

*Saint's Bones*

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Thierry circled the aisles, the tail of his robe trailing through the muddy bootprints of the travelers. The travelers made pilgrimages to Thierry's church every year, and he came to recognize them. The little red-headed one was Sebastian, looks like he has some stubble now, God love him; Remy didn't come with his father this year, I hope he's feeling well; looks like Paul still prays with his hands pressed to his lips; so on, so on. Thierry didn't greet them by name just yet, letting them silently bask in the presence of what they came for—the left ring finger of Saint Evegne, held in a sealed marble reliquary behind the altar. Thierry stepped through the front door of the church to where Guiscard was keeping watch. “Do you think he's coming?” Thierry asked him.

“Hmm.” Guiscard scanned the hills surrounding the church. “His neighbor told me a fire started in his house and took a wall up with it. I want to be prepared if he shows up, if it's anything like last year.”

Thierry sighed. “I don't know why these things must happen when the pilgrims are here. There has to be a reason.”

“That's what they're saying, you know. All these travelers bringing misfortune.”

“We should know better than that by now.” Thierry squinted. “That's not his horse, is it?”

Sitting on top of the distant horse was Romain, a farmer from the outskirts of the village. As far as anyone knew, he was as deeply religious as anyone else in the village, yet he kept to his family and only showed up at the church when calamity struck. Lackluster crops,

stolen livestock, and overlong winters had all brought Romain to the church, angrily demanding answers about why his simple life had been disturbed, and what it was he did wrong. His family seemed normal enough—his wife sang while she washed clothes outside, his kids ran, skipped, and skidded knees like all the other children, but Romain came across as increasingly unstable and angry every time he appeared to the clergymen, which was why Guiscard and Thierry felt dread when they saw the wide smile on his face.

“It’s good to see you two here!,” Romain said, descending from his horse.

“Hello, Romain,” Guiscard said cautiously.

“I came here late last night looking for you but the place was empty.”

“You were...at the church?” Guiscard asked.

“The door was unlocked, and...I’ve been mulling over how to say this...Something profound happened last night. I needed to tell you but I wasn’t sure how, and I went back home.”

Guiscard and Thierry looked at each other, concerned. “The church is always open, Romain,” Thierry said, “we didn’t know you came in.”

“I was up at the altar by the marble and I had a vision. Just like in the old times. I’m not sure what it meant, but, I know it meant something.”

“That’s great, Romain, uh...” Guiscard said.

Thierry ran inside.

“Where’s he going?” Romain asked.

“I, uh...this might be important, Romain, I—”

“You’re not going in too, are you? This is the most important thing that’s ever happened to me...”

“Yes, I...I want you to reflect on it, you may be overexcited now, but give it time—”

“I’ve thought about it all night. I’ve found a peace I’ve never known before. I’ve been rethinking my whole life’s purpose.”

“Excuse me, I’m sorry,” Guiscard said, leaving Romain and running into the church. He lifted the ends of his robes and fast-walked past the pilgrims to meet Thierry at the back of the church. “Look at the corner,” Thierry said, his finger pointing to a wide crack in the marble reliquary. On the ground beneath it, grass and small yellow flowers were growing on the tile. Guiscard gasped.

“It’s my fault. I should’ve inspected it earlier,” Thierry said. “And the stoneworker is away in the city. He won’t be back for a week, at least.”

“What do we do? Get some plaster? Sap? Mud? We have to plug it with something.”

“Those won’t do. We don’t know what it’ll do to those. We know that stone works, and that’s what we’re going to have to use.”

There was a voice from behind them. “What’s going on?” It was Romain, walking towards them. The clergymen spun around and said, “Nothing.”

“Is that what it is? That crack there? Is that what’s so important?” Romain said, walking between them towards the reliquary. “That’s an easy fix.”

“No, Romain, please don’t go any further.”

Romain kneeled down and stopped, transfixed by the crack in the marble. The pilgrims in the aisles broke their concentration, turning their heads up to observe the action. Romain slowly stood up, brushed off his knees, and walked past the clergymen and the pilgrims and out of the church.

“He saw something,” Guiscard said.

“And we have no idea what,” Thierry said. “But I can make a guess.” Thierry turned to the pilgrims, who were all watching him. “How many of you are strong? This is a duty...for God.”

Paul and Remy stood up. “You two, follow me to the kitchen,” Thierry called out. “There’s a stone table, we need to carry it in here.” He turned, “And Guiscard, go into town, get as much stone as you can find. We can cover one side with the table but I don’t want that crack spreading onto the other sides. We have to keep it sealed until the stoneworker comes back.”

“I can help, sir,” the young red-headed Sebastian said, overhearing from the aisle. “You’re going to need help bringing all that stone back here, right?”

“That’s fine. Let’s hurry,” Guiscard said.

They rode towards the village, Guiscard too old for his horse, Sebastian too young for his. They weaved between the hills with empty wood carts bouncing behind them, headed for the houses and the crooked fields of the village. Sebastian didn’t speak or make eye contact with the old priest, content knowing he was helping a man of God. “Sebastian,” Guiscard said, “what did you see? At the front of the church.”

“Sir, it...it looked like there was a stream of diamonds falling out of the box and falling right through the floor, not making a pile, like it’d go on forever. It’s different for everyone, isn’t it?”

Guiscard nodded. “I didn’t see anything, but I felt warm, like there was a fire burning in front of me.”

