

RESPECT THE CREST

A Paramouth Fantasy Tale

Four flagons of ale clanked dully together as they were raised from the grained bartop, two in each of the barmaid's hands as she procured her next order and turned briskly to deliver the lot. The air was stuffy, a far cry from the cool autumn winds biting at the tavern's exterior. Of course, the chill made a night at the tavern all the more inviting, dozens of souls gathered in search of relief or merriment through good company or appreciable ale; both of which were in great supply at the Crestwood Inn. Her body was grateful to be freed from the red shawl she'd worn through most of the day anticipating the stuffy heat.

The barmaid shrugged her way between the occupied stools and benches between her and the patrons she served, a pair of tan straps wrapped securely over her bare freckled shoulders holding up her modest dress. Her honey gold hair was tied in a loose bun, with two stray strands left framing her diamond face in a pleasing fashion. Her lips were painted a tasteful brown, baked at the center of her tanned face ever-fixed in a knowing smirk.

A simple white chemise left her neck and arms exposed to the air, only covering as much as her sizable bosom and downward. This fact was never lost on any patron with a set of eyes and basic human instinct. Simply walking by, her immodest chest subtly bounded with every pace she took, drawing many a glance in her wake.

If the attention unsettled her, she never let it show. She kept her mind on work, the consummate professional among a throng of drunks and rouges. Now arriving at a table of jovial workers taking a load off from their daily labors, she deftly landed the four mugs at the center of the table, leaning forward with familiar ease.

"Right you lot, three ambers and a hoppy mug for the foreman," she grinned, her amber eyes darting between each gentleman with knowing friendliness, "Anythin' else I can get ya? Some more stew? Furs for the cold?"

"Bless ye, Lyra!" the aforementioned Foreman declared with weary enthusiasm, "If anythin', we'd moight appreciate ya's stickin' 'bout for a round or two."

"Woof! Easy there love," she chuckled, standing upright and placing her strong feminine hands on her maroon-covered hips, "You've already worked up quite the tab! Don't think you'd afford a night of my company at this rate."

“Ooo! That’s a bloody challenge mate!” one of the others jeered, grabbing their ale and taking a fine swig in good humor. He was met with a swift baffle to the shoulder, chuckling at his boss’ indignation with the others.

“Oy! I moight as well dock your pays to make her fee, you keep on loike tha’!”

“What do we look like? A chari’ty?” another chimed in, raising his glass in Lyra’s direction with sober gratitude, “Honest though love, many thanks for the always spectacular service!”

She nodded warmly, her enthusiasm contagious as always, “course mate! Holler if ya need anythin’ from this ol’ gal.”

She’d already begun taking her leave, her deep red skirt swishing behind her and settling around the tasteful impression of her rather shapely rump and thighs. Inevitably, her display and parting words were plenty of inspiration to evoke a final holler from the foreman.

“The day they call you old is the day the sun goes out!”

Lyra smirked to herself, turning toward the boys and offering a playful wink. Now relieved of any immediate duties, she scanned the remainder of the bar in search of any others in need of her care. So far as she could tell, most were content talking over guzzling down their booze, only a few in need of refills or just happy to have her presence amongst them.

“Everything goin’ alright, folks?” she’d approached one of the short tables populated by a mix of sellswords and adventurers. An archer, a cleric, two fighters, and what may have been a domesticated barbarian of sorts were he not wearing finer garb than one would expect from the type. They’d likely just returned from a recent quest if the grime and scratches on their armor were any indications.

The men were at attention immediately at her appearance, the two women amongst them regarding her with more relaxed politeness. Murmurs of contentment all around, save for the barbarian, “Yea, might go for some more of the dark lager.”

Lyra nodded, her caramel voice responding in turn, “Right away, hun. Just the one, or would there-”

“Hold the fuck on,” the cleric cut in. Standing from the table, her eyes fixed on the entrance of the bar. Curious, Lyra turned to face whatever had pulled the girl’s attention, only to find a pair of newcomers entering the establishment. They appeared disheveled, worn from whatever their

latest exploit must've done onto them. As the rest of the table took notice of the pair along with their partner, the two arrivals noticed them in turn and went pale.

“Those vermin made it out, ey?” The burlier of the group grit his teeth, seething as he cracked his knuckles under the table. The archer and rouge shared a glance, procuring their daggers discreetly and beginning to rise.

Until Lyra's gentle but firm hands urged them back down, “Something the matter?” Her demeanor was ever friendly, though insistent in distracting from the collective adrenaline bubbling beneath the surface of the group.

The archer looked up at her, awkwardly grasping for some valid reasoning for their behavior, “N-no ma'am... just some work associates we'd rather not parlay with at the moment.”

“Oh, that's all? Could have had me worried there,” she chuckled, a defusing charm that rang over the tense group.

As her laughter settled, her friendly expression adopted a quiet seriousness, “I might remind you lot, see that crest?” Her hand calmly addressed the imprint of a sigil above the kegs behind the bar. It bore a shield with a scraggly tree in gold and red, the colors of the minor house that held dominion over the lands this building was made. The tree, however, was a personal sigil; the mark of the family who had owned the establishment for generations.

The party knew its meaning, as did all who frequented the tavern, though Lyra was happy to reiterate for effect, “All who find the Crestwood Inn are welcome. This is neutral ground, for any honest guest of any background, should they have the coin.” She closed her righteous recitation with a playful grin, patting the archer's shoulder playfully, “So if that's agreeable, I'm sure you'll be on your best behavior under my roof, aye?”

She emphasized her warning with a gentle rub on the back of her two captive's necks, the others letting their shameful behavior sink in.

The other woman, the monk fighter, nodded gratefully before the rest could speak, “Apologies, mum. We appreciate your hospitality.”

Lyra beamed, a welcome release from the tension they'd simmered down, “Oh, it's my pleasure to serve. Remember: all are welcome here!” Her bright matronly grin left a lasting impression as she departed, seeing the newcomers cautiously finding a booth in a far corner of the tavern.

She eventually returned to the bar, regrouping with a pretty wisp of a girl she'd left cleaning out some dirty mugs. Lyra was at least a decade this girl's senior, the reserved manner in which she conducted herself thoroughly contrasting the elder's easygoing nature. Her shoulder-length hair was drawn up into a tight braid, her objectively adorable features fixed in quiet frustration from the few moments a stranger looked her way.

There was a reason Lyra, the owner of the establishment, was the one out on the floor instead of the younger. Grabbing a new mug from the girl's efforts, she noticed her worker flinch as she retrieved the cup, now wondering if something had further shaken the shy young woman beyond the occasional ogling.

A hand gently landed on the girl's back, drawing the younger brunette's attention, "Ay, something the matter luv?"

"I-it's nothing. I'll handle it," she stiffened up at her boss' touch, as if remembering her duty to stand firm despite whatever troubled her.

Lyra wouldn't accept the feeble deflection, "Right, don't give me that. Someone giving you the ringer?" She might've taken pride in accepting all forms of patrons, but would be remiss to tolerate outright harassment of her employee.

"N-no mum, it's..." she started, eyes darting out to the floor, to an empty table by the far eastern wall.

Whatever it was, she'd have to investigate later. For the moment, she relieved the girl of contact and began pacing back around the bar front, "Just as well. Let me know if there is."

She was back from the caring matron to the straight-talking manager in a breath, "In the meantime, Elly, that pair in the corner, need you to take care of 'em. Keep an eye on 'em along with that party in the middle. Some kind of quarrel over a job, nothing serious. Sure they'll be fine; but eyes up, just in case."

"Yes mum," Elly nodded, returning to washing the glasses in the basin while Lyra brought her recovered flagon to one of the taps of dark stout ale.

