

THE HORNED SKULL

“Father Wulfric! They are coming!”

The old man finished his prayer with a sigh before making the sign of The Cross. He knew who “they” were without seeing the young novice’s blanched face or noting the tightness of his voice. The signs had been there all day: yesterday’s milk had already curdled, the butter would not churn, and every flame in the abbey from candle to cook-fire had burned bluish green.

Though he had hoped the signs were not in fact portents of doom, Abbot Wulfric had made the final preparations for this most evil of nights. He had always known that it would eventually come. He had known for over thirty years, dreading it ever since he had brought the cursed thing from Glastonbury.

The witch cult had finally come to Spelthorne Abbey to claim its treasure and its king.

“Help an old man to his feet, Wyglauf.” Naturally they had come in the middle of his nightly prayers just before Matins. *And it is such a damp night!* He grunted and the bones in his knees crackled like distant thunder as his sister’s grandson carefully raised him up.

Wulfric squinted at the boy’s face, seeing his sister there in the pale smooth skin and the watery blue eyes. For a moment he let himself wonder if he had ever looked so pure and innocent in the flower of his own youth. “Tell me, has Prior Æthelred been informed?”

“Yes, Father,” Wyglauf replied. “We counted at least twenty torches from the watchtower!”

Wulfric leaned on Wyglauf’s shoulder and allowed himself to be led from the chapel. “Twenty or two, it makes no matter if they are hard men armed with swords and girded in mail, my son. Secrecy has ever been our weapon and our shield.”

And now it has finally failed us.

“And faith, Father,” Wyglauf reminded him.

Wulfric smiled and patted the lad indulgently. “Yes, my son; we must not forget our faith.”

Pray that should never fail us.

“Father Wulfric,” the stalwart Æthelred greeted him as they entered the darkened, muddy courtyard. “We have the reliquary and are prepared to leave.” Standing behind the tall prior were a pair of frightened initiates holding a couple of guttering torches and the reins of three fully-laden mules in their shaking hands. Æthelred wore a sword over his robes.

“Very good, brother,” Wulfric said. “Make all haste and may God speed you and keep you safe. But take young Wyglauf here with you.”

Æthelred’s narrow eyes widened in the flickering green torchlight and his stern face clinched. “This is not part of the plan! There is no time!”

“I shall remain here with you, Father Wulfric.” Wyglauf’s quivering jaw was suddenly firm. “I am not afraid.”

“Then you are a fool, my son.” Wulfric softened his voice as he smiled at the boy. “Go with Prior Æthelred and perhaps you will live long enough to grow out of it.”

Turning his attention to the prior, Wulfric’s tone grew stern. “You will take him. He is young and small and will therefore not slow you down nor diminish your provisions.” Placing his hand on Æthelred’s stout shoulder, he added in a quieter voice, “Please. I beg of you, for mercy’s sake; please take the last of my kin from this place of death.”

Æthelred's stony face cracked. He nodded as he clasped Wulfric's hand for a moment; then turned and hurried the initiates and the mules away without another word. Wyglauf was rooted to the spot, unsure of what to do.

Wulfric gave the boy a weak smile and silently mouthed the word, "Go."

Alone, Wulfric rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. *This should have happened before I grew old* "Dear Heavenly Father, give me the strength to face Your enemies one last time."

The bells rang, men shouted within the stone walls and without, dogs howled and barked, horses neighed, and someone was pounding at the heavy wooden gates.

Wulfric stood in front of the old stone chapel, leaning on his cane of gnarled ash, suddenly surrounded by cloaked and armored men on horseback. He felt a tightness in his chest, watching his brothers cower along the edges of the darkened cloister in their hooded cassocks.

Rain began to fall. *God weeps for us; for what is to come.*

Wulfric counted at least forty mounted warriors in studded leather and old mail, brandishing torches, unstrung bows, spears, axes, swords, and a brace of snarling hounds. As a deathly silence finally descended upon the monastery, this dire company divided and made way for its master.

Wulfric squinted to better see the huge shape descending upon him. A tall knight, all in black, rode a magnificent ebon destrier at a leisurely gait. The quality of his harness and horse marked him as one of the conquerors.

"How is it that a Norman lord should come to this place of peace so armed for war?"

Wulfric demanded in the invaders' tongue, his deep voice echoing off the abbey's ancient walls.

The Knight halted his steed and raised his hooded head. Wulfric saw the green torchlight dance along a steel skull etched in bronze. “How is it that a Saxon dog speaks to me without my leave?”

The Masked Knight’s question was answered by a soldier ramming the butt of his spear into Wulfric’s belly, dropping him to the mud in breathless agony. Wulfric saw Leofric and Siward, two of the older obedientiaries, step to his aid but quickly waved them off. Catching his breath and slowly, painfully rising to his knees, the old man watched as four of the armed intruders dismounted and rushed into the chapel. Another half dozen ran into the dormitories. An interminable time passed as the sounds of shattering glass, snapping furniture, breaking crockery, ripping paper, and ribald laughter filtered out to the silent courtyard.

At last, a pair of the soldiers emerged from the chapel carrying a large box. It was of gilded hawthorn, engraved with the images of defending angels and warlike patriarchs from the Old Testament.

“Open it,” commanded the Masked Knight. The man’s eerie metallic eyes never left Wulfric’s face; not even when a startled gasp went up from the gathered warriors at the opening of the reliquary. Wulfric did not flinch from that gaze, knowing what had amazed the soldiers: a human skull, covered in filigreed gold and adorned with a pair of ivory horns sprouting three inches from the brow.

