

Part 2

The SEDLEC OSSUARY

(The Church of Bones)

By: Caitlin Quinn



"NO! I am so not doing this!" Shayla cried. Her hands shook and the sweat beaded on her forehead; her feet refused to move. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the... unbelievable. As if the Family Crest and the wall decorations hadn't freaked her out enough. What was in front of her was more than she could handle. Right now, she wished she'd watched more of the horror movies Colton was always teasing her about. It might have made this easier. Then again, probably not. Just would have given her more reasons to be nervous.

Shayla stood near the doorway, still not wanting to enter the Chapel. Colton, on the other hand, was fascinated. He continued snapping photos, saving them to send to his friends back home as soon as his cell phone got enough bars. Madison was looking around, not quite as bored as she pretended to be. She noticed Shayla wasn't with the group, scowled, and searched for her sister, finding her hovering by the entryway. Madison walked over to join her.

"Come on, it's not so bad, really, it's kind of pretty, come on, just stay with me," Madison whispered encouragement into her sister's ear.

Shayla steeled herself, then took another look. Hanging from the chapel's ceiling, was the most grotesque, horrendous sight she had ever seen. An enormous chandelier made entirely of human bones, and according to what little Shayla could grasp from the guide, it contained at least one of every bone in the human body. Hanging from the nave, garlands of skulls draped the vault, their empty eye sockets staring at her, watching her, following her every movement. Each of the eight outstretched arms of the fixture held up a grouping of eight or maybe ten skulls. Finger and other short bones dangled from each extension, further adding to the macabre design. Still more skulls and arm bones decorated the rope the chandelier was suspended with.

All along the ceiling, even more skulls lined the room, forever contemplating the tourists below. The walls were adorned with hip bones, the long femurs reaching towards the ceiling at odd angles. The hip bones were supported by shorter bones, tapering to sit on tables, also constructed entirely of bone. Shayla thought the chalice looked like lamps, the hips and femurs forming what would be the bulb's cover, though, when she looked again, she realized the shades were upside down to a normal lampshade. Beside each of the abnormal fixtures, jawless skulls rested on top of each other, towering to the ceiling.

"It's okay, Shayla, I'm not leaving you," Madison told her. She put her hand on Shayla's arm for reassurance. "This is a holy place, nothing here will hurt you."

"But, it's so bizarre, all these eyes staring at me, yet, they're not, they can't. It's weird," Shayla squeaked.

"You can lighten your grip on my arm, just a little, okay?" Madison peeled Shayla's fingers off her arm, revealing whitened skin where it had been squeezed so hard. "I promise, I'm not leaving you. Come on, we're falling behind the others. I can't hear what the guide is saying. And, where is Colton?"

"I see him, he's right next to Eliska. Look at him, he's so enjoying this," Shayla pointed to a bone adorned wall to their left, Eliska was telling the group what it was.

"Hurry, we're missing it." Madison tugged her along, catching up to the group just as Eliska was showing them another wall. Rint had created a shrine there - something resembling a ship's wheel. Once again, the centerpiece was a skull, with the eight spokes made of femurs, a tailbone resting between each length. The pedestal holding it up was stacked hip bones, supported on upright femurs. On both sides of the platform were two more skulls, perched on top of still more bones. The wheel reminded Shayla of Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl. She could just see Captain Hector Barbossa at the helm, appearing in the moonlight,

guiding the ghastly ship over the treacherous waters. She secretly loved the Pirate movies, despite the zombie-like ghosts of the Black Pearl's crew.

"How way cool is this? Look at all those bones, staring at you, Shayla. They're watching you, putting a curse on you!" Colton oogedy-boogied her, satisfied when she flinched.

"Stop sneaking up on me!" Shayla screamed, flinching when everyone turned to stare at her. Whispering to her brother, "You are so dead when we get out of here. Or maybe, I'll just add your bones to the pile. Who would notice?"

"Shut up, both of you brats," Madison again whacked the back of Colton's head. "We're moving, keep up."

"I'm still taking pictures, check out the pyramids of skulls - is that thigh bones protruding from their mouths? I've never seen so many bones in all my life. This would be a forensic anthropologist's dream come true. I bet Dr. Bass has been here. I bet they let HIM touch the bones. If only I already had my degree." Colton so wanted to touch, but the guide kept watching him.

"You spend too much time in front of the TV watching CSI, Bones and Forensic Files. What's so great about this place?" Shayla asked. She just didn't understand.

"This is real, not make believe like on TV. These are real life people who died from diseases, accidents, some were even murdered. I bet many of them were actual members of The Crusades. Can you imagine what these peoples' lives were like?"

"No, Colton, I can't," Madison answered for her sister. "And whatever brought them here to be displayed in this gruesome place, I can't imagine this is how these people wanted to end up. As artwork, to be gawked at, to be feared. It seems disrespectful to me."

