



Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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AFTER COMPLINE, SILENCE FALLS

by M. Bennardo

As I rub down the pony after returning from Biyen's farm, Frère Bruno steps silently into the stable, his hands and forearms still smelling of the sweet wort he has been straining from the barley mash. He has something to say, but he is waiting to be spoken to. I ignore him and continue rubbing Jacques, watching the steam rise off his flanks into the cold air of the stable as I slap him.

After tying on the feedbag, I turn back to the cart and reach out to the basket with the two barn cats that Biyen allowed me to catch. Biyen is Cree, and his grandfather and great-grandfather have farmed the valley of the Rivière rouge since the days when the Forks were primarily a crossroads for Indians—Cree and Sioux, Ojibway and Anishinaabe, the nations of the plains and lakes trading and fighting and intermarrying at the lap of the Red and Assiniboine.

Now, much of that history is lost under the houses and shops and silos erected by the twenty-five thousand white settlers that the railroad has brought to Winnipeg in the last fifteen years. Biyen himself now farms like a white man, still on

the same land where his grandfather and great-grandfather grew maize but harvesting wheat and barley with horse-drawn mechanical reapers and threshers.

The cats hiss as I heft their basket and carry them from the stable to the brewhouse. Frère Bruno continues to look at me, and I impatiently make the sign to ask what he wants, with my free hand. As I pass by him, he says simply, “We are meant to stay together.”

It is not Frère Bruno who is saying this to me. Dom Christophe, the abbot, has been to the brewhouse in my absence and has made some remark. I sigh. “No,” I say, “you are meant to be with me while I am in the brewhouse. There should be no danger in leaving you alone here, and we would have lost work if we had both gone to Biyen.”

Biyen’s knowledge of the prairies is far in advance of anything we Trappists have learned in the three summers since we were sent here from Quebec to found this abbey under Dom Christophe. And so when I found the gruesome collection of mouse bones and fur mixed in with the grain in the bins of malted barley, I carried them to Biyen for his opinion.

Biyen merely shrugged his body into the shape of a large bird and suggested an owl had gotten into the brewhouse. But however the bones came to be, there were certainly mice there. Unless I could stop them from eating the grain, Dom

Christophe would be almost certain to blame me—and that would mean another round of punishments for all the brothers.

Already, much to my shame, my own weakness in the matter of stealing handfuls of barley to eat resulted in Dom Christophe cutting our daily meals from two down to one—a communal penance for an individual sin. And the simple fact that Frère Bruno was assigned to shadow me in the brewhouse was proof that the abbot was not satisfied I had the strength to resist a relapse into my former errors. Another unexplained disappearance of food may leave us on water and gruel for a week to drive the lesson home.

I open the basket and the cats bound out, losing themselves instantly among the bins and tubs of the brewhouse. If I know anything about cats, I won't see them again for days—unless they're tempted out by the heat of the mash tun or the copper. But at night, at least, they should keep the mice from the grain.

“What did Dom Christophe want?” I ask at last.

“Célestin is dead. You are to tend to the body and dig the grave.”

I nod. This is not punishment exactly, but it too is a reminder of my shameful behavior. Célestin once was a brother at the abbey, but he could not reconcile himself to the stability required by strict observance of the Rule of Benedict. In

Quebec, he twice left the abbey and went to other orders for a time before returning. It was hoped that by sending him to Winnipeg he would be cured of this tendency. But again he left, and so Dom Christophe closed the door of the order against him.

But a week ago, when Célestin turned up outside the abbey gates, half-frozen and emaciated, Dom Christophe was moved to pity and admitted him as a guest. Everyone was surprised when Dom Christophe appointed himself the special attendant to Célestin, but the task did not seem likely to be a protracted one. Célestin was so long without food that there seemed no hope of saving his life.

Célestin did not starve to death because of anything I did. The barley I stole was extra above what we needed for eating and planting, and was set aside for brewing beer. Carelessly, I thought that my actions would have no real effect on any of my brothers. But Dom Christophe of course must strive to remind me that what I took came directly from each of them.

* * *

Before I see to Célestin's mortal remains, I first attend vespers with the rest of the brothers. There are eight of us—barely enough for the work required to keep ourselves self-sufficient while attending to the offices of the hours, especially on these short winter days. This year is the first that there is

grain enough left over for brewing, and the income from selling the beer in Winnipeg will perhaps allow us to improve the chapel or dormitory.

None of the prayers at the abbey are long, and vespers soon conclude. The hymn gives way to the psalm, then the canticle, and the reading from the Bible. I have never been a great student of Latin, and except for the moments when responses are expected of me, I find my mind wandering.

We Trappists do not talk except when it is necessary, preferring to sign to each other if possible, but still I feel that Dom Christophe is cold and silent to me. Perhaps he sees my visit to Biyen as a threat to the self-sufficiency of the abbey. It is hard to plumb his mind when he always keeps his own counsel—he seems only to know how to reprove, not to guide or mediate, and I would wish for another brother to be chosen abbot if it were my place to have an opinion about the matter.

As the other brothers file silently from the chapel to the dining room, I instead make my way to the guest house to fulfill my duty towards Célestin. As I pass by the dining room, I can hear Frère Michel reading from the Rule of Benedict as the other brothers eat silently, attending to study and prayer even during mealtimes. After dinner, Frère Michel and the brother who is serving dinner tonight will be allowed to eat. I do not

expect to be finished in time to join them and may very well miss my meal for the day.

It has been several days since I saw Célestin, so the state of his body is a shock to me. If anything, he is more hollow and emaciated than when he came to the abbey. His eyelids lie closed over deep sunken pits beneath the sharp ridges of his nose and cheekbones. His cheeks are like paper—almost translucent—and his neck is a shriveled cable of tendons and esophagus, with vertebrae jutting sharply from the back. He has no teeth and little hair, as though he began to disintegrate into a disconnected jumble of parts even before death.

Slowly, I undress Célestin, marveling at the sparseness of the flesh on his body—the great gaping bowl that stretches from his ribs to his pelvis moves me momentarily to tears. The wintry cold was not kind to Célestin either. His ears and fingertips are black and stiff, and a few of his toes are missing.

