

One

A nocturne rang through Castle Umberto.

It began softly, winding through halls—catching first the ears, then feet of the castle denizens. Charwomen danced with brooms; chandlers hummed over molten wax. Milkmaids sang to the cattle, and the houndmaster howled with his dogs. Blacksmiths clanged, scullions banged, chefs chopped—all to the rhythm of a great clock. The melody rose, up-up-up, into the blackest spires of Umberto's castle, where imprisoned maidens swirled in gowns of spider silk, forgetting, for just a moment, the gruesome death that awaited them. And down-down-down it went, into the castle's bowels, past smoky kitchens where chefs prepared the master's feast, and through tunnels, until even the dead heard the music. Zombies spangled in black bile crawled out of the earth, and skeletons in their cells sashayed to their master's tune.

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Now the music dives. It bores into the deepest, dampest cells of the undercroft, searching for the one thing that hasn't learned how to dance.

*The newling snapped awake.* There was no transition, no gentle rising from slumber; one moment he was floating in a brackish, foul-smelling void, and the next he was rattling with anxiety on a stone floor. He reached up to wipe the sleep from his eyes and discovered two disturbing facts: firstly, he had no sleep to wipe, and secondly, he had no eyes. He did, however,

have a distinct memory of a foul tongue running along his cheek – along with an equally terrifying croon:

*“Ripen, my pretty. Dry out for Mama. Zeeesty booones...”*

But the nightmare vanished, replaced by a dark, grimy cell.

The newling turned his head. A robed skeleton sat opposite him, pressed against the iron bars, frowning and clutching a single femur in his hand.

"Welcome to hell, poppy," the skeleton whispered, leaning closer. "You seem... refreshingly uncomplicated. A blank slate. Tell me, were you this wonderfully simple in your previous life, or is this a fresh start?"

The newling blinked. "Am...I dead?"

"Very clearly!" the robed skeleton said, gesturing wildly with the femur. "You're bleached bones and nothing more. Don't cry. Don't shout. Don't plead for God. You are dead – and mostly useless. Now, listen to what I have to say and amount to something, or be a useless bag of bones and invariably get sniffed dead by a nasty witch. Yes? Good. So, listen up!"

The skeleton rose, his tattered robes swaying around a ribcage that had seen better centuries. He loomed against the bars, eye sockets glimmering with a dull, scarlet light. "I am Solsmaru," he announced, striking a pose that suggested he expected applause. "The Greatest Sorcerer Who Ever Lived. And you...will be my loyal stooge."

The newling sat up. He realized the cell was crowded. Shadows moved in the corners—clinking, shuffling, watching. *Other skeletons*. "Well..." he muttered. "If you're the Greatest Sorcerer Who Ever Lived, why are you imprisoned?"

In the corner, a cloaked skeleton groaned and put his head in his hands. “Oh no, idiot! You don’t ask him questions!”

“Shut it, Regnier!” the robed skeleton said, then clapped. “An excellent query, newling. You are an intelligent one, I can see! It is a tale of tragedy. Of betrayal! One HUNDRED years ago...in the court of idiots! Yes—a God Sorcerer met a plebeian wampyr by the name of Duke Umberto. But I was Blindsided! Trickstered! Dupliciiiiity!”

“Solsmaru,” Regnier muttered. “I swear to God...”

“And what happened, you think?” Solsmaru shouted, pacing the small space between the bars and the newling. “Nincompoops happened, idiocy unrivaled. Distracted by a single-celled *moron*! And then? My prominent Solsmaru neck! Bit by a bat-like rube! Drained of my beautiful Solsmaru blood... But the true betrayal? We must go even further back...to the worst of all apprentices across the world—”

“If you want us to escape—” Regnier hissed.

