

Secondhand Saints

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Introduction

There are only two kinds of value left in the world: what keeps you alive and what keeps you believing. Food, fuel, filters—those are obvious. But belief? That's trickier. It glints from a saint's fingerbone sealed in amber, from a cracked smartphone with the last voicemail of a mother, from a museum label that still insists on the word original. In the years since the dead learned the bad habit of returning, we've learned a different habit: we sell faith by the gram. We are the middlemen of memory, hawkers

of holy and almost-holy things. We call ourselves scavengers because thieves is a moral word and morals are a luxury we can't always afford.

Civilization did not collapse neatly. It slumped, like a drunken guest who swears they're fine while dropping heirlooms. First went the trains that ran on time, then the ones that ran at all. After that, the official voices told us to stay calm and indoors—advice that only made sense if your doors were better than your neighbor's. Museums tried to wait it out, climate control humming bravely as the grid flickered. Clergy argued over protocols for sanctity in quarantine. Bankers invented new derivatives to securitize hope. Out in the alleys between these grand failures, we learned entry codes, memorized guard rotations, and cataloged what was worth the run.

A heist is a prayer with moving parts. It begins with intention—who, what, how—and proceeds through confession: the small lies you tell to get a little closer to the thing you want. Along the way there is penance, usually paid in blood, and redemption, sometimes. Our crew is not the kind you'd select if you were building a better world from scratch. We are the ones the world had left over: a locksmith with ecclesiastical patience, a forger who cries at operas, a medic with a knack for stitching both flesh and stories, a driver who can parallel-park an armored truck in a courtyard the size of a chapel vestibule. And me, who keeps the lists and the ledgers and the promises we rarely make out loud.

We steal relics because there is a market, and there is a market because someone is always trying to buy back a future with the past. The right reliquary can buy you passage through a barricade. A chalice can purchase six months' worth of antibiotics. A saint's anklebone will convince a militia that your caravan is blessed enough to spare. The old world melted down its gods into commodities long before the undead began their rounds; we only refined the process. The richest clients we ever had kept their apocalypse in private vaults. They wanted assurance that meaning could be stockpiled. We assured them until the money cleared.

But meaning resists inventory. Objects carry their own stubborn biographies. Some of the things we lifted refused to be just things. They arrived with a weight that manuals can't measure, humming with the kind of power that either belongs in a liturgy or a laboratory. We told ourselves that these were just echoes, tricks of a tired mind in tired times. Then we started finding artifacts that didn't fit the catalogues or the folklores, items with inscriptions that at first seemed like museum Latin and then read like a set of instructions for how to end a curse. A relic isn't a solution, we reminded each other. It's a story with a handle.

This is a book about robberies and about reverence, about the long con and the longer questions. If it laughs, it does so in the only way laughter survives here—quietly, with a hand over its mouth, not wanting to wake what sleeps in the next room. You will

meet collectors and counterfeiters, wardens and undertakers, and enough bureaucrats to populate a small afterlife. You will ride with us through sightless nights and through afternoons so bright they seem like amnesty. There are chases in stairwells and arguments over ethics at loading docks. There is, inevitably, a safe that opens the wrong way.

Some say the undead cycle is a natural correction, a fever breaking across the species. Others say it's a judgment we sentenced ourselves to long before it arrived, in boardrooms and basements, in little decisions that made the dead walk because we preferred our comforts to our reckonings. We did not set out to arbitrate between these sermons. We set out to get paid. Yet certain jobs do not end when the truck doors slam. Certain truths, once lifted, cannot be returned to their cases without leaving fingerprints.

If you want guarantees, go find a cathedral that still has a roof and sit very still beneath it. If you want answers, you may get a few, but they will ask for payment in currency you do not expect. We have tried to be honest, which is an odd promise for people like us. Honest about how we planned it and how it went to hell anyway, about who we saved and who saved us, about the compromises you make when your mortgage is mortality. Honest, too, about the moment we realized that some treasures are not meant for any market, not even the blackest one.

We are, at best, secondhand saints: we handle holiness without owning it, pass it on without fully understanding its charge, and hope it does more good than harm in the next pair of hands. If there is a patron for people like us, they have a pawnshop for a basilica and a receipt book for a missal. This is our account, written before memory barbers away the last of its clarity. The cases are labeled. The alarms are armed. The dead are punctual. Shall we begin?

