

Irradiated Lead

Our setting: the dry and cracked Atlantic seabed, beneath the parching midday sun. Our cast: Boussard, the monk, with only sackcloth on his back. Malleve, the knight, his encumbering armour glinting bright in the sunlight. And not too far behind: the great misshapen mountain of wet hair and bone, shambling slowly but unceasingly after the two men.

Through a bent pair of spectacles, Malleve squinted at the western horizon. It was ever so slightly thicker than all other directions, a shade darker, although it wavered in the hot air, indecisive about its reality.

"Three days since we spotted it, and no matter how far we walk, it still refuses to emerge from behind the earth's edge. How deep is our last flagon, Boussard?"

"A day's worth at most. Unless I empty it onto the ground and plunge into the insatiable mass of our pursuer right now."

"If the distant shore stops running from us, we should reach it in only an hour. Lift your spirits! It isn't far now."

The mountain ambulated just slightly faster than they walked. This perpetual shifting of such a mass produced a constant rumble, punctuated by the staccato snapping of bones, that the men had tuned out long before. Its motion was that of an amorphous wheel, hair and bone disappearing between it and the earth as more reappeared at its apex, rolling ever forwards. It did not rest or deviate from its targets. To pause in their toiling march for even a moment was to allow the mountain to grow that much nearer. Malleve could no longer lift his feet from the earth, shuffling more than walking. The sword he held carved a wavy line in the earth behind him. Boussard dragged himself forward, every step a hard-fought battle of will.

"I can think of nothing but our pursuer in this din. Tell me, Boussard, of your life before. Did you indulge in wine? Did you sneak out of the cloister to secretly break your vow of chastity? Did you laugh heartily with your fellow man?"

"Not once. I devoted my life to the study of natural philosophy and to meditation on the divine. Before the sky tore open and the sea burst into flame, I was copying a manuscript by the ancient bishop Irenaeus of Lyon. He was discussing the Valentinian heresy: how they affirmed a pagan and Pythagorean theology in which all descends from a Dyad: one named 'unspeakable,' one 'silence.'"

"Hardly a true tale to take my mind off things. I'll say, if I knew there were maidens and mead waiting for me on that western shore, I could sprint the whole distance right now. There's no sacred image I wouldn't trample on for the sight of a drink in this heat. I don't mean to offend you, Father."

"I'll pay it no mind. There's no more use for virtue where we're headed. We don't have much time left for vice, after all."

"Do you mean to disparage my soul, Boussard? My stomach might be deep, but I'm no sinner. I served my Lord on earth and my Lord in heaven without complaint. I trekked to the holy land with all of Christendom beside me to retake Jerusalem. I have no doubt as to my place in paradise."

"If your destination was heaven, Malleve, you'd be there by now. Look around. The earth is being cleansed of the damned to prepare it for the second coming. We are delaying His cosmic itinerary by prolonging our deaths so."

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Bones littered the landscape. Fish spines snapped under their feet. They slinked through whale vertebrae and gave a wide berth to gargantuan beaks left gaping at the sky. The mountain merely subsumed all it encountered. Most of its bones were not of the sea, though; they were of men.

"The most profane, God-forgotten salt plains of Asia Minor hold not a candle to these waste lands, good Boussard. I can scarcely wait to emerge onto that Eden on the shore and be rid of our blasted hounddog." He glanced back to see the hulking mass shiver in the chill.

"Yes, Malleve. It is not far now. Paradise will embrace you with open arms." The horizon had grown no closer. The monk went for a sip of water, but not a drop escaped

the flask. They exchanged a weighty look. He dropped the empty vessel and kept walking.

"I'll say! Perhaps we have been thinking of it all wrong. Perhaps the answer has been right in front of us all along — or, rather, behind!" Malleve swivelled around to face the mountain edging towards them.

"What has gotten into you, you bedlamite! It doesn't tire! Resume your march!"

"If it moves, it bleeds, Boussard, if the laws our Lord endowed upon the world still hold. Here is the one source of meat and drink in this whole blasted landscape. Stand back!"