But Solsmaru shouted even louder: “MY FOOL OF AN APPRENTICE: IRA THE SECOND, THE CURSE TO ALL MY WOES! I bet he’s still lost in that mushroom dispensary in Crocus! High on spores while I rot in a cell! Just wait until I find that second-rate dog! And guess what revenges will be had? What sweetly terrible plans I have concocted for the worst, most incompetent fools I’ve ever met?” He started pacing. “Oh, I’ve had my revenges; and plenty more I will have. Have you heard the story of Rubenhard Curse? It is Legendary, of course, and known across the world.”

“Please...” Regnier cried. “I can’t do the muffin story again. I really can’t.”

A third skeleton—this one with an oddly-shaped hammerhead skull—stepped out of the gloom. “Perhaps, Solsmaru, we should stop monologuing and help the newling get the tusk?”

“Monologuing?” Solsmaru gasped, offended. “This is chronicling! Betrayals, backstabbers, the past will be the future; that which was betrayed – ME – will enact revenges upon revenges!”

Regnier flicked a knucklebone. It zipped through the air and lodged itself perfectly into Solsmaru’s left eye socket.

“My eye!” Solsmaru howled, clawing at his face. “My beautiful Solsmaru Gaze! You could have blinded me!”

“You don’t have eyes, Solsmaru,” Regnier said flatly.

“You merchant pig!” Solsmaru screamed.

And chaos erupted. The sorcerer flung himself at merchant; the hammerhead skelly Philbert jumped in-between them only to have his head struck off by Solsmaru’s swing of a femur. And a fourth figure, a chaotic pile of mismatched limbs, burst from the corner.

“Bones, bones, bones!” cried the freakish abomination. Bones flew here and there as Solsmaru and Regnier rolled and fought, and the abomination picked up every piece in his hands – and his figure, the newling saw, was legs made of ribs, a hand for a foot, and a foot sprouting from his chest. “Oh sweet, smashing bones!”

“Hey!” came a shout. “Watch the shelf!” The newling realized this came from a glass jar. Inside, a heap of gray dust swirled in rage. “Stop this roughhousing immediately! Regnier, you goddamn fool.”

“Shut it, Old-Paroe!” Regnier said as he shoved his fingers into Solsmaru’s nostrils.

The sorcerer screamed. “Nyaaah! Let go off me, merchant scum! Newling, I call for your assistance!” Then with a wicked flourish the sorcerer swept sideways and flung himself over on Regnier’s back. He pressed the femur against Regnier’s neck until the bones began to crack. Solsmaru cackled maniacally. “To dust you become, idiot fool!!”

Then, the hammerhead skeleton—Philbert—grabbed Solsmaru by the ribs and hoisted him into the air like a unruly toddler. “That’s enough, Solsmaru.”

“Nyaa, Philbert you dumb wretch, let me go! I was winning!”

“Please, Solsmaru,” said Philbert. He held the sorcerer with ease – even as Solsmaru writhed and twisted like a furious, clacking crab. “I want you both to apologize. You first, Solsmaru. Go on. Apologize to Regnier—and to Old-Paroe for almost knocking over his shelf.”

“Nnnever!” Solsmaru screeched.

“We’ve been through this before...” Philbert said calmly. “You want me to hold you like this for another decade? I’ll do it.”

“I’ll kill you all!”

The newling twisted away, trying to distance himself from the lunacy. His gaze drifted to past the bars. There, against a leather skin on the wall, wrapped in a single band of silk, was a curved piece of white bone. He felt a pull in his fingertips. A memory almost came to him. It felt like he’d seen that thing before – or if not that thing, something similar.

“Is that...” the newling said. “Is that the tusk?”

The silence was instant.

They all turned to look where the newling pointed, even Solsmaru, who was still held up by Philbert.

“The ivory,” Solsmaru breathed. “Fetch it for me, newling. I’ll save us all.”

“You just said you’d kill us,” Regnier said.

“Shut up! He’s the only one who can get it; I am the only one who can use it – because guess what, Regnier, I am the Best Sorcerer—”

Regnier waved a hand. “Yea, yea. Fine. Get it for him, newling – but only once he promises to let us all out.”

