

Normally, I loved tending to the catacombs beneath our convent. Often dark, but rarely dank, the walls and alcoves brimmed with history and religion. Sister Lucy told me often the stories of the most important dead—well, they were important to me. She made a frequent and hard point that all were equal before the Beloved. But some had done deeds so much more brave and selfless and heroic, I could not help but admire them more. Whenever it was my turn to bring the incense and pray, I'm sorry if I sought out particular ones, and perhaps prayed there more fervently.

But today had not been normal, so far. The candle I brought with me guttered constantly. I worried it was one I had cast, had been lazy or inattentive when I made the wax and all sorts of impurities had gotten in—or, more properly, water hadn't been gotten out. It looked perfectly fine, to me. And yet it weakly fought off the shadows from corners and holes, and I tripped constantly on the uneven floor.

I think that's how I got lost. Between the tripping and the shadows and the worrying about what my hem might look like by the time I returned, I looked up once and didn't recognize the passage where I stood. I traced over the walls with my eyes, seeing names I had never read before. Part of my job was to clean out the dust and cobwebs, too; but the task had not been done in months, it looked to me. Except behind me, where I now could see clearly the trail of my dress. I would be scolded for that, for certain.

I should have gone straight back the way I came. On a normal day, I would have. But something kept me. I thought it was merely curiosity—a trait not completely gotten out of me by the Sisters. Well, they had tried their best, but it had only been a few months so far. As I stood there in the warring

shadows, my eyes kept drifting further into the dark, into the undisturbed dust. Why had no one gone that way in so long?

I took a step further in, and in my mind I thought I felt—a presence? A hum? Then, and now, I cannot tell, though I have suspicions. I might have had one last chance to decide to turn back, but I didn't. What I know for certain is that, by the second step, I was trapped. I know that now.

In the moment, I only knew my little candle struggled more at times, and at others blazed forward brighter than a torch. The catacombs here were clearly even older. The letters carved in the faces were better-worn and more angular, the dust in them lay thicker. It smelled earthier, less like stone and wax and more like mushrooms and leaf mold. In my head I saw fleeting and dancing visions of whirling druid circles. There was a strange thrill in me, like when I would stand at the edge of the bell-tower and look down to the flagstones far below.

The visions came more frequently with each breath, each time the scents swirled through my nose—now of holly and elm. The longer they lingered, the more I saw in them—there was some festival going on in the moonlight. Drums thumped like heartbeats. Men and women ululated or sang in otherworldly, guttural tongues. I had heard them once before, when pale men in thick beards and braids had stopped by our convent for an evening. I wasn't supposed to, but I heard them talking in low voices after supper in their own language. It frightened me, then. It sounded like a language forged from violence. But in song...

So I must be forgiven, as these visions glowed and pulsed, that I thought the music was simply part of this dream festival. It took time until I realized the music was there even when the visions were gone for a moment. Only when it grew louder

than the visions.

I stopped walking. The scents and visions faded for a moment, and there was only the music. One instrument, a harp. But softer and not as...plucky. Like they weren't being created by a harp string. More like each note already existed and could simply be heard when it was supposed to be. And it seemed far distant, like the song came to me from across far hills, now stronger, now quieter, as the wind carried it to me.

It was only then I began to actually feel the entrapment I think I entered in that second step. Because suddenly I wanted to go, to leave the music far behind and find the Sisters and ask what this place was and what was happening to me. But I couldn't. The desperation grew in me as the visions and music had: slowly at first, increasing desperately as I felt more and more the invisible shackles. It peaked when I tried to turn my head back the way I had come, and could not.

The wind upon which the music came grew more violent. It was my own breathing as I gasped my panic. The drums thumped faster. The dancers whirled swifter than any human limbs could possibly move. Their eyes grew wide in desperation as they felt the entrapment of my imagination. Their limbs were shackled, too, the strings leading to my mind, their movements entwined to my panic. Soon, no matter how I moved them, their desperate eyes found mine and they begged silently for me to release them, but I could not.

I could not let them go, as I could not be let go. But I could let the panic go. I focused on this. I forced myself to breathe deeply. I stopped trying to turn back. I stopped trying to move altogether, and let myself live in the moment I had found myself. Slowly I consoled myself that I was here whether I willed it now or not, and the only way out was acceptance or

death. I didn't like it, knew it was not something I should harbor. It was that attitude that had brought me to the Sisters in the first place.

The panic rose again, briefly, but I fought it down again. The drums slowed. The dancers moved slower and with grace. Their eyes thanked me, and the joy of the dance returned. The harp-wind came gently, the soft strains and notes soothed the way they had at first.

Movement came back to me. I looked down at the dust, previously undisturbed ahead of me. There were tracks, now, made with tiny little feet with long toes and claws. On the left side of the passage, the toes all pointed toward me, and were sharp and clear and I could almost count the number of those who made them. But on the right side the tracks were indistinct as though the rats had departed swiftly.

I still cannot recall seeing them. But I knew they had come and gone while I stood there. Some hoard of rats, perhaps dozens, had come while I was entrapped, watched me as I fought my panic, then left swiftly in a mad rush as I came out of it, almost as though they feared what I might do to them when I became...

Free. I could move fully again, even look behind me. I think at this point I could have chosen anything I wished. So it was again the curiosity not quite gotten out of me that extended my hand with the candle to try to read some of the names of the interred. I had to ask the Sisters about this place, and hoped they would know of it by the names. It was older than them—I knew some parts of it were—but I knew they had learned about much of it, in various ways.

I now wish I had not been so curious. But it is too late for that. Here is what I read:

*Bartimaeus of Holden. Worship of demons, letting of blood, strangling of two children, known. Buried without his head and hands.*

*Percival of Holden. Worship of demons and stars, sacrifice of white bulls, stoning of three monks, known. Buried without his head and hands.*

*Garrett of Holden. Worship of trees, letting of blood for sacrifice, hanging entrails of three monks, known. Buried without his head and hands.*

*Bruce of Holden. Worship of demons and demigods; offering of dismembered women and children; performing Blood Eagle on women, children, and clergy; abuse of women, children, and corpses for carnal pleasure. Buried without head, hands, feet, or left ribs. Consigned by monks to eternal purgatory at the edge of the Lake of Fire, in torment of flames and with unending and unrealized hope of salvation.*

I realized I was praying. My eyes read the inscriptions over and over, and my feet shuffled closer. My head bowed as though being pulled by invisible threads toward the tomb of Bruce of Holden. To my horror, I realized I was praying for his salvation.