

Reginald stared into the polished metal hanging over the basin. Its dull reflection captured his troubled image. A man of 24 years stared back at him. Unkempt brown hair and several days' worth of stubble covered his face. It had been seven months since the events of Bern and his arrival in Dijon. Reginald had sought a quiet retreat within the city's walls. He was utterly disappointed.

His damnation meant the citizens of Dijon treated him with disdain and loathing. The knight had been in denial of The Lady's decree. But the hardships he continued to face soon validated her claim. The latest example involved his assignment as a bodyguard for the governor of Dijon. Reginald's unique background in combat made him more than adequate for the role.

However, Reginald's curse quickly reared its head. The captain of the guard suddenly took a dislike to him. The captain and a few of his trusted men threatened to reveal to the governor that Reginald was an English traitor. A baseless accusation, but one the knight knew he would be found guilty of nevertheless. With no choice in the matter, Reginald resigned from his post.

The knight spent the last few days in a ramshackle room he rented in the slums of Dijon. Cheap ale and moldy bread were his only companions. Here was the only place in the city he could go unnoticed, here amongst those damned by their own vices. How sad. Reginald had dined with the King of England. Damned and with no future prospects – what was he to do now?

"Resume your duty. Fulfill your obligation," a silvered voice answered.

Reginald whipped his head around to see The Lady standing in the middle of his small room. She was unchanged since he first encountered her in the outskirts of Bern. She was a vision in white garments. Her pale face was framed with locks of scarlet hair. And as always her eyes were piercing and knowing as they locked onto his.

"I...should have expected you at some point. As bad as things are now – they are only about to get worse. Aren't they?" Reginald asked rhetorically.

The lady said nothing. She waited patiently for Reginald to collect himself before giving her message, "You are needed in the village of Guerande. An evil terrorizes its people. Something comes in the night. One by one the children of the village are being taken - never to be seen from again. You will travel to Guérande and find the lost children.

Reginald remained silent for some time. He took in the Lady's words and what they meant. The last time he heeded her, he nearly died in battle. A vile necromancer and its undead minions nearly succeeded in killing him. Being damned as he was – his soul would immediately be cast into hell if he perished. A fate Reginald had fought desperately against and only narrowly avoided.

Once more he was being commanded to face deadly peril with that very consequence in

mind. Reginald steadied himself before he asked, "Do you know what it is that I will encounter there?"

The Lady made no response.

"Is there anything I should expect once I'm there?" Reginald pressed.

But the question, like the previous one, went unanswered. Reginald's temper flared at this. "Is there anything you'd be willing to share? I don't see why you bothered to appear here in person at all."

Without malice or contempt The Lady asked, "Do you care to share with me the details of your time here in Dijon?"

The anger and bluster left Reginald as his eyes traveled to the empty ale bottles littered about the room. Reginald closed his eyes. Through force of will he pushed the apathy he wallowed in aside. He was a knight. Despite any predicament or problem – nothing could change that. Reginald passed The Lady without another word – retrieved his mail armor from the chest by his bed. By the time he strapped on his gear and turned, The Lady was gone.

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It took the better part of six days to ride from Dijon to Guérande. In the brief time Reginald had worked at the governor's mansion, he had managed to make enough coin to purchase a horse. A foul tempered stallion named Misery. A name the horse no doubt earned from its jilted, former rider. Being raised around horses most of his life, the knight managed to tame the belligerent beast.

Through ragged mountain passes and rocky trails, horse and rider traveled. Rough country gradually leveled off by the fourth day. It became increasingly marsh like as run off from the mountains pooled into the lowlands. Thick fog rose above the marshes in the morning. The echo of Misery's hooves echoed in the eerie surroundings – it filled Reginald with a sense of foreboding.

On the morning of the sixth day, Reginald spotted the village of Guérande. It was a sizable settlement at the bottom of a long slope. The village was surrounded by farmland. Except from the south, where a large marsh served as the village's southern border. Banks of fog swept over the walls of the village. Even from his elevated position – Reginald could sense something was wrong. It was if the buildings and people below were tainted by a great shadow from the south.

Reginald gazed over the village a moment longer before riding Misery down the slope in a slow canter. The knight was quite mindful of the occupied guard tower by the gate. He took note of the two men who leaned on long bows casually, but kept his eyes averted. He did not want to draw attention to himself as he neared the town square. He observed the villagers as they shuffled about in a subdued fashion. The scene had a muted and

lifeless feel to it. And Reginald knew why – there were no children running about.

The knight dismounted and tethered his horse in front of an Inn. He felt eyes on his back as he walked into the dwelling and headed straight for the barkeep. He was a worn, hard looking man who gazed upon Reginald with open hostility. Reginald knew his tainted presence, caused by his damnation, would make finding answers to what plagued Guérande difficult. Still he needed to start somewhere.

Reginald reached into his cloak. He grasped enough coins for several rounds of drinks and placed them on the stained and dented counter. The knight noted how the barkeep's eyes lingered on the pile before he gruffly asked, "What can I get for you?"

"Some wine and information," Reginald answered evenly.

The barkeep grunted and bent down to retrieve a wooden goblet. He opened a tap of a large wine barrel, filled the goblet, and placed it before Reginald.

"Now, what do you need to know?" The barkeep asked irritably. The presence of the large pile of coins blunted his disdain only so far.

Reginald eyed the man impatiently before speaking, "There are stories of something lurking in the night. A beast that takes the children of Guérande and they are never seen again. What else can you tell me?"

"Everyone's afraid. Mothers most of all. They've taken to feeding their children wormwood and other bitter herbs. They think it will spoil the taste of whatever is after them. What's it to you? It is our problem and we will deal with it. It is of no concern to an outsider," The barkeep stonewalled. Suspicion filled his face.

The animosity directed towards him was nothing new. Still – Reginald fought to keep both his pride and temper in check. He didn't need to get thrown out of the village before he learned what threatened it. Reginald slid a few more coins towards the barkeep – hoping he could just buy the information he needed. The surly man cleared his throat and was about to speak when the inn's door slammed open.

Reginald turned to see a tall, broad shouldered man enter. He wore a fine suit of mail and a blue embroidered tabard. A thick round shield was slung over his back and a long sword was belted at his side. Given the quality of his dress, Reginald assumed this was someone in authority.

"I am Andre Laurent – the Sheriff of Guérande. State your name and business here," Andre ordered.

