

The Art Dealer

The art dealer Guillam swung the lock box shut and turned the key with a click, the end of another night. Yawning, he shuffled back to the back room - his bedroom – and gently set his lit candle on the nightstand by his bed. It was an uneventful day, but he got a couple of sales out of it, so he was satisfied. Changing into his bedclothes, he allowed his mind to wander and started planning his day tomorrow. A few things needed to be rearranged, a few appointments needed to be made...

Then he heard footsteps.

He strained to hear them, but they were footsteps, undeniably. He had remembered to bolt the front door, hadn't he? He took a long dagger from his nightstand's drawer and cautiously approached his bedroom door, listening. The footsteps slowed, then stopped, in the same way that one might slow down to inspect an art piece that had caught their eye. It seemed unsettlingly normal, given the circumstances.

As quietly as he could, he pushed the bedroom door open. Sure enough, someone was standing there in the darkness, facing Guillam's most recent acquisition, the visitor's back turned away from him. He was dressed oddly - entirely in red, it seemed, and trimmed with gold - and his black hair fell just past his shoulders. Guillam had dealt with would-be burglars before, but this man certainly didn't look or act the part of an ordinary burglar. The front door, he noted, was still bolted. He tried to imagine a burglar politely bolting the door behind them.

"H-hey, you!" he stammered despite his best attempt not to. "If you're planning to steal anything, forget it! I'm armed and I'm no stranger to dealing with thieves!"

The man turned. His eyes, set in a pale, corpse-like face, glowed a piercing red. He had the eyes of a snake - no, the eyes of a vampire.

Guillam choked. "W-what I mean is, uh... We're closed, but... Feel free to, um, continue looking... After all, art is meant to be appreciated, right? Hahahaha..."

The vampire did not respond, but studied the art dealer intently. After a long, tense silence, the vampire turned away and faded into red mist, disappearing through the door. Guillam staggered backwards, frantically scanning the room, then bolted for the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him and sinking to the floor, shaking.

The next day, Guillam swung the lock box shut, but hesitated before turning the key. His friend Leopold, over by his invitation, casually leaned over the counter.

"Say, Leopold. Would you mind, uh, staying here a bit longer?"

"Oh? Do you have a proposition for-"

"Leopold, *no*. I had a run-in with... well, an intruder last night. To tell you the truth, it's left me a bit rattled."

"Well, I don't know how much help I can possibly be, but I can stay as long as you like."

"Thank you." Guillam sighed with relief. Indeed, Leopold wouldn't be much help in an emergency, but he'd at least appreciate the company. "Would you help me close the store, then?"

"Of course."

With Leopold's help, he had completely cleaned the store before the sun had completely set. He double-checked the door's lock several times and hung protective charms around the door frame, muttering prayers to any god he thought might help.

"Are you alright, Guillam?" Leopold asked, concerned. "This is unlike you."

"Well, these are special circumstances..." Guillam had paid good money for these protective charms, and he could only hope that they worked. "Alright, that's probably enough." He walked back to his bedroom, and Leopold followed after.

As the sun set, Guillam kept his ear pressed to the door, listening. Leopold watched, casually resting against the bed. "Are you going to tell me what this is about or not?"

"Well, I... You see, it's..." Every time he started to speak, it just sounded ridiculous in his head. *A vampire visited my store to do some window shopping last night*. How could he possibly say that in a way that didn't make him sound like a madman? "N-never mind... It's probably nothing," he finally decided.

"Well, I brought some cards. Care for a game?"

"Yes... I could use some relaxation. Thank you."

Time passed, and nothing unusual happened. Guillam had, of course, lost all the money he set aside for gambling, being unable to focus on the game. Eventually, he opened his shutters and looked at the moon outside. It was well past midnight.

"This has been a blissfully uneventful night," Guillam remarked. He stretched, feeling his mind begin to shut down after such a long period of nightly alertness. "It's getting late; you should probably go home."

"This has certainly been interesting," Leopold replied with a disappointed yawn. "See you tomorrow, then."

Guillam followed until Leopold had exited the shop, then bolted the door behind him. He sighed in relief. Nothing strange had happened; no unusual sounds interrupted their card games. Perhaps his fears were for naught, or perhaps the protective charms had worked. He turned away and headed back to the bedroom. No sooner had he reached the bedroom door, however, than he heard a knock at the door. Guillam froze.

"Guillam?" *It's Leopold's voice, thank the gods.* "Were you expecting a package?"

Guillam furrowed his brow and doubled back, then swung open the door to see Leopold with his usual casual stance. "A package?"

Leopold gestured to his left. "Look."

There, indeed, was a small wooden box. The box was taller than it was wide, polished and engraved with remarkable craftsmanship and inlaid in intricate patterns with silver. Guillam approached it and gingerly picked up. It was surprisingly heavy. *The box alone would be worth quite a bit to the right buyer,* he thought. "I wasn't expecting anything like this, no..." he murmured. He unlatched the delicate silver clasp and found that the box folded outwards rather than opening from the top. Hesitantly, he opened it fully.

His breath caught in his throat.

It was the most spectacular piece of metalworking he had ever seen. It represented some god or saint that he didn't immediately recognize, but regardless, it was stunning. Impossibly small details made of precious gemstones adorned the figure, and the figure's eyes seemed alive. Leopold looked over his shoulder to marvel at it. "Astounding," he said. "I've never seen anything like this."

Guillam found it impossible to speak. He was fairly certain he knew what artist created this. *But... why? Why bring this here?* He inspected it closer and saw a note underneath the statue. He took it, and read it. "Do with this what you will." It was signed at the bottom with a flowing script - "Pisano".

"What are you going to do?" Leopold asked.

"I..." He paused. A sculpture made by a vampire!? "I think I'll take it to a priest."

"What!? You think this beautiful sculpture is cursed!?" Leopold gaped at him, then relaxed and shrugged with a sigh. "Well, you may have a point. It is rather odd to be receiving strange statues in the middle of the night."

Guillam nodded. "I think I'm going to do that now. I'd rather not keep this in my home without knowing if it's safe."

"No, it's not cursed," said the priest.

"Really?" Guillam knelt on a fine velvet cushion, on the verge of falling asleep in the warm, dark temple. He was only kept awake by anxiety of the business that had brought him here, as well as the pungent smell of incense and smoke from the roaring fire.

"It does, however, have faint traces of dark magic. It may have lived in a cursed place recently, but it is not *directly* cursed."

A small gathering of nighttime temple-goers crowded in to ogle the statue. "You're Monsieur Guillam, right? Where did you find this?" one of them asked.

"He received it from a mysterious benefactor," Leopold interrupted before Guillam could speak. "It was even signed, by an artist named Pisano." He showed off the card that came with the statue, letting everyone see it.

"That name doesn't sound familiar at all," someone said. "You'd think, with this level of skill, that they'd be famous by now."

"And what was that about a 'cursed place'? What kind of artifact is this?" someone else added.

"It's certainly a curiosity, isn't it?" Leopold said. He took Guillam aside, whispering to him. "This statue has already caused a stir. You should auction it off while people are talking about it."

"I don't know..." He had been trying to figure out the vampire's motivations. He remembered what he had said... *Art is meant to be appreciated, right?* He had just blurted that out, but maybe that was the reason for all this. If so, it was up to him to honor the artist's intentions, right? Especially if it earned him some coin. "Well... I'll consider it," he decided.