"You're keeping well? A touch busier tonight." The drink poured over, bitter foam dripping over her firm, womanly fingers clasped around the mug. Cutting the tap and scraping off the excess foam, she was about ready to make her way back to the merc table. That is, until she saw her protege once again nervously eye the far table before noticing her master's gaze and getting back to work with a small eep.

“...Something’s the matter. Tell me,” her voice was still commanding, done with beating around the bush if there was something potentially amiss in her establishment.

“I... I’m fine,” she nodded, though a quivering lip betrayed something heavier on her thoughts.

Of course, Lyra took notice, placing the beer down and softening her demeanor, “Aye? You sure you’re alright, girl?”

“Yes... I’m just a bit worried about the side table,” she muttered out in her mousey voice.

“What about it? They rude to ya?”

“N-no, just... they’re a bit different, I don’t know how to serve them.”

“How do you mean?” Lyra quirked a brow, leaning against the bar with her hip cocked.

The girl looked down shamefully, embarrassed by this apparent shortcoming she’d been faced with, “J-just see for yourself. Maybe you’ll have a better idea.”

The older barmaid’s curiosity piqued, she looked over to the table Elly addressed, not seeing a single soul. “You sure? Not a peep over there.”

“Please just look,” she insisted, realizing her perceived outburst and returning to her washing, “They’re... little folk.”

“Little folk?” Lyra mimed, a queer brow raised in confusion until blossoming with recognition, “Halflings then? Nothing out of the ordinary there.”

“N-no ma’am,” she whimpered, her doe eyes peering up cautiously, “Just check on them, please.”

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ Lyra obliged and carried the lager for the barbarian with her to investigate the side table Elly had addressed. Swaying her hips as her flat shoes padded deftly over the aged boards of the tavern floor. She cleared the handful of denizens blocking her unimpeded view of the side table and found herself genuinely surprised.

It was empty, save for an untouched mug of light ale and a few rags. That is, until one of the rags appeared to wiggle. In the dim lantern glow, she realized that the rags twitched and moved about with more life to them than anticipated. On closer investigation, reaching the edge of the table,

she finally came to understand the rags were just coverings over two impressively minute figures trouncing toward her on the table's edge. They had limbs, faces, and small voices that hardly carried over the rabble around them. To the side of the mug was a small pouch of sorts, with a meager bulk within, though a glint of gold did catch her eye. A few other patrons followed Lyra's discovery, wondering idly what the popular server's reaction would be.

"Um... evening lads! Apologies, it's been brought to my attention you need some help?." she smiled, adopting her usual friendly grin to address the newcomers.

"Oy I reckon!" The taller of the two, if only by mere grains of sand, strode to the edge of the table to answer their server, "We've been waiting on one of you for near an hour now!" His tone was gruff and biting, though slightly understandable given the neglect.

"Y-yes," the other, more reserved than his partner, contributed meekly when faced with the far more immense being addressing them, "W-we were- that is my partner and I- wondering whether you might have any, um... more *appropriate* goblets for patrons of our-"

"Ye! How long do we have to arse around before getting some decent cups!?" the other shouted, far less polite than the second.

Lyra was set aside, for once having trouble finding her words to react, "Y-yes, apologies again."

She paused, running through ideas in her head. Perhaps she could find a thimble to suit their needs. Obviously, they'd already ordered more beer than the two could handle in a lifetime which Elly misguidedly provided; all they needed were smaller containers than the glass that many times dwarfed them.

Lyra had been lost in thought while the louder of the two still shouted whatever gibberish he could muster to get his point across, all lost on the experienced barmaid as she came to a conclusion.

"That's all then? My pardons, dear travelers. I'll have you sorted right quick in a moment," she nodded, brightly curtsying to the pair with her infamously winning grin.

The two didn't respond right away, likely flummoxed by the genuine courtesy she offered the wee folk. "R-roight, thas all we're askin'... appreciate the understandin'." the loud one uttered, finally phased from his belligerence by her unquestionable charm.

Lyra nodded heartily, straightening her posture and turning toward Elly across the room, "Oy! Find me two thimbles for the customer!"

Elly had been watching raptly, startled by the sudden command before properly processing the order, “Y-yes mum! G-gimme a minute-” she hustled to the side door that led to the kitchen.

Turning back to the table, the two blond strands around her lovely face swayed vibrantly while her amber eyes returned to the unlikely patrons, “So what brings you to the Crowlywood? Can’t say we’ve had many of your kind here before.”

For once, the two were stunned. So often they were used to being ignored or avoided by the taller races that having the attention of one so stunning as their server was a cathartic experience in itself. Surprisingly, the skinnier one spoke up first, “Th-th-that sounds about right, normally we wouldn’t have dreamed of coming to these grand halls.” He tried to sound regal, a difficult feat at his size, “This would be our first time.”

Her smile bloomed, sprinkled with a light chuckle, “I’ll say, likely the first time I’ve served your lot too!”

“W-we felt like a change of pace,” the gruffer tiny started, recovering his wits, “For our celebration, we’ve earned a splurge after our heroic deeds!”

She quirked a golden brow, intrigued by his comments as she placed the dark lager down and pulled out one of the unused stools, sitting to join them, “Oh? What sort of feats?”

The thin borrower interjected, “Oh it’s nothing! Wouldn’t want to bore you with the affairs of the minish folk.”

“Bore her!? We’re bloody heroes, man!” The partner smacked the other’s back, straightening his humble posture while he took over, “Tell me love, you ever hear of the Rat Queen, Phaylgis??”

Lyra crossed her arms over the table, forming a box around the sea of breast flesh on full display for them, “I can’t say I have. Sounds ominous~”

The stout one chuffed, “You better reckon! The bitch was a menace to our clan since we can remember! Sending her soldiers to steal our food, even some of our children over the years!”

She raised an expertly dramatic hand to her open mouth in feigned shock, “Oh my! What an awful thing! But you’re celebrating?” she shifted her surprise into a knowing prompt, egging them on, “I hope for good cause?”

“Right you are! Me and my lad, Metz here,” another smack to his younger partner’s back, “along with a host of our strongest blighters hunted down the dread queen’s nest and took on her whole host! All throughout were scraps and treasures from not just our lands, but the homes of your human kin too! Riches beyond our years wrongfully nabbed by the bleedin’ vermin!”

“So you fought her?” While to the pair her interest was emphatic, her true regard was one of more casual intrigue. She rarely pondered the comings and goings of the borrowers, let alone that they had tribes. Still, hearing this ‘rousing’ tale of heroism brought some appreciable amusement.

“-and bloody minced her!!” he swept his hands in the air triumphantly, a humorous gesture from her point of view, “and I, Renahld the Rock, dealt the final blow! Never again will those urchins pester our people!”

Lyra made a show of lightly clapping, tickled by the diminutive performance, “Brava! So you really are little heroes~”

Metz spoke up, though less boldly than the boastful Renahld, “Yes miss, though the two of us are the only ones left.” His reminder belayed the sobering truth of their presence here. Lyra could see the minuscule emotions on the younger’s face turn somber, a unique depth she hadn’t expected from a borrower.

Renahld of course brought a hearty hand to Metz’ shoulder, pulling him in, “Which just means we need to drink their share in remembrance. Like we said!” Now was the larger’s turn to look up with an almost sympathetic glance, “W-we figured that, as rightful victors, we’d try enjoying a few pints like the other adventurers do.”

“Well gentlemen, I’m touched by your tale...” she shut her eyes, nodding her head solemnly out of respect. Just in time for Elly to approach, her right hand clasped to her chest around imperceptible objects she hastily handed to Lyra.

“-and I think all that deserves a toast! Whaddya say?” she proudly swung her hand down to a landing just inches before the two, opening her ale-scented fingers to reveal two small (to her) thimbles.

The boy’s eyes widened, Renahld’s spirits quickly lifting back up, “Now that’s more like it!”

