

Grotesque ~ A Gothic Epic

by G.E. Graven

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 centered the hall, their hellish embers warding off a perpetual chill. A handful of monks remained in the hall, having finished their meals, whispering the latest rumors surrounding daily confrontations between resident friars, squires and the unwelcome soldiers who stood guard seemingly over every door and corner of the abbey. Ivan had lifted a bowl of fish stew and bread from the table, left the sparse gathering and stepped outside the refectory, when 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, 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, eyes narrowing. "I speak the truth."

"Into the wine a bit early, yes?"

"You must believe me."

"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 this ~ his own words, even." Ivan 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 his 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 when the Abbot promised him that he would soon open the Gatestone. The Captain gave him three days more. The Abbot agreed."

"What?! You're in earnest, aren't you?" Ivan questioned through crumpled face. "Dear God. They've come to ~ "

Odino shook Ivan's shoulder, demanding utmost attention. "And there is more! Clodius Greville and Grate are going to help him. And you know they know as much, the method of removing the altar slab. And they've since agreed upon this, Ivan!"

"Why would they agree to this? 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 from it ~ to send against King Edward's men at Crecy. I gather even His Majesty, King Philip, is party to it, 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 ~ the hood?"

Ivan recalled how six years previous, Clodius had demanded 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 flew 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 the stables guarded ~ since Festoneau's death. We cannot get near the cart. And we would be fortunate to steal even a single horse ~ without being given chase as well."

"Ivan stared off into the grounds. "It seems we have no recourse but 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 ~ 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 all to the catacombs. 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."

"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 shot 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 it. Come eat," Ivan stated. He turned and left. 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 and christened after Bishop Claire Baston, a former des

Gardiens Abbot of three centuries prior. With a pop and a twist, Ivan unlatched the door, whereupon he and Lazarus 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 rough wood-hewn meditation table; and beside the door stood a narrow candle table. Lazarus set the bowl on the table and sat down on 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, complaining to himself. 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.

"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 his thoughts. Lazarus swung his gaze to the door ~ to the origin of the mental chill.

"They should be dry when we ~ what is it?" Ivan asked, his voice seemingly muffled and distant.

Lazarus could feel it ~ 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 ~ that it would come to see me."

"You spoke with~?!"

"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 ~ and you forbade me to speak ~"

"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. 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 shapeshifted 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 fruitless mummy.

Lazarus uncovered his ears and raised his head. Before him stood Mother Lucifael ~ 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. Not 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 glanced at Lazarus and back again.

"He belongs to God."

She smiled, bent over, and opened her arms, "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, suspending loose and full. The twins swung 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.

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 burned her black eyes through him; "Do not test me, beast."

Lazarus looked up again. Past Ivan, 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 and countered Ivan, "Servant? Bound? Hear wisdom, beast. It was I, who bound your Christ and tried and flogged him. It was I, who drove the spikes into his hands and feet. It was I, who split open his side and mocked him, and crowned him king with brittle thorns. It was I, who tested him and him that attested me. 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 me as Jesus did and as Lazarus does."

Ivan followed her gaze; Lazarus staring at her, again.

"Lazarus!" Ivan scolded him and further blocked his view. Lazarus threw down his head, hands over his mask. She 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 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 former; "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 out of the room. The candle surrendered its flame and the crypt fell black. Lazarus' pupils flew wide and peeled away the layers of shadows only for him 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 and they writhed in a rabid mess. 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, ears laid back and 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 and into 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 whom to attest. Heed this: In a field that is mine, the stone is not yours to wonder; I am not yours to wonder; the Eljo is not yours to wonder. 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 me, as did Jesus. I am Lucifael, Angel of angels, leader of legions, and with rightful claim to that which you can never gather. Were you not already mine I would finish you here and now. Stay out of my affairs, beast." Ivan heaved but spiraled into unconsciousness.

She turned and, in the hum of a thousand locusts, she melted through the wall. And a silence lingered over the pitch room ~ a deathly quiet befitting of any crypt.

~*~

Friar Odino shuffled across the courtyard with all the feigned nonchalance he could muster, having stashed roughly five days' worth of stolen provisions back in the monks' dormitory. He slipped into the side entrance of the building housing 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 flanked down a corridor leading to the catacombs. Bourne turned away with the remainder; they marched straight for Odino. Odino sucked his gut, pressed himself into

a corner and held his breath. Within arms reach and nearly close enough to count hairs, soldier after soldier after soldier swept passed him and exited the building.

Odino scrambled away from them and slipped out of the side entrance, eyes everywhere. He felt naked ~ 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 ~ and weak knees. He had to catch Ivan before the Captain's men could find him, he had to keep Lazarus' hood on, but headmost, he had to catch a fat man's breath. In a striking and even sobering notion, he knew he was outnumbered, 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 question him. Another discovered Lazarus' mask on the floor and gave it to the man questioning Ivan. Behind them, Lazarus peered over the corpse.

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

Several men passed their torches over the room, seeing it empty, save rows of mummies slotted in the walls. Ivan spotted a bit of fresh robe behind the mummy ~ Lazarus', robe. It shifted.

"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 ~ the dark."

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

"Oh, he has many masks. That one is used up ~ a rag now. Lazarus is confined to his quarters. I beg you, I must get some air," Ivan forced himself to the door. The men stole one last glimpse of 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 the friar ~ Odino?"

"He was in his cell, in the dormitory, last I recalled. 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?! And for what?" Ivan asked incredulously.

The soldier addressed the others, "All of you, continue the search ~ the boy's quarters."

He turned to Ivan and spoke, "I find this as difficult as you, friar. 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 body was that of the very priest who sealed Naramsin in the Benion tunnel, hoping forever to bury the language and secrets of the gatestone.

1 October, 1347

The sun rose, fell and dusk 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 ~ no ready means of escape. One of the men entered the bathhouse and passed him by. At the rear corner of the building, he stopped at a raised platform, 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 outside the door. He mumbled to the other guard who peered in at Ivan and laughed.

"P~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 shortly returned, 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 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 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. And he did ~ Ivan grimaced as the front of his robe fell warm and wet.

"The soldier continued, glancing over his shoulder and back at the dummy, "Even the devil would never ~"

The stream stopped. 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 when the second 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 now with Clodius, Greville and Grate. 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 passed 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 passed him, stepped through the bushes and darted over to the side entrance of the building which 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! You all, 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, "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, grit his teeth, and beat his fist against the stones ~ a tragedy complete.

Ivan sprinted down the main corridor, yelling for Lazarus. Almost instantly, Lazarus rounded the tunnel corner which led to the Baston Crypt. They clasped one another in open arms.

Ivan tore him 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 priest 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 away, spun 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 collected 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.

"*Hiss!*" Lazarus spat at a retreating Bourne; blue eyes wide, black hair, wild as snakes, long ears pressed flat, and threatening fangs.

"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 ~ a terrible thing in Ivan's eyes.

"*Screech!*" 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 weapons, exchanging dumbstruck glances amongst themselves and gawking at Ivan and Bourne. To Bourne, Ivan groaned: "He means no harm. His heart is with God. I beg you, leave him ~ 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 him; 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 down 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 and his men, "No proper priest protects a beast." He summoned six, "You men come with me. I trust you readied my troops in the courtyard."

To which one of them affirmed, "Aye, captain. One hundred largest men ~ awaiting command."

Bourne glanced over his shoulder at Ivan's corpse, narrowed his eyes and stormed up the stairs.

"Let's be done with it."

[End Chapter 6]