I bathe Célestin's body, the water running off sharp ridges that should be round and plump and pooling in strange hollows that would be filled with flesh on any other man. My hands fit around his arms and even his shins. When I lift his body to turn him over, he seems to weigh nothing. After cleaning him, I dress him in a clean habit and sew him into a shroud. Tomorrow morning, I will dig his grave in the quiet

twilight hour before matins. After the funeral, I will fill it over again.

As I gather up the implements of my work, I notice the bowl from which Dom Christophe had spooned broth to Célestin during his last week of life. A chicken was killed to make the broth, its carcass boiled again and again over eight days until the bird disintegrated into its component parts—bones, tendons, flesh, feet—and the kitchen was heavy with the suffocating smell of boiled poultry. Even with such economy as this, to kill even a single chicken for food is a great extravagance that would only be afforded to a sick or dying man.

I have not tasted meat for eleven years, since I was admitted to the Trappist abbey in Quebec. Fish, mushrooms, eggs, and chestnuts I have had since then, and often in abundance, but never beef or pork or even a chicken like the one that was sacrificed to Célestin's broth. I lift the bowl to my nose and breathe deeply of the dregs. I can smell the chicken still, and a little liquid sloshes even yet in the bottom.

It seems a paltry indulgence, less than a mouthful of weak broth that will otherwise be thrown away untasted. But even so, I put it away from me. I wash the bowl with water and empty it into the cold fire grate. Now the temptation is gone and there is nothing left, but still I am ashamed. It is easy to

work up the one second of courage needed to throw away the contents of a bowl. But would I still be strong enough to resist the temptation of working in the brewhouse—the nutty barley grains and the sweet syrupy wort—if Frère Bruno were not always watching me?

* * *

We gather for compline, the last prayers of the day, and listen to Frère Michel read out the three psalms. Dom Christophe is short with both the hymn and his lesson, and we are dismissed to the dormitory. In Quebec, the dormitory was a single great room with a bed for each of the monks, a light burning constantly upon a table in the middle throughout the night. Here, the beds are segregated by ones and twos into recessed alcoves that look upon the common area of the dormitory.

There is more privacy this way, but Frère Bruno's fitful snoring is hardly dampened by the walls of the shallow alcoves. After compline, we are enjoined to keep strictly silent until morning prayers, but there is little anybody can do about that snoring. It's a long while before I am able to sleep.

Late at night, sometime before invitory, I wake. Something is different about the dormitory, but at first the shroud of sleep keeps me from understanding what is the matter. Then I realize that we are in complete darkness. The

dormitory light is gone—the lamp’s wick was trimmed too close, perhaps, or the reservoir was not filled with enough paraffin.

But it is of no matter. The dormitory is silent at last, and the darkness makes it all the easier to drift back to sleep. I rearrange the coarse cloth of my habit and my blankets to make the straw tick as comfortable as possible. Surely, I think, there is no sin in wanting to lie on a smooth, soft surface, but before I can answer myself I am asleep again.

* * *

I am right about the cats. Not even the heat of the copper tempts them out of wherever they are hiding when I boil down the wort that Frère Bruno strained the day before. Afterwards, the boiled wort is poured into casks with yeast and herbs and left to ferment. For this batch, this is almost the end of a long and complicated process that I have not had an opportunity to practice since I learned it in Quebec. My mind is alive with details and concerns and succinct orders for Frère Bruno. The day passes quickly.

It is the next day, when I go back to the tub of malted barley to prepare more mash, that I have misgivings. There is considerably less barley than I expect, and I call Frère Bruno over to ask his opinion about the quantity. He seems perplexed as well.

“There was more here two days ago,” he says, sifting through the barley with a wooden ladle. “A great deal more.”

Then I see something that sends a chill through my body. I put a hand on Frère Bruno’s arm to stop his sifting. Reaching into the tub, I brush away the barley grains and pull up a smooth, dry bone. But this is no mouse bone—it’s fully as long as the longest of my fingers. It can only have come from the leg of one of the cats, yet it is picked clean of flesh and covered with gnawing marks like the impression of teeth.

I reach back into the tub and sift through it by hand, searching for the rest of the bones. Frère Bruno joins me, and soon we have almost the complete skeleton and skull of a cat. Every bone is utterly cleaned of flesh and covered with the same gnawing marks.

“This is no owl,” I say.

“The other cat?” asks Frère Bruno.

I don’t know if he is suggesting that the other cat may have been the culprit or if he is wondering if the same fate befell her, but it is worth rooting her out in either case. It’s a long search, and many times I think it will be fruitless, but at last we find her wedged in a gap in a stack of firewood. As I peer through the hole—seemingly too small for a cat—all I can see is the glint of her eyes.

My arm goes in and is met immediately with a scratch. But I reach further back and grab the scruff of her neck, pulling her out against her clawing and into the open air of the brewhouse. Hanging in my hand, she hisses and bats at me uselessly. She is alive, untouched but badly frightened, and hardly so fat as she should be if she had eaten her sister to the bones—if such a thing were even possible. I let her down, and instantly she runs off into some other secret hiding spot in the brewhouse.

Later, Frère Bruno tells me that he thought the pantry was strangely empty as well as he was preparing dinner last night. I have a cold feeling. Something or someone is eating the abbey out of its stores. When deep winter falls, it won't be so easy to take Jacques out to Winnipeg—or even to any of the neighboring farms—if we should find ourselves suddenly short on food. An ill-timed blizzard could leave us all in the same extremity as Célestin.

At that moment, I think of the extinguished light in the dormitory. I feel I must ask Frère Bruno about it. “Did you notice,” I ask, “two mornings ago, when we rose for matins, was the lamp in the dormitory burning or not?”

Frère Bruno looks oddly at me, as well he might in reaction to such a question. But he thinks and nods. “It was lit. I know because I blew it out when I rose.”

This is the answer I thought I would hear, though perhaps it means nothing. One of the other brothers may have relit the lamp after I went back to sleep. It proves nothing.