Reginald struggled not to let his frustration show. The interruption caused his answers to remain unspoken by the barkeep. The knight decided to take a different approach given the new obstruction of the sheriff,

"My name is Reginald. I am a simple man at arms looking for an opportunity to earn some coin. Rumors have spread. Tales of Guérande's children being stolen in the night are already being told in taverns as far as Dijon. I'm here to see if there's some reward for slaying whatever is responsible."

"Don't you mean, whomever is responsible – Englishman," Laurent accused. The Frenchman wore a pronounced sneer as he looked Reginald over.

This would go nowhere. The French naturally reviled any Englishman. The Plantagenet acquisition of Aquitaine through marriage to Princess Eleanor of France was a point of contention. King Louis VII had been furious over the arrangement, understandable so. An English King was a greater landholder in France than Louis himself. The sheriff, apparently, was no less bitter.

Reginald tried to humor the Frenchman without creating a potential scene, "You seem to have someone in mind already monsieur, I wish you success in capturing the fiend." The knight turned from the tavern counter and began to leave when the sheriff stepped in front of him.

"Yes, I do suspect someone of this. How strange that a foreigner should appear as our children go missing. I don't believe your story," the sheriff pressed.

"Yet it is the only one I have to tell," Reginald said through clenched teeth. The English hatred for the French was no less potent and Reginald's patience was at its limit.

Then Andre Laurent made the mistake of insulting Reginald's knighthood when he demanded, "You will surrender yourself to my custody. Now hand over your sword..."

## Part Two of The Lost Children of Guérande

Things seemed to move slowly at that point. Reginald could see Andre's outstretched hand ready to accept his sword. The knight stepped around him – knowing how the Frenchman would react. An affirming rasp of the sheriff's sword leaving its scabbard warned Reginald. The knight turned sharply as he drew his broadsword. Andre's eyes widened and he reared his sword back to strike the first blow. Reginald's sword intercepted the hasty attack and a deft twist of the wrist disarmed the sheriff. The finely polished blade skidded across the tavern floor. So complete was Andre's shock that he fixated on the lost weapon – even as Reginald's mailed fist collided with his chin. The sheriff of Guérande collapsed.

Reginald immediately turned to face what he knew would be a second threat. He dashed to the counter as the Barkeep fumbled with a heavy crossbow behind the cover of the counter. The short, ill-tempered man rose up from behind the counter only to have Reginald strip the loaded weapon from his hands. The knight deftly flipped the weapon around and pointed it directly at the terrified owner of the tavern. Reginald was very tempted to fire the loaded bolt into the hateful little man, but forced himself to toss the

weapon aside as he leaned in closer.

The barkeep shrank away, cowered like a whipped dog as the knight stared down at him. Reginald collected all the coin he had placed on the counter and said,

"The service here is deplorable. Then again, French hospitality was never very impressive. If you know what's good for you – you'll stay there like the cowardly serf that you are."

Reginald turned away from the man and towards the door. He kicked the groaning form of Andre hard in the ribs as he passed. Once Reginald was back onto the street, his rage at last dissipated enough for him to think clearly. People stared his way. He could tell they expected him to be wearing irons or at least accompanied by their sheriff. The absence of the local authority figure would only go unquestioned for so long.

There was nothing to be done about it now. He needed to leave before things got out of hand. Frustrated at the futility of his efforts, Reginald unfettered Misery and rode quickly out of town. Without being able to operate within Guérande, he would need to make camp somewhere close by. An unappealing prospect given whatever evil he was hunting for was no doubt nearby.

Reginald rode through a farmer's fallow field and along the marsh's edge. He needed to find some place suitable to keep Misery while he attempted to return and watch over Guérande. Hopefully without being apprehended by the very people he was trying to protect. A dilemma he faced when he slew the necromancer of Bern. The knight preferred not to repeat history and be chased out of Guérande by an angry mob – no doubt lead by a vengeful Andre Laurent.

The smell of wood smoke reached Reginald's nostrils. This was odd – given the distance he was from the village proper or any farm. Who would be out in the marshes at this time of night? Reginald scanned the tree line and spotted the tale-tell wisp of gray smoke. He rode towards the source slowly. Through the screen of trees Reginald discovered a hut. The structure was of rough timbers and a thatch roof encrusted with growth. Layers of moss and vine concealed the hut in a naturally camouflage. Indeed – if not for the smoke – Reginald would have rode on by.

Reginald dismounted Misery and walked the gray stallion up to the hut. The door suddenly opened. Out stepped a hermit with short gray hair and a well-trimmed beard. His face was lined with the deep creases of age. The old man's noise had been broken at some point in his life, for it leaned to the right. The hermit looked upon Reginald with calm and knowing eyes.

"Well now," the hermit began, "You look like trouble."

Reginald cringed. He didn't want to antagonize another person with his presence, but needed some help if he was to uncover the source of evil stealing Guérande's children.

Reginald met the hermit's gaze squarely and stated,

"I'm looking for some place to tether my horse, there's...a beast on the prowl and I'm hunting it."

"...Is that so? And I suppose you'll want something to eat while you're here as well, my lord?" the hermit offered more than asked.

Reginald tilted his head suspiciously. He was naturally skeptical of such quick and unforeseen acceptance. The knight remained by his horse. For all he knew the old man had some dagger tucked away in the faded red robe he wore.

"What is your name young man?" The hermit asked, sensing Reginald's hesitation.

"Reginald," the knight answered.

"Well Reginald, you have my permission to tether your horse to my home and go about pursuing your quarry. My invitation for dinner still stands," the hermit stated politely.

Without a further word he re-entered the hut.

Reginald could now smell the roasting meat, wafting from the open door. His stomach growled audibly and the knight could not deny the temptation. Reginald also knew he needed to keep his strength up. There was a likelihood he faced danger later that night. And...for some reason there was just something about the old man that put the knight at ease.

Reginald decided to accept the hermit's offer and entered the hut. What he saw was surprising. On the walls were shelves lined with glass bottles. Within them were small wooden ships, complete with tiny cloth sails! Reginald had never seen the likes of these creations. He stared in wonder at the displays until his eyes caught the dull shine of something. In the corner of the small hut was a strange staff with an intricate headpiece. Reginald felt he'd seen the staff somewhere else before...

His musings were disrupted as a wooden bowl filled with hot beef stew was passed to him. Reginald devoured the meal. The hermit smiled and took the empty bowl when the knight was finished. It was then that Reginald realized that he hadn't even asked for the hermit's name.