Lyra turned briefly to Elly, nodding approvingly as the thin girl hastily retreated to the bar, unwilling to interact further. Lyra considered having her apologize as a sort of lesson, though she reckoned it unnecessary.

Her attention back to the table, she adjusted her hand to pinch the two impromptu glasses in her thumb and forefinger before dragging them through the surface of the looming mug behind them. Metz' eyes were on her immense arm so easily craning over their heads, while Renahld's were understandably though impolitely locked to her bosom molding in the scant confines of her blouse over the edge of the table.

Content she'd filled the little containers, she carefully lowered the thimbles to her customers who gratefully accepted the gift. To them, the containers might as well have been entire casks! More than enough drink to last them many helpings. She grabbed the normal-sized mug herself and raised it to the smaller men.

"To the victorious dead, and the heroes who succeed their noble deeds!"

"Hear hear!!" Renahld chanted, quickly hoisting his barrel to his mouth and tipping it almost to the point of dunking himself. Had Metz not stepped in and helped balance the container after placing his own down.

"You dolt! You'll make her have to serve you again if ya spill!"

Renahld burped from the first drink, the only acknowledgment his partner would get.

Metz sighed, then sipped from his own tankard while Lyra was just finishing her healthy pull from above with a crisp, "Ahh~"

The mug was returned next to their pouch with a thud, Lyra raising her hand back to wipe the excess foam from her lips, "Hope you don't mind me having a share. Certain you'll have your 'ands full getting even a pinch through all that tonight, hehe." Her heavenly chuckle wiped away whatever reservations the pair may have had from unwillingly sharing their vat of drink.

"Not at all, miss.... Eh?" Metz started, realizing the two hadn't inquired about their host's name.

This got a light laugh out of her, nodding in a small curtsy to them again as she stood from the stool, "The name's Miss Lyra Merriwyn. Please feel free to flag any of us down if you need anything. Alright?"

"*urp!*- Thank ye Miss Lyra!" Renahld raised his thimble in salute.

"We'll try not to be too much a bother," Metz added.

She smirked, suppressing a chuckle before reclaiming the dark lager and taking it to the merc table promptly. She shared a few words with them and some other groups before returning to the bar, where an anxious Elly was washing the same mugs in quiet indignation.

“Can’t believe you rushed me over for those things...” she mumbled, not intending either way for Lyra to have heard her or not as she passed behind her.

The older barmaid raised a brow, accepting the girl’s challenge, “And why not? They’re paying customers like the rest. No reason to deny them service,” she added casually, quickly joining Elly in washing more mugs in the basin to excuse her continued presence.

Elly turned to her, her hands clasped together nervously as if what was being shared should be kept a secret, “B-but where could they have gotten the money? They must’ve stolen it from a human, or worse! Or-”

“Calm down, girl,” Lyra tutted, more focused on the dishes than anything, “If they have it, and all they want is a few drinks, why not serve them?”

The younger girl’s face was quizzical, working over Lyra’s quandary, “...Because they’re tom thumbs?”

Lyra sighed, leaning against the sink facing towards her with her shoulders askew, “Look, it might be odd, but we’ve had stranger customer here. Remember the minotaur?”

“...Y-yes.”

“And the caravan of elves that passed through?”

“Yes, but-”

“So where do they differ?”

“It’s...” she stopped, turning down to the counter in shameful thought, “you wouldn’t serve vermin, would you?”

Lyra paused for a few moments, then let out a short chuckle, “Heh, I thought I knew you, girl.~”

A flush of red blossomed in Elly’s pale cheeks, “I-I don’t mean offense, but they are! My father’s farm was full of them when I was growing up! They’d always steal our food, and pester the livestock. They-”

“And now those two are offering hard-earned gains for an honest pint,” she snickered, her pretty lips beaming with satisfying moral superiority, “If they’re paying, strange as it is, don’t see much reason to break our creed.”

Elly was stunned, but slowly accepted Lyra’s words, “...I ‘spose.... But don’t ask me to fling ‘em out if they cause trouble with the other guests.”

“Hah! Believe me; anything happens, I’ll see to them personally,” she chirped, finishing up the two mugs she’d contributed to cleaning.

“I just still can’t fathom where they got the money! Let alone why they’d come ‘ere of all places,” Elly continued, less agitated than annoyed over the situation.

Lyra shrugged, her autumn apparel jumping with her shoulders, “Believe it or not, they told me exactly where it came from. Some mouse queen or whatever; was an awfully cute story.”

A second later, her charmed smile drooped to a pained frown. She raised a hand to her abdomen where just below the sound of clinks, chugs, and general rabble of the tavern crowd, one might hear a low growl rumble from her corset-constrained belly.

Elly’s thin dark brows furrowed seeing her boss’ reaction, “Everything alright, mum?”

“I’m fine, just need some grub... tell me, any of the stew left?”

Elly cringed, tensing her shoulders while considering the request, “...Probably enough for a small bowl? Sorry, the entree was quite popular tonight.”

Lyra sighed, nodding solemnly as she turned back toward the door, “We still have that cabbage from the market then?”

Elly nodded emphatically, slightly enthused to discuss the food, “Y-yes! You could steam some and have that with the stew!”

“Ah, that’ll do just fine then. Thanks love,” Lyra squeezed the girl’s shoulder and turned to the kitchen.

The positive validation did wonders for the shy up-and-comer, whose heart fluttered from her superior’s care, “Eh- I also added a little extra butter to thicken the broth, mum!”

“Fantastic as always,” Lyra called out without turning back, already disappearing beyond the portal to the backroom. She could cook something else up if she really wanted to, but there was no time to indulge in a full meal when soon enough she’d have to be right back on the floor. Maybe when she was older, and Elly took over properly. Until then, this was her lot.

The thimble clanked hard against the hard grain of the wood tabletop, the container now deprived of half its total sum of liquid now consumed by the thoroughly drunken Renahld. His red beard dripped with golden residue, his paltry sleeve doing little to cleanse the mess for each bout he gambled with the cask.

“My lords, this fucking nectar- what’d I tell ya lad? Humans keep the best stuff for themselves!”

Metz smiled, as much recognition as the statement would get as he gingerly reached his hands in and pulled out a handful more of beer, sipping carefully from his palms as to not messy his already impoverished attire. The amber elixir was doing a number on his countenance, his spine far more limber than was normal for the anxious boy, “I- I- ya know, I never doubted. I just found the prospect of *this* being preposterous.”

Renahld’s brow hitched, mouth slowly agape, “Preposter... preposous... what you bloody mean!?”

This actually got a chuckle from the former, sloshing the beer in his thimble held between his bent legs while sat down, “I mean *this*, man! A human tavern? Next you’ll say we go off to the wars, or some shite!”

“And why the fuck not?” he chortled, steadying himself on his arm, “We’d be even bigger legends when we got back from tha’!”

“*If* we came back,” Metz corrected.

“You and your damn semantics, they should be so lucky to have two cunning fighters as us!”

“Well... maybe to a strategic degree. Think about it,” Metz sat upright, crossing his arms over the edge of the thimble to steady himself, “What could we do with a platoon of human knights looking to us for command? You’ve heard the stories too, yea? Huge, armored warriors bred for battle, to fight for honor, justice! It’d be such an honor to-”

“Oy! Thas wha’ we should do!” Renahld cut him off, flapping his beefy hand excitedly, “We should get some armor!”

“What!?” Metz exclaimed, throwing his head back laughing, “You dolt! Buying more beer than the tribe could ever manage is one thing. But getting a human smith to take our measurements, *let alone* forge us armor sets!? Out of the damn question.”

“So was slaying the Rat Queen! You said we couldn’t do it, and look at us now!”

“Yea,” the reminder didn’t hit him as intended, rather sobering his humor, “and look at what happened to the rest...”

