

A short story that takes place sometime before The Book

Par didn't believe in monsters. The tales of horrible beasts that watched from the shadows were only stories to scare the younger kids. But his heart froze as a figure appeared in the lamplight down the empty corridor. The man was as close to a monster as Par ever cared to get.

The monks called him Buckets. He prowled the abbey after dark. At a distance, he was frightening enough: swollen and hulking; silent, except for a moan or grunt from a mute mouth, or the squeal of pails that swung from a pole across his shoulders. A rumor told that things other than buckets sometimes dangled from those iron hooks. When the man found a child alone, he caught it, hung it there screaming, and took it away to the cellars, never to be seen again.

Par tightened the grip on his broom and held deathly still, hoping the man wouldn't notice him.

Buckets head turned. He stepped forward, his melted face and dead eye hideous in the flickering light.

"Crap!" Par dropped the broom, bolted through the closest passage, and rushed into the cavernous temple and the protection of the monks.

Except it was empty.

He should have known. There had been no chanting or singing. They were all at evening meals.

Scores of candles lit the large chamber. The high stained-glass windows loomed dull and gray with the onset of evening.

Par ducked behind the altar, body shaking, and prayed the man wouldn't follow.

Not that the gods ever listened to him.

He took a shuddering breath and waited. Silence. The rose-scented incense did nothing to calm his thrumming heart.

What an idiot he was! *Can I change my hours to later?* he'd asked.

You may, the Prior had said. *You're here to improve your sigil invocations and your worthiness before the gods. Do what you think is right.*

Par didn't think any of this was right. His father had volunteered him. But during the daytime, his chores led him around the grounds to clean the pigeon crap off the statues. Or through the cloisters to wipe it off the benches. Or up the ladders to wash it off the stained glass. His classmates had pointed and laughed and called him the Crap Master. Then they'd go off to their families, or to play, while he stayed behind to scrub, scrub, scrub the abbey. Scrub away the unworthiness of his soul.

At least after sunset, the other kids didn't notice when he sneaked back here to work. And the chores were inside.

No pigeons.

A lantern flickered in the side passage. Boots scuffed across the stone floor.

Par tried to shrink into himself like a turtle.

The light grew.

Run! screamed a voice in his head. *Run now!*

But his legs weren't listening.

And then it was too late. The man stepped from the passage. He no longer balanced the pole with its iron hooks across his shoulders. Instead, he held something in his hands. Something long, slender, like—

A sword!

"No!" Par yelled.

A gated archway stood in a back corner behind the altar. Par flew to it. The gate was unlocked and let off a nerve-clawing screech as he pulled it open. He leapt down the narrow steps.

The steps to the crypts—but his only escape.

He emerged in the long, low burial vaults. Rows of stone caskets stretched before him, like a classroom for the dead. Altars lined the walls. Dark niches held urns. A pale light glowed through a far entrance.

No sound followed. He made his way carefully among the crypts, careful not to disturb anything. The air smelled like stone dust and dirt and...

Old socks?

No. That was his own stink of terror.

Had the gods at last brought him to this evil fate? Whatever sin, whatever blot of conscience that kept him from invoking his flame sigils like the rest of his classmates—had it finally caught up with him?

But Par shook off the despair that threatened to bury him here with the other residents. He swallowed hard and to the far passage. The ghostly light from a single wall sconce greeted him in the outer corridor. The way had to connect to the river docks somehow.

At the next corner, he stopped. An odor of warm grain drifted to his nose.

The brewery! That was near the docks.

He peered each way, straining to see. He raised his nose to sniff which route had the strongest odor of wort.

While he hesitated, a brief puff of warm air touched his neck.

Then another.

Breathing.

Par tried to scream. Nothing came out.

A shadow leaned around his right shoulder.

He couldn't move. He strained his eyes in that direction.

A melted face. A dead eyeball.

Par screamed and ran, his arms flailing as if he were on fire.

The corridor widened. Tall wooden doors stood open on the right.

The docks!

He ran out.

Smack into another boy.

They tumbled onto the hard stone landing. Par rolled, panting, his heart in his throat.

The boy he'd crashed into let out a curse.

The monster stood in the doorway.

Par scrambled backwards. "Help me! It wants to kill me! It—"

The other boy regained his feet. He raised his arms and faced the monster.

"Please! Please don't eat him!"

The hideous man cocked his head.

Par glanced again at the boy, dirty and ragged. They'd met before. His name was Enio. He had strange, broken teeth along one side of his mouth. Par remembered having felt sorry for him. He worked on the river and didn't attend the abbey classes. They called his kind *river rats*.

Enio continued. "Why eat him, anyway? He smells like something a dead dog dug up."

Par raised his eyebrows.

"And you don't like vegetables," Enio told the monster. "This kid's got turnips

for brains.”

“Okay, hold on.” Par’s face warmed.

Enio chuckled. “He looks like a huge pigeon took a crap and—”

“Hey!” Par said, his fear almost forgotten.

Enio grabbed his stomach and laughed. He stumbled over to the ‘monster’. “Did he scare you, Buckets?” Enio patted the big man’s side.

What in the purple hells was going on?

Buckets towered over the skinny boy, grinning a barely human smile.

Enio grinned too. “You’ve never met Buckets, have you?”

Par shook his head.

“He got hurt in the Gray Wars, so the abbey takes care of him. He works here.”

Par realized he’d never seen the man do anything violent. Or mean. Even when kids taunted him to scare themselves and then ran away screaming.

The man lifted the sword.

Par flinched. But it wasn’t a sword. It was the broom Par had dropped in the hall.

And suddenly, Par felt ashamed. Just who was the monster here?

“Come meet him,” Enio said, his face sober now.

Par hesitated, then let out a sigh. He really was an idiot. He stepped forward.

“Hi, um Buckets. I’m Par.”

With a soft grunt, Buckets handed Par the broom. His single good eye held only peace.

Then the man nodded, messed Enio’s mop of black hair, and left.

“Wait—” Par began.

“He’s got work to do,” Enio said.

“So do I,” Par remembered. “What are you doing here this late, anyway?”

Enio shrugged. “Sometimes I canoe past in the evening. If the doors aren’t shut for the night, and if I’m, you know, thirsty...”

“Hold it.” Par said. He’d seen Enio trying to sneak into the brewery before.

“We’re not allowed—”

“Shh.” Enio perked an ear. “You hear that?”

Par listened. “What?”

“Exactly. No chanting. The monks are at dinner. Nothing’s keeping us from those tasty kegs.” A wide, broken smile stretched across his face. “It’s like a gift from the gods.”

“But we’re not allowed—”

“Aw, come on.” Enio put his arm around Par’s shoulders and ushered him through the doors. “Don’t be a monster.”