"Nicholas," the old man answered, "Now, I have a question for you. What 'game' are you really after? Outside my door lies La Briere. Long stretches of brackish water and suffocating vegetation are what you have to look forward to. It's hardly the place for a lord as yourself to hunt for a stag or deer."

Reginald's suspicion flared anew, "And how did you come to that conclusion!"

"My lord is in full armor and noticeable lacking a bow," Nicholas humored Reginald with a smile.

The knight palmed his face in embarrassment. He was surprised when he actually found himself laughing. He looked back to Nicholas with a smile and nodded his head in agreement. Reginald then proceeded to repeat the same story he told Andre. Honesty was still not an option. As much as Reginald appreciated the rare showing of kindness, there was only so much he could tell. And in any event, only so much someone would be willing to believe.

Nicholas was silent for a long time. He looked over Reginald skeptically, seemed to want to say something more, but remained silent. When he did speak it was to enlighten Reginald on what he sought,

"A very old evil has taken residence in La Briere. I've felt it in the depths of night, stalking towards the village. I've heard what's been happening. It's evil, young man, a powerful evil. My advice to you is simple. Get on that horse of yours and leave this place. Take my word – this land is fallen to darkness."

Reginald smiled sadly as he said, "If only I had a choice...I thank you for your hospitality Nicholas. I'll take my leave now and return to Guérande."

Nicholas sighed and shook his head sadly, but said nothing more. Reginald closed the hut's door behind him. In the distance he could see the lights of Guérande. Large clouds drifted slowly across the face of the moon – casting inky shadows across the village. Again, an overwhelming sense of foreboding filled the knight as he sprinted towards the village.

It didn't take Reginald long to cover the distance back to Guérande. Though his mail armor was heavy – the knight was in his prime and conditioned for such exertion. Reginald pressed himself against a section of stonewall which encircled the village. He still needed to get within Guérande without being seen and have the good (or bad) luck of disrupting whatever happened to be stealing its children.

Reginald had crept along the wall looking for an accessible point to climb over when a voice nearly jolted him out of his boots...

"Hello, monsieur. My name is Clemence."

Reginald whipped his head around and spotted a young girl beside him. She was a frail and filthy thing. Her blonde hair was uncombed, half of which hung to one side by a single pigtail. She gave Reginald an impish smile, more than aware of how badly she had startled the knight.

"How did – What are you doing here?" Reginald growled.

"Ssshh," the girl cautioned, "Keep making so much noise and the guards will hear you. I was just wondering what you were doing. That's all."

The knight scowled at the girl a moment longer before replying, "I'm here to stop whoever's been stealing children out of this village. You should be home where it is safe."

"No need for such anger milord. I'll be on my way..." Clemence trailed.

"Wait," Reginald ordered, "How did you get out here in the first place?"

The girl's smudge covered face formed an ear-to-ear grin and she motioned for Reginald to follow. The knight was flustered, but did so. It was humiliating when a little girl managed to sneak up on you from behind. The knight was also worried about this Clemence getting caught between him and whatever he came to find. The knight didn't need anymore-innocent blood on his hands.

Reginald followed Clemence as they sneaked along the wall. The girl's ragged slippers somehow found sure footing in the darkness. At one point Reginald heard the booted feet of guards walking the wall just above them. For a tense moment the pair didn't twitch until they were sure the guards had moved on. They resumed walking until they reached a large drainage spout. A deep stone chute that funneled water and feces out of the city. The smell was obvious evidence of the latter. Sir Reginald twisted his face in disgust – having to scuttle through the shit of the peasantry mocked his noble ancestry.

The iron grate that prevented entry into the city was not held in place by mortar any longer. The stone had worn away and the grate was merely propped up. Reginald pushed the grate aside. Once the knight was through the chute, he quickly took in his surroundings.

Directly in front of him was a large garden surrounded by several homes. Reginald could see bright light from behind closed shutters and doors. Reginald kept low. He listened for any sounds indicating he'd been detected. There was nothing. He realized the lights would stay aflame throughout the night, for the people of this village had reason to fear the dark.

Clemence resumed the lead and rushed behind a water trough on the other side of the garden, facing the drainage spout they entered from. Reginald followed the girl and knelt beside her in the darkness. It was past time he dismissed her and patrolled the village. She could only get in his way now.

"Clemence, I thank you. Now go home. I need to make my rounds," Reginald ordered.

The girl gave him a pained look, "What you're looking for will pass through here. Believe me."

"How would you know such a thing," Reginald pressed irritably. The knight wanted to be on his way and didn't have time for a little girl telling stories.

But Clemence would say nothing more. She only gazed to her right, down one of the paths leading into the village. Reginald didn't know what she was looking for. His teeth grinded with impatience and he was very tempted in leaving Clemence to her own devices. Then an odd light floated towards them.

The light bobbed and swayed down the path Clemence was so preoccupied with. Reginald strained his eyes, but could not see the source of the light. Tense moments passed. He remained still as the strange light approached. As it entered the garden, Reginald could see a young boy followed it. The child's entranced steps were made in pursuit of the odd glowing orb and Reginald knew where they were headed. Both the light and the boy moved towards the drainage chute leading out of the city.

Reginald stepped out of the shadows and drew his broadsword. The boy was oblivious of his presence, but the glowing orb stopped. Reginald peered into its center and saw a dark outline. Without hesitation the knight smacked the source emitting the light with the flat of his sword. A high-pitched squeak was emitted and the light faded substantially as it corkscrewed to the ground. Reginald stood over the oddity in wonder.

A tiny figure lay sprawled in the grass. It was naked, had flesh as pale as starlight, and the wings of a large dragonfly. Reginald knew what this was. A will-o-wisp. The miniature being struggled, but could not regain flight. Its wings were mangled by Reginald's attack. When the wisp realized this, it snarled viciously, revealing rows of tiny, pointed teeth. Reginald grimaced. A moment later the knight's foot descended upon the tiny figure as it screamed. Its bones grinded beneath the soles of Reginald's boot.

The death of the wisp broke the trance. The boy cried out once he became conscious of where he was. A natural reaction given the fact he just woke up beside a strange man holding a broadsword. Then there was a scrambling sound on the other side of the wall. Reginald heard something scaling the stone barrier. A dark form hauled itself atop the wall. The night made identifying the being impossible. But Reginald knew whatever it was – it was staring down at him. Cold certainty of imminent conflict filled the knight and he turned to the boy at his side.