The newling looked at the tusk. Then at the gap in the bars. It was just out of reach for him, but maybe... “Why can’t you get it?” he asked.

“Shackle-hexed,” Old-Paroe wheezed. “A dirty magwort witch has bound us to the four corners of this cell. Try to breach and we burn in a second.”

“But you can!” Philbert said giddily. “And Solsmaru can use it.” He lifted him high. “He might be pissy, but he’s a great sorcerer! He can get us out and get us bodies, real bodies, can you imagine!”

A sound echoed from above. Heavy. Rhythmic. The thud-thud of boots and the rattle of chains.

“Oh bones, it’s her!” Old-Paroe cried.

Philbert tossed Solsmaru aside like a sack of flour. The sorcerer hit the wall with a clatter and scrambled up. “Get down, newling! Pretend you’re dead!”

“Why...?” the newling said.

“She’s our jailer,” Philbert whispered, scuttling into the corner and curling into a ball.

“We just dig worms for her. It’s not so bad, really. The worms can be quite combative!”

“She’s a witch?” the newling asked.

“A very powerful one,” Philbert said.

“Hardly!” Solsmaru cackled, pulling his robes over his head like a shell. “My funny bone has more magical might than her! She’s hardly a witch, that boggy weasel!”

The footsteps grew louder. And they heard the heaving breath of the witch as she hobbled down the stairs.

“Wormsh,” a wet voice lisped from the dark, whirling staircase. “Mama needs wormsh.”

The abomination didn’t wait to be told twice. He threw himself into the corner of the cell where the stone floor had cracked, revealing a patch of damp, black earth. “Dirty durt!” he cried, his hands—one of which was attached to his ankle—clawing frantically at the soil. “Dirt, dirt, dirt, hides the worms! Worms for Magwort; worms for the stew!”

The newling lay scattered on the floor. He felt the thumps vibrate in his skull as the witch descended.

First the cell went dark. She filled the doorway, her frame blotting out the torchlight from the staircase. She looked like a towering beast of mud and robes, full of waterlogged folds and ashen skin hanging gray and wrinkled, and her smile revealed teeth like brown glass, each housing a tiny red implet curled into a fetal position.

But the worst part wasn't the baby imps nor her droopy face. It was the thing between her sagging breasts.

There, a large, fleshy wart – the size of a plum – writhed on her sternum. This was her witch's teat; her stigma diabolicum. It was alive, and its eye and sneering lip suggested it was very, very pissed off.

"Shweet children," the Witch said, her voice thick with spit. "I require wormsh for shupper. My good bonesh..." She hefted a wooden mallet the size of a skull, tapping it rhythmically in one fist. "Who hash wormsh for me?"

"Good bones!" Philbert squeaked from the shadows. "We're digging! We're digging!"

The abomination pummeled the dirt until he found one. "Worms for you, ma'am! A bone-worm, a nasty worm, put it in a stew!"

The Witch's eyes rolled back in pleasure. She plucked the worm from the abomination's fingers with a delicacy that seemed impossible for her sausage-like digits. "Ahh," she purred. "Thish ish a niishe worm, Frockfurt. Fat. Juicy."

She dropped it into a pouch on her belt. The wart on her chest licked its lips.

"What kind of stew is she making?" Regnier said, holding up three worms through the bars. "Bone stew? Zombie stew? Blood stew for the wampire? Or a simpler stew, a rotten stew, a blueblack stew for shades? I got what you need, ma'am. No matter the stew!"

"Oh, Regnier," the Witch giggled, taking them. "You alwaysh outdo yourshelf."

From beneath his pile of rags, Solsmaru made a noise like a kettle boiling over. He couldn't stand it. The Greatest Sorcerer Who Ever Lived could not be outdone by a merchant and an anatomical disaster.

He scrambled to the corner, shoving Frockfurt aside. He dug with manic intensity, flinging dirt over his shoulders. He snatched up a handful of wriggling shapes—earthworms, grubs, a centipede that was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and then, he decided to steal the worms from their reserves.