Renahld saw he’d struck a sore spot, now reminded of the regrets they both shared. Reaching over from his seat, he placed a grubby hand on his partner’s arm, “We did all we could, and I know they’d gladly give their lives again had they the choice. That’s loife, nature in action. We fight for what we believe, for what we care about, and sometimes loss begets victory. Blood buys peace. The way of the world... Oy, you listenin’?”

What Renahld thought was a tender moment was gradually lost on the youth as his wandering gaze fell upon the distant bartop. More specifically, the fair lady tending behind it. The girl was apprehensive of the pair when she helped them in, understandably. Though he deeply appreciated the lingering scent of cream and salt she gave off, an odd combination of smells that reminded him of the sea. Despite the source being the enormous palm that ferried them to their current location, and belonging to a human girl who evidently wanted nothing to do with them, he still found himself pining from across the cavernous hall.

The fireplace still crackling in the late evening hours illuminated her pale cheeks in flickering sparks, her dark hair done in a lovely braid danced between a dark black and warm chocolate with the crackling flames. Though he remembered her being curt with the pair and initially assumed it to be a distaste for his kind, he began seeing the same discomfort in her regard for the regular customer as well. Unlike the older barmaid, her rapport was to the point and hasty, quick to return to her demure, private demeanor. She was anxious, though diligent. Like him. The haze in his mind drifted to visions of meeting her at a shared stature, asking how her day tending the bar had gone, and pulling her sylph-like form against his thin but taller frame for a warm kiss...

“Oh ho~! You’re pining, ain’t ya?”

Renahld’s jab yanked Metz from his fantasy, “N-not! I mean, I’m not! I-”

“Oy! Nothin’ wrong with it, lad!” he raised his hands in mock respect, “You ain’t the first to get your- eh... *head in the clouds*~” Renahld winked at the boy with a wry grin hidden amidst his fiery trim before it disappeared behind the thimble’s edge in another swig.

“That’s not what I-” Metz stopped, figuring it better to levy the embarrassment than outright admit it, “I was just observing. It’s fascinating, getting to see humans do what they do up close for so long. Such pronounced feats that would be life-changing for us, that all mean nothing to them but a casual turn of hand.”

“*hurp*- Right, right...” Renahld relented, leaving his partner to their logical musings. That is until that wiley grin sprouted again, “You thinkin’ about diving up her bird?”

Metz, who had taken the cue to have another drink as well, promptly spit out his mouthful and spilled the rest of the beer in his hands over his front, “*pfft* Gods! W-why would you even-!? How could-!?”

“Eh, I heard it’s doable,” Renahld qualified, offering a genuinely thoughtful look, “Some old legends about our type getting on with humans, or elves. Ain’t new.”

“B-but... truly?” Metz was unconvinced, though a sliver of hope had been conjured.

Renahld pursed his lips, collecting his memory on the matter, “Ah sure. Loads of fae folk from way back used to lay with humans. Some stories say fairy lasses would ride atop a tall ones tackle ‘til they cum. And even when I was a lad, a friend of me Pa’s insisted he’d fucked a seamstress girl when she stuffed ‘im in her-”

“Okay okay! I get the image. That’s... something.” Metz was quick to cut off the rest of his friend’s tale, though found his blue eyes wandering back to the jumpy brunette.

This wasn’t lost on the older, who had an eye for these sorts of infatuation, “My advice lad, don’t go for the wee one. She doesn’t seem the friendly type. Now her mistress, on the other ‘and-”

He pointed away from the bar, addressing the honey-blond elder of the barmaids who’d sorted them out earlier as she escorted a group of surly workers from the building. In contrast to the younger girl, this woman wielded an undying friendliness that warmed the whole of the tavern nearly as much as the fireplace. Her autumn attire and sun-kissed skin wove her ensemble into a truly regal display of hospitality. The kind of energy worn by a mother to all, the queen of her humble hall. When she laughed, her dimpled smile carried the promise of sanctuary, and even a spark of companionship only a seasoned woman could bear with such grace.

“I... I admit, she’s lovely too.”

“Damn right,” Renahld punctuated, lowering his cask after another gulp of beer, “Imagine the things you could do in all that tit flesh.”

Metz was about to protest until he himself was stunned by even the distant view of the expansive cleavage on display. “...If you could survive it.”

“Tha’ a challenge, lad?” Renahld boasted with a hearty laugh, going in for a fast return to his drink. “You jus’ watch then. End of the night, I’ll be going to bed with ’er~”

“Whatever you say, Ren,” Metz laughed to himself, bringing his hands back to his drink to make up for the sips he’d lost.

Renahld laughed in turn, then was cut short as his eyes widened, “Mmph! Speak of the devils.”

Sure enough, when Metz peered over his fingers while taking his drink, he saw the busty maid making her way to their table. Eyes on them though unlikely she was able to discern them individually from such a distance. Still, her gilded stare landing on his personage made his young heart yield, quickly finishing his palmful of ale before her arrival.

While she approached, they felt the familiar tremors of a giant’s footsteps as the uneven flooring far below jostled their high-up perch. No borrower went through life without coming to grips with the weight and presence of larger beings. Yet, seeing the womanly monolith approach at such leisurely, inevitable speed dropped the boy’s jaw. As if her pursuit and attention were something to be feared. Despite the instinct that whispered he should brace himself to run, he persevered with the humbling pleasure of expecting her arrival.

When she reached their table, the gentle bounce in her shoulders and chest came to rest along with her friendly yet weary grin, “And how have you little ones held up?” The low, fried timbre in her voice revealed exhaustion that her body language refused to qualify, as sweet and lush as she still sounded to the boy.

“Aye, ma’am!” Renahld shouted up, “You’ve shown us a realm of hospitality like we’ve never seen.” His rhetoric had taken a formal turn, almost reminiscent of Metz’s own politeness.

Her eyes shut with a pleased smirk, a hint of crow's feet crinkling in the corner of her closed lids, “Wonderful! I hoped for nothing less.”

“Y-yes miss,” Metz finally spoke up, properly standing to address her with Renahld following suit close behind him, “You’ve certainly eased my worries venturing to such a place as this.”

“I’m glad,” her smile waned, a bend in her brow begetting a nagging concern, “None of the other patrons gave you trouble, did they?”

“Not a peep!” Renahld added, “Save for the queer looks which, hey, let’s say were granted, we can’t say it enough how spectacular tonigh- **urp!**- was!”

He stuck the landing on his formality despite the intrusive belch, a fact the towering woman seemed charmed by. “Then I suppose this was a successful test of our creed. Congrats all around I reckon.”

“And what creed would that be, miss?” Metz inquired, curious to the vague mention.

“Oh! Well, you know-“ she started, though found herself somewhat trailing off, “I inherited this pub ages ago, and running this place comes with an understanding of a simple merit we try to uphold.”

She scoffed, shaking her head, “It’s not like I have it down word for word. More a sentiment than written code.”

Lyra paused, looking to the shielded crest hanging over the bar, “...Ever since I can remember the law was to welcome anyone. Humble, royal, big-“ she paused to smirk knowingly at the pair, “-or *small*. All are welcome in these walls. Neutral ground, as you’d say.”

Her expression was somber, almost nostalgic, until the illusion of sentimentality was cracked with a wry brow and mischievous grin, “That is, as long as you have the coin~”

“BAH!” Renahld burst with one loud guffaw, greatly enthused by the glimpse of the lady’s greedy side, “As you should! Can’t think of more noble grounds for a place of business, meself.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” she obliged, nodding casually and brushing one of the loose strands of blonde hair behind her ear. “Speaking of, there is the matter of closing your tab.”

“Wha’? You mean-... but we still have all ‘this to get through?” Renahld balked, addressing the looming tower of ale behind them.

Metz, ever the realist, quickly interjected, “O-of course not, mate! In no world will we be getting through all of that.”

