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Opening extract from

Tom Fletcher and the Angel of Death

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Prologue – Human Meat

Delilah licked her yellow teeth. The boy had tasted most peculiar, but then she had not tasted human meat before. Perhaps it was always so sweet. The lioness yawned. She would like to have slept now, her stomach full and the flavours still fresh in her mouth, but there was such a commotion outside the bars of her cage, such wild crying. All those staring eyes – and the old man who looked so like the boy she had just eaten was screaming at the fat monk – the one who usually brought in the offal bucket.

"My boy! My little one!" he howled, eyes wild with pain. "My Obadiah!"

"Don't blame me, Job Pug," blustered the red faced monk, shaking the old servant roughly from his sleeve. "It's not my fault. How was I to know the handle would stick? I gave 'im a job, didn't I? You'll get 'is wages up 'til today, if that's what you're worried about!"

And then there was the woman – that was the worst of

it – down on her knees at the cage, rattling the bars, arms stretched through, clawing at the air, not screaming but wailing – a terrible high pitched keening sound that hurt Delilah's ears.

But what could be amiss? After all, it was just a regular Sunday afternoon at Saint Wilfred's Abbey, the usual time that fat Brother Benedict fed his animals. The only odd thing about this afternoon was that her prey had tried to get away instead of slopping out of a pail in a quivering mass of cold flesh. Not quite as satisfying as stalking the plains of Africa, but better than staring desolately through the bars of a prison, waiting like a helpless cub to be fed.

Delilah growled nervously, a hunted look in her amber eyes, and then she flung back her broad head as a deep grumbling sound began to rise from the depths of her belly. The anguished onlookers gasped in horror as the rumble grew, rising up through her powerful shoulders, rippling the muscles of her massive neck, erupting at last from her gaping red mouth in a ferocious roar of bewilderment and fear.

Chapter I – Fish Hooks and Conkers

Saint Wilfred's was no ordinary monastery, which was just as well, because Tom Fletcher was no ordinary novice. He certainly never intended to become a monk, as he had told his father tearfully at the headstrong age of seven, when kicking and biting, he had arrived at the great bronze doors of the abbey to be left in the care of the Brothers. But as the youngest of ten children, his desperate parents had little choice. There were simply too many hungry bellies, and Tom owned the hungriest – a surprising fact, since he was as bony a little urchin as you could ever have the ill-luck to meet.

He was also the least obedient child in the family; a detail which his anxious father kept strictly to himself, that frosty winter's day nearly six years ago, when Tom first pulled the grey woollen habit of a novice over his untidy thatch of chestnut hair and emerged the other end as Brother Thomas.

Hiding his tear stained face from the other boys, Tom

pushed his meagre bundle under a lumpy mattress in the draughty novices' dormitory. It contained everything he possessed in the world – to be more precise: a fish hook, a piece of frayed string, two prize conkers and a spare pair of scratchy underpants (five sizes too big). These he generously donated to plump Herbert Glanville, the son of a local corn merchant, younger by only a few months but twice Tom's size. Herbert had dried his eyes already and was comforting himself with a greasy mutton pasty on the next hay pallet along. It was a fine beginning to a firm friendship, cemented as the years rolled round by memories of practical jokes played on those monks least likely to see the funny side of life.

Strict monastery rules about eating very little, and doing exactly what you were told, would have proved impossible for a high spirited boy like Tom, but in this he was fortunate. For their leader, Abbot Theodore, was a worldly man – an old soldier, who had lost an eye in the Crusades. And under his easy-going rule, the monks spent many a blissful day brewing ale, carousing in *The Frisky Friar Inn,* and trading in fake relics with the pilgrims who worshipped at the shrine of Saint Wilfred's bunion.

But life at the abbey was not always so comfortable. For Abbot Theodore was often far from home, spending much of his time up in London, hobnobbing at the Royal Court, and in his absence, Prior Solomon steered the helm with a firmer hand. And then the monks would say their prayers and sing their psalms and starch the linen altar cloths until the abbot thundered home again on his trusty Arab steed.

Naturally there were those in the town of Saint Agnes

next-the-Sea who spoke against the monks and their worldly ways but they'd as well have saved their breath to cool their pottage. For the abbey owned the town, from every stinking hovel, wayside tavern and market stall, to the grandest merchants' houses that lined the bustling harbour where the River Twist poured into the ocean. And Brother Benedict, the greedy bursar, demanded rents and tithes from the poor without pity, sparing neither a skinny herring nor a heel of cheese for the lepers at the monastery gates.

Enough to stir up bad feeling, you might have thought, since so many depended on the abbey for their work – and then there was the small matter of little Obadiah Pug and the mishap with the bursar's lioness … but that was a year ago and surely such tragedies are best forgotten.