He lifted his sword from the ground with great difficulty. It seemed to have gained a great weight since the start of their march. He stood in a fighting stance as the mountain encroached, surrounded by bones, the frightened monk wringing his hands beside.

"Have at thee!" he cried, and other cries, devolving into the animal noises of war as it grew nearer. Once it reached arm's length, he raised his blade high and slashed at it. Some hair was torn, but the bones jutting out held firm. Boussard tugged thrice at his sword before it came free from the tangle, all the while shuffling backwards before its ceaseless approach. The mountain blotted out the sun from here, its long shadow chilling the two men. This close, all that could be heard was its internal rumbling, a fell noise that no man nor beast could have produced. Like the prolonged collapse of a stone keep.

Malleve stabbed and stabbed, each gash evoking no response from the mountain. He stumbled on the bones underfoot as he hurried backwards. Boussard fumbled for the crucifix hanging around his neck, but once it was in his hands, his mind went blank. Malleve opened his mouth in a roar, but it was rendered silent by the deafening rumble. He plunged his sword deep. It disappeared in the mass of hair and bone. He pulled at his hand, but it wouldn't budge.

Boussard grabbed onto his chest plate and pulled hard. Malleve squawked in pain. The knight's sabaton slipped and stuck fast in the mountain. He thrashed and flailed like a fish caught on a hook, his only free hand squeezing Boussard's desperately as the monk pulled. He sank until the hair had engulfed his knees and elbows, then his waist and shoulder. He gave one final look at the scrambling Boussard. A memory flashed into

the monk's mind: a glance he shared with a condemned man the moment the pyre beneath his stake was lit. Abject.

His head was swallowed. The plated arm, still sticking out, went limp. Boussard dropped it in guilty revulsion and watched as the rest of the body was consumed. It resembled Thetis dipping her son into the river Styx. He turned and kept walking.

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Boussard couldn't tell how much time passed. The sun no longer seemed to budge from its seat at the firmament's crown. His stomach was ravaged by bouts of stabbing pains. His throat cracked and bled with every breath. He barely stumbled along, clutching his gut, his steps more to stop him from keeling forward than to walk. Malleve's last moments replayed over and over in his mind. He couldn't tell if the rumbling was deafening or silent anymore.

"My Holy Lady, Mother of God, hear my humble petition. I ask not for food to mend my hunger nor drink to quench my thirst. Neither do I ask for the life of my companion, whom you have deemed it wise to free from this wretched land. I ask only for mercy — a droplet from the endless ocean that is your compassion and justice. I would prostrate myself before you if it did not spell certain death. Oh, Lord."

He realised, eyes trained on the horizon, marching forward, that his stomach no longer ached, and his throat no longer stung. He had surpassed the crescendo and now lay on the other side, the impossible, silent plains after pain. His stumbling walk achieved a steady rhythm that carried him forward thoughtlessly. His mind was as still as a subterranean lake, its surface untouched since the dawn of the world.

The western horizon began to dilate. That one-dimensional line, ever so slightly darker than in the north or south, began to take on shape and definition. Arid earth turned to grass at the shore, and behind that a dense row of trees, and far beyond, a mountain range that stood tall and firm. He released an inarticulate noise of desperate joy and broke into a run. The mountain's rumbling slowly subsided as he approached the shore, numb to the pain in his legs.

The verdant shore shone with colour under the sun's radiance. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Every tree could be made out now: they were taller than any he had ever

seen, branches swaying gently, their bark a vibrant shade of red unlike any back home. The rumbling subsided and dropped almost to nothing as he ran, until, slowly, it began to rise. He glanced up, his run halting. The rumbling came from before him, past the grass, past the trees. The mountain range shivered. Their darkness was not of stone. As he watched, the mountains began to approach.

Boussard sank to his knees, head hung low. The rumbling grew until it bore into his ears from all sides. Looking up, the sky narrowed as if the cosmos was closing its eyes. Mountains of wet hair and bone squeezed towards him, never tiring, never wavering, until that pinprick of light above disappeared.