“But we still ‘ave the night ahead o’ us! Right?” he looked up to Lyra expectantly.

All he received was a reluctant bite of her dark brown painted lips, “Unfortunately, we’re past closing time for the tavern. I’ll be heading off for shuteye soon, meself.” She emphasized this by slowly stretching her shoulders and chest, raising a hand to her mouth in a vast sweep of motion to stifle a soft yawn. “Now, if you two would like overnight accommodations, I’d be happy to find some arrangements for you.”

“N-no, that’s all good, we-“

“Oh, I know exactly where I’m staying love.” Renahld sauntered forward away from his partner, closer to the beauty addressing them, “You say this is the first you’ve served a borrower?”

He waited for her to respond, only earning a curious turn of glance before he finished, “How ‘bout we see the first time a borrower’s serviced you~?”

She was confused for all but a moment before her face contorted in the first fits of repressed titters, then bursting into full-on laughter. Although it was clearly not what he’d anticipated, the genuine reaction wasn’t altogether unpleasant.

Wiping her eyes, she righted herself and responded, “You’re a bold little thing~... how about we talk about your accommodations after settling the bill?”

Metz could sense Renahld’s pulse skip a beat amidst the torrent of hormones practically oozing from his little being, “R-right away, luv~”

He turned toward their pouch, nudging Metz as he passed with a hushed whisper, “Play your cards right lad! Perhaps we both get our luck’s share t’night!”

Metz was blushing like a beet at those words, his eyes inevitably drawn to the barmaid’s lazily attentive gaze as she watched the pair. Seeing his eye contact prompted a soft smile from her, forcing him to turn away lest he lose blood from his lightly spinning head.

Renahld reached into the thick tarp that to taller beings must’ve been a light coin purse and procured a single gold coin. Truthfully, borrower’s had little understanding of human currency. While their own economy operated on a barter system, humans created coin and parchments to represent goods and value. All they knew was that coins bought things, and the coins they’d plundered from the rat queen’s hoard would cover more ground than they could think of.

After all, gold talks. And the bag of gold coins they'd claimed was likely enough to make them quite wealthy among their peers. Wealthy enough to go for drinks at a human bar, at least.

It was with this esteem in mind that Renahld proudly carried the single gold piece to their host. They'd confirmed by watching others through the night that this would be overly sufficient. Others paid in copper and silver pieces, meaning in comparison this might've been a truly extraordinary amount to share for such a relatively small purchase.

All the same, he offered it up to her proudly, one foot set forward as if presenting tribute to a goddess, "All yours, mum! Keep the change, you've certainly earned it."

Lyra raised a brow, gently reaching for the coin and pinching it between huge, plush finger pads. Claiming the prize, she lifted it to her eye and examined it. Renahld, expecting immediate gratitude, grew nervous seeing her scrutiny.

"S-surely that's enough? We haven't had that much?"

She paused, thinking before a smile crossed her lips again, "Hehe, alright, what else do you have?"

"Wh-what?" Renahld gawked, robbed of his validation.

Metz too was left confused with the group, "Pardon ma'am, but that's what we have. One gold piece." He paused, suddenly more cautious of his words, "Is that insufficient?"

"Sweeties... this is scrap metal," she bluntly remarked, holding the coin up in the light. Metz was dumbfounded! Surely this was a mistake?

Renahld was of the same mind, though more indignant than baffled, "The hell does that mean? What, like our gold ain't good enough for ya's?"

"No, I'm saying this isn't a gold piece. Not of any crown I know of, that's for sure." She inspected it again, confirming again that the dented, weathered metal wasn't the genuine article, "In fact, seems the gold color was painted on. You can notice the chips along the edges, see?"

She offered it to them, presenting what they thought was a valuable treasure along with the other five coins in their satchel as nothing more than rubbish.

"Th-this has to be a mistake," Metz muttered, clutching his hands together anxiously.

Whatever warmth Lyra shared just a minute ago was lost, replaced by the tired countenance of a woman with little patience left, “Apologies, but I must reiterate: what pay do you have?” This wasn’t a request, but an ultimatum. The amber irises once infused with friendly companionship now bore dull, venomous daggers into their small beings from on high.

Metz was at loss, fumbling with the given facts and kicking himself internally. How could he have thought those coins were real? Not all coins were inherently of value, he should’ve considered this. The alcohol clouding his head didn’t help his inability to properly grasp the situation. Not before Renahld got his say.

“S-so what if those aren’t *your* gold pinches? That’s valuable to us, and that’s how we’re paying!” Metz sensed disaster in this line of thinking, then considered it further in the proceeding moments. Maybe they could convince her this was borrower money? It’d have to do if they were to escape the quiet wrath of the barmaid’s new indifference.

Renahld continued pointing up at their host, with more accusation than he should’ve, “An’ what was all that about welcoming all sorts of folk here if you can’t accept us as we are!? Your own words, mind you!”

The silence that followed was chilling. Above the crackling fire and the open reverberance of the room, Metz was now acutely aware of the rushing wind that flooded the atmosphere each time the massive being before them breathed in and out. He noticed the small fluttering dimples in the hem of her blouse as she exhaled, clearly deliberating how to deal with their case.

Finally, she sighed, her lips pivoting into an imperfect half-smile, “You’re right. Absolutely, all are welcome here at the Crestwood.”

Metz breathed out the tension that had piled up in his spine and shoulders all at once, relieved to hear what might’ve been an impossible understanding between the two parties.

That is, until her hand deftly swiped up his partner, whisking him in mere moments to her weary face. The wind that followed in the massive limb swinging past and away wildly rustled Metz’s hair as he followed its destination.

“That is, for those who have the coin.”

Renahld barely managed a bark before her hand tossed him forward. Metz didn’t register where, though. His eyes darted around her hand and head to find any sign of his friend. Had he been tossed over her shoulder? He rampantly skittered to the edge of the table to catch a glimpse of Renahld on the floor. Borrowers were hardy folk, though not immune to gravity. Wherever his

man wound up, he'd likely be in pain. Dealing with the giant maiden was secondary to finding his comrade.

Above, a muted squelch was heard as he was mere yards from the table edge. That squelch came with a soft hum of consideration from their host, followed by a quiet shift of her jaw. Metz stiffened, slowly craning his neck up to follow the thread his hazy brain was horrified to put together.

Sure enough, he found a pronounced bulge in her cheek, occasionally squirming against what must've been the invasive prying of her tongue. The soft, rosy flesh wriggled oddly as it accepted the living mouthful. A mouthful Metz now realized he was all too familiar with.

"N-NO! No, stop!! Let him out, he didn't mean to offend you!" Metz's pleads came out in rapid-fire, raining every excuse and pardon he could muster against the captor torturing his brother in arms, currently being sloshed back to the middle of her jaw by the loss of his impression in her tanned cheek flesh. "We're sorry! It was an honest mistake!! W-we can find real money for you! By tomorrow!! Just give us some time, we'll be in your debt-"

So transfixed by the terror of her savoring his friend, he never noticed her now free hand come in for him. A mighty clutch pinched at his waist, and the breath he'd taken in to further his case was whipped away as he was craned several dozens of yards above solid ground. When the rush of air registered in his overly sensitive ears, his shrieks were the first sound to escape his thin, panicked lips as he was raised to level with her chin. She held him at a modest distance from her face, not caring whether he had a view of this humiliating intimidation tactic or not. She simply slid the borrower in her mouth about, each shift of her jaw denoting Renahld being tossed to another corner of the hidden cave. Metz's mind raced trying to make sense of this turn: was she trying to scare us? Was she going to chew him? Gods, was she going to kill him in there? Was he already dead?!