CHAPTER ONE: Scavengers' Credo

The first rule of scavenging, etched into the collective memory of every crew that ever risked a pulse, was simple: don't become the meal. The second, more nuanced but equally vital, was: never trust a pristine item. Rust, rot, and general decrepitude were badges of honor, proof that something had survived the initial purge and subsequent neglect. A gleaming relic was either a trap, a forgery, or so thoroughly cursed it had repelled even the hungry maw of time. We preferred our treasures with a patina of apocalypse.

Our current target, however, was stubbornly un-patinated. It was a silver-plated chalice, allegedly used by some minor saint to bless the loaves and fishes, now

residing in the secure, climate-controlled vault of a private collector named Elias Thorne. Thorne was the kind of client we usually dealt with on the selling side: a man who believed the world had merely paused, not ended, and that his wealth still conferred immunity from its grimmer realities. He kept his collection polished, his security systems state-of-the-art, and his undead guards surprisingly well-fed, considering their dietary restrictions.

"It's a fool's errand," muttered Silas, our locksmith, running a skeletal finger over the faded blueprint of Thorne's vault. His hands, usually steady as a surgeon's, had a slight tremor tonight. He'd spent too long in the archives, breathing dust and the ghost of information. "Too clean. Too perfect. A saint's chalice, indeed. More likely some communion wafer dish from a particularly fancy church."

"The provenance papers say otherwise, Silas," I replied, tapping the thick dossier. "The Vatican archives, before they went up in smoke, confirmed it. And the market for confirmed relics, however minor the saint, is astronomical. A chalice like this could buy us a year's worth of high-octane fuel." Fuel meant movement, and movement meant survival.

Silas grunted, adjusting his spectacles. "A year's worth of fuel to run from the bigger problems this 'saintly' chalice will inevitably bring. You mark my words, Elara. Clean things are always trouble." He paused, looking at the faded photographic plate of the chalice. "Besides, it's silver. Silver tarnishes. This one gleams like it was polished yesterday. By a ghost."

He had a point. Most genuine relics we encountered were as battered and weary as the world itself. This chalice, however, in the grainy black and white of the old photo, shimmered with an almost ethereal glow. It felt less like a historical artifact and more like a carefully staged prop. Still, the intelligence on Thorne's wealth and his desperate need for *authenticity* was solid. He was willing to pay. We were willing to take.

Our medic, a woman named Lena whose hands were as adept with a sutures as with a pry bar, chimed in. "Maybe Thorne has a particularly diligent house staff. Or perhaps, Silas, you're just getting old and cynical." She grinned, a flash of white teeth in the dim light of our makeshift planning room. Lena was the youngest of us, barely old enough to remember the before-times, but her pragmatic ruthlessness was honed sharp by the now-times. She believed in efficacy, not omens.

"Cynicism is a survival trait, Lena. You'd do well to adopt some," Silas retorted, but his tone lacked its usual bite. He respected Lena's instincts, even if he often disagreed with her methods. "What about the guards? Still the... walking sort?"

"Thorne prefers them, apparently," I confirmed, consulting my notes. "Believes they deter living thieves more effectively. Fewer ethical qualms about dispatching them, I

suppose. And they never complain about overtime.” The undead guards were a known quantity, slow but relentless, and easily distracted by loud noises or the scent of fresh meat – which we tried very hard not to provide.

“Easy enough to deal with the slow-moving variety,” Lena said confidently, sharpening a small, wickedly curved knife. “A few well-placed headshots, a little... redirection. Nothing we haven’t handled before.” She spoke of dispatching the undead with the same casualness some people discussed grocery shopping. It was a necessary skill.

Our driver, a silent behemoth named Kael, merely nodded from his corner, cleaning the scope of his crossbow. Kael rarely spoke, preferring to communicate through grunts, gestures, and the devastating accuracy of his bolts. He was our muscle, our getaway, and occasionally, our moral compass when things got too murky. His loyalty was fierce, his patience legendary, and his driving skills unparalleled. He could navigate the choked, collapsed roadways of the Old World with the grace of a gazelle.

The plan was audacious, even for us. Thorne’s mansion was a fortress, a testament to pre-collapse opulence and post-collapse paranoia. High walls, laser grids, pressure plates, and, of course, the aforementioned undead sentinels. The vault itself was buried deep beneath the main house, accessible only via a labyrinthine system of corridors and an elevator that required retinal scans, voice authentication, and a specific sequence of archaic dance moves, or so Silas claimed.