It was a warm evening in late summer, just before the Lammas Day Fair. The hawthorn was bursting with rusty berries and fat blackbirds squatted in the spiky branches, gorging themselves in readiness for the harsh winter months. The vines were heavy with sweet grapes, the monks were brewing barley beer, and a symphony of blowflies buzzed drowsily over the dung heaps; but all was not as peaceful as it appeared at Saint Wilfred's Abbey. For Abbot Theodore had met with an accident.

Returning to Saint Agnes from London for the stag hunting, he had fallen from his Arab stallion as he was fording the River Twist. It was only the matter of a shattered kneecap – a trifling injury, you might have thought, for a hardened old soldier – but the Abbot was not in his first

youth and the wound had begun to fester. No amount of bleeding and leeching seemed to cool his fever.

And, as if this were not trouble enough for the thirteenth century abbey, young Brother Tom had taken a fancy to the miller's daughter, and old Brother Ethelwig was about to launch his flying machine from the top of the bell tower.

Chapter 2 – The Ornithopter

Brother Ethelwig, ancient keeper of the bells, perched on the parapet of the abbey tower, beating his wings impatiently. He strained against the rope that tethered him to the battlements, long muscular feet gripping the ramparts. The evening was warm and breezy; perfect conditions for flying.

"Hurry up, Pug," he bellowed to the belfry assistant over the booming of the wind. He pointed his eagle nose windward, two hundred dizzying feet above the sandstone walls of the abbey – above the monks in straw hats, crawling like black bees in the honey meadows and the tiny grey novices, playing leap-frog in the cloisters.

"Nearly there, sir," cried old Job, checking his master's leather harness and adjusting the scarlet tail feathers. "It's very windy!" he added anxiously, squinting west across the cloisters into the sun, already sinking in a rosy flush behind the watermill on the bow bend of the River Twist. "Maybe another day would be …"

"Nonsense, Pug," laughed the wiry old monk. "We have the best Chinese silk this time. I feel as light as a dandelion seed! Ready with the taper?"

"Ready when you are, sir," trembled Pug, struggling to keep the flame alight.

"Then hurry up!" he cried. "Ignite me! Wait for the up-draught – then launch the ornithopter!"

"Good luck, Brother Ethelwig. Remember what we said. Think up! Think elevate ..."

"Think eagle!" cried Brother Ethelwig as he stretched his crimson wings and began a slow, rhythmic beating.

The wind sang in the bell ropes. Pug's hands shook only slightly as he held the glowing taper to the black powder in the crucible beneath the kite shaped tail. The wind dropped. For a solemn moment the trees stood still, quivering, like dancers waiting for the music to begin. And then on the up-draught, old Job Pug plunged his hand into the crucible. There was a hideous bang. Jackdaws exploded upwards in a cloud of wings, shrieking in terror as Brother Ethelwig shot over the abbey like a bolt from a crossbow, black smoke belching from the rear of his flying machine.

He whooped in triumph as he soared over the abbot's house, hawk's eyes picking out the infirmary below with its own neat herb garden, the beast house where the bursar kept his lion, strips of farm land the colour of saffron and burnt sugar, the dark scar of the forest and the turreted silhouette of the coastal town beyond. Gliding on the air currents, he swooped back towards the apple orchard along the leafy line of the River Twist that lay coiled like a silver serpent around the refectory wall.

But Job Pug, watching anxiously from the tower, saw that something was wrong. A small corner of scarlet silk seemed to be flapping free. He stared in horror as it gradually began to unpeel itself from the structure of twine and feathers. Brother Ethelwig twisted his neck sharply upwards, alarmed by a sudden sensation of losing height.

Everyone looked up, and afterwards everybody blamed Ethelwig; from the inky scribe for the ruby blot on his parchment, to the potter in the great court of the abbey, whose skewed jug would never grace the Lord of the Manor's table.

"Think eagle!" screamed Pug helplessly from the battlements as his beloved master was tossed upwards on a gust of wind, the loose wing silk streaking out like a blood red flag behind him. "Think up! Think elevate!" he wailed in bitter disappointment, as Brother Ethelwig spiralled wildly downwards, a brilliant tangle of ropes and pulleys, tumbling out of a pink and purple sky.

Tom Fletcher sat in the apple tree, his grey habit tucked up in his leather belt, sweet juice dribbling down his chin. The dusting of freckles on his nose had deepened in the summer sun, until now his face looked if someone had slipped with the nutmeg shaker. He leant his auburn head towards Bessie Miller, a shy look in his eyes, and then planted a quick kiss on her plump mouth.

"Tom!" she gasped, black eyes flashing. "You're a novice! I thought you weren't supposed to like girls. And anyway, you're all sticky," she grumbled, touching her mouth with the back of her hand.