But even so, when we gather for vespers and again for compline, I cannot help but look at my brothers one by one with uncharitable suspicions in my mind. Did one of them get up in the night and take the lamp with them? I heard nothing when I woke—not even the snoring of Frère Bruno—so any one of them might have done so. But if so, then why? And what did the cat have to do with anything? Even if one of the brothers were sneaking into the pantry at night, I cannot fathom why anyone would want to strip a cat of her flesh.

As I lie on my bed in my alcove, my eyes fixed on the yellow glow of the paraffin lamp, my thoughts follow such tracks. And they follow them on, deep into the night, until I fall fast asleep, despite my intention to watch and wait through the night.

* * *

I wake with a start, and this time I am immediately aware of the complete darkness around me. Once more, the light is gone and everything is silent. I lie quietly on my bed, listening and hoping to catch some clue. But I hear nothing.

The dormitory is pitch black, but luckily it is the custom of the Trappists always to sleep in our habits so I have no need to

dress. The stone floor of the dormitory is like ice against my bare feet, but I dare not look for my moccasins. Instead, I grope slowly away from my bed out into the inky abyss of the dormitory.

It's a long eternity until my hand brushes what must be the table in the center of the room. I spread out my fingers and sweep my arms slowly across the surface of the table. There is no lamp. Someone has taken it.

A quick look around tells me that it is far too dark to tell who is missing by sight alone. At the very least, I would need to fumble my way into every alcove to get a close look at which beds were occupied, and that would surely wake at least some of the brothers. Instead, I follow the edge of the table by feel and quietly creep towards the dormitory door.

It is another long, silent stretch to the door, my toes curling around the gaps between the cold flagstones on the floor. The soles of my feet are tingling, and I force myself not to imagine any terrible creatures of the night crawling over or under them.

At last, my hand reaches the wall. Slowly I search to the left and right, feeling for the wood of the door. Finding that, I search again for the handle. Pressing down, I open the door and slip quietly outside.

The dormitory door leads directly to a path that runs past the chapel and up a hill towards the stable, the brewhouse, and the other outbuildings. Out here, it is not so completely black, but the night is still dark. Slowly, shapes begin to form in the middle distance around me. Otherwise, I am aware of a cool wetness on my back—I have been sweating heavily without even noticing it.

The sandy path with its crust of frost is harder on my feet than the cold flagstones, but it is too late to go back for my moccasins. I push on, up the path, pulling my habit tight around me. As I pass the chapel, a great white shape suddenly detaches itself from the building above me and falls gracefully towards the ground before ponderously flapping a set of heavy wings and soaring away. As my heart quiets and slows to its normal pace again, I recognize the night-shrouded form of a snowy owl.

As near as I can tell, there are footprints in the frost of the path leading up to the outbuildings. They may be old footprints—I'm not certain—but they are all I have, and so I follow them. Then, as I near the top of the hill, I see the lamp from the dormitory sitting on the ground unattended in front of the brewhouse. I pause a moment, regarding the lantern glow as though it might be a trap, but finally I go forward and step into the circle of pale yellow light.

Leaving the lantern where it is, I push open the door of the brewhouse and peer inside. Nothing stirs for a moment and I step forward. Far in the corner, I hear the rustling of something on the floor of the brewhouse coming towards me, and then a sudden squeaking retreat. A mouse, frightened by my entrance. Clearly no one else has been here recently. I step back outside and shut the door quietly.

As I regain the path, a noise comes from away down the other side of the hill, towards the chicken coop. I take a few rapid steps in that direction and reach that side of the hilltop, where I can look down onto the coop. The birds are clucking and rustling about, and then one lets out a strangled scream. Making my way towards the coop, I now see the shutters that protect it at night were taken down. Somebody or something is inside.

More clucking follows and the sound of rapidly flapping wings. Two alarmed chickens bolt from the coop amid a tumult of screams and a flurry of feathers. I crouch down, my feet tingling with pain against sharp rocks on the frozen ground. I hold my breath, trying to decide what to do—when suddenly, out of the coop bolts a figure.

My heart freezes in my chest as I take the measure of the figure. It clutches three or four dead chickens in each of its hands, heads lolling insensibly on flaccid necks but bodies still

twitching. The figure's body is bent and stark white under its habit, with deep shadowy hollows along its neck and arms. Suddenly, it sniffs the air and turns to look at me. The eyes and the mouth are black voids, gaping and inhuman, while the forehead stretches white and round as a death's head. Looking into its face is like into a skull.

Then the figure is gone, bounding away with its dead chickens, its gaunt shoulders flashing in alternating relief until the darkness swallows it totally.

I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding and wipe the cold sweat from my brow. There could be no mistake. The dead man, Célestin, was raiding the chicken coop, and I stood witness to the act.

* * *

It is a long while before I am able to shake off my daze, but finally I creep forward again. The aftermath of the carnage will tell me whether this figure is the same one responsible for the dead mice and cat in the brewhouse. But no sooner do I bend down at the entrance to the now-vacant coop than I see the lantern suddenly rise to the top of the hill. Despite this new horror, I force myself to take stock of the coop—the same bones, picked clean of all flesh, are here again. I still don't understand, but at least it seems these strange events are all linked.

The lantern moves forward down the hill and I now see the long habit trailing beneath it. One of the other brothers has woken and followed me out here. I turn sheepishly to face my brother and find that it is in fact Dom Christophe. In the glow of the lamplight with its weird shadows and sickly pallor, his face has a terrible cast, hardly more comforting than the death's head I had faced only ten minutes earlier.

Ever conscience of the nighttime silence of the order, he merely motions to me with his arm. Once, and only once, Dom Christophe gives the sign for me to follow him, and then he turns without staying to see if I obey or not. I hasten to follow, for I know that if I do not, I will no doubt be excommunicated in the morning.

* * *

Excommunication returns to my mind again the next day as I make my way across the icy lane towards Biyen's farm on the Rivière rouge. I endured a public excoriation in front of the other brothers for my unauthorized excursion the night before. It was impossible to explain that I was following someone else and even more impossible to explain what it was that I saw. There were simply the circumstances as Dom Christophe observed them, and that was damning enough.