Before the tears could pour, Metz detected a faint cry. Vaguely, through the flexing lips and cheeks, the boy heard his friend's protests. Muffled and staggered as they were, they did less to comfort the lad than paint him a fuller picture of Renahld's predicament beyond the contorting dark portal ahead.

Meanwhile, her eyes were on the ceiling, as if letting her mind wander while Metz continued begging for Renahld's life. How could she be so indifferent? This had to be a threat, or a joke! No way was she going to-

Her lips tensed, smacking for an instant and letting one of his partner's cries ring into the room before sealing with a pursed grimace. Her eyes shut, and her jaw hiked upward to a slight angle.

Metz tried following her eyes to find any kind of link to her better nature, pitching himself over her unyielding thumb pad to get a glimpse past her chin, lips, and nose to continue his appeals.

Then a deep, guttural drop pounded below his eye line. He hardly turned his head down towards the dwindling cries of his friend when he saw her slender neck return to rest. He missed it, but knew exactly what she'd done.

“N-no... y-you just...” the words couldn't form lest he admit what he knew. Initially, he feared that she'd harm or even chew his friend up alive in her jaws. Instead, he was sent wriggling down screaming into her body, already disappearing behind her defined collarbone. His eyes bulged, staring at the throat that gave off a nigh imperceptible gurgle as its inner mechanism settled after the load it just conveyed.

Metz's heart cracked. There were always stories, of course, about borrowers being devoured alive by various beasts and animals. Even some tall folk. But he never paid mind to them. Mostly, because the distant reality of those stories always filled him with a quiet dread. The ever-present status at the bottom of the ecosystem never left the back of his mind, informing his cautious disposition whenever he ventured beyond the tribal territories.

Now faced with this unspoken fear, he couldn't accept it. The horror of something greater than himself taking a life and totally consuming it, whole or in pieces, to never be seen again. The weight crushed his spirit, reducing him to hyperventilating in lieu of his prior protests.

He looked back up from her idle throat to find her golden irises locked passively on him, as if considering his own merits against the morsel likely in her belly by now.

Metz was still reeling in his quiet terror, a new angle to his nightmare becoming all too apparent: this woman, who at a point might have been considered a friendly host, had turned on them. Deeming them unworthy enough to reduce to nothing but... food.

But his friend wasn't food. He was Renahld, and now he was trapped alive inside the unfathomable depths of this human woman's torso. Right now, he was very much intact, and could be recovered! The boy refused, fear squeezing his nerves, shaking his head, and internally beating through the cloud of denial to challenge what transpired.

“L-let him out!!! You can't do that, he's alive in there! You can still save him, PLEASE!!!” Metz pleaded, the tears that had been denied earlier now at full measure.

For a moment, her expression softened. Sympathy piqued in her brow, an upturned grimace stretching those man-eating lips.

“Damn, you’re a cute one too...” she muttered, his eyes inexorably drawn to the minute contortions shaping her mouth and tongue, providing only brief glimpses of the dark pink abyss beyond. Tiny squelches and smacks accompanied every syllable at such close range, causing him to shrink back in her grip despite himself.

The lips parted, and a hefty exhaust of hot wind blasted him from beyond. A simple sigh for her, a typhoon to the timid, terrified young minish.

“Sorry lad. Nothing personal.”

A sincere apology, for what little it was worth. The death knell of her sympathetic tone swiftly parted into a gaping tunnel of ivory teeth and fleshy, dank humidity. He wasn’t even afforded a proper look inside his doom when darkness collapsed around his upper body. Her lips sealed around the fingers holding his waist before they slickly retreated, like massive manicured sausages slipping out from the hungry lips that now sealed tightly around his midsection.

He quickly cried out into the shadowy chasm until a surging, spongy mass slapped his face and chest. Thousands of needful buds slicked over his head before slipping off to the right. Before he could breathe again, it returned for another swipe in the opposite direction, the lips keeping him halfway back in the real world slurping another few inches of him inside. Now his body was forced into the oppressive mat of suds and slime, his knees dimpled by a blunt but firm wall of bone. Metz couldn’t fully picture his surroundings, every monstrous sensation so unearthly and unbelievable he could only fill the spaces in with visions of tentacled demons and a stone prison.

Another pronounced slurp let stray beams of the dim firelight enter the cavern. Where it hit, Metz only saw what, realistically, he was all too familiar with. This was a mouth. The barmaid’s mouth. Very much like his own that he tended to and kept clean all his life. Just like every other borrower’s, and human’s for that fact. There was nothing remarkable about this slithering wet prison. Save for him.

No one should be in this place. The horrifying mantra played on loop as his feet were ultimately sucked all the way into the cave, gravity carrying him into a graceless slide until coming to a stop in a dimpled basin at the tongue's center.

He thought he was dead, like simply entering a mouth was the end of the nightmare. The pressure still pounding in his chest begged to differ.

The beast reared up to his right, sliding him down a new incline of fibrous taste buds and drool into the crevasse between her molars and tongue. His elbow banged harshly against the teeth

before his entire front was raised into and smothered against the whole rigid wall. Prying, selfish muscles slurped and slithered across his whole front, carelessly tearing his shirt off with ease to get at his hidden flavor beneath the rags. The tip of her tongue swung around to lap at his legs, intending to do the same with his trousers. To his power, he forced his legs closed, or at least enough to give her probing appendage the disadvantage.

“STOP! MISS, PLEEEASE! YOU CAN’T-” He yelped as the tongue scooped underneath his form, building up into another ramp that ushered him across its plane to the opposite jaw. This time, there was little room to fall freely, forced under the pressure of her hard palate until finally finding release when he squirted out from the bristling force and slipped under her tongue.

For just an instant he had some autonomy to rearrange his scrambled arms and legs, thoroughly discombobulated and making every attempt to figure out which way was down. He didn’t have to wait long when a crushing weight compacted him into the pliable, veiny flesh of the inconstant floor. Metz’s face now firmly planted into the wrinkly, slimy mass had no air access. Ironically, this was the first time she opened her lips to exhale while he was occupied under the tongue, missing the last ray of light to grace his prison before it returned to pitch blackness.

She once more squeezed his body out from under her tongue’s force, plopping him with a dull splat on the its surface where he fit nicely within its subtle inline. The muscle was quick and dexterous from years of sociability and matching wits with her customers; something he was once considered to be.

But no simple rulebreakers had to deal with such fatal penalties. Metz’s head panged fiercely, deprived of air and grounding, unable to conjure further words for mercy. The fight was thoroughly drained from him, and the field hosting him relished in his submission with some gentler, though no less discomfiting suckles against the roof of her mouth. From the depths of the tunnel, evidently now before his face, a low rumble trembled the soggy flesh and sopping spittle that drenched his being.

She was humming. He couldn’t tell if it were from approval or dissatisfaction with his taste. Did it matter? The greedy pink carpet milked his flavor another few passing moments, then pulsed him forward. Down to the source of the mild breeze he barely sensed at the edge of his conscious thought. Holding a saliva-webbed hand up to clear the scum from his face, he was blasted by the scent of raw meat and mead.

The darkness prevailed still. And yet, there was a foreboding, deeper blackness just below the precipice Metz had been brought to. His mind was only just coming to process the unique ministrations and smacks that came with being tasted by a massive human mouth. The slick noises and gurgles barely heard below, however, brought to mind new alien visions distinct from

the horror of being tasted. These contractions below were uncaring, unthinking. If he were ushered into their grasp, nothing could change his course...

"...please... don't-" His voice a mere wisp of breath, drowned out by the already sealing wind tunnel below. The thicker rear of the tongue shifted idly, slicking him one last time along a thicker sheet of buds. It squeezed inward, then up, forming an irresistible incline that conveyed the boy beyond her conscious care. His torso hit a hard flap of cartilage before he could feel the tongue bounce his legs away, thrown into a new cataclysm of flesh and mucus that sealed the limited space he'd been thrown into, squashing his meager mass into a tight vice that pulsed him along.

