



The Abbey

Aditi Kavi

She ran, tears streaking down her pale white cheeks, thundering through the hallways surrounding the courtyard like a thing of fury.

Winter hung about the convent, fresh snow usually icing the stone-cold floors, and yet, she stumbled not once. Even when sister Hawthorn called out to her with a mortified expression plastered onto her pudgy face—“no running in the halls, child!”—she did not stop.

All the way across the other side of the convent, up a few weathered stone stairs, way into the kitchens, dodging past the surprised cooks who called out her name in vain and the annoyed acolytes in the libraries, she ran fast and swift in her habit.

The Church was separated from the main courtyard and from there branched off the library, kitchens, laundries, dining hall, and the place she most wanted to go.

The person she most wanted to see.

The servants' quarter was at the farthest side of the priory, with large stained-glass depictions of the birth and death of Jesus and holy saints, free of sin and devout in their faith. They certainly looked it when sunlight hit the glass just right and burst into brilliant color.

She ran down a few steps in the corridors between rooms, jumping off the last and turned into a large opening leading into a tiny wall of stone which curved around a door.

And she stumbled, for the first time, at the sight of that door, and the rough wood which—if you weren't careful—would splinter into your skin. She had learned that once too many times.

She swallowed against her sorrow, a lump forming in her throat as she approached the door and knocked on it hesitantly. Softly.

It was enough.

It opened to reveal a girl her age, shorter than she, with beautiful brown skin and dark, curly hair. Black eyes as deep and endless as the sky at night. Her hair was tied back, a drab dress pulled across her waist, and it was the thought that Mary would never see that stupid dress again that set her sobbing right there in the doorway.

“Hey—hey,” the soft words captured Mary as Leela murmured them, her arms encircling her softly. Mary let herself be gently hauled into the brightly lit room.

Leela could feel Mary's shuddering tears as she held on tightly to the crying girl in her arms, even as they sank onto the old, stone floor of her room. Mary's fingers dug

into her sides, holding on as if Leela was an anchor in a raging sea.

Maybe she was.

She hiccupped against Leela's chest.

"I-I'm sorry," she sniffled pitifully.

"Mary—" Leela sighed fondly, "—tell me what's going on, love."

Mary liked when Leela called her love.

But that was irrelevant.

"My father," she gulped, "is going to send me away. The Abbess presented me with a letter from him, telling me he was going to move my family because of the sickness."

Leela's brows knitted together.

"And this is bad because...?"

Mary looked at Leela in astonishment.

"Leela—it would be *horrible*," Mary whispered, her brown eyes wide.

Leela's lips pursed. "I don't see how it could be *horrible*, Mary. You will be safe and with your family and—"

Mary's hands slid to hold Leela's face, desperation hidden underneath her voice. "Leela, they were *never* my family."

You are.

And then Mary started crying again, silent tears as she looked at Leela's saddened face, and felt the deep throbbing hollow of her chest.

Leela murmured soothing words into the space between them, her fingers smoothing away Mary's veil to reveal bright red hair, wiped the tears away before they could fall. Kissed the crests of her cheeks, her chapped lips, even as something bittersweet tumbled through her chest.

Mary kissed her back softly, hugging her close, living in a quiet moment smeared with the world's viciousness. Hugged her against the twisting feeling in her stomach, memories of the sickness her father had mentioned returning.

Leela made Mary look into her eyes as both of their hearts were being chipped at. "Mary ... *Mary*, you're going to be all right—escaping the sickness is a good thing."

Mary looked down in shame. "It's only because my family has money."

"Even so, at least I know you're safe, love." Leela threaded fingers through Mary's hair in a way that made her shiver.

Mary looked out Leela's windows, at the vines that curled over the glass in twisting patterns.

"I remember Sister Anne, when she caught the sickness," she looked back to Leela. "It was only a cough, Leela, a *cough*," she whispered. Leela listened gravely.

"Then one day she collapsed, and we brought her to the dispensary, removing her habit to reveal those ... *things* on her body. I couldn't look away as Sister Lynn took her scissors and broke open the sores, all red and yellow as they burst and Sister Anne just laid there with a ghastly yellow tint to her skin, like she had already crossed the river Styx," Mary almost puked just thinking about it. She looked at Leela. "Leela, she was just 18."

"Mary, I—"

"They didn't even give her a proper burial. Just tossed her into a wheelbarrow and lugged her somewhere far like throwing out trash."

Mary looked lost.

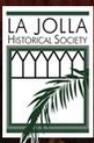
Leela twined her fingers with Mary's, laid them back slowly against the stone floor, a tangled puzzle of limbs and warmth, tucked in ways which only two people who were comfortable with each other could be.

Leela looked into Mary's eyes and told her quietly with a small grin:

"I bet Sister Anne is somewhere stuffing her face with strawberry pies."

Mary let herself laugh and curl against the sunlight streaming from the windows, the solid floor beneath her, the girl she held, and understood simply that she did not know what tomorrow held for her.

She let her eyes close softly.



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