"Run you fool!" Reginald shouted.

The lad broke into a terrified sprint, screaming the entire way. Reginald looked to see if Clemence followed, but whatever had perched itself on the wall had leapt into the air.

It landed just in front of the knight. The creature's height increased as it straightened. Reginald kept his guard up as he back peddled slowly. He struggled to see what he was up against. Long hair partially masked the beast's face. Reginald saw other will-o-wisps circulating around the dark being; they briefly illuminated blotches of scaly green skin and hide armor. Reginald's military training immediately noted the weapon it held. A

large animal femur it used as a club.

Whatever it was – it roared. A deafening blast of sound rattled the marrow in Reginald's bones. The club swept in like an avalanche and the knight brought his broadsword across to block. The force of the impact numbed his hands and drove him back. His attacker raised the massive weapon high into the air and Reginald didn't bother to block. The knight dived clear. The bone club smashed into the ground sending clots of earth into the air.

Reginald came out of the roll onto his feet and squared himself with his enemy – he circled to the left to stay clear of the overpowering weapon. The knight could not match the force being used against him. Reginald clenched his teeth in frustration – wished he could see what he fought.

And divine intervention came...in the form of Andre Laurent and a half dozen torch bearing town guards. A humorous chorus of "sacrebleu" was shouted and Reginald at last saw his opponent. A green skinned titan clad in a tribal armor of leather and animal hide. Skulls from various beasts were used as elbow and knee guards. The will-o-wisps buzzed around its massive body in a frenzy. What patches of flesh that were left visible by the armor were green and scaly. As Reginald's eyes traveled upward – he noticed a long, pronounced nose. Its ears were large and fanned. Reginald suspected what this monster was, but could it possible be...

"Troll!" Someone yelled.

The troll roared again, a booming war cry that affirmed its identity and froze its enemies in fear. It lumbered forward. The giant bone club reared back in preparation to strike. The guards brought up their steel shields defensively, thinking they were enough to protect them from the impact. The troll's club thrust forward into their midst like a battering ram. Men scattered aside, but one caught the attack squarely on the shield. Its metal crumpled under the blow and the guard was lifted clear off his feet.

Reginald used the distraction to attack. He rushed behind the troll as it engaged the sheriff's men – Reginald got within range as it turned its head and spotted him. A low, sweeping swing threatened to take Reginald's legs out from under him. But the knight hopped over the off balanced attack and charged.

Within such close range the troll could not bring its mighty weapon to bear and Reginald took advantage. His broadsword drove up into the exposed flesh of the creature's armpit. The knight could feel the blow was blunted by the troll's hardened skin. Reginald pulled the sword free and tried to drive it in further. But the troll's free hand whipped around in a vicious backhand strike that clipped Reginald's shoulder painfully.

Reginald gritted his teeth and struck back. The edge of his broadsword only struck the hardened leather armor on its thigh. Reginald growled in frustration and pursued. But in a stunning display of power – the troll leapt over and behind the guards. The men turned

and pivoted to face the monster, but it lashed out again. The power its reach and weapon gave it was overwhelming. Once more the guards were sent sprawling. The audible crack of bone as it slammed into steel reverberated loudly. Reginald charged the green titan with his broadsword high overhead. He brought the weapon down with all of his might...it was blocked by the troll and then Reginald was flying.

The knight hadn't counted on the monster being limber enough to follow up the block with a kick. An enormous two-toed foot slammed into his chest and Reginald was sent airborne. The knight landed several feet away. His eyes were clouded and he couldn't breathe. He tried to stand. His legs wouldn't hold him up. Where was his sword? Where was the troll?

Reginald's head cleared enough for him to see the men still battled the troll. He heard the approach of more guards and knew he needed to retreat as more torchlight flooded the garden. Reginald found his sword as another deafening roar signaled the troll's retreat. Its massive body scaled over the stonewall again as Reginald crawled back down the drainage chute. None of the guards noticed his escape into the night.

Reginald pursued his quarry across a farmer's field. The troll's towering form was a dark blot in the distance. Its long stride rapidly covered ground towards the darkness that was Brière. Reginald had wanted to intercept his foe before it reached the marsh.

But even if he did, what could he do to stop it? Reginald's ribs still ached from being kicked and his lungs labored for breath. The knight could barely keep pace. Fighting and overpowering such a powerful creature was unlikely, but he refused to relent.

He had been sent to Guérande to discover what was taking its children. Reginald was determined to stop it.

The knight entered the marsh. He felt the ground beneath him grow more sodden as he circumnavigated stagnant pools of water. This gave way to slow flowing streams and deep running channels as high as Reginald's waist. Cold water soaked through Reginald's armor making his progress through Brière miserable.

In addition, Reginald's vision was impaired by thick foliage that blocked what light the moon offered. Reginald strained his ears to hear anything above the slow churning water. He had no idea where the troll was. Under these conditions his opponent could easily step out from behind a tree and maul him. A fear Reginald fought against as he maneuvered wearily through the cold water and fog.

The knight decided to withdraw after failing to locate his enemy. There was just no way for him to track it. Reginald snarled his frustration and began backtracking out of the marsh. Startled cries of roosting crows filled the night air. Marsh water splashed loudly as a dark mass charged out of a copse of trees. The knight braced at first and then realized it was the troll. Reginald rolled to the side as the troll's massive club whistled by just above his head.

Reginald wrenched his broadsword free of its scabbard and blocked another strike. Again, as before in the garden, Reginald stepped forward to press his attack. The troll backed up a step and reoriented to smash him. The knight didn't hesitate. Reginald rushed forward through the hip high water as the club smashed down behind him. He spun to the side, using the momentum to hack viciously into the troll's thigh. Once more Reginald felt his sword partially blunted by the troll's thick skin. But this time Reginald did hear a satisfying roar of pain from his enemy.

Both combatants pivoted to bring their weapons to bear. This time Reginald was too close to dive clear of another attack. Forced to block, his broadsword absorbed little of the attack's strength. Reginald's arm-twisted painfully. The knight was knocked off his feet and into the brackish water. The current dragged Reginald along the bottom. He held his breath and remained submerged beneath Brière's waters.