The swallow wasn't heard as much as felt, the collapse of reality into prying and mulching throat flesh molded the borrower's shape mercilessly with hardly a gulp. Once again, there was no air to relieve his crying lungs. All the while, through the slick innards crushing and mashing his ears, he could hear the calm pounding of the woman's heart, dancing in smooth polymer with the slow vacuum of her lungs. His earlier assessment of this alien world was only partially accurate, unaware how truly disgusting and dreadful the sheer heat and sliminess would be when compacted into every sense imaginable.

The sound of her demure, content workings began fading as a deeper menace closed in. Rather, Metz found himself surrounded by a building cacophony of grumbling noises. Muffled at first, due to the flesh over his ears, but building in intensity as he must've passed her liver. The crushing grip built to a crescendo, leading to a sudden pop in his spine as his head finally found purchase against a firm surface.

All at once, the stopper that halted his descent puckered and sucked him further in. A painful pop ravaged his ears as the suction released him into the open space, crying out from the pain.

As his shout died down, and his body instinctively attempted to inhale, a sour, putrid haze once again denied his desire for air. He coughed profusely, his shuddering form easing the rest of him out of the orifice's grasp and into freefall.

He didn't land far, flipping and landing on his back, bouncing off a bulging fold of muscle that caught his lubricated form before it slid down along the vacuous slope into a shallow mire of mush and ooze. He landed with a thick splash, a submerged fold catching his fall and leaving him above the waterline from the chest up. Some sour fluids splattered his relatively dry skin, softly sizzling from the shock of being stirred anew before settling in as a new layer of film.

Metz's breath was ragged, filtering what little oxygen there was in this gastric chamber to finally come to grips with his circumstance.

He'd been eaten... swallowed whole, and alive. By the beautiful barmaid who came and saved their festivities, no less. Slowly turning his head in the darkness, his budding dark vision only now beginning to make out the churning, flexing ridges and walls that surrounded him, the horror trembled from his spine.

Trying to picture the lady's beauty was an impossible feat surrounded by the bubbling, gooey muck that must've been her long dissolved dinner. A dinner he was now a part of...

Metz pulled his legs in, lips quivering and began to rock. His mind devolved to basic instinct, the little motions sloshing the chyme around his lower body to and fro. Burying his head between his knees and crossed arms, he squeezed his eyes as shut as possible, a light irritation having slowly built up since his foray with the witch's tongue. "-this has to be a dream.... this has to be a dream... must be, has to be a-" He muttered over and over while his rocking unwittingly processed the woman's meal even further. A convenient byproduct of devouring living things.

Metz tears poured out in whimpering mewls, groaning bubbles and gurgling dominating the audible landscape, a veiled threat from every direction. Farther in the stomach, he could hear a rush of thick fluid rush through a squishing, suctioning surface. Likely part of the nutritious sludge he now waded in moving on to the rest of her guts. His logical mind at least understood that much.

As his wits slowly returned to him, he began to wonder if one could make it beyond the stomach alive? Surely the body wasn't built to resist something trying to get *out* knowingly? Then he remembered the impossible strength of the hole that conveyed him into the organ, and his spirits dampened. Pulling the exit open would be no mere feat.

While pondering this possible strategy, a unique call began sounding over the burbling symphony of digestive ignorance. The call slowly morphed into words, and those words wound up being his name.

Metz shuddered as two strong hands grasped his thin shoulders, pulling him from his ineffective cocoon back to the reality he now shared with another.

"OY! You fucking dolt!!" Renahld was a foot deeper in the swamp, despite standing a mere breadth from Metz on his shallow fleshy shelf, "You can't fucking winge out on me now!! Y-You gotta have something!"

"W-wha-what? I-I-I don't-"

“Don’t fucking lie!!” Renahld slapped him harshly across the face, smacking him into the plush wall curdling on his flank, “You got some kinda plan! Get us outta this bitch!!”

Metz was recovering from the sobering shock. In truth, the both of them were likely still quite inebriated from their festivities, the pleasant humor of the evening now muddying their minds like the noxious swamp they waded in.

“Th-there’s nothing I can... look where we are, man.”

Renahld clasped his shoulders again, squeezing the young boy desperately, “That’s not right!.... I was- we were...”

The floor below them shivered, just before a roaring groan shoved the pair from the poor perch they’d chosen. Both succumbed to the acrid pool, splashing beneath the surface, separating again. The lake offered no visibility, or even opportunity to open his eyes without a searing pain forcing them shut again. This was his first true introduction to the deadly acids that would soon be overly acquainted with his body. Frantically, he swung his arms through the thick slime and lingering chunks of digested food to swim back to the surface.

Breaking through, he gasped for air, hungry gulps of toxic fumes that carried with them sprinkles of stinging juices that now seeped into his vulnerable insides. He may have made his own contribution to the slop while treading the surface, tossing his blind head back and forth with one goal in mind.

“RENAHLD!! REN- **cough**- RENHALD!!!”

“Lad!! I’m- **hack**- follow me voice!!!”

Metz latched onto the vague sense of direction he had remaining, plunging himself through the deluge of mud and gunk keeping him from his partner. They had to reconnect. Together, they might be able to fight their way out. Force their way through the exit, maybe beat the walls to make her sick. If anything just to stick with each other to avoid the draining basin of disgusting juices that’d spell death for them should they linger too long.

He kept his focus on Renahld’s voice shouting through the pulsating cavern. He’d been in caves before, and walls, even hollow trees. In these places, voices echoed off the walls. Here, no such phenomenon. All sound was absorbed deftly by the stomach lining, ever shifting, always churning. Growling, hungry for everything unfortunate enough to wind up within.

“I see you brother! This way!!”

Metz picked up the pace, mere moments passing since they'd been separated. Time itself was warped by the contortions of the organ, stretching the pull of each second over several beats of the immense heart far beyond their prison.

A less identifiable sound had since joined the raucous chorus of the inner world, a muffled speech the two sacrifices cared little for. They did, however, take notice when several pronounced glurks rattled the whole of the human woman's alimentary canal, all the way down to the recesses of her stomach. A grim omen of the force already rushing down the dreaded chute they'd fallen victim to.

Gallons upon gallons of fizzing fluid cascaded from the puckered hole above. They arrived in collective bursts, each barreling into the bile pool and immediately stretching out the stomach walls which gladly accommodated the intake. Metz was quickly washed away in the frothy deluge, spun about by the violent currents as more and more gulps came in. It stank of fermentation, a once brisk ale hastily warmed by the body consuming it, soon to suffer the bubbling heat it had just barely cooled.

Alas, Metz was lost in the cascade of beer. He recognized its taste, albeit on a far less desirable scale. Renahld was nowhere to be heard in the maelstrom. The bile around him shuddered as the distant stomach walls contracted inward, a distant expulsion of air sending an aftershock down through the unfathomable body processing them and the beer. As the onslaught from the esophagus ceased, and the soup calmed to a sloshing sack, the young borrower shut his eyes. Too overwhelmed, he unhappily relinquished his will to being anything but food.

Lyra shuffled the little thing around her tongue. His flavor was unimpressive, particularly while his trousers never gave. Disappointed, she turned her attention to clearing the minuscule mess they'd left. Two drying thimbles in need of a wash, a nearly full mug of ale, and the cloth pouch loaded with fake money. She shook the latter, hearing only two or three other pieces of scrap at best. Just in case, she took a peek inside to be sure there wasn't any real gold within.

Sure enough, more fakes. Content with her disappointing observation, she dropped the small bag in her side pouch to dispose of later. Everything in hand, she returned to the bar and tossed the thimbles to the sink, setting the beer on the counter next to the anxious Elly.

"Well, that was rubbish." She said stoutly, resting one hand on the wooden counter with her hip cocked.

