

Conversations Between Outsiders

by /a/non

*For those who are undeniably smug and have trash taste of a more
doggish inclination.*

I

Easy Talk in a Dead-End Town

From the bosom of a forest valley rose a hamlet, well placed along a trade route between kingdoms. The dusty, well-worn path pockmarked with hoof and footprints marked the town as a hub of respite and commerce amidst long, interconnected trade routes. At least, it seemed, it was a town of commerce. Now it was a ghost town, with nary a soul haunting its pathways, save one of its most recent visitors.

A strange man, with equally unusual features, walked cautiously towards the interior of the hamlet. He bore with him an odd cloak with sleeves and a hood along with trousers of a strange, stitched, blue pattern, topped off with a head of raven black hair and sharp, refined looking features. The town, to him, seemed to be of medieval make in terms of construction. But that would be impossible, there was no kind of historical settlement like this where he was from; not in driving distance let alone walking distance. Then again, he also didn't recognize any of the hills or mountain ranges in view. But that was also impossible, it had been a mere trail walk, how could everything look so different?!

Surely, he thought, he just had to be lost somewhere, having taken a wrong turn at a fork or maybe dozed off with his attention somewhere and wandered off trail. The circumstances of the matter, however, begged to differ. The streets were not afield with busy families and workers moving to secure livelihoods for the future, as would be expected of such a recreational settlement. More accurately, the village was lifeless, a fact made more evident by the bodies sprawled haphazardly across the place.

Person or animal, all the bodies bore the same horrific fate. They were devoid of any fluid and withered to blackened skin

and bone. Their last moments were agonizing ones if the contorted expressions were any indication. On each of them was a vicious bite mark on the neck created from pointed, inhuman teeth, though there were no blood splatters visible in any location, unnatural deaths to be sure.

Careful not to touch any bodies more than he had to, the man, Lawrence, took to scavenging them for anything useful. The most obvious (and most useful in the moment) prize he managed to scrounge was a sword off an armor wearing body, one that was still within its sheath. A genuine sword too, not a mere replica meant only for reenactment. It was what had to be genuine, high-quality steel. From being drawn at the wrong angle to getting stuck in a plank of wood when swung, it was sturdy piece.

Deciding the weapon would suit him better than its less-than-fortunate owner, Lawrence undid the belt clasp around the body's waist, clinching his nose against the fetid stench of death as he wrenched his prize away. Despite the distraction of rustling metal plate and the crack of taut muscle and bone, Lawrence's spine twitched in instinctual worry. He could practically feel that a set of eyes were watching him.

Attaching the belt to his waist, preferring survival to respecting the dead, Lawrence looked about his surroundings, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever, if anything, might be watching him. No such luck. Not spotting anything, he stood up with the looted weapon at his side, ready to leave this graveyard to rot in his absence. As he began to leave, however, he heard something over the gusts of wind and creaky, ajar wooden doors. It was a voice, young sounding and desperate for an answer as it called out, "Hello? Is anyone there?" The source, it seemed, wafted on the breeze from a larger, two-story building at the end of the road, which seemed to lead directly to its front door.

It was totally a trap. He just *knew* it was going to be a trap. That, or whoever was still hiding there was going to accidentally gut him and leave him for whatever killed everyone else in this dead-end town. But it could still be some poor girl who just had a streak of luck to avoid whatever breezed through town.

Then again, by whatever grace or misfortune allowed him to get here, he might be better off playing along in the game of fate. At least until he figured out where he was.

With clinched teeth, and a less than enthused demeanor, the stranger slowly made his way towards the voice. With silent, rolling footsteps and a constant vigil, he kept a hand on the sheath at his side, wary that he was still being watched. At the front of the building, he peeked through the windows silently, attempting to get a better view of the darkened insides to no avail. Wooden shutters barred his vision and would not budge, even with force. The voice called out again, "Is someone there?" from within the building. Lacking any other options, Lawrence gritted his teeth as he was forced to use the front door practically blind to the layout inside. With a forceful shove, the door opened, though not without resistance the clatter of furniture belied a hurriedly constructed barricade.

Cracking open the door, Lawrence leaned into the cover of the door from the outside and called out, "Hello? Fellow human here. Please don't go about stabbing me because you think I'm someone else! And if you think that that's exactly what some sort of monster would say to gain trust, I don't know what to tell you to defeat that! And if you're a monster yourself I am armed and able to defend myself!" Confident that his warning would have the intended effect, at least, for a genuine call for help, he pushed against the door further, finally making his way inside.

The inside was dark, nearly pitch black if not for the light now streaming in through the door. The building, it seemed, was some sort of bar or canteen. Tables and chairs that weren't dedicated to barricading the windows were in disarray, tipped over in an utter panic or strewn about the room. Several bodies littered the room, all drained in a similar manner to the rest. In the center, cradling another drained husk, was a healthy human woman. She was decidedly average, about Lawrence's age as well, with wavy, brown hair and tattered cloth garments with a splatter of blood about her clothes. She looked up from the body she was cradling, tears in her eyes.