The troll's club slammed the water around Reginald as it sought to finish him. The knight knew breaking the surface meant death. He let the current carry him away from the frenzied creature. When his lungs were nothing more than burning cinders he resurfaced. Reginald dragged his armor-laden body onto a muddy bank. He couldn't see the troll, but continued to hear it thrashing nearby.

His arm ached as he lifted himself upright. He pounded the mud in frustration. Every time he attacked, the much stronger creature simply swatted him aside. He couldn't hope to overcome the monster with his sword alone. It was futile. Reginald needed to escape Brière and devise a strategy.

He started walking. It was a cautious retreat away from the troll and further into tendrils of fog and twisted trees. Time passed and Reginald struggled to gain his bearings. His sense of direction had been upset during the battle. The knight was forced to admit he was lost. He heard no sign of pursuit and allowed himself to sag wearily against a tree. Without daylight there was no chance of him finding his way out of the marsh, no matter how badly he wanted to leave.

"Why are you just sitting there?"

Reginald jumped to his feet in surprise. He turned and saw the child Clemence trying to stifle a smile after having startled him again. The smile was completely abandoned as she noticed the furious expression on Reginald's face.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Reginald demanded.

Clemence shrank back fearfully and answered, "I saw you chase after the monster. I wanted to know what happened."

"I told you to go home. Your parents are bound to have heard the commotion and will think something has happened to you," Reginald growled.

A strange look crossed over her face, "They already know, Monsieur."

Reginald stared at the grubby child in disbelief. Her parents were either helpless degenerates or mad.

The knight didn't know how, but Clemence had followed him into Brière. This was despite the knight's explicit order for her to go home. He was of a mind to smack the impertinent little serf, but if she had followed him in...

"Clemence, I'm going to follow you back to Guérande," Reginald stated.

The girl looked disappointed, "You aren't going to fight it again?"

Reginald laughed bitterly, "Oh, no. I'm going to fight that beast again, but not tonight. And not with you underfoot."

Clemence stamped her foot impatiently and pouted. Eventually she began a sullen march back to the village with Reginald in her wake. Reginald continued to look over his shoulder, half expecting the troll to come barreling out of the woods at them. But no danger presented itself and the marsh gave way to farmland once more. Reginald sighed upon seeing Guérande lights.

"I can go the rest of the way without you, Reginald," Clemence huffed.

Reginald couldn't get a word in. He just watched the little girl dash towards the village. The knight kept an eye on her a moment longer – felt somewhat responsible for her safety. She had guided Reginald out of the marsh. When Reginald was certain nothing could intercept Clemence he trekked back to the hermits hut.

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Nicholas sat on the porch of his little hut with his eyes closed. He let his heightened senses take in the night. Nicholas smelled the damp earth and listened to the ceaseless chorus of crickets and frogs. Though he missed the Mediterranean, this land wasn't so bad. His presence here was a mystery, but a subtle change in the atmosphere told him answers were coming tonight.

He opened his eyes and a resigned sigh escaped his lips, "Hello, Bridget."

"Greetings, Nicholas," The Lady greeted.

She was a luminous being in the night. The old hermit had detected her presence earlier and waited for the angel to appear before him. He was about to learn why he was summoned to Guérande. The answer was not comforting...

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Reginald woke up needing to stretch his cramped muscles. The knight literally collapsed and fell into a deep sleep upon returning to the hut. An action Reginald knew to be reckless. He barely knew the strange hermit named Nicholas. Yet the old man had taken care of Reginald. A warm wool blanket lay overtop him, placed over him during the night as he slumbered.

The knight pulled his mail armor up and stared at the bruised flesh of his chest. A dull ache had settled where the troll kicked him. Reginald ran his fingers across his ribs. They didn't seem to be broken. He couldn't say the same about his sword. The weapon's edge was blunted and chipped in places. Damage incurred from blocking the tremendous blows from a giant femur the troll swung so proficiently. Now that Reginald thought about it, he realized the troll possessed genuine fighting prowess. A fact that did not bold well for Reginald.

The knight needed an advantage. If he could not get close to the troll, he needed to attack it from a distance. Somehow incapacitating the powerful creature would help as well. Maybe he could lure the beast into some trap...

Reginald mulled over several tactics in his head as he took a honing stone to the ruined edges of his broadsword. He was lucky. Escaping from such an encounter with his life was more than he had a right to ask for. If it were up to him he would simply leave these wretched peasants to defend their own village. But leaving wasn't an option.

The knight needed to get a ranged weapon and supplies if he was going to defeat his adversary. First he needed to get back into the village without alerting the local militia. Reginald doubted security by the walls were lax even during the day – not after Andre Laurent and his men got a good look at the troll. Reginald thought about the terrain surrounding the village. The knight looked towards the farmland at the forest's edge. Perhaps he wouldn't even need to sneak into the village...

As Reginald expected a man was sent to the surrounding farms seeking volunteers to hunt the troll. A detailed description wasn't forthcoming for those men gathered just outside of Guérande. A wise withholding of information, given the peasants would return to their fields if they knew the truth.

The few farmers recruited were armed with hunting bows and large wood cutting axes. Worn deerskin hides and shoddy spun garments were all the protection they possessed. Peasants were little more than cannon fodder in the end.

The local militia accompanying them was better armed. Large pikes rested at their sides. Massive weapons when used together could form a fearsome steel wall. Thick cured leather cuirasses and greaves protected them. A small detachment of militia was also armed with crossbows.

Andre Laurent and a few of Guérande's nobles were present. They wore coats of mail and bore both shield and sword. Normally these men would be astride their warhorses, but the swamp prevented their use. Even so, these men could hold their own if they didn't falter in the face of fear.

Reginald kept his distance and watched the assembly march into Brière. When he was sure the hunting party couldn't be signaled back – Reginald rode Misery into the village. The guards posted in the watchtower didn't sound an alarm or shoot at him. As Reginald expected – anyone who would've recognized him was already with the sheriff.

The knight rode Misery to one of the shops in the marketplace, kept his eyes down and averted from the suspicious gazes being shot his way. With his horse tethered, Reginald entered the small shop. Once inside he immediately noticed a fine crossbow hanging on the wall.

Reginald bought a bundle of rope as well before paying the merchant who had eyed him suspiciously the entire time. The man only sold his goods to Reginald because he correctly assumed the knight would use them in hunting the beast. That much was true. However, the knight planned on facing the troll alone.