“I was so happy when I saw it,” Sebastian said. “There are some people back home that don’t go on pilgrimages because they think churches put pig bones in boxes to trick people. I never believed them, sir.”

As they rounded a curve, they could see a man sitting stationary on his horse in the middle of a bridge over a wide stream. It was Romain. “Ride back behind me, Sebastian. Don’t speak to him,” Guiscard said. The boy followed his order. Romain stared at Guiscard as they approached and stopped before him. For a while the only sound was the misleading peace of birdsong and tumbling water until Romain broke the silence. “What are you making him do, Guiscard.”

“I’m not making him do anything. He volunteered, leave him out of this.”

“I know what you’re doing,” Romain said, not dropping eye contact. “I know what your whole church is doing. I had another vision, in front of that box. I saw blood dripping from the crack in the marble, like from a wounded animal, before it started pouring out onto the floor. And unlike last night I know perfectly well what this vision meant. He was much clearer this time.”

“Let us through, Romain.”

“Why do you keep God in that box? He wants out, Guiscard.”

“He’s not in the box. All that’s in there is the finger bone of a long-dead man.”

“That’s almost heresy, priest. If that were the case, why do you need the marble?”

Of all times. The box was cracking in half, and he wasn’t going to get to town because a man was blocking the bridge, arguing about theology. So be it. “You know why, Romain. It’s that finger that’s made the church’s existence possible, it brings the pilgrims that let this whole village operate. We’re humble men of God, and we’ve given ourselves to saving the

souls of everyone in this village, and the souls of people from miles away—we've even helped you, when you've come running to us in hard times. Without that finger there wouldn't be any of that!"

"My past is meaningless compared to what you're holding down. For your own selfish justification."

"There needs to be order, Romain. We can't let what lives in that box out and have miracles happening throughout this land...willy-nilly. This way we can understand it, and let it help everyone."

Romain turned to Sebastian. "Is that what you came here to do, boy? Hole up God? Keep holiness sealed away in the church?"

"I said leave him *out*, Romain."

Sebastian's mouth hung open as he looked between the two men. He stuttered, "It's-it's best kept in one place. We can see it that way, it's...it's tangible." Guiscard winced for the boy.

"No, pilgrim," Romain said. "It should be everywhere. Throughout these hills, throughout this country. Not kept in a box so it can validate the church."

"But..." the boy's mind spun, "h-how would we know what's real and what's holy? If it's out in the open, not in the church..."

Romain was chuckling to himself, shaking his head at the boy. Guiscard had enough. "Sebastian, ride back up to the church. Now, please."

Sebastian unhooked the cart from his horse and quickly rode off in the direction of the church. Romain smirked and kicked at his own horse to move from the bridge. "I won't keep you, priest."

Guiscard made it to the village's main street. It was busy as it usually was, but he couldn't bring himself to ask the strangers if they had stone tables. These were farmers, merchants, practical people—why would they need to eat off anything more than wood? He decided to ride further to the stoneworker's wife. She agreed to let Guiscard borrow an unworked slab of rock from her husband's inventory, and they loaded the heavy slab onto the cart. Barely out of the village, the horse was already struggling to pull the cart up the beginning foothills. Guiscard dismounted to lighten the horse's load and walked alongside the strained beast, holding its reins. Along the side of the road he made out Romain's farm, but he couldn't see any signs of life. No smoke from the chimney, no children running, no wife singing. He legs felt tired and he lamented his age. He eventually crossed the bridge, passing by the cart Sebastian left behind. Curse that Romain, scaring him like that. When this all cleared up he would send Thierry to retrieve the cart—it was his turn to run errands.

Guiscard heard another horse galloping and feared a second encounter with Romain. The charging horse rode past, not ridden by Romain but Thierry, still in his clergy robes, not stopping when he saw him. He shouted from the horse, "Turn back! They all saw! Meet me in Niven!" He rode on, galloping out of view, throwing dust into the air. Guiscard coughed. Niven? Niven was two day's travel from here. His horse wouldn't be making any more travel today, and he was already so close to the church's stables...

Guiscard could hear from afar there was shouting within the church. He freed the horse from the cart and left it to its trough. He looked at the sleek black steed that remained in the stable, and thought about taking off like he was told to. Thierry didn't seem like one to

retreat from the church so easily. If I'm going to abandon it too, Guiscard decided, I deserve to at least know why. He took a deep breath and approached the front door of the church.

The travelers were behind the reliquary, pushing with all their weight. Romain was with them, commanding them and pulling at the edges of the reliquary. The box scraped along the ground with a sharp screeching, nearing the altar steps. Guiscard started stepping backwards, realizing why Thierry left, but unable to look away. The heavy reliquary hung over the top step and glacially tipped down onto the first step with a thunk. The reliquary was at an angle now, and the travelers lifted it from underneath to tip it over. It crashed against each step, each thud resonating throughout the walls of the church. The flat marble slammed square onto the final step and its sides fell apart from their own weight. The left ring finger of Saint Evagne rolled forward onto the tile. Guiscard always pictured it as a dry sun-bleached bone, but now that it lay before him, he could see brown flesh still hung to it like dry saggy paper. It was too late now. Romain and all the others stepped back, their work finished. It wasn't until now Guiscard noticed the boy Sebastian was among them. The ground underneath the rubble shimmered and rippled like water, and golden vines of ivy stretched out like fingers in all directions. Good luck in Niven, Thierry. And may God bless you in your travels. The walls of the church began to turn inwards.