“Look here!” Solsmaru shouted, rushing to the bars to show her his collection. “I have worms too. Look! Finger-worms. Dust-worms. Mine are better than Regnier’s. Mine are of legendary taste!”

The Witch didn't even look at him. She was too busy clucking over Frockfurt, patting the abomination on his skull. “Good boy, Frockfurt,” she was saying. “Shuch a good shkelly boy.”

Solsmaru stood there, arm extended, his legendary worms ignored. His skull began to vibrate. The red light in his eye sockets flared. “You...” he hissed. “You magwort hag! Take your worms and begone!” He flung a handful of dirt and bugs right in her face.

One worm hit her cheek with a *plap*.

The Witch stopped moving. Slowly, she reached up and plucked a centipede from her eyebrow. She popped it into her mouth and bit down, juices running down the lines of her mouth. “What did you shay, Sholsmaru?”

The witch’s teat on her chest bared its tiny teeth, growling.

“I said you are a warty scullion wench!” Solsmaru yelled. “I have seen fish with more magical talent than you! You are a stain on the arts! You greasy strumpet!”

“The Great Sholsmaru,” the Witch said, hefting her mallet. “One day, I will knead your dusht and make Sholsmaru bread. It will be bland and utterly forgettable.”

“Boo-hoo!” Solsmaru raised his skeletal fists like a boxer. “Try me, Hag! Come at me and I’ll shove that mallet up your—”

The Witch didn’t swing the mallet. Instead, she reached into her sludge-robcs and pulled out a tuft of coarse grey hair. Mule wool. She blew on it. The hair ignited with a green flash, turning into smoke that drifted through the iron bars – and taking the Witch with it. And there she suddenly stood, looming over Solsmaru with a wide grin. “Care to repeat yoursself?”

Solsmaru crumpled before her feet. "A jest, ma'am! A witticism! Surely a sorceress of your refinement appreciates wit?" He crawled to her feet, kissing her toes—even the blotches and warts. "You wouldn't harm your sweet Solsmaru, would you? Your shweet shervant... your bestest Sholsmaru?"

He saw the way she gripped the mallet; and he did not like it.

“I have something better than worms,” Solsmaru whispered, carefully matching her gaze. “I have...a vintage bar none.”

“Oh?” the Witch said.

Solsmaru bowed his head. “I saw Old-Paroe! The winds returned him, mistress!”

The witch stopped. Her head swiveled, as if drunk on the thought. "Imposhible. The windsh took him."

There had been a pact among skeletons for hundreds of years: lie about Old-Paroe. His centuries-old dust made him a prime target for the magwort's sniffing addiction. Whenever asked, they always said: "the winds took him."

Solsmaru cared little for sacred pacts.

"And returned him!" he said. "He's somewhere in this room—a dusty, decrepit old fool! Think on it, ma'am! How potent he must be. Four hundred years of finely attuned bone dust. It's time you shniff-shniff him to kingdom come!"

The witch's eyes lit up. "Paroe!" She abandoned the skellies instantly, whirling toward a large pile of dust in the corner. She jabbed her fingers into it, rubbing it on her gums. "Mmm, you in there, Paroe? You dushty cretin." She took a deep breath. "Zzzeshty, but weak. Where are you, Paroe? Oh, you musht tashte sho delicioush!"

Such was the magwort addiction she dropped to her knees, abandoning her mallet, and crawled on four with her elongated nose against the floor like a hog for slop. "Par-oh-oh, where are you hiding, my shweet dushty boy?"

She grabbed a handful of grey fluff from under a bench—a century's worth of spiderwebs and dead skin—and inhaled it with a sound like cat choking on furballs. "Yesh!" she shrieked. "Zesty. More. More!" And deeper into the shadows she crawled – both inside the cells with the skellies, who kept a clear distance, and outside the cells, where she climbed tables, chairs, snorting line after line of grime. But the dust was not prime four-hundred-year-old dust, not even skelly dust.