Reginald was fastening his gear onto Misery's saddlebags when he heard a soft hissing sound. It came from the darkened space between the merchant's shop and the building next store. Reginald walked towards the source of the noise. Making sure no one watched, he entered the alley and saw Clemence. The little girl waved for him to follow her deeper into the gloom. Reginald shook his head in disbelief and walked up to her.

Her dirty hair was still hung to the side in a single pigtail. The dress she wore remained soiled and looked as if it were dragged through the brambles of Brière. Clemence's cherubic face was still unwashed since the last time Reginald saw her.

"Your parents still let you run amuck?" Reginald greeted.

The little girl shrugged, "There really isn't anything they can do about it."

"Well, I'm happy you made it home safe last night and I thank you for helping me escape the marsh," Reginald admitted.

Such an admission was a concession the knight normally forswore. But the grubby little girl before him deserved some encouragement. Seeing her face light up once more – Reginald turned to leave.

"Wait! Are you going to fight the monster again?" Clemence asked excitedly.

"Yes. And you will stay here. I have no idea how you managed to follow me into the marsh last night, but you will not do so again. Brière is filled with nervous men ready to let fly an arrow into anything that moves. Including little girls," Reginald warned.

Clemence squinted defiantly. When Reginald showed no signs of relenting she looked down in defeat. What a willful little girl, Reginald thought, as he turned to leave again. But Clemence stopped him cold.

"I know where that monster is...I can tell you," she offered.

The knight spoke over his shoulder, "Stop it. You won't convince me to let you come along. It won't work."

"I'm not lying, Reginald! Let me tell you! I promise I'll stay home. Please?" Clemence begged.

Reginald walked on a bit further, determined to ignore the pleas and be on his way. Clemence was just trying to get his attention...but what if she wasn't. He halted as he considered the situation. Clemence had navigated him through the marsh with ease.

Seeing Reginald hesitate, Clemence forged ahead, "You are going to enter Brière by crossing the fallow field. Keep going straight until you see the large stream. Follow its current until you see the stone steps and use them to cross. Up ahead you will find the skeleton tree. Just past that will be the hollow where it lives."

Reginald tilted his head in thought. He was tempted to dismiss Clemence's instructions, but the knowing look stamped on her face stopped him. What if she had spoken true? Clemence had known where the Troll would strike. In the end, there was no reason to ignore her directions.

"Alright, Clemence. I'll see how far I get with your instructions. But I better not see you in the marsh," Reginald warned.

The knight reached into his coin purse, wanting to reward Clemence for her aid. The poor peasant could at least buy herself a new dress. But before Reginald could extend his coin filled hand, the little girl was running away. Her frail figure disappeared behind the corner of the shop. Reginald thought about pursuing her, but it would only draw the attention of any remaining militia.

Reginald rode out the village and returned to the hut. It wasn't far from where Clemence had instructed him to go. The knight entered the shabby little structure and found Nicholas staring at the strange staff propped up against the wall. The old hermit's brow was creased and his arms were crossed over his chest.

"What troubles you old man?" Reginald asked.

Nicholas sighed heavily before replying, "I was recently enlightened. My purpose here in Guérande is now clear... and the explanation troubles me."

"The truth is seldom a welcome thing," Reginald reflected, "So? What is your reason for living near a troll infested marsh?"

Nicholas favored Reginald with a humoring smile, "You will have your answer the next time we meet."

The knight chuckled, "That's if I live that long, old man. I'm going back into Brière."

"Then farewell for now. I have faith that we shall meet again," Nicholas said.

The old man walked Reginald to the door. Though Reginald did not share the hermit's confidence, he appreciated the gesture. Once more the knight left Misery with Nicholas and marched across the fallow field towards the Brière to do battle with the beast that dwelled there.

Reginald strode along a deep, slow churning stream. His eyes constantly scanned the brush and trees for the quarry he sought. The marsh was silent besides the soft squelching sound his boots made as he tread over the mud. The sun shined wanly through trees and Reginald tried to remain in the shadows as he moved forward.

The knight hadn't encountered any of Laurent's men and didn't know whether that was a good thing. Reginald certainly couldn't afford being detained by the sheriff, but the knight knew they could overpower the troll together. Again, the alienation his damnation caused hampered everything he tried to accomplish. He could only hope the troll ran across the men of Guérande and they managed to cripple or kill the massive creature.

An increasingly unlikely scenario if Clemence's instructions were correct. Up ahead Reginald saw "the stone steps" the little girl had mentioned. Large, flat stones formed a natural bridge across the deep water and onto the elevated bank on the other side. Reginald crossed the stream with ease and quickly moved back into cover as he looked for the next landmark.

A roar sounded in the distance and Reginald froze in his tracks. No boar or bear could make such a noise. After several tense moments without hearing anything more the knight resumed his search. His surroundings grew dark as the trees became clustered and their branches blotted out the sun. Up ahead he could see a clearing.

What had to be the "skeleton tree" that Clemence described, stood in the middle of the glade. It was a decaying silver birch tree. Leafless, its pale limbs were rigid with death. Reginald's eyes caught movement around the trunk and saw several will o wisps entering a hole within the tree. Given their vicinity to the troll's lair – the knight knew these were the same creatures helping the beast to lure children out of Guérande.

Reginald wasted little time in gathering whatever tinder he could find. When he was sure he had enough for his purposes he raced up to the hole and jammed handfuls of moss into the will o wisps home. The knight saw tiny, pale arms sticking out the barrier as the

wisps attempted to crawl free of their impending doom. Reginald denied them. More moss followed and then pieces of dried birch bark.

Sparks from his flint ignited the death trap and in moments a fire blazed brightly. Reginald could hear the wisp's muffled screams as they were burned alive within the tree hollow. Reginald watched a moment more to insure none of the winged fiends escaped to warn the troll of his approach. Satisfied with the extermination, he proceeded through the glade.

Finally the hollow came into view. The knight's hand grasped the hilt of his sword as another roar broke the silence. This time Reginald was able to locate its source. Several yards ahead of him was a cave that served as the troll's lair. Reginald found cover to hide behind as the beast stepped out into the light. As he viewed the massive monster from afar – Reginald waited until it eventually plodded down a path into the marsh.

Reginald immediately began digging deep, narrow holes along the path. The foothold trap his father had taught him was a vicious way to snare an animal or man. A deep hole was dug into the earth. Then sharpened stakes were embedded into the sides of the hole in an angle. A snare with a slipknot was then placed over the hole and tied off to a nearby tree. When the unsuspecting prey stepped into the hole, the sharpened sticks would dig in and the snare would tighten as the prey attempted to jerk free.

