

Friar Amos kept a quick pace. The dead could walk but they couldn't run, "thank God". The summer sun cast golden patches through the trees, highlighting the trodden earth beat into a path before him. High in a tree a songbird trilled out a sad song, fluttering off when the friar came stumbling by, returning the forest to its ominous silence once again. This expedition outside the Abbey's walls had been particularly fruitful; a handful of elderberries, some sprigs of wild onion, and almost a dozen undersized apples. To his amazement he had found a rather large porcupine in one of Derin's traps. The people at the abbey would eat a decent meal tonight, and no part of that creature would go to waste.

Amos darted off the path mid-stride, taking a moment to lean his back on a large elm tree, he was breathing heavily and sweat dripped down his brow. Even with sparse food for the better part of three months the friar had managed to keep his portly figure. In the middle of this dreadfully hot summer, the friar's frame was rubbed bare and drenched under his brown, scratchy habit and cloak. He took a quick drink of water from his satchel and looked back down the path he came.

One had followed him. A risen one. Skin rotting, eyes permanently open and devoid of life, a shambling gait that unnerved any who looked at it. Truly a demon incarnate. The friar clutched at his rosary beads and closed his eyes, leaning back behind the tree's shielding girth. It hadn't been thrown off, or else it wouldn't be moving towards him still. This risen was probably once a man, maybe even a boy, it was hard to tell once the skin had mostly rotted and fallen away.

The friar reached down and picked up a smooth rock and hurled it opposite the path where it shattered. The risen one paused, definitely aware of the sound the rock made when it exploded against a small rocky outcrop. It shuffled sideways, turning slowly to face the direction of the sound as it made its way there. Amos took this as his chance to run.

The abbey wasn't far now. Amos left the old shepherd's trail and cut a steep line through the forest to a small clearing. No more than a hundred yards ahead of him lie Brickwald abbey. Brickwald was old, overgrown with vines and sun-baked to an orange-dusty color on the two of its walls that received sunshine. On one unstained wall there was an enormous iron gate, permanently shut and enforced. On the other sun struck wall was a smaller wooden entrance to which Amos made haste towards. The ancient oak door was heavy and hinged with iron, it typically made a great deal of noise when opened. The friar drew a small knife and grabbed the porcupine carcass hanging from his belt under a large flap of cloak. He made a small incision, grabbing at the globs of yellowish fat he had exposed. After liberating some of this fat he smudged it all around and over the hinges of the door.

"Shall I open it, friar?" a meek voice whispered from the other side of the door. Amos jumped up, slicing his hand with his knife in the process.

"Yeowch! Jesus above...er, yes open, yes...just unlock it rather. I've greased the hinges. Should be able to open it from this side. After you unlock it run along and fetch Derin, Meryl, and Claude. I need to speak with them. Hurry now Abbie, I've nicked my thumb." Amos heard the familiar creak of the bolt being dislodged and the rustle of the chains being undone.

"You're welcome mister friar." Said the same youthful voice from before, growing fainter as Abigail sprinted off to gather the other adults.

"Little brat-" he muttered under his breath. **Whud** Amos threw his considerable heft against the imposing door, knocking it slightly open. He wedged his wooden sandal in the small opening to prevent the door swinging shut. Near the doorway was a bent piece of wood which the friar promptly jammed into the open crevice and pushed on. The door gave way, much easier than normal. He was quite pleased with himself, smiling his big toothy smile as he stepped over the small stone ledge and into the safety of Brickwald. A small pulse of pain reminded him of his bleeding thumb, which managed to smear blood all over his lever stick and the outside of the door, which had just swung shut. He'd need to clean it before nightfall.

"Amos!" A rough shout came from behind him "We were almost going to worry about you, friend! I'm glad to see you've returned safely." A large, well-built man dressed in a green tunic and sack-cloth pants came strolling towards him.

"Derin!" Amos managed to heave out between breaths, trying his best to match the enthusiasm of this tree-sized man barking at him. "Is Meryl coming? I've sliced my thumb open, and-"

"Say no more." Derin was close enough to retrieve the basket Amos had been carrying. He gave the friar a solid pat between the shoulders, buckling his knees a little. He continued on, talking aloud but basically mumbling to himself. "Let's see what our favorite friar managed to find. Elderberries...not much and they're a little wilted...maybe wine?...no...no, something sweet to raise the spirits...onions? they're not much in the way of keeping us full, maybe a stock...my nan taught me to make rock soup...apples, and so many!" he suddenly grew much louder, "Amos you've truly outdone yourself this time! This will get us through at least tomorrow." The unbreakable optimism of the bear-like cook always amazed Amos.

Claude emerged from the shadows of the main church. Limping with intent and a sense of precision to his movements. His white hair blew off the top of his mostly bald head, lifted by the slightest wind. The sun was at his back as he made his way towards the pair, but he was still grimacing like the world was too bright.

Claude was the Father Abbot of Brickwald, the only abbey dweller besides Derin to be holed in the safety of the abbey when the dead rose and afflicted the living. The inhabitants of Brickwald were on a fortnight excursion to Brickberg on a charity mission, trading healing and labor for abbey supplies when they were set upon by the dead. The pain of his lost brothers and

sisters worn permanently on his wrinkled face. "Amos" he gasped "I'm so glad you've returned safely to us, and from Derin's yelling I assume your expedition went well. Come, Meryl is waiting to tend your wound."

Inside the church was holy relief from the Summer's torment outside, the hottest one Amos could remember. The brick was slightly cool to the touch and the large rectangle windows near the roof kept the place well vented.