For Dom Christophe saw me peering into the chicken coop, and saw the chickens all gone. What else was he to think

except that I let them loose or otherwise made off with them somehow? As to accusing Célestin of the crime—the man was dead. We all saw him buried, and I myself sewed him into his shroud and rained earth down over him. I even satisfied myself in the morning that his grave was still undisturbed under its dusting of frost and snow.

But what of the lamp? How did it get outside? That question gnaws at me almost as much as the question of how a dead man can walk and eat. And yet, I can put none of those questions to Dom Christophe or anyone else.

Instead, I was stripped of my duties in the brewhouse and gave Frère Bruno whatever instructions he might need in writing. Otherwise, I am to remain separate from the rest of the community, scrubbing the stable by day and sleeping alone in the guest house at night. No one will have any food for three days, and after that time Dom Christophe will decide whether I am to stay at the abbey or not.

There is a modicum of a blessing in my exile, for it means that I might make it to Biyen's farm and back without my absence being noticed. There is a chance the other brothers might catch sight of me on the road, but I have to put what I have seen before someone, to help me work out my own opinions. With things standing as they do at the abbey, Biyen

seems as likely as anybody to be able to make sense of these strange events.

Biyen, however, is even less given to superstition and tales of the walking dead than a monk is. “The man is not dead,” insists Biyen again and again. “He has tricked you, and is still lurking around the abbey.”

It is with difficulty that I convince Biyen this is impossible, but at last he sighs and looks thoughtfully into the fire. I am used to silence, so I let him sit. After a great while, he looks at me again.

“You say this Célestin left the abbey and went north, away from the city?”

“So far as we know.”

Biyen is quiet again, apparently turning something over in his mind. “There is a story among the Cree,” he says, “of a creature or a spirit called the witiko. It looks as your Célestin must have looked, like a ravenous and starving man, though it is so insatiable of appetite that it is never satisfied for longer than a day or two. Whenever it eats, its hunger grows more, so that each meal soon makes it only hungrier and more brutal.”

“But we know this man. He’s no spirit.”

Biyen shrugs. “These are just Cree stories. I don’t believe them myself, so I would not want to try and convince you about them.”

“But there is more?”

“The Cree do say that a man can become a witiko, or like a witiko, if he is possessed in a dream or if he resorts to cannibalism. Even today, up north in the isolated villages, there are cases where people claim to have the urge to kill and eat their families or neighbors. Sometimes it even happens.” Biyen makes a disgusted face and shudders. “Madness, madness.”

“What is the cure?”

Biyen shakes his head. “Death, usually. Among the Cree, it is better to kill oneself than to eat another human to stay alive. And so the witiko is already living a borrowed life.” Then he looks at me intently. “These are stories, you understand. The white doctors believe this is all madness, and I agree with them.”

I nod and look out the window, lost in thought. Snow has started to fall, heavy flakes drifting drearily out of the grey sky. “Yes,” I say. “I understand that.”

* * *

By the time I make it back to the abbey, the snow covers the ground to the depth of four inches. I plow heavily through the thickening cover, my feet wet and aching through my moccasins. I am very hungry after such a long and cold walk,

but I know there is no food waiting for me. Biyen offered me some of his own stew, but I felt bound to refuse it.

When I reach the stable, I go inside and light a lamp. Night is falling quickly, and soon the other brothers will be called to vespers. They will have no dinner either—punishment for what Dom Christophe believes I have done. The first time he levied such a communal punishment, I was deeply ashamed and felt the responsibility for it keenly. This time, I did nothing to deserve the punishment so the injustice of it strikes me instead. It is a bad punishment and a bad way for Dom Christophe to run the abbey.

None of the brothers took vows of poverty that would require us to live on these starvation rations, but we have all took vows of obedience to the order. And out here, a thousand miles or more from the next nearest Trappist monastery, Dom Christophe is the order.

I do not know what to make of all that Biyen told me. I understand what he means when he says it is just stories, but too much of it makes sense. The part I do not understand is how Célestin returned from the dead. From what Biyen said, it seems that the witiko can die or be killed like any other man.

But however that may be, it's clear to me that I cannot delay trying to capture the creature. According to Biyen, its appetite increases every time it eats. For tonight, since it seems

to prefer meat, that leaves only Jacques, the pony—or one of the brothers. This is what I fear most of all, this gathering threat of cannibalism. It did not occurred to me before that things could ever get so dire, but with the snow falling and our stores in jeopardy, the possibility suddenly seems real.

Standing in the stable with a great quantity of rope and as much of the leather fittings as I can pull together, I survey Jacques's stall and the area around it critically. Part of this, I can do now. The other part must wait until Frère Bruno leaves the brewhouse for vespers. All of it must be completed before the silence falls after compline.

* * *

I wait in the guest house, filled with anticipation as I peer through the window, up the hill towards the stable. I will see and hear well enough from here, but I do what I can to ensure I do not fall asleep. It is hours since the other brothers prayed compline, and the snow has finally come to a stop. There are great drifts along the path and against the walls of buildings. In one day, the landscape around the abbey seems utterly changed, and now we are that much more alone.

Outside, an owl mewls in the darkness—most likely the same one I saw the night before. With this fall of snow, it will easily see anything that dares venture out into the cold. As the night wears on, we wait together.

At last, sometime after midnight, I see a lamp emerge from the dormitory where the brothers are sleeping. It's too far and too dark to see more than that, but nevertheless the hair rises on the back of my neck. I get up from where I was sitting and creep forward towards the window in a crouch.

The figure with the lamp steps away from the dormitory, and I get a better look at it. Hunched and frail, its body has the same shape as what I saw at the chicken coop. I suck in my breath as it lifts its head towards the guest house, and I see the unmistakable hollows of its eyes and mouth. It is Célestin—or rather, it is the witiko.

Suddenly, it's moving, and not up the path to the stable as I expected. Instead, it hastily walks towards me, its head flitting back and forth suspiciously. With a start, I realize that it is not just coming in my direction—it is coming for me. It knows I am alone in the guest house, a perfect victim for its cannibal appetites. I slump back onto the floor in fright and despair—I have not considered this and I am not prepared.