Reginald doubted such a trap would cripple the troll, the thick rope he purchased might even snap given the beast's incredible power. Still, the trap would serve his needs if it managed to restrain the monster long enough for him to use the heavy crossbow. Reginald could fire the weapon safely while the beast remained leashed to a tree.

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Andre Laurent marched through Brière irritably. The peasants behind him grumbled constantly about the dampness and the cold. The militiamen under his command whispered to one another that this expedition was a fool's errand. Unlike the peasants, they knew what lurked in the eerily silent marsh. Having battled the troll last night, the pressured Sheriff of Guérande knew they were right.

But there was nothing else to be done. The villagers were in a state of panic. If he took no action he risked losing their confidence in his ability to protect them. This was an unacceptable outcome for the proud Laurent. His duty to the people of Guérande would be fulfilled when the beast's severed head rested atop a pike on the village wall. Such a victory would remove the bitter taste left by his recent setbacks. Especially the thrashing he received from the mysterious knight named Reginald.

Laurent was a noble. He was trained since childhood to bear arms in his family's name and in service to the king. To be disarmed and so soundly defeated was a humiliating outcome. Laurent's anger was only blunted by his immense curiosity. Reginald claimed to have come to Guérande seeking a possible reward if he ended the threat to its children. At first Laurent suspected the English knight of being the actual culprit. But last night he

saw Reginald in the village, locked in single combat with a troll. A creature he thought existed only in children's stories. The troll was most likely the reason for the lost and presumably slain children. So the knight had spoken truly.

If so, why did he still hold such a strong loathing and suspicion of Reginald?

The ground shook suddenly and Laurent knew the troll was upon them before he even saw the monster. The Sheriff of Guérande turned and saw the troll had charged them from behind. His green skin had concealed him in the surrounding vegetation and allowed him to ambush the peasants under his command. In stunned horror, Laurent witnessed one man simply explode into bloody scraps of meat and bone. His body obliterated by the giant club the troll held. With the blood of their fallen comrade sprayed over their faces – the peasants fled.

If Laurent hadn't acted it would have been a rout.

The pike militia fell into line behind Laurent as he rushed the towering troll. Seeing so many enemies arrayed against it, the monster retreated a few steps. The giant femur it held poised to sweep aside the men. Laurent needed to keep the troll off balanced to prevent it from bringing its full force to bear.

The sheriff signaled for the detachment of bowmen to take a position on the troll's flank. The pike men formed a loose formation up front. Their weapon's length kept them out of the troll's reach as the crossbowmen got into position. Seeing the discipline of the militia, the peasants regained their nerve and joined the fray with a ragged charge. Laurent's forces had held together, despite the terrifying display of the troll's power.

Laurent slashed at the monster's legs. His attacks served more as a distraction than a genuine threat. The steel pikes of the militia began to pierce the troll's armor of leather hide and scaly skin. Black blood oozed out of the wounds the men afflicted. The monster tried to advance, but another hail of crossbow bolts drove it back. For a moment it seemed the Sheriff of Guérande would have his redeeming victory.

Then the troll roared.

A deafening war cry that froze the men around it – their attack stalled. It was all the time the troll needed to rear the femur back and strike. Laurent saw a pikeman's arm torn free at the elbow, the weapon he held snapped in two. Another man went down when the troll's club collided with his knee. The leg snapped like a twig and he collapsed to the ground in agony. Seizing the opportunity, the beast stomped on the prone man's chest. His ribs caved in and he writhed in agony, gurgling blood before he died.

The peasants wavered. Their courage faltered in the face of the troll's renewed onslaught. Their hesitation gave the green titan the opening it needed to attack the detachment of crossbow men. Being lightly armed, they broke rank and fled. One of the militia did not flee fast enough and was grasped from behind. The desperate and condemned man flailed his limbs in a futile effort to escape. The troll lifted the man above his head and squeezed.

Like a wrung towel, blood poured out of the twisted wreckage of the body and into the troll's gaping maw.

"My god...", Laurent whispered.

He pushed through the fleeing peasants and joined the remaining militia that gave ground as the blood soaked monster advanced. The nobles finally joined Laurent - but their backward glances towards home told the Sheriff they weren't committed to the battle. Defeat was a certainty. Survival would take a miracle...

Reginald heard the distant screams of dying men. Laurent's mob had encountered the troll after all. The knight worked quickly to conceal the foothold traps. He left the crossbow loaded where he would make his stand. His preparations complete, Reginald set out towards the sound of battle. Reginald wouldn't have to worry about a confrontation with the villagers since they were preoccupied with running or fighting for their lives.

The knight moved swiftly around fetid pools, brambles, and fallen trees. His heart raced as the shouts of men and the roaring of the troll intensified. A few moments later he could see terrified peasants running through the screen of trees. Reginald drew his broadsword and took in the carnage as he charged.

Mauled and crippled bodies were sprawled across the blood stained ground. The remaining men who fought the troll were exhausted. Too tired to escape their enemy, they were fighting to the death. Amongst them was Andre Laurent. The surprisingly brave sheriff of Guérande was splattered with the blood of the fallen, but still standing. Reginald needed Laurent alive to keep the remaining men in the fight.

Without hesitation the knight flanked the troll and struck its leg a fierce blow. His elbows ached with the reverberation of the impact. Reginald moved quickly to stay behind his massive enemy as it turned to strike at him. Hardened steel found its mark again. The green titan howled in pain and frustration. The knight was finally forced to back up as the troll's giant femur swept by, barely missing its mark.

Reginald looked to the militia and noticed some used his intervention as a means to hobble away. Laurent was screaming at them to continue the fight. A few nobles and battered militiamen rallied to him and pressed the attack once more. Forced to return its attention to them, Reginald was free once more to assail the troll's leg. Again, he struck the monster's knee. His broadsword finally hacked through its hide armor and deep into its scaled flesh. It actually staggered and hope flared within Reginald, maybe he wouldn't need to lure the monster towards the traps.

Then the troll lifted its weapon, the strange looking femur, and high into the air. A lurid purple fire encircled the bone. Reginald and the men of Guérande backed up wearily, but could not anticipate what followed as the troll slammed the weapon into the ground.