Lawrence had to suppress the tugging pity in his chest with an astute eye, tirelessly searching for any discrepancies.

“Are...are you here to help us?” The girl asked.

“That, doesn’t really have an easy answer.” Lawrence answered after a brief pause. He took a step forward before catching himself from fully stepping into the room. Taking a moment to place a chair in the door’s closing arc, he then allowed himself to venture somewhat into the dreary looking townhouse. “I...only just got here, what’s going on?”

“Oh, it’s terrible!” The girl sobbed, “A horrific demon came into town and murdered everyone! I only just barely managed to escape with my life...unlike...mother...” The girl cuddled the corpse more closely, burying her face in its brown, stringy hair before breaking down into tears.

“Well, hey, I think things are safe now. I mean I managed to get here without getting torn to shreds—”

“Please, you should come inside and hide with me.” The girl spouted, interrupting Lawrence’s reassurances, “There’s no telling if the demon is still nearby.”

There it was. There was the hook. “No, no I feel more comfortable talking in the light. Why don’t you come outside and talk with me? We’ll see it coming out in the open.”

“Please, that thing could come back at any moment, you should take refuge in here with me, it can’t get in here without us noticing with the barricades at the windows.”

“No, I don’t think I will actually.” Lawrence responded flatly. He knew his next move, but God if the risk that came with it didn’t scare him. He turned on his heel, popping the sword out of its sheath with his thumb. “In that case I’m just gonna turn my back around and go outside to leave—” The pattering of quick footsteps on wood was a nice sign to tell him he was right.

Leaning down to potentially dodge whatever swipe could be coming for his head, Lawrence drew the sword with a flash, forcing the charging girl back with a snarl as his newfound blade created space. The girl retreated to the darkness and, within it, audibly began to change. He could hear the snapping of bone and the

tearing of sinew as he barely made out the woman contorting inhumanly in the darkness, its features, clothes, and all changing by the second. Not bothering to bear witness to what was probably a horrifying transformation, Lawrence quickly dashed back to the door and took cover behind it, his sword pointing at whatever was inside.

What emerged from the darkness was a radically different entity from the woman that was just before him. A feminine form, the creature bore horns that jutted upwards from its skull and a tail with a spearhead like tip that gleamed in the darkness. The rags had changed to a more refined wardrobe, with cloth and fur draped off the shoulders towards the chest as a risqué display of regality. The only thing separating the thing from nudity and any sense of decency was a set of undergarments that covered the demoness's bosom and womanhood. The thing's skin was porcelain white, accented with various runic tattoos that was topped by a head of short, straight, black hair that covered a fair face. The mouth and eyes further belayed the thing's inhumanity, with razor sharp teeth and sharp, slitted, red eyes. These various features, alongside the thing's expression, betrayed a playful though predatory nature. Easy on the eyes, no doubt about it, but every aspect of the thing screamed of an otherworldly danger.

"I fuckin' knew it." Lawrence spat out, his paranoia justified.

Despite the...woman's failure to surprise Lawrence, she spoke with a mature, almost noble tone with underlying notes of haughtiness and amusement. "Well," she started, a hand cushioning her chin, "a clever one, for once. Not a knight or a hunter, but not some lowborn either. How ever did you manage to see past my disguise?"

"Are you looking for specific answers or are you just trying to eat up time to close the distance to me?" Lawrence replied, never taking his eyes off the creature.

"It depends, whichever one promises to be more...fun, I suppose." The predatory, almost psychopathic tone in which she spoke sent a chill up Lawrence's spine. It was as if he was face

to face with the likes of John Gacy.

“Okay, well that’s perfect then, because I’ve a game for you!” The demoness raised a brow and cocked her head in obvious interest.

“Oh? Do you now?”

“Yup, it’s called ‘Step into the sunshine!’ You win prizes if you manage to go outside and do something! Like touching grass!” Without further ceremony, Lawrence slammed the door shut. Distancing himself from the building, he half expected the door to fly off the hinges from the demoness’s fury at being scorned. When no such thing happened, he warily relaxed hoping that sunlight was, in fact, anathema to whatever the woman was. Yet, he could not shake the tingle in his spine. It felt that despite the literal barrier that existed between him and the woman, he was still just within reach...

In response, he flailed his sword behind him, striking air and not much else. He was alone in the ruined street, a quick glance around the rooftops and the alleys between houses confirmed as much. The complete silence complimenting the complete loneliness, Lawrence let his tension go with a huff through his nose. Either she was deathly allergic to sunlight, or she was toying with him without his knowledge, in which case he was screwed. Though he had to wonder if said toying would be due to some manner of magic, which had to be a given with how utterly medieval everything was, or if it was due to some other physical quality of hers. The answer, of course, came face to face with him as he turned his body about and nearly ran into the demoness.

