot?"

"Do you wish to confess something?" Moments spanned as though they were long as days.

"No Abbot."

"Really?" More days spanned.

Vonig asked again, "Do you deny ~ there is a rat in your catacombs?"

"A rat?"

"Thou shalt not kill?" Vonig question a third time, a tired smile creeping over his face.

"If only my monks saw their duty as clearly as your blessed catacomb squire boy."

"Yes, Abbot." Ivan replied.

"I must come visit the boy again, soon ~ *Lazarus*, is it?"

"Tis his name."

"How is his well~being?"

"He is healthy and active; prompt and generous with prayer and penance; wants for nothing," Ivan offered with a shrug.

"How does Lazarus fare with the duties you assign him? Does he need more help down there? Another squire or two for assistance ~ perhaps on more demanding days? If so, I can make the required labor shifts."

"I could ask for none better to assist with catacomb tasks than Squire Lazarus and Friar Odino. The three of us are more than adequate for all assigned duties, Abbot."

"Pity ~ his condition. Poor boy," Vonig added, shaking his head. He drew a deep breath and offered Ivan a bit of scriptural wisdom, "*Verily...inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of mine, ye has done it unto me.*"

"Yes, Abbot."

They searched eyes.

Vonig turned and inspected the cathedral interior ~ staring in the very direction of the newly discovered live grotesque. His brow hardened and he set his jaw. "You may go." Ivan bowed and hurried out of the cathedral, heavy in heart with his newly discovered sin.

[End Chapter 3]