The witiko comes within twenty paces of the guest house and then pauses. It places the lamp on the ground, just as it must have done the night before outside the stable. The hunched body stands, regarding the guest house carefully. I imagine the calculus that the thing must be performing, weighing its greed against its fear. For this thing is not brazen—

this witiko is not some instinctual, unthinking killer. It is clearly crafty and scheming, driven by its appetites to use its intellect for evil, and that makes it all the more terrible.

After a short moment, the witiko creeps forward again. Suddenly, I am no longer transfixed but in a dead panic. I crawl across the flagstones of the guest house, silently praying I reach the door before the witiko does. My hand clamps on the handle and presses against it, holding it closed with all the might I can muster.

A second later, I feel a pressure on the handle, firm and insistent. Upon encountering my resistance, the pressure stops. Something scratches the door—fingernails, perhaps—and I hear labored muttering through the wooden panels. I squeeze the handle tighter, and then I feel the pressure return. The handle digs into my palm as I press back down on it. Once, twice, three times more, the witiko tries to force the door of the guest house, its feet scuffling on the patio outside and its frail shoulder bumping against the portal. The odor of a grave wafts into the guest house.

At last, when I feel that I must scream or faint if it goes on, the pressure lets up, and I hear the feet of the witiko retreat across the patio. I empty my lungs and collapse on the flagstones in a disconnected bundle. Outside, I can see the

witiko pick up its lamp and head up the path to the top of the hill, its hunger driving it on to easier prey.

As soon as I can work up the courage, I follow the witiko up the hill. It has put down the lamp again and gone into the stable. This is what I expected and hoped for, but even now my plan may still go awry. In fact, if this does not work, it probably means I will have sacrificed Jacques for nothing—which will make our predicament even all the more dire.

I am only a few paces away from the stable when I hear what I have been waiting for—the loud gong of the copper kettle falling from the rafter, where I had placed it, to the stable floor.

My feet lock for a moment, but I know I must go on. With beating heart, I rush into the stable, but I cannot see what's going on in the darkness. There are growls and howls coming from Jacques's stall, and his hooves beat heavily against the walls of his enclosure. He lets out a terrified whinny, and I wait no longer.

Even though I can see nothing, I race forward and grasp the ends of rope that I left hanging down near the entrance. Gripping them tight in my hands, I pull heavily on them, dragging them outside the stable as though I were pulling a sack of rocks behind me. I feel the ropes snap taut in my hands, a great weight snagging the other end, and I wrap them three

times around the trunk of a nearby tree. Then, with shaking and freezing fingers, I tie them off and stand back.

From inside the stable, I hear one last great crash. It is the sound of Jacques kicking down the wall of his stall, and an instant later he runs out and into the snow drifts with terror in his eyes. He is all right, though—still alive. I did as much as I can do, and there is nothing left now but to wait and pray until morning.

* * *

In the morning, I join the other brothers for matins. Everyone is there as usual, except Dom Christophe. There is confusion at this, and at first no one seems to know what to do. Already my mind is spinning, but I sign to Frère Michel to lead matins. Until the prayers have been said, we cannot even talk about Dom Christophe's disappearance.

By the time matins are over, I am sure I know what has happened. "Come," I say to the others and lead them up the hill to the stable. Jacques stands outside in the trodden snow, having come back sometime in the night but still not daring to go inside. I pat his flank affectionately, but he must wait a while yet for his oats. Instead, I open the door to the stable and stand on the threshold, peering in amid the early morning light.

Far at the back, behind the cart, I see what I expect to see. The tangle of ropes and harness that I set up the day before is still there, and hanging amid the cables is a limp, emaciated form. The trap ensured that so long as the witiko kept moving forward, towards Jacque's stall, the ropes would pull tight around it and keep it immobile. If it stopped and retreated, it could have broken free—but not after I tied the ropes off around the tree. From that point on, it was caught as securely as a fly in a web, entrapped by its own single-minded greed.

“Célestin!” cries Frère Bruno in surprise when he sees the witiko.

I shake my head. That is what I had thought at first, but no longer. But the other brothers have already run forward, eager to cut down and help whoever it is. “No!” I shout. I reach out and grasp Frère Bruno by the arm. He turns and looks at me incredulously. It is clear from his face that there is no thought of possible danger in his mind. Though he believes the man feebly struggling with the ropes has been dead for days, there is no fear or hesitation. There is only the instinct of mercy. I release his arm, and together we join the others.

It is Frère Michel who gives voice to what I have suspected since matins. “It is Dom Christophe!” And then, an instant later: “But how? He looks as though he hasn't eaten in weeks!”

Now I come forward and I explain as best as I can about the witiko, repeating what Biyen had told me and bringing out the bones of the cat and the chickens. I see disbelief on the faces of the other brothers, but the ravages wrought on the body of Dom Christophe do not allow for many other explanations.

It does not take long to say all that I can, and when I have finished, the other brothers are quiet. But then Frère Michel shakes his head and says, “We must get him inside.” Though Dom Christophe struggles and strives against us, he is frail and weak. The night without food has changed him horribly and his own appetites have wasted him, leaving the unmistakable stink of the grave heavy on his breath.

Dom Christophe does not live long and never regains consciousness. He was partly strangled by the ropes of the trap, but it is obvious to everyone that he starved to death despite being healthy and hale just the day before. It is after examining his body, and marveling at the wasting of his flesh as I did with Célestin, that the other brothers come to me again.

“We don’t understand,” says Frère Michel.

He is quiet for a long while after that. I can see the struggle in his face—he is crossing the gap that lies between what he always believed to be possible and what he since learned in contradiction to that. It is a struggle I face too, despite all I saw.

I wait for him silently, and finally he speaks again. “Dom Christophe was a hard man at times, but it is inconceivable he could be a cannibal. I do not think this witiko story can apply to him.”

I nod. I have thought this over myself, and I cannot entirely disagree. “We don’t know if what happened to Célestin is the same as what happened to Dom Christophe. Neither do we know what happened between the two of them when they were alone for eight days.”