With a shocked yelp, he quickly jumped back as the woman stood unfazed by his flailing. “I believe I’ve won this game,” She cooed, “stepping into the light and scaring you as such. Since you mentioned prizes, I can only assume that I’ve won at least one of them. So what is that I’ve won, stranger?” The last words were tipped with expectation and toxic annoyance.

“Oh, uh,” Lawrence stumbled, “You...win, the...” With each passing moment, he could practically feel a noose tightening around his neck, almost imperceptible contortions on the de-

moness's face acting as an hourglass. "You win, the answer to how I managed to spot you out!"

"Oh joy~" The demoness mockingly cooed, "do go on." Befitting her nature, the demoness began to circle around Lawrence, tail bouncing in the air like a cat circling prey. Primal instinct warned Lawrence not to turn his back to the thing, lest he invite his own death.

"Well," Lawrence started, shoring up his own confidence to boldly critique the woman, if only for his final, defiant moments. "For starters, the entire set up is, frankly, scuffed. Every living thing in this village is dead, for," he gave a shrug, "however long, and there just so happens to be a single survivor, in the biggest building, just sitting in the darkness. Who, mind you, is worried that whatever killed everyone might be coming back, and just so happens to cry at the right time to attract whatever schmuck comes across this place?"

"Which it did." The demoness retorted.

"True, but I hardly count but I'll get to that. Next, what gave you away was the form you decided to take." The demoness narrowed her eyes at the claim.

"Really now? How so?"

"For starters, you had it so that the neck had a blood splatter on it, when all of these other poor bastards got sucked dry. You expect me to believe you got nicked on something and managed to escape? Then again with the tail who's to say what's what, I guess." Lawrence admitted, acknowledging the sharpened point. "The bigger thing that gave you away, however, was the hair." He motioned towards the woman's head of hair, who mirrored his attention. "Your act was implying that you were cradling your dead mother, or something like that. And while you got the color right, your hair was wavy with a slight curve to it while the hair on the body was straight. Granted it could have been a thing from a father or something, but I decided the more paranoid answer would work. Overall, a scuffed performance, though I imagine you were looking to try and fool any brave lawman types who showed up."

At this point, the demoness stopped in her tracks and turned to face Lawrence, the annoyance giving way to mere curiosity. "A...fair assessment. I'll freely admit I didn't have long to think of something when you showed up. And I suppose you have a fair point about the blood I decided to dab on, knowing things that the person wouldn't know. But you still have to admit it did work on attracting someone foolish enough to stick around."

"That's just an error on my part, don't think that I had any good intentions looking through the place. Besides, I only just got here! I hardly know which way is up at this point!"

"That much is obvious. I've never seen a man with hair or clothes like yours in any of these lands. From where do you hail, stranger in this land?"

Lawrence scoffed at the question. "I mean I'd say where, but something tells me it'll hardly matter considering how I sort of just wound up here." The demoness locked her eyes to Lawrence's, a half-lidded look showing contempt at his reply.

"Playing coy now, are we? Fine. I'll figure it out myself." Despite turning his head slightly away, Lawrence felt an odd sense of pressure to keep his focus locked on the woman's steely, unblinking gaze. "What family do you claim?"

"I'm not really on talking terms with my family."

"What lord do you swear allegiance to?"

"I don't have a lord."

"What occupation did you fulfill in your village?"

"I don't...uh, live in a village." The demoness was getting visibly upset at his answers, with fingers tensing and the corner of her lip turning upwards in frustration.

"Enough of this tripe. ^{Where} do you come from?" Her gaze was even more intense now, and Lawrence simply could not bring himself to bare against it.

"I'm, sorry." Lawrence turned away, breaking eye contact with the woman. "Could you quit staring at me like that? It's really distracting. Also, I already told you it probably doesn't—" He stopped himself when he looked back to the demoness, who

stood seemingly taken aback at him. "I'm sorry is there some weird thing I'm missing right now?"

"...Were you not under my spell this whole time?" The demoness asked.

"Ah fuck, magic's a thing here?!" Lawrence replied. The demoness stood stupefied before him, shocked and incredulous at the revelation Lawrence had apparently bestowed upon her.

"'Is a thing here—'" The demoness stopped herself, regaining her composure as she idly chuckled at the question. Lawrence couldn't help but chuckle himself at the ridiculousness of the exchange.

"I'm serious!" He blurted out. "I don't know word one of where I am, and to make matters worse I'm finding out magic exists wherever it is I am!"