"Amos? It's just like you to survive a trip to Brickberg unscathed only to butcher yourself on a pretty little pocket knife inches from the safety of my watchful eye." Amos could hear the playful teasing in Meryl's voice, sweet as honey and twice as thick with wit. She shoved the friar's hand into a basin of cool water, gently massaging the cut beneath the surface, freeing bits of leaf and rubble that had been stuck. "Does it *huuuurt* Amos?" she asked, modest as a peacock with a tone that trailed off in sarcasm.

"Um, er no it feels quite lovely, thank youooOUCH! You did that on purpose!"

"Did not! You just had a stone the size of your eyeball that I had to remove from this horrible wound *somehow*, don't be a baby...there now, it's all better." Meryl removed their hands from the pink-watered basin and set about drying. After a moment vigorously toweling his hand, she grabbed a stick from another, smaller bowl. It was thick with something, and she applied it to his cut. It was fragrant like wild mint and rosemary, the intense smell helping him forget his pain. After a bit more wincing and bandaging Amos was "fit and proper as you please" according to Meryl.

"Kiss it?" Says Amos, now returning fire at the pretty handmaiden.

"Kiss it yourself you great lug, I've got blood to clean off a buggered door before the dead catch scent." The redheaded girl was pale and freckled, mouse-faced with the cutest upturned nose Amos had ever seen. He caught a glimpse of her smiling at him as she bounded off to scrub his mistake off the oaken entrance.

"Friar, now that your cut is all 'fit and proper' and your breath has been caught, could you fill me in on the journey to Brickberg? Did you *end* anyone known to us?"

"No, Father. I didn't get as far as Brickberg this time, too many risen on the shepherd's trail. None we knew. I couldn't chance it. I made a trip to the Thorne family's stead and saw what I could scrounge together there. I've done better sure, but I could have definitely done worse-OH! the porcupine." The friar, still kneeling on the stone floor, began fumbling under his mess of habit, cloak and robes eventually pulling a porcupine out, still attached to his belt. He held the carcass by the now freed string, calling out "DERIN! I'VE GOT A HELL OF A SURPRISE FOR YOU, GET IN HERE, THE TRAP WORKED!" He turned to Claude, "well, one of the traps anyways - the other two looked like they'd been destroyed by wandering dead."

"I see, I see..." Claude remained mostly expressionless, like he was deep in thought. "Amos the spread you gathered is wonderful, a true blessing and will sustain us a few days..."

"...But?"

"We cannot remain here forever Amos. The Abbey is too much work for such a small group, we cannot survive winter with no harvest. Our fortress will become our prison against the cruelty of the coming seasons."

"We have the space, Father. We just need more people, more survivors. We can't be the last ones left, I'm sure of it."

"Of that I have no doubt, but Brickberg is the only town for many leagues in any direction, and Brickwald - known for our "red-brick bee honey and mead" across the land have drawn no survivors in the past months. No one is coming, and it's time for us to be leaving."

"I don't want to leave!" A high voice whined from behind the entry arch. Abigail came running into the room, throwing herself around Amos, smothering him in a hug as best a small child could do to the large man. She craned her head up, pecking him on the cheek and snickering. "Your face is pokey, I'm going to go tell Meryl it's time to shave you again." Just as soon as the energetic blonde blur had come into the room, she was running out of it again, the porcupine rope in her little hand, "glad you're home, mister friar sir."

"That child..." Amos started.

"Adores you." Claude finished.

"I was going to say that she's a real refreshment after dealing with the dead-"

"-And you're sure this one was risen and not afflicted, right Amos?" Claude adjusted in his seat, righting himself against the slump he often found himself slinking into. "You know it's very easy mistake them for each other, the risen are rotting and blind. The afflicted have scratched themselves raw, but are still somewhat intelligent even if they are touched by Satan. According to Derin at least."

Amos found himself waiting out of respect for the abbot, but it was hard for him to not shout his surety immediately when asked. He composed himself a moment and answered "Yes, absolutely sure Father. It was lying motionless when I stepped on a twig near the Thorne family well. It took some time standing up, so I gathered a few sprigs of onion from around the well and set off back the way I came. It was missing an arm and foot...I don't know how it stayed upright, let alone moved."

"The water?"

"In the well? Tainted. Smelled of death and looked to be a rotting heap of some kind of creature, maybe even a human at the bottom."

"Shame, our well is getting low with the summer we've had. We need the rains badly, I've never seen a year so dry in my all my years." Abbott Claude stood up after a moment with some effort, he turned to Amos and once more thanked him for being so brave as to journey out today. "I'll leave you to your rest."

Claude shuffled away, making his signature **click* *plod** sounds as he limped out of the main hall. Amos rose from his knees and made his way to this desk. His one comfort in this God-forsaken world was his writing desk and his plush sitting stool. He had been cataloging the local vegetation when the dead started afflicting the living. He had reams of parchment and a deep well of ink, and he was intent on recording everything "for posterity."

He wrote a few brief sentences, set his quill aside, and fell asleep face-first on his desk.

"I didn't recognize the Risen that followed me today. I'd guess he was one of the Thorne kin. Probably a young man, not old enough to properly care for himself. I didn't notice him attempting to stand until I rounded the well, it must have sensed me nearby. A thrown rock made enough noise to distract it. This is the twenty-seventh riser I've encountered. I've yet to encounter an afflicted one, but Derin tells me that I'll know it when I see it."

"Mister friar...mister? Someone is asking for you...mister friar?" Amos jolted awake, startling Abigail, who shrieked.

"It's alright dear," said Amos, coming to his senses. There was no light coming through the windows overhead, only a cool breeze. "Come again now, what were you saying...someone needs me? Is it Father abbot? Meryl-"

"No mister, it's someone at the-"

BANG BANG

Someone was knocking on the abbey's oak door.