Frère Michel considers a moment. “Perhaps the spirit of the witiko that possessed Célestin left him and instead possessed Dom Christophe?”

“Perhaps.” I do not think this is what happened, but in some ways it is more comfortable to believe it might be so. “Perhaps not. Dom Christophe believed the whole community should suffer when any individual erred. We suffered often, even when Dom Christophe could not say why.”

“That is true.”

“We may have suffered for his sins. His hardness to us may have been a penance for himself—for his own great failings in matters of the flesh.”

“That may be.”

I see the question still lingering in Frère Michel’s eyes, and I try to answer it as gently as I can. “Dom Christophe was no

cannibal, but he appointed to himself the care of Célestin for eight days. Despite the chicken we killed to feed Célestin, he still died with less flesh on his bones than he arrived with.”

None of the brothers speak at this. They are all thinking—remembering perhaps the empty bowls, once brimming with broth, that were collected from the guest house each day. No one expected the chicken to bring Célestin back to life. Such a miracle was beyond mortal means. But if Célestin really took all that nourishment during his last week, then his body would have shown some evidence of it.

The conclusion was simple. For eight days, Dom Christophe guiltily ate the food of a starving man in addition to his own fair portion of our meals. For eight days, he watched that man grow thinner and closer to death. Dom Christophe had never tasted human flesh, but he was cannibal enough in the end.

Whether he planned it or whether he simply succumbed to weakness when the opportunity presented itself, I prefer not to speculate upon. Likewise, I leave the question of whether he sent me to the guest house specifically to get me alone at night unexamined. But, try as I might, I cannot shake the terrible image of the witiko as he stood outside the guest house, his warped brain calculating the relative dangers and rewards of killing and eating me.

“I have something to say,” says Frère Bruno. I am glad to be interrupted from my glum thoughts, but then I notice that Frère Bruno is shivering in fear. “My brothers, I too have eaten more than my portion. On nights when I served dinner, I ate dried fish from the pantry.” Frère Bruno looks down at Dom Christophe, and then up at the rest of us. “Will I too become like this?”

There is a murmur among the brothers, and I grow cold as I realize they are all confessing to their own sins of secret gluttony. There is not one among us who did not have his moment of weakness, not one who did not eat from the store that was to feed his brothers.

“What will happen to us?” asks Frère Bruno again. “Will this be the fate of all of us?”

Somehow, all the brothers look to me, as though I can answer them. I look back at them incredulously. For the moment, I cannot move beyond my own selfishness and I cannot think of anything except their silent hypocrisy in allowing me to be publicly admonished for sins they were just as guilty of in private. I feel a hardness grow in me. “I don’t know,” I say. Then I leave them with Dom Christophe.

* * *

I do not speak with any of the brothers again until the next day. Frère Bruno does not join me in the brewhouse, and I pray

the minor hours by myself over my work. But habit and duty compel me to return to the chapel for vespers. Afterwards, we eat dinner together—the draconian edicts of Dom Christophe dissolved now with his death. But we continue to follow the Rule of Benedict, and conversation is set aside so that Frère Michel may read to us throughout dinner. Then comes compline, and the sacred silence of the night.

The day and the night give me a chance to think, and after we bury Dom Christophe the next morning, I am ready to address the brothers again.

“We have all committed our own secret sins,” I say. “Myself, all of you—especially, it seems, Dom Christophe. So great was his shame that it changed him and led him to his destruction. It is these secrets, if they continue, that may destroy the rest of us as well.”

Here, I pass out seven chits, one to each of the brothers, including myself.

“I have spent the morning calculating the property of the abbey,” I say. “The stores, the buildings, the land, the money. I have divided that value by seven, and have given each of you a token for your share of the abbey and everything in it.”

“No,” says Frère Bruno, attempting to thrust his chit back into my hand.

“Wait,” I say. “Somehow, we have forgotten that we are brothers. We have come to believe that if we are hungry, we must sneak food from the common stores. Or if we stray, we must hide our sins or be shamed and excommunicated. But who among us, if we knew our brother were hungry, would not give him our own full portion in addition to his own? Who among us, if we knew our brother sinned, would not give everything to lead him on a better path?”

I take my chit and rip it in half. “I want to live with my brothers,” I say. “If I am hungry, I trust them to feed me. If I stumble, I trust them to catch me. Therefore, I give up my individual title to the property of the abbey, and return it to the community as a whole.”

Holding open my arms, I look around at the six other faces around me. “If any of you would have it differently, you may withdraw your share of the property and leave. Otherwise....”

But I never finish, for the torn chits are already blowing away in the wind, and my six brothers are once again at my side.

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M. Bennardo's short stories can be found in Asimov's Science Fiction, Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and Shimmer. He is also editor of the Machine of Death series of anthologies. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, but people anywhere can find him online at <http://www.mbennardo.com>.

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THEY MAKE OF YOU A MONSTER

by Damien Walters Grintalis

When the footsteps approach, Isabel scrambles to her feet. She staggers; spots of light dance in front of her eyes. Two days without food. Two days without water. She backs up until her spine presses against the stone wall. Tucks her hands behind her. She knows it won't make a difference.

She tells herself she won't scream.

The Healers, three women draped in robes of red, enter her cell. They don't say a word. She keeps silent when they grab her. Twists away from their grasp. Fights against them with all the strength she can summon.

It's not nearly enough.

Then they snap the first finger, the pinkie on her right hand. The pain is white. Blinding. Below the pain, a sensation of leaking. Emptying.

Her cries echo off the stone. From another cell, she hears shouting. One of the Healers laughs.

By the fifth finger, she doesn't have the strength to struggle anymore.

By the eighth, she can't even scream. Wavery moans slip from her lips. The greedy stone walls gobble them up and wait for more.

By the tenth, the world is grey, flickering in her vision like candleflame.

After the last snap fills the air, the Healers weave a spell to fuse her bones back together. To fill her up with something new. When they let her go, she crawls to the corner of her cell, holds her ruined hands to her chest, and sobs into the filthy straw.

* * *

Midday, a guard shoves a bowl of porridge through the bars of her cell. Her stomach rumbles, but she makes no move for the food. If she does not eat, will they force it down her throat or will they allow her to starve?