The Masked Knight took the gilded skull, turned it over in his gloved hand as if weighing a cabbage, then tossed it into the throng of his men. Ignoring the commotion this act inspired in the ranks, he walked the huge charger closer to where Wulfric knelt. The warhorse snorted and pawed dangerously close to the old monk, baring impressively white teeth next to his face.

“Where is it?” the Masked Knight asked.

“You came for the relic,” Wulfric said. “You have found it.”

“You Saxon monks have had over three hundred years of practice at hiding your treasures,” the Masked Knight observed. “You have it buried in a secret place, perhaps?”

“No. Wait... you had it spirited away as soon as you saw our approaching torches. That is it, isn't it?”

Wulfric remained silent. He flinched as he stared into the steel skull mask and the cold eyes behind it. This close he could see that those eyes were hazel; so large and flecked with gold that they looked like cat's eyes in the torch-lit darkness.

“Very well, old man,” the Masked Knight said. “This does not have to end so badly. Just tell me which path your men took with the real skull and how long they have been gone, and this will all be but a bad dream.”

“And no one will have to die, I suppose,” Wulfric said, slowly rising to his feet.

The knight looked at him for a long moment. “Oh no,” he said. “Of course someone will have to die. The Horned God always demands blood; that much is sure, but it need only be one death. Give me what I want and there will be no unnecessary killing, upon my honor as a knight.”

He leaned down from the saddle and fixed Wulfric with his soulless golden eyes and said, “Tell me true, old man, would you not gladly give your life if it meant that all these others could live? I know you aging Christian mystics; a martyr's death has to hold much more appeal for you than another long winter.”

For a moment Wulfric considered the offer; this past winter *had* been harder than the last... *But it will not end with my death. They will kill Æthelred and his boys ... and Wyglaufr... And after that...?*

He lowered his head and began to recite the 23rd Psalm aloud. *What is to stop them killing us all?*

“You are a fool, old man.” The Masked Knight straightened in the saddle. He barked an order and a dozen mounted men and the pack of dogs thundered through the gates and into the night. Turning back to Wulfric, the Knight said, “My best huntsmen and their hounds will scour the countryside in every direction. They will find your people before dawn, and they will kill them and butcher them like deer.”

“My faith is in the Lord.”

“Then let us test that faith.” The Masked Knight turned the big horse, and walked it over to one of his sergeants and spoke a quick word. In a matter of minutes, the soldiers had formed all of the monks up into a queue in front of the chapel.

The Masked Knight rode back to where Wulfric continued to pray. “Tell me, monk, how strong is your faith? How loving is your God?”

“I am going to kill every one of your brothers, one at a time, until you tell me what I want to know or my men return with the skull. Shall we now find out which of your fellows is truly faithful and which will mew and beg me for mercy rather than appeal to your Nailed God?”

Wulfric knelt and closed his eyes as he prayed. He had always known that this was a possibility, that this was a price he might one day have to pay. *God, give me the strength ... and please forgive me.*

“Oh no, old man,” the Masked Knight said. “You have to watch.” Two warriors hauled Wulfric back to his feet and held him fast in front of the row of monks. “Sergeant, if he closes his eyes even for a moment, you will gut the next man in line and let him die slowly.”

With that the killing began.

Wulfric watched as Brother Bayard was brought forward and pushed to his knees. The man was over forty, yet Wulfric remembered when he had been a lad of twelve who had wet his bed for a month after joining the monastery. The old abbot began reciting the prayers for absolution just before the sergeant opened wide-eyed Bayard's throat from ear to ear.

God bless him, he held his water until the end....

Brother Bayard was dragged away to be replaced by Brother Cenwulf, who had confessed (always with a sly grin) every week from the time he was fourteen to just past his fortieth year that he was visited almost nightly by a succubus. Cenwulf winked at the old man and gave him a smile just before he died.

May God reward your courage in Heaven, brother....

Next came Brother Roger, a young man with the voice of one of God's own angels. He was weeping when he was forced to his knees, but Wulfric could not tell if it was for himself or for his brothers.

You will now sing in Christ's heavenly choir....

By the time Brother Arnulf - who had a weakness for wine, but was an excellent cook - was dragged forward, Wulfric could barely see for the tears clouding his eyes. Yet his voice never faltered, his prayers never lagged. The soldiers took their time in dragging the monks before him; tempting him to give in to the Masked Knight's demand. Hour after hour, murder after murder, his tears continued to fall and his voice continued to carry until it was the only sound that filled the isolated monastery, drowning out the scrape of blade on bone and gurgling death rattles.

Wulfric took heart from the fact that not one of the doomed monks asked for mercy.

Finally as the sun began to rise and the remains of Brother Harold, the youngest member of the cloister at just fifteen, was unceremoniously tossed onto the pile of bloody corpses, Abbot Wulfric's voice cracked and his knees buckled. His captors let him fall and he wept, broken in the mud.

"I suppose you will kill me now," the old man whispered between body-wracking sobs, pulling himself to a sitting position upon the chapel steps. His voice was raspy and ragged. He wiped at his eyes with muddy hands so he might better see his executioners. After the slaughter of his charges – the men he loved like brothers and sons, Wulfric welcomed the deathblow. *Please, Merciful Jesus, do not let me bear the weight of this terrible night one more hour.*

"I think not." The Masked Knight waved a command to his men. As they mounted up and filed out of the gate in an orderly column, he said, "I want you to live, old man. I want you to live knowing that the Horned God demanded only one life this night." Walking his stallion closer to the pile of forty-four bodies, he added, "While your God demanded ... this."

As the Masked Knight rode toward the gate after his men, Wulfric tried to shout but it came out barely more than a croaking sob. "You won't succeed! The Lord of Hosts will prevail!"

He must prevail

The Masked Knight laughed as he called back, "Check the tally, monk. I believe that we are winning just now."