

Gravediggers

Edric's shovel broke the earth with practised silence. He knew each type of soil by little more than touch now; how the texture changes as you get closer. The worms were always first, stirred by the rhythmic thud of labour turned routine. Then came the smell. Something that even a lifetime of exposure couldn't make any easier to stomach. Tonight that familiar nausea mingled with something else. Incense, sickeningly sweet by design, to cover the smell of decay.

He froze, tool suspended mid-strike. The heavy scent drifted across the graves, bringing with it the sound of whispered voices in the frigid night air. Edric abandoned his work, extinguishing the hooded lantern as quietly as his shaking hands would allow, and lowered himself into the half-dug grave as multiple sets of footfalls approached.

The voices grew clearer as they closed the distance. He recognised the familiar gravelly tone of Gravekeeper Mills first, then nearly lost his breath at the voice that replied. William. *What could possibly bring him to the churchyard at this hour? Unless...* His heart balked at what his mind already knew.

No.

The footsteps drew closer, accompanied by a third set that Edric didn't recognise. These moved differently. Deliberate. Edric raised his head just enough to see the figure.

It appeared to almost glide as they made their way among the headstones, dark robes dragging across grass still wet with the evening dew. The incense thickened, cloying, until it curled in Edric's nostrils and churned his gut.

"She's just here," William spoke, his voice thick with numb sorrow. "My Sarah's just here."

Edric pressed his back against the damp earth of his hiding place. Sarah. His wife. William's daughter. The three men now walked the path Edric had trodden a thousand times in the last few weeks; the one leading to the still fresh grave of his late wife.

"You're certain about this?" Mills asked, "Once the Shepherd begins--"

“I’m certain,” William interjected. “If there’s even a chance to see her again. To say a proper goodbye...”

Edric risked another glance.

They stood over Sarah’s resting place, washed in the cold silver of the twin moons that dominated the clear night sky. Mills was easy to spot. His silhouette twisted by years of grave-digging, bent like the tools he carried, William stood beside him, shrunken. A man who would once fill a room with silence, now barely filled his coat... if it weren’t for his voice, Edric might not have recognised him at all.

And between the two, the figure clad in dark vestments. Its presence alone made Edric’s skin crawl like the worms that surrounded him. A Sanctioned of Nytros.

Edric had heard whispers in taverns. Seen them walking the lower ward’s streets as people scrambled to clear the path for them and their ‘flock’. But he’d never been this close to one. Those who didn’t know the religious history called them Shepherds, for the herds they command, groups of cloaked figures that follow silently in their wake. One and all carrying the same sickly sweet incense that overpowered whatever aromas existed before their arrival. It was illegal to interfere with them, religious dictates from high above, they were sanctioned by Saint Nytros himself and none dared to question that. Even so long after his disappearance.

The cloaked figure moved to Sarah’s grave with unsettling grace. From within their dark robes, pale hands emerged, holding implements that mirrored Edric’s own tools with uncomfortable familiarity. The mechanical precision of their movements spoke to the same professional detachment he’d cultivated in his own work.

“The vessel must be intact,” the Sanctioned spoke, voice softer than Edric anticipated, disquieting in its grotesque calmness. “Recent.”

“Three weeks,” William said, trembling. “We couldn’t afford better treatment, but I... I tried.”

Edric’s fingers dug into the soil beneath them. Three weeks. Three weeks since he’d held her hand as fever took her. Three weeks of unearthing graves to pay for the one that mattered. If he’d had more time, more coin for the physicians he stole for...

The Sanctioned began to dig, and Edric watched as another set of hands performed the work he knew so intimately. Each impact felt like a blade in his gut. They reached the coffin faster than he would have. No need for caution when you have religious sanction to desecrate. When you wear the mantle of divine purpose rather than desperation.

The lid cracked open. Nails groaning, wood splintering like a gunshot in the quiet night. William stepped forward, but Mills held him back. “Let them work,” the old gravekeeper warned. “They need silence.”

Edric could barely breathe as the Sanctioned began to chant. Low and guttural, in a tongue that made Edric’s teeth ache. The air changed, charged, almost wet. Not death. Something worse. The feel of death, unraveling. How could this have been divine?

The Sanctioned’s chanting grew louder. Edric watched, a violent clash of horror and fascination warred in his chest, as they reached into their robes and withdrew a coin. Blackened. Brittle. It crumbled between rolled fingers as they scattered the ashes over Sarah’s body, and for a moment, it seemed to soak into her like water into parched earth.

The corpse twitched. Then again. Then all at once, upright.

Edric bit into his knuckles to silence his scream. It wasn’t Sarah. He’d felt her die. Felt the last breath slip past his cheek. Whatever sat in that coffin now wore her face like a mask.

“Sarah?” William called out, his hopeful desperation evident. “Sarah, can you hear me?”

The thing turned toward his voice. Eyes dry and unfocused. Its movement too smooth. It looked at William, tilting its head like a curious dog.

“Sarah...” William stepped closer. His breath caught. Edric saw it, the half-step backward, the flicker of confusion in his eyes.

He knows.

But then William's shoulders collapsed, and he rushed forward, falling over himself as he clambered to embrace his daughter's stolen body. "Oh, my girl..."

Edric opened his mouth. Nothing came. A silent sob clawed its way out from deep within him, tears tracking through the grave dirt on his face.

"I've missed you," William said, voice cracking. His hands trembled as they reached out, hesitated, then finally rested on the thing's shoulders. It didn't flinch. It simply stared at him, unblinking.

"There's so much I need to tell you..."

Don't. Edric mouthed the word. Useless. The Shepherd had done their work. And William, even if he saw the mask, would rather believe in the illusion than accept the truth. It hadn't brought back their Sarah, but instead crammed some other lost soul into the body of the woman they'd both loved.

The Sanctioned stood back, head bowed. Allowing what Edric, even through his anger and grief, could recognise as a twisted kindness; letting a grieving father believe, for a moment, that the finality of death had been undone.

Edric pressed his forehead against the cool earth of his hiding place, unable to bear the desecration happening above. His tools lay abandoned beside him. The physicians would have no more corpses from him. He was done.