“Wh-what was?” Elly inquired, somewhat reluctant to hear Lyra’s answer after what she’d witnessed from afar.

She blew through pursed lips, shrugging her tired shoulders, “Those two wee folk. Didn’t have any money at all. Just junk.”

Elly’s eyes widened, recognizing the small loss her better had suffered, “Oh... I’m sorry mum... didn’t think they would.”

“You were right, just wasting our time for a free drink.” Her brows lifted, as if acknowledging the joke at her expense.

“Did you really just-?” Elly paused, the question already imbuing a bad taste in her mouth.

“Hm?” Lyra raised a brow, until realizing the girl’s hesitance, “Oh! That? What of it?”

“You just-!... Right in the open!?”

“Sure. No one’s here but us anyway.”

“B-but!...”

Lyra crossed her arms, now leaning fully on the bar, “Don’t tell me you’ve never tried a mite before, have ya?”

“Absolutely not! Who would?” Elly huffed back indignantly.

“Not even a touch curious?” Lyra leaned forward, egging on her young apprentice’s amusing embarrassment.

The girl’s cheeks flushed adorably, just as her superior had hoped, “Why would someone want to? They’re just rats off the street!”

“Eh, maybe,” Lyra smirked, running the two thimbles through the washing basin thoughtfully, “Sometimes, all you have are rats. You take what you can get...” Staring into the sudsy water with small particles of food floating around, she found herself lost in a train of thought. A memory long past yet no less resonant in her heart.

Elly took notice of the thousand yard stare, pressing her lips while dropping the topic, “I-I guess I can see that.” She crossed her hands, clutching her wrist with the other hand and turned to lean against the wall opposite the bar, watching Lyra from the corner of her eye.

She truly was stunning. Mature like a fine mead, lovely as the autumn leaves, and hardly a wrinkle to show for her age. The girl could only wish to look half as graceful once she matched her years.

The mood had settled into an odd reverence, something Lyra couldn’t leave peacefully, “...plus, the wiggles are awfully delightful~”

“The wha-?” Elly started, before the flush renewed in her cheeks, blue eyes widening, “Oh Gods! Why’d you ‘ave to go and say that!? Uuuugh!” She visibly squirmed, though clearly a part of her was well in on the joke Lyra had planted.

The older turned to face her charge, both hands helping her balance against the shorter bartop, “What? You don’t like the idea of wriggling little men skittering around in your belly~?”

“You’re mental, mum!” she giggled, a tittering little laugh was reward enough for the sentimental woman who joined in promptly.

When Elly calmed herself, her eyes were inevitably drawn to the corset and high tucked skirt shielding Lyra’s torso from view. “So... you say you can feel them... right now?”

Lyra considered the question, looking down as if through her breasts into her non visible insides, “Hmm... not as much as I’d hoped.” Her lips formed a crooked half smile, a slight shake of her hips being her first attempt to rile up her food.

“Oh please, stop that,” Elly chuckled again, slightly more at ease with Lyra’s humor.

“You’re right,” she frowned, her dark lips molding into a petty pout. Suddenly, in a swift grab, she swung the remaining mug of ale up to her mischievous grin, “Better stir things up, then!”

Without another word, she pitched her head back and started downing the last drink of the night. Elly clasped her hands to her mouth, shocked at the brass display as the lady’s neck bobbed again and again and again, delivering every last drop to her guts. As the last of the amber ale drained past her lips, gulped down without issue, she pulled the mug away with a satisfying, “Ahhh~ There, that should liven things a touch!”

“You’re demented! Aha~” Elly chuckled again, Lyra appreciative of the audience reaction.

Lyra was about to retort as a lump forced its way into her chest. Her lips closed, cheeks bulging out while she flung her closed fist to her lips to stifle a hearty “*Brrrap*!”

The lady rubbed her gut, dropping the mug in the basin before pushing herself from the counter, “Be a dear and wash that, then get some sleep. Early day tomorrow.”

She walked briskly past the girl toward the kitchen entrance which connected the rest of the private quarters of the inn. Elly nodded, stepping forth after Lyra’s passing to finish her evening’s work posthaste. Yet, with her hands in the soupy pool, she turned her head to follow her boss’ backside and hips as they casually swayed. Elly knew how uncomfortably her drink sat with her when she didn’t take care walking, so seeing Lyra’s hips move with their usual ease brought to question the conditions within the woman’s stomach. That, and the two inhabitants within.

“...Mum?”

Lyra turned, her hand grasping the banister of the stairs just beyond the door, “Yes love?”

“...I guess... I mean no offense, but... why *did* you do it?”

Lyra nodded, turning her head to the wall in thought, “Well, hadn’t had much of a supper. S’pose I wanted something extra to tide me over for the night.”

“N-no, I get that, but...” Elly paused, cautious of her word choice to not potentially upset her senior, “What about the creed? It’s all about us being neutral here, or whatever. I thought the point was being kind to anyone that comes here?”

Lyra smiled softly, bowing her head in affirmation, “That’s absolutely true. All are welcome at the Crestwood Inn, no matter how poor, rich, big, or small they be.”

She began up the stairs, her dark red skirt brushing the wooden planks on her way. Before leaving Elly’s view, however, she peeked her head back into view with a smirk, “Long as they bloody pay~”

The roiling cauldron sloshed about in building rampantness, stirring the ungodly concoction of beer, beef, cabbage, and bile in constant waves against the unyielding stomach walls. The stomach shifted always at random, no singular rhythm or reason composed in the relentless churns and groans that permeated the hell pit.

Its contents filled up the chamber nearly to full capacity, only a small pocket of space open near the sphincter that led all things to its care. Dangling from the minimal ceiling of this proverbial cave were several thick drippings of slimy spittle brought down from the mouth... and a single arm held tightly to a thin enough fold at the stomach top.

Renahld grit his teeth, more filth splashing into his face every second he sustained his unstable tether to the last pocket of breath in this life.

He'd have a better hold if both arms were committed. Alas, in his left arm hung the limp body of his partner. Metz hadn't moved since he found him in the soup. Despite the absence of life in his friend's little form and his head well submerged under the waterline, the gruff borrower held on tirelessly to keep his brother in arms close.

"Ngh!!!... you won't... claim us you whore!" he screamed through his near-shattering teeth, the taste of blood in his mouth beginning to usurp the sour flavor of vomit he'd been dealt the last hour.

As if to answer his feeble defiance, the world shifted wholly, the pool doubling over the pair to reorient itself with the body around them all. When the chyme finally settled, a healthy mix of the liquified sludge squirting into the duodenum, no bodies returned to break the surface again.

Lyra lay down in bed, now changed into her simple white evening gown. Her bare feet slipped under the rough cotton covers, the hem of her nightdress hiking up as her bare calves found rest in the above-average mattress. She sighed, easing herself into some semblance of comfort as the cool night air lightly tapped against the shutters on her nearby window. Reaching over, she grabbed her thick woolen blanket and tossed it over her shape under the sheets, curling over onto her side and pulling it close to her unrestrained chest.

From this point, she might be able to get four hours of sleep before the sun rises. Maybe she could sneak in a long nap in the half-day past lunch hour, but she was committed to the limited rest she'd get.

She didn't think about the lives she'd claimed. They hadn't resumed scrambling about like she'd hoped, likely a tad inundated with the ale she shouldn't have finished. Oh well, why linger on such things. Now, she shut her dark-gold eyes, bracing herself against the chill of slumber while her body continued working as intended. A low bubbling growl emitted from her gut with little

notice. She was well asleep by the time the two borrower heroes were truly, both physically and in spirit, gone.

Lyra slept peacefully, rolling over under the covers, a weathered sigil hung above the headboard of her bed. A tree carved over the royal shield of the realm, and a single dagger embedded into its gnarly branches.