“The dance moves are a joke, Elara,” Silas said, catching my eye. “But the rest is real enough. And the security feed is encrypted with a legacy system that hasn’t been updated since the first wave. We’ll need Ophelia for that.”

Ah, Ophelia. Our resident technomancer, our ghost in the machine. She wasn’t present at these planning sessions; she worked remotely, from a hidden bunker deep within the city’s forgotten sub-levels, her only connection to us a series of crackling, encrypted radio bursts. Ophelia was a genius, a savant with circuits and signals, capable of coaxing information from dead networks and turning hostile defenses into docile sheep. She was also notoriously mercurial, her moods as unpredictable as a dying power grid.

“Ophelia is already on it,” I assured him. “She’s been probing Thorne’s network for a week. She reports a certain... archaic elegance to his systems. Says it reminds her of a child’s toy, all bright colors and simple logic, despite its layers.” This was Ophelia-speak for “challenging but doable.”

“Elegant, my ass,” Silas grumbled. “It’s designed to keep honest folk out, and dishonest folk like us very, very dead.” He unfolded another section of the blueprint, revealing the ventilation shafts. “The only way in without tripping every alarm and waking the entire neighborhood of ghouls is through the old coal chute, which leads to

the boiler room. From there, a narrow service tunnel, then the ventilation system. It's tight. Lena, you're our contortionist."

Lena smirked. "I've squeezed into tighter spots than a coal chute, Silas. Besides, I prefer the path less trodden. Fewer booby traps."

My role was coordination, information gathering, and, when necessary, the smooth talker who could convince a skeptical client that our recently acquired artifact was indeed the genuine article, with a lineage as impeccable as their own faded family crest. I kept the crew organized, the contacts fresh, and the prices high. In this post-collapse economy, information was currency, and I was a wealthy woman.

"Kael, you'll be on perimeter and extraction," I continued, pointing to a diagram of the mansion's outer walls. "We'll need a clean ingress and a swift egress. No noise, no fuss. The fewer bodies, living or undead, the better. We don't want to draw attention from the local militia. They've been jumpy lately."

The local militia, an outfit calling themselves the "Righteous Scourge," were a constant headache. They were less interested in law and order and more in hoarding resources and asserting dominance through intimidation. They saw scavengers as competition and dealt with us accordingly. Avoiding their notice was paramount.

The planning stretched into the night, fueled by bitter coffee and stale rations. Every contingency was discussed, every variable considered. What if the vault door jammed? What if the power flickered? What if Thorne himself was awake and decided to take a midnight stroll past his prized possessions? We ran through scenarios until exhaustion blurred the edges of the maps and the faces of my crew.

As dawn approached, painting the sky in sickly shades of bruised purple and grey, we finalized the details. Lena would go in first, through the coal chute, neutralizing the initial set of low-level undead and disabling the motion sensors. Silas would follow, picking the mechanical locks and bypassing the archaic alarm systems leading to the vault. I would be their eyes and ears, coordinating with Ophelia, feeding them real-time data from the mansion's compromised security network. Kael would be the anchor, waiting in the repurposed armored truck, engine running, ready to spirit us away.

The weight of the plan settled heavily in the air. This wasn't just about a chalice; it was about reputation, about our next meal, about proving that even in a world gone mad, a well-oiled machine of human ingenuity could still triumph over technological hubris and the walking dead. It was about sustaining the illusion that we were in control, that chaos hadn't won entirely.

"Any last-minute concerns?" I asked, looking at each of their faces in turn. Silas, with

his worried frown; Lena, her eyes bright with anticipation; Kael, a stoic statue of readiness.

Silas sighed, pushing his spectacles higher on his nose. "Just the usual. That it's too easy. That the gleaming chalice has teeth. And that Thorne, for all his Old World airs, knows more than he lets on." He looked at me, a flicker of something close to fear in his gaze. "Some things are buried for a reason, Elara. And not all reasons are written on a museum plaque."

I nodded, acknowledging his unease. He wasn't wrong. Some treasures were best left undisturbed. But the world didn't offer us that luxury anymore. We traded in the ghosts of value, and sometimes, those ghosts traded back.

"We'll be careful, Silas," I promised, though I knew promises were cheap currency in our line of work. "We always are."

And with that, the Scavengers' Credo was invoked, not in words, but in the grim resolve in our eyes. Survive. Adapt. And for God's sake, don't touch anything that looks too clean. Tomorrow, we would test that credo against the gleaming, potentially cursed, chalice of Saint Whoever.

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