It was just dirt.

The Witch paused. Her nose twitched. Her eyes watered. The sentient wart on her chest squeezed its eyes shut in anticipation. “Ah...” she said, brewing like a storm. “Ahh...” Her eyes rolled back with a weird mix of ecstasy and wet gurgling. “ACHOO!”

She blasted a cloud of mucus and sludge across the cell, coating the far wall in green slime. And then she sneezed once more, twice, thrice. Her witch’s teat turned red like a beet. “My sinushesh!” cried the Witch, eyes running with water. “Too much, too much!”

Blinded by tears and snot, she scrambled backward, flailing for the stairs. She hit the doorway, bounced off the frame, and fled upward, her sneezes echoing down the stone shaft like cannon fire.

Shortly thereafter, the heavy door crashed shut – and the lock clicked.

"She almost sniffed me to death, you fool!" Old-Paroe's dust wailed at Solsmaru.

Solsmaru didn’t even deign him with a look. “Newling,” he said. “The ivory. Now!”

The newling rose from where he'd scattered himself, bones clicking back together. He eyed Philbert, who gave him a nod, and then he stepped through the bars without any resistance. No hex burned him. No magic flared. He walked past the chaotic scene where the Witch had just wreaked havoc and, with a deep breath, grabbed the tusk from the wall.

“Bring it to me!” Solsmaru hissed, his skeletal hands grasping through the bars like a beggar reaching for gold.

"I..." The newling's voice came out strange. Distant. "I know this." His gaze fixed on the tusk, turning it over in his hands. The candlelight caught the carved surface, the symbols etched into aged bone. "I've held hundreds of these," the newling said slowly. "Mammoth. Elephant.

Rhinoceros. Even kraken beaks." His skeletal fingers traced the etchings. "This one's... wrong. It's a fake."

"Agh, damnit," Regnier muttered. "Of course it is."

"He's lying!" Solsmaru hissed. "Bring it to me. At once!"

The newling brought it to the bars, and the sorcerer snatched it from his hands. He had but a moment to catch the eyes of Regnier, before the air suddenly shifted with a thrum of magic. Solsmaru brought the tusk high into the air.

"I am power incarnate!" the sorcerer roared.

He swung.

The bars quivered—screaming, shrieking, bending. Beeswax candles turned into yellow lances, shooting across the cell and splattering against the walls like blood. Goblets began to hum, a sound that climbed higher and higher until they shattered. The light in the cell curved, twisted, bent into impossible shapes. A family of mice that had been chittering in a moldy bread burst through, wondering what all the fuss was about.

Then they gyrated and exploded like furry zits.

Dust rained from the ceiling, filling the cell with a thick, impenetrable haze. When it cleared, the iron bars lay shattered across the floor, and for the first time in half a millennium, the cage was open.

Solsmaru stood there, the cracked ivory tusk still in his hands. "You *are* a smart, newling, this one is cheap," muttered the sorcerer. "An Ira would have gotten zilch. But I, with my legendary skills? Oh yes, this is just enough..."

Philbert strode forward. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Of course,” Solsmaru muttered. *A few spells left in this cheap thing. Let all of them be vengeance!* He raised his tusk.

“Wait—” Philbert cried.

With less than a flick, a pale green blast consumed him. Not just his bones—*everything*. His essence. His soul. His very existence. The magic tore him apart at a level so fundamental that not even dust remained, and in less than a breath, Philbert was simply...gone.

The others barely had time to scream before the witch, drawn by the explosion, sprang back down the stairs.

The Witch’s eyes were still red from sneezing, her nose dripping with dust-snot, her teat writhing with rage. Solsmaru didn’t even hesitate. Another flick and a crackling bolt of magic ripped through the air and tore her heart out. Just—out, like plucking an apple from a tree. The organ hit the floor with a wet thump.

His third flick sent the witch’s teat was ablaze like a sausage on a spit. There was a little screaming, to be sure, but soon the cell was quiet except for the sizzling of a burning teat.

