

The Bone Flute

he flute lay on the altar in the small chapel, where it had lain for a long time.

No one knew who had placed it there. It was pale and smooth, neither wood nor stone. Some said it was bone, though of what creature no one could say. It was not locked away. It was not marked. Most people passed it without noticing.

One evening, a man named Eldritch noticed.

The day had been heavy, and he did not know where else to go. He sat for a while. After some time, he picked up for the flute. He noticed an inscription in an ancient script, worn almost smooth with age: "Something given. Something taken."

"Curious," he thought, and played a single note.

It was not a melody. It was barely a sound.

An old woman who had been sitting nearby with her head in her hands lifted her face. Her breathing eased. She stayed a while longer, then rose and left.

Eldritch set the flute back on the altar and went home.

The next night, he returned.

This time there was a child with cramps. When Eldritch played, the child slept.

People noticed. Eldritch did too.

He found himself coming back, not always intending to. He learned how some notes steadied breath, and others eased pain.

And in time, he noticed the cost.

After playing, he grew tired in a way rest did not mend. His hands shook. His sleep shortened. When the elders suggested he should stop, he did not answer at once.

"This just costs someone," he said finally.

He continued.

He played for children whose bodies burned with fever. For the old, when dying was too hard. For those whose pain had made living unbearable.

He did not count how often. He only noticed that lifting the flute required more care than it once had.

One winter, pain came and stayed. The flute lay within reach.

People came and sat with him. No one asked him to play.

One evening, a child — not ill — sat beside the bed.

"Why don't you use it?" the child asked.

The man looked at the flute.

"It would help," he said.

"Then why not?"

"Because," he said gently, "it does not help in that way."

After a long silence, the child asked, "If you had known, would you have kept playing the flute?"

Eldritch paused, then smiled.

That night, when the room was empty and the lamps had burned low,
Eldritch lifted the flute once more.

He did not play what he had played for others. He played a single, low note.

The pain loosened. The fear softened. His body rested.

In the morning, the flute lay beside the bed. Eldritch did not wake.



The village buried him without song. No one could have led it.

They returned the flute to the altar.

For a long time, it lay untouched.

Life went on.

Then one evening, a mother came with her child. The child's breathing was shallow, each breath an effort. The woman stood before the altar for a long time before lifting the flute.

She played one note.

It was enough.

Weeks later, a man came whose wife had not slept in days. He played with trembling hands. When he returned the flute, he stood in the doorway for a long while before he could walk home.

The flute remained on the altar.

No one guarded it. No rule was made. People took it only when they could not do otherwise. No one played it twice.

Until one winter evening, someone did.

Ronan.

One night he had come home late and found the house empty and blackened. His family perished. Lost, he now stood before the altar for a long time before lifting the flute.

He played.

And he kept on playing for all in need.

He learned the notes. He did not ask what they would cost — he had heard the stories, and seen the words on the flute.

The flute did not choose its keepers.

It just waited.

— *William Zeitler*

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