She knows the answer.

The porridge is bland, with neither milk nor honey to give it flavor, but she eats it all. She does not want to die.

Not yet.

* * *

At night, a guard walks the passageway between the cells. His feet tap a steady rhythm on the stone. He stops outside the bars of Isabel's cell, his face all sharp planes and angles, his clothing tainted with sorrow.

She pulls her knees up to her chin. What does he see? A young woman in a dirty dress or a monster in the making?

He runs his fingers along one of the metal bars, his skin safe behind leather gloves. All the guards wear them. For their protection.

“You knew it was forbidden,” he says, his voice a blade.

She holds her tongue.

“You knew the risk, the penalty, yet you still did it. Does that make you brave or a fool?”

He walks away before she can take another breath. It is not her fault. What she is. She holds up her hands. What she was.

They’ve made her something else now.

* * *

They came for her two days after Ayleth fell. She doesn’t know how they knew what she’d done. Perhaps someone was hiding nearby. Watching.

She pushes the thoughts away and thinks of Ayleth’s dark hair, her green eyes, the way she laughed into the wind.

* * *

She feels it growing inside her, a darkness where before there was a spark of light. Their corruption.

If she had a knife, she would cut it out and leave it bleeding on the floor.

* * *

The guards bring in a girl whose face still holds tight to childhood. Her fingertips leak thin grey trails of smoke. Her fire is spent. She does not fight against the guards' grip. She does not cry. She is already broken.

They put her in the cell across from Isabel's.

The girl screams when the Healers come. Isabel covers her ears. Had her own screams sounded so loud? So long? If her gift was fire, she would've set the straw in her own cell ablaze and burned herself alive.

* * *

Moonlight peeks between the bars of her cell's window, a window too high to reach, even if she stands on her toes. It does not matter, though. The only thing beyond her window is a rocky cliff facing the sea.

She closes her eyes, breathing in the stink of her own waste. The hopelessness of the stone walls. How many were in this cell before her? How many listened to the waves crashing against the rocks?

How long before they gave in?

* * *

She paces in her cell. The sun has turned the air thick and sticky. The straw rustles with each step of her bare feet, scratching against her skin. They took away her shoes when they brought her here.

The guard in the passageway does not look in her direction. He does not look at any of them. He smells of roasted meat; her mouth waters.

The girl in the cell across from Isabel trembles, her teeth chatter, and ice crystals form on the straw beneath her. Is there even enough left of her inside to miss the warmth of her flames?

She is too young, far too young, to be so defiled.

* * *

“Let me see your hands, little fool,” the night guard says.

She turns away so he cannot see them. Her heart races. Will he kill her? It would be a kindness.

Instead, he walks away.

She doesn't know why he wants to see. Nothing shows on the outside. She feels it inside, ugly and wrong.

* * *

They bring in an old woman. Her back is bent; her eyes, clouded with white. She cries for her children to save her. No one will come, except the Healers and the guards. Everyone knows that.

Isabel doesn't think it will take long for the old woman to give them what they want.

* * *

She dreams of drops of blood falling from the sky. She dreams of a field of knives littered with bones. She wakes drenched in sweat with a strange taste in her mouth, like sour milk laced with ashes.

Her old magic, her real magic, tasted of ripe raspberries.

* * *

The guards take away a woman with long dark hair. She walks with her back straight and her mouth set in a thin line. Her eyes flash with defiance.

A door slams. After a time, muffled screams creep into the air and hang there for hours. When the guards bring the woman back, she smells of urine, vomit, the acrid tang of fear. She leaves a trail of blood on the stones.

The sight makes Isabel's stomach twist into knots.

* * *

The new king took the crown the year of her sixth summer. "You must never," her mother said, time and again. Even at six, Isabel understood why.

"Never, ever."

And she listened. Until Ayleth.

She thinks of Ayleth's broken body, the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. What would happen if she touched her now? Would she be able to hold it in?

* * *

Finally, the guards come for her.

They bind her arms behind her back. Even with their gloves, they do not touch her hands. They lead her into a windowless room; the door shuts with a bang that vibrates in her teeth. The room smells of pain and sorrow. Of giving up. Giving in.

The man in the room smiles. A lie.

There is a table covered with a stained cloth, the fabric full of bumps and bulges. She does not want to see what the cloth is hiding.

“Will you serve your king?” the man asks.

She takes a deep breath. Doesn't answer.

She will not.

He does not remove the cloth from the table, he does not ask his question again, and the guards take her back to her cell.

* * *

Magic was not always forbidden.

When she was a small child, there were no Healers, and only criminals were locked away. The old king was loved by the people, not feared. He loved balls, grandeur, music. The new king does not care for music, save that born of screams. Only those sworn to his service are allowed to wield magic; even then, they are only allowed a magic that has been perverted. Inverted. Fire to ice. Healing to—

No. She will not think of that now. She cannot.

Rumors say the king acts in cruelty because he secretly wishes he was born female. If so, he might've held magic. Instead, he has only his cock and the kingdom to grip.

But the why doesn't matter. Not here.

* * *

She dreams of Ayleth running toward her. Though Isabel runs as fast as she can to get away, to keep her safe, Ayleth won't stop.

She wakes just before Ayleth touches her hand.

* * *

They take the young girl out and do not bring her back. When the night wind blows cold through the window, Isabel thinks perhaps it is the girl, making ice for the king's wine.

* * *

The new magic inside her hungers. For what, she doesn't know.

She doesn't want to know.

* * *

The guards take her to the stone room again. The table is uncovered, revealing knives, hooks, spikes, and something shaped like a metal pear that screams malevolence. Anguish.

She feels the blood run from her face. Her fingers tremble.

“Will you serve your king?”

She swallows before answering. “No, I will not.”

They laugh when they take her back. They know she will give in, eventually.

Or she will die.

* * *

She and Ayleth grew up in the same village, casting shy smiles at each other until finally, Ayleth kissed her behind the baker’s shop. Their love was not as forbidden as magic; people pretended not to see.