The remaining cellmates knelt before Solsmaru one by one, and the newling followed suit in pure, unbridled fear.

“You doubt me now, merchant?” Solsmaru asked.

“No, no,” Regnier clattered. “But it’s time we go. Right...Master Sorcerer?”

“Am I not of epic power, Paroe?”

Old-Paroe cleared his throat. “A-hem...yes...very epic. That ivory won’t last much longer, though.”

“It will last one more spell,” Solsmaru said.

“Then get us out of here!” the newling said.

“No,” Solsmaru said.

“You promised!”

Solsmaru examined the cracked ivory tusk, still glowing with residual magic, then turned to his cellmates. He was petty; he enjoyed this. “Yes, I promised to free you all. But vengeance trumps promises. You all doubted me. Laughed at me. It’s not my fault Ira the Second was a fool! Well, I see no laughs from you cretins now! I could snap you all like twigs! You mocked me for a century. Let’s see how you like an extra four.”

“Wait, please!” Regnier said.

“Wait for what!” The sorcerer’s skull flashed red-hot. “I gave everything for this world! I invented spells! I cured diseases! I helped kings and queens and councils! And what did they give me? What did you give me?” He laughed bitterly. “Nothing. Mockery. Doubt.” He raised the ivory tusk, feeling the last dregs of power humming against his bones. “I don’t need any of you. I never did. It was always you – needing *me*.”

He carved darkness into the air. The portal gleamed with otherworldly light, showing glimpses of somewhere else. Somewhere far from this cursed cell.

“Solsmaru, please!” Regnier screamed.

But the Greatest Sorcerer Who Ever Lived stepped through the portal and vanished.

The silence was long. Heavy. Frockfurt was the first to move, shuffling back to his corner, Old-Paroe's jar still settled in his pelvis. He began digging in the dirt and soon snatched a handful of worms in his fist. "Maybe our next gaoler will like these worms."

Regnier slumped against the wall, flicking bones.

The newling stood frozen, staring at the spot where the portal had been. The hallway beyond was too still. Something had changed come the silence, something deep. As if the castle itself held its breath.

He raised a skeletal hand to his neck and stilled. *Wait...Duke Umberto. He killed me. Killed us all. Raised us with his unholy nocturne and left us in this cell to rot.*

"Can we not get out?" the newling said, suddenly panicked. "Can we not just leave? The doors, the doors are open..."

"Unless you're a mage with a tusk, shut your trap," Regnier said.

Old-Paroe's dust swirled within the jar – in a conciliatory fashion, the old man thought, but failing completely since no one spoke dust language. "No need for animosity, boys."

There was a sudden whirl. Magnetic, crackling, spurring. As if the fabric of the universe was opening before them. A rainbow flash exploded brilliantly through the cells. From out of the rift stepped a young mage with a bright smile.

"I am come to save the dead!" he declared.

The skeletons cheered—briefly. Behind the mage, two yellow eyes gleamed in the darkness.

“Master Umberto,” said all the skellies except the newling, who stood gawking, one hand clutching his throat.

The young sorcerer blinked. “I am no master, and I’m certainly not this beast Umberto! I am the third son of Ira the Second, apprentice of the Great Solsmaru, whom I have come to rescue on behalf of my great—”

A shape lunged. Fangs flashed.

Duke Umberto bit his neck. A jet of blood showered the skeletons. The mage clawed at his throat, made a wet, gurgling sound, and went limp. The body dropped as Umberto melted back into the shadows.

They stared at the corpse of Ira the Fifth. After a long silence, the nocturne resumed its soft, haunting melody. Frockfurt dug for worms. Regnier flicked his bone. Old-Paroe snored dustily. The newling looked at the dead mage, at his hopeless companions, and stumbled into an unoccupied corner. He slumped to the floor and hid his skull in his hands.

*So much for sorcerers saving us, he thought. I have a feeling we will be here for a long, long time.*