Tom drew back, his face suddenly hot. "Who said anything about liking girls?" he mumbled, picking a scab on his knee. "And it's *Chief* novice, if you don't mind, Bessie," he corrected. "And also head chorister, to give me all my titles."

"You're only chief novice because you're the oldest," she said with a quick frown, as if the idea displeased her. "Not for any other reason."

Tom flung his apple core through the tangle of branches with a strangled groan. "Don't rub salt in my scabs, Bessie! I'll be fourteen in a few months – old enough to take my vows – and then I really will be stuck in this place. I want to see the world, like Abbot Theodore ... Constantinople ... Jerusalem ... and just look at me – trapped here learning Latin with a bully of a novice master and his spiky cane."

He slapped his bottom with a grimace. Bessie giggled, looking up at him from under her long eyelashes. "It's not funny, Bessie," scowled Tom. "You know Brother Dunstan's a real tyrant. He keeps his true nature in check when Abbot Theodore's around. But the abbot's very ill – haven't you heard? Heaven help us if Prior Solomon becomes abbot. The prior's not cruel but he's strict, and Brother Dunstan adores him." Tom hunched his shoulders and wrung his hands together, pursing his lips into a thin mean line in a perfect imitation of the novice master. *"Oh, Prior Solomon,"* he mimicked in a grovelling voice. *"Is there anything else you can think of to make the novices' lives more miserable? A smaller fire in their dormitory perhaps or a little extra ancient Greek?"*

Bessie clapped her hands in delight. Tom was a wonderful

mimic. She could almost see the bland doughy face of the novice master, with its clammy sheen of perspiration, like a film of wax.

Tom gave Bessie a warning nudge as two pious novices in neat grey robes passed beneath the tree, their hands folded. They looked up suspiciously as the remains of the apple landed at their feet in a splatter of juice.

"Is that you, Brother Thomas?" called Brother Odo bossily, peering into the branches as the abbey bell chimed through the evening air. Tom bit on his knuckle, his hazel eyes stretched wide as he struggled to stifle a laugh. "He'll be late for Vespers again if he's not careful, won't he, Felix?" said Odo, in a voice meant for Tom.

Tom fingered his newly chipped tooth. It was still a bit wobbly, but at least he'd given Odo an eye like a damson in return for it. "Here's an idea," he whispered, brightening. "I'll buy a flock of sheep and take the wool to Flanders. Everyone wants English fleece these days. And when I've made my fortune, I'll come back and marry you, Bessie." His cheeks felt suddenly hot again. "I ... I mean," he added with a casual laugh, "nobody else would touch you with a pig stick!"

Bessie's dark curls quivered with indignation. "You can't suppose Father would let me marry you! He has no time for monks, along with everyone else in this town. Your fat bursar, Brother Benedict, has put up the rent for our mill again. And besides, *my* mother was Alice de Lacy before she became plain Mistress Miller. The de Lacys are noblemen," she preened, smoothing her tangled hair.

Tom wiped his sticky fingers on his robe, a sly look in

his eye. "Come to think of it – why *did* your mother marry a humble miller?" he asked, regretting his spite as the barb hit home.

Bessie flinched. "Love, I suppose," she said uneasily, avoiding his eyes.

Tom raised one sarcastic eyebrow – he'd been practising the trick for weeks. *"Love?"* The word cracked in the middle and dropped a few tones. He winced. What on earth was wrong with his voice? Squeaky one minute and down in his boots the next. And he had a spot on his chin the size of a pea. He tried again. "Love? It would take more than love to make me leave a grand house like Micklow Manor for the Mill at Tirley Grange. Just think about it, Bessie. Sir Ranulf de Lacy is actually your grandfather and yet here you are, living in corn mill!"

Bessie gazed down at her homespun dress, a crease in her brow. "You know we never mention Sir Ranulf at home, Tom. I've never even spoken to him. Whenever I ask my parents about it they always clam up ... change the subject ..."

"Bessie – look!" shrieked Tom, nearly losing his balance on the branch. He scrambled up the gnarled trunk to get a better view of the plummeting scarlet object spinning out of control. "Oh Lord! It's Ethelwig again. We don't see him for days and then he comes tumbling out of the sky!"

Bessie covered her head, as a shower of twigs and acorns rained down. There was a sickening crunch and the sound of splintering wood as the wounded ornithopter burst through the branches of a nearby oak and came to a shuddering halt. Brother Ethelwig dangled limply below,

upside down like a scarlet bat. His eagle nose had come to rest somewhere close to his left ear and his eyes were closed.

"Too many tail feathers," they heard him murmur as he twirled gently in the evening breeze. "That was my big mistake. And maybe I'd better think Buzzard next time."