A violent shock wave rocked Reginald along with everyone else to the ground. The troll's

baleful eyes locked onto the knight as it limped towards him. Reginald scrambled in the mud as he regained his feet, conscious that his adversary was closing in. Reginald's head still swam as he stumbled forward, narrowly avoiding the troll's attack. Though injured the monster closed the distance and managed to clip Reginald's hip.

The knight fell to the ground again. His leg was numb and useless. At that moment Reginald knew his death was assured as the troll laughed menacingly. But a young voiced pierced the damp air.

"Leave him alone!" Clemence screamed.

Reginald turned his head towards her voice. She stood between him and the troll. Her arms spread out wide as if she could somehow stop the monster that dwarfed her.

"Clemence...run!" Reginald ordered.

But the little girl ignored him. She waved her arms wildly and the troll tilted its head in confusion. Its eyes narrowed – an expression of what looked like recognition crossed its grotesque features. It swung its arm towards her and the girl skipped back a step, getting clear of the troll's reach.

Reginald growled in pain as he tried to rise to his feet. He could see Clemence leading the troll away from him. She darted just out of range whenever the monster tried to grab her. What made matters worse, was where Clemence was leading the troll. She was headed straight towards its lair and the traps he'd set.

"Clemence, sto -- !" Reginald's warning was interrupted as his leg buckled and pain shot up his hip. When he looked up again, both Clemence and the troll were gone.

Reginald hobbled after them. His leg gradually regained feeling as he followed the path back towards the troll's lair. Images of Clemence crippled by one of his traps tormented the knight as he struggled to move faster. A look behind confirmed he was on his own. The militia had routed after the troll's stunning display of power. The strange femur it used as a club was enchanted with some foul power. As if that green monstrosity needed any further advantage.

Reginald cleared the thick brambles and entered the hollow in a dead run. He heard an enraged bellow and spotted the troll. One of its legs was trapped and snared. Reginald scanned the surrounding area for Clemence, but didn't see the little girl anywhere. Suspecting the worse, Reginald sheathed his sword and took up the crossbow. The first bolt hit the troll's bicep and it turned to face the knight. It tried to rush Reginald but the noose around its leg held firm.

For several moments Reginald fired bolt after bolt into the troll. The monster was clever enough to shield its head with its arm. The vengeful knight simply fired bolts into the troll's bicep and shoulder. All the while the troll desperately tugged on its leg to snap the

thick rope leashing it to a nearby tree. Finally, the troll simply dropped its weapon and began gnawing on the rope with its teeth. Reginald knew he needed to end this now.

Drawing his broadsword once more, the knight charged the troll. His blade struck the troll across its back. The troll twisted onto the ground in pain, but continued to grind the rope with its molars. Its desperate flailing prevented Reginald from closing in and landing a finishing blow. And then the rope snapped...

The troll rose despite being struck on its shoulders and head. Reginald panted. His weapon and armor had grown heavy during the course of the battle. He could barely stand, but refused to surrender ground to this hated enemy - this slayer of children. With the enchanted femur in its hand once more, the troll stamped towards Reginald.

The knight ducked beneath the troll's first attack, but could not evade the strike that followed. Forced to block – the femur collided with Reginald's sword. The strength of the blow shattered the tip of the blade and Reginald was knocked to the ground once more. Though beaten and battered senseless, Reginald's numbed fingers still clutched his sword. He rolled onto his back, determined to face his death.

A soft and golden light suddenly enveloped the area. Even with his blood boiling from battle – it soothed and comforted. The troll on the other hand, fell to its knees and clutched the sides of its head. The light tormented it. Reginald looked for its source and squinted his eyes. At first he was unsure of what he saw. Then his eyes clearly discerned his savior.

"Well? Get on with it! Kill the damn thing already!" Nicholas implored.

The old man wore a fine white robe and held the strange staff that emitted the light. How a hermit could possess such power was beyond the knight. All Reginald knew was Nicholas had given him the opening he needed to finish this.

Taking up his broken sword in both hands, Reginald set upon the troll with renewed fury. Again and again his sword struck the creature's skull. Even as the weapon's edge grew dull from use, Reginald continued to bludgeon the creature. Finally there was an audible crack and the troll's brain oozed out of a fissure in its forehead. Exhausted and triumphant, Reginald fell to his knees beside his vanquished foe.

After a few moments Nicholas laid a hand gently on Reginald's shoulder. The knight shot the hermit a suspicious look. Seeing Nicholas wield that power raised many questions. But they could wait. The knight scanned the area, frantically searched for some sign of Clemence.

"Reginald, what's the matter?" Nicholas asked.

Reginald grasped the old man's shoulder and used it to pull himself to his feet,

"Clemence! Clemence, where are you? Did you see a little girl? She wore a tattered dress!"

A shadow crossed over the hermit's face before he spoke, " Reginald, you are tired and your wounds need atten--"

"Damn it! I don't care about that – we need to find her!" Reginald pressed.

The battered knight looked at Nicholas, puzzled as to why the man was showing no urgency in locating the child. Reginald struggled against a sense of foreboding that felt like a boulder on his chest. Why wasn't Nicholas worried?

"I...I know you will not listen. But I will say this anyway. Do not go into the cave, Reginald," Nicholas advised.

Reginald pushed off of Nicholas and began walking across the hollow towards the cave. His shattered blade fell out of his hands, was forgotten. Each step he took towards the darkened space before him was unbearable. He could not suffer this – not after all the bruises and blood.

As Reginald approached the cave opening an overpowering smell of rot filled his nostrils. The knight stopped. Realized he could not see anything in the darkness before him. A light shined over Reginald's shoulder and without looking he knew it was Nicholas. His way now visible, Reginald proceeded.

Diminutive sized skulls that littered the ground confirmed the fate and location of the lost children. The carcasses were relatively intact. The bones held together by the remaining sinew and flesh the troll hadn't chewed off. Reginald continued to search the cave – expecting and hoping against finding a fresh blood trail.

His eyes spotted something familiar. The remnant became more visible to Reginald as the light grew closer. A tattered dress lay strewn overtop a skeleton. It was Clemence's dress, but the remains were too old, could not be hers. What was going on here?

A chilling sensation numbed Reginald's left hand and when he looked down he saw Clemence. The girl was holding his mailed hand. She appeared unharmed. A look of genuine satisfaction stamped on her face as she gazed into Reginald's eyes.

"You did it, Reginald. You found us," she congratulated.

""You found us.""

Then Reginald knew the truth and squeezed his eyes shut, forcing himself not to cry.

The End