The day Isabel broke her promise of never, they were foraging for berries atop a wooded hill. In the distance, the spires of the castle gleamed in the sunlight. Ayleth paused with a handful of berries and whispered, “I would like to burn it down with the king inside.”

“Do not say such a thing,” Isabel said, casting a glance over her shoulder.

Ayleth shrugged. “There is no one to hear. Only us.” She took a step forward. A twig snapped. Leaves crackled. Her mouth dropped open as her legs slipped out from under, and she tumbled down the side of the hill, her shouts punctuated with thuds and thumps all the way.

Isabel raced down as fast as she could without falling herself. At the bottom, she found Ayleth holding her belly,

blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. She tried to help her stand, but Ayleth shrieked and begged her to stop.

The village herbwoman would not be able to help. Not with this. In spite of Ayleth's protests, Isabel grasped her hands and let the magic out.

And the sensation... Her mouth flooded with the sweetness of berries, her fingertips tingled, and inside, it was as if butterflies were dancing soft beneath her skin. She felt it leave her body like a breeze through a window; as it flowed into her lover's, Ayleth's eyes brightened, her mouth formed a circle of surprise, then laughter bubbled up and out. They danced together like children, forgetting for a moment that, as proscribed by the king, the magic was wrong.

* * *

The guards carry out a body, laughing all the while. Isabel sees long dark hair. Pale limbs streaked with the telltale lines of blood poisoning. A face with blank eyes where defiance once lived.

* * *

The night guard watches her through the bars. She meets his stare, hiding her hands in the folds of her dress. She fears what they've done to her. She fears who they've made her become. But she is not her hands. She is not their monster. She will not let it change her.

Yet she fears it already has.

* * *

She stumbles as they push her into the room with the table. A skinny man with a ragged beard stands in the corner. His clothes are tattered. Shackles bind his bloodied ankles.

“Will you serve?” the man with the false smile asks.

“Never.”

He nods at the guards. They hold her arms tight as they guide her toward the shackled man. The smell of his unwashed body makes her eyes sting.

“No, I will not do this. I will not.”

But inside, the twisted magic says yes.

She struggles to break free. The guards shove her toward the man. She lifts her hands. A reflex. Not on purpose. When she realizes what she’s done, it’s too late.

Her skin touches his.

Pain radiates through her belly like claws and fangs tearing free. Her fingers clench, digging into the man’s flesh. She tries to hold it in, but it will not stay. She cannot make it stay. It rips free, an animal in search of prey, and leaves the taste of rage in its wake. A vile brew filled with bitterness.

The man’s eyes widen. His mouth opens. His face contorts in pain. His body spasms.

He falls.

For one quick moment, a feeling of power, of possibility, rushes through her. Then she shoves it deep down inside. Shame floods her. One of the guards nudges the man with his foot. He does not move. The liar smiles.

“Do you see what you are?” he says.

She closes her eyes. She doesn't want to see.

She doesn't want to know.

* * *

The night guard pauses in front of her cell again. Isabel wipes away her tears.

“They will take you from here when you agree. You will have meat, wine, clean clothes.”

She shakes her head. She is not a monster. But she thinks of the man, the way it felt to take his life, and she shudders.

* * *

“Will you serve?”

“No,” she whispers.

“You don't really want us to tear up your pretty flesh, do you?”

“I will not serve,” she says between clenched teeth.

It is her turn to scream. To leave a trail of blood on the stones.

* * *

She dreams of the field of knives. Of Ayleth, her blood pouring from a wound Isabel can no longer heal, her arms outstretched. Isabel tells her no, but Ayleth doesn't listen. She grabs Isabel's hands and falls to the floor, her eyes open. Unseeing.

In her dream, Isabel laughs.

She wakes with a cry in her throat; her mangled body answers with a shriek of its own. She catches movement from the corner of her eye—the night guard, walking away.

* * *

Death came for her father in the shape of a lingering illness that caused his limbs to wither and his skin to turn grey. Her mother forbade her to help.

“I cannot lose you both,” she said.

So Isabel held her magic in, no matter how hard it fluttered, yearning to help.

The twisted thing inside her now scrapes and pushes, burning to hurt.

* * *

He taps the bars of her cell.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Why do you fight?”

She doesn't answer. He would not understand.

“They are looking for your friend.”

A whimper escapes before she can steal it back. Not Ayleth. Anything but that.

“Why do you care?” she whispers.

“The king’s sister is next in line for the throne. She does not share her brother’s penchant for cruelty. She would be a good queen, I think.”

She looks up. He is staring at the window.

“The king is coming to the prison tomorrow. He is not happy with the progress of late.” The guard steps close to the bars.

He looks into her eyes.

“He does not wear gloves,” he says, his words so low that, save for the movement of his mouth, she might have imagined them.

The breath catches in her throat.

He gives her a small half-smile, the expression strange on such a harsh face. “You remind me of my sister.”

As he walks away, she steps back with her hands held between her breasts. Why would he tell her such a thing?

How long until they find Ayleth? How long until they force Isabel to watch while they press the blades against Ayleth’s skin? Her eyes burn with tears, and she covers her mouth to hold in the sound.

The waves crash upon the rocks. The wind blows in through the bars on the window. The cell fills with the smell of the sea.

She thinks of the girl who could make fire. The dark haired woman. The old woman crying for someone to save her. She thinks of all those living in fear, the ones they haven't found yet.

* * *

In the morning, she hears a strange coarse laugh. Heavy footsteps move down the hallway. She steps close to the bars. Waits. The metal is cold beneath her fingers. The footsteps move closer.

Will they kill her once the king is dead?

She looks down at her hands. Her weapons. Not perverted. Perfected. The monster inside her extends its claws.

Let them try, she thinks. Let them try.

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COVER ART

“Lost Citadel,” by Jonas De Ro



Jonas De Ro is a Belgian digital artist specializing in concept art and photography. He also has experience in animation, visual effects, and sound design. He has worked on commercials and music videos and is currently a concept artist for the upcoming science-fiction movie *Jupiter Ascending*, directed by the Wachowski siblings (*The Matrix*). Visit his [website](#) to view a selection of his works..

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