Eliska interrupted her, "Not really. Their bodies were sent here for interment; instead of being buried and forgotten, they have become a part of the Chapel itself. I think of it as an honor, to be blessed in such a way. Now, if you'll follow me, we're entering the sanctuary. As you can see, Rint used nearly every space available for his bone designs. Watch your step."

The group followed her down the ramp and through the archway. Once inside, four pinnacles of skulls protected the altar. "Christ hangs on the crucifix, surrounded by the skulls and bones of his followers. Even the sacred monstrance, the vessel used to display the consecrated Eucharistic host during the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, is made of the bones of the faithful. People from all over the world come to kneel before this altar." "Is there a list of names of the people buried here?" Madison asked.

"No, unfortunately, most of the names of the faithful are known only to God. Yet, as I'm sure you've noticed, this is a sanctuary, a place of peace. The thousands of followers chose to be buried here, and they now form the shrine to their savior. This concludes the tour. You may stay as long as you like and I'm available if you should have any more questions. Don't forget to visit the gift shop."

Shayla walked beside of Madison, taking their turn at kneeling before the sacred statue. The archway in front of it was embellished with stacked coolness. The Crucifix was mounted on chiseled stone. It stood in front of a paneled window that let the afternoon sun in. The warmth spread over her skin as she looked up at the carving of Jesus hanging there. The cross reached nearly to the vaulted ceiling, the one place in the Chapel she didn't see skulls or other bones. A single candle burned, though Shayla wasn't sure if that was significant or not. What she did know was that at this moment, she was at peace.

She closed her eyes, letting the serenity of the place calm her. She felt safe here. She finally understood what Eliska had been saying earlier about the thousands of people who were buried here, why it

was so important to them and why they wouldn't be upset with having their bones dug up and exposed. Why they would feel honored instead of vulnerable or betrayed.

Shayla let her mind drift back in time, what she imagined life would have been like for these people. She knew from her World History classes that during the Middle Ages, religion was a huge part of everyday life. Churches, chapels, cathedrals, basilicas, mosques, and monasteries had sprung up all over Europe during this time. Famines, epidemics and religious wars were commonplace. Many of the souls here were poor peasants who had struggled to feed their families, toiling in the fields of the barons, earls and counts who were supposed to protect them, but instead, exploited them. Taking more than the families who served them could spare, yet, always wanting more to line their coiffures. Other people interned here were members of the royalty, most surely having felt it was their birthright to be buried on such sacred ground. From what Eliska had told them, a few had actually earned the right to be interned with the pious priests and nuns who had served the Chapel and their countrymen. Merchants, millers, stonecutters, wood carvers, builders, and other craftsmen's souls and bones had been intermingled with the peasantry's and the royals' bones. Here, the souls of thousands of the devout rested.

When Eliska talked about the Crusaders, Shayla found herself totally immersed in the world of the religious fighters. Eliska told a story, though she admitted it couldn't be proven, of a young man, barely 15, if Shayla understood correctly. According to the legend, the original crusaders were mostly known as fideles Sancti Petri or the faithful of Saint Peter or milites Christi, the knights of Christ. Many of the men from the youth's village took up the iter, the journey or the peregrination or pilgrimage. Each crusader swore a votus, a vow, to retake the city of Jerusalem. They were granted a cloth crux or cross to be sewn into their garments. This "taking of the crux" became associated with their entire journey. This particular young man was supposedly one of the guards killed while protecting St. Francis of Assisi when the Saint crossed enemy lines to meet the Sultan of Egypt. The group had been discovered and though he'd fought valiantly, he'd been speared through the lung, left to die a slow agonizing death on the bloody battlefield. The surviving soldiers had gathered the dead on their return, bringing the bodies to the Chapel in Kutna Hora to be interned in the consecrated cemetery.

Shayla could only imagine his life. Just a year older than her and Colton, yet he had faced such immense danger. She couldn't help but be impressed. If only she could have known him. She didn't want to live back then - she was too addicted to her iPhone to ever live like he had. But, a true hero at only 15! Colton's idea of a hero was a professional ballplayer. Her idol, until today, had been Justin Bieber.

Colton tapped her on the shoulder, pulling her away from the stories she had surrounded herself with. "Oogedy, boogedy, they're going to get you!" "No, they're not, they're the souls of people. It's... actually, once you get past the ick factor, this place is beautiful. So, bring it on beastly bro, I'm so over it," Shayla glared at her brother.

Madison genuflected, then rose. "Come on, brats, I want to check out the gift shop and Aunt Margaret will be waiting for us. She's promised to take us to Zvikovské podhradí, that's the bridge over the Vltava valley where we can bungee jump!"

"Alright!" Colton said.

"Great," Shayla added. First, bones of the ancients. Now, with her luck, they'd be going to the local ER with her own broken bones. Bones! Everything seemed to be about bones. What a vacation this was turning out to be.

Madison ushered her siblings into the shop where Colton bought a plaster skull and a key ring. Shayla and Madison purchased a handful of postcards, and then they wandered back to the car where Aunt Margaret was waiting for them. "So, children," she said, "tell me, what did you think of the "Church of Bones?"

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