"'Does magic exist.'" The demoness mockingly repeated. She let out a haughty guffaw, seemingly satisfied with whatever conclusion she's reached. "I see now. You're just playing the fool to have fun at my expense. Well, not for long, anyways." Before Lawrence could ask what she meant, her tail whipped into the ground, a silver gleam sending a cloud of dust and dirt into Lawrence's face, blinding him.

"Ah! Fuck, man!" Lawrence cried out, dirt in his eye. As he worked to rub the distracting particles of earth away, the demoness took advantage of her diversion to grapple his arms; one in a preternatural death grip and the other wrapped up by her tail like a boa constrictor. The bladed tip of the tail glinted in the corner of his eye as the demoness traced a claw-like nail down his jaw line, the path like a thin singe mark upon his skin. With a firm grip, the demoness forced his gaze to meet hers as her fingers cupped his chin.

Her gaze was sharp and menacing, with fires of excitement burning behind unnatural irises. And yet, despite the steely gaze of a predator, there lurked something else that slowly grew in volume, dampening the woman's blazing confidence.

"I don't know who you are, 'stranger,' but you chose the wrong demoness to slight with your poor attempt at feigned ig-

norance. When I release you from whatever sad life led you to this moment, you may rest knowing that I shall be having the last laugh from your petty...little jest..." The demoness paused in what was meant to be her final send off to Lawrence before she killed him. Her gaze shifted rapidly from minor confusion to sheer terror within seconds, a concerning detail to say the least.

"What?" Lawrence asked, dumbstruck for anything else to ask. The demoness roughly pushed him away, releasing her grip on his arms. The demoness took a low, bent stance, as she distanced herself from Lawrence, fully alert and ready to strike with snake-like speed.

"You...what the hell are you?" The demoness asked.

Once again without any other recourse, Lawrence repeated his question. "What? Excuse me?"

"You can't be human, not anymore anyways. Your mana's practically gone, but you can't be undead. You've still color to you skin and you're still warm. There's no way you're a demon either, so I'll ask you again. What the hell are you?"

It certainly didn't sound good, whatever the problem was. Either way, it seemed that things were escalating and needed to be brought back down to some level of civility. "I'm...Lawrence." He answered, still not knowing what else to say to calm down the situation. "Look, I think we've both gotten off on the completely wrong foot. How about we talk about things over a bi—" Lawrence caught himself from making any unintended double entendres that would potentially make him sound like a platter. "...a drink of...over some food or water like regular people?"

"Gh, you've got some nerve, equating yourself to a person." The demoness retorted. "You've hardly more mana than any of the poor fools I've sucked dry around here. You're practically a walking corpse."

"Well, I'm still walking and breathing and sweating, so I can't be dead. And, like you said I can't be a demon so I must be a human, though, granted!" Lawrence exclaimed, pointing a finger upwards to make his point, "I don't have any loyalties to whoever these people were! In regard to that...mana thing, maybe where

I come from might provide some explanation for that. Would you at least be willing to chat with me about where I am in exchange for telling you where I come from?" The demoness relaxed somewhat, and the look of terror softened into mere apprehension and suspicion with a raised brow. "Please?" Lawrence pleaded.

"...Fine." The demoness relented. Lawrence couldn't help himself but to smile at the answer.

It's always the please that works.

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While the townhouse's atmosphere was more than slightly dreary, mostly due to the assortment of bodies and the general mess within, it still served well enough as an eatery. Though it took some cleaning up, namely fixing up a table and chair to sit at and clearing away barricades for proper mood lighting, the place still made for an excellent forum of easy conversation. Sitting down to talk, drink, and eat stale bread (though Lawrence's appetite was more or less absent in such an abattoir) Lawrence told the demoness all he could about where he came from. From the wonderous nature of his home to his on-the-spot moment of hiking which lead him to this strange new land, he told her everything he could think of that might interest her.

The demoness, though apprehensive and tense during the beginning of the conversation, eventually warmed up as the conversation continued. From leaning back in her chair to make any distance she could, to leaning in and even resting her head seductively against her hand, she eventually divulged an interest that was growing by the minute. For every bit of information Lawrence shared, the demoness traded her own information about the strange new world he found himself in. Between the existence of elves, undead, dwarves (mountain ones, not the genetic anomaly ones) and of the general fantastical layout of the land, Lawrence felt himself similarly enthralled in this world as she was his. She even traded supposedly vaunted details of her

own “home.” She spoke of a plane of darkness and fire, clad in stone towers whose shadows towered above all as pits of fire and brimstone burned eternally, sustaining a chorus of the screams of the damned.

A bit like Los Angeles, as far as Lawrence was concerned.

“What a utopia it sounds like,” The demoness declared. “While magic doesn’t exist, the mere fact that ‘technology’ allows even peasantry to benefit from warming in their homes, and that the royalty can reside in magnificent pillars of glass, practically a fairy tale! The uses of this technology you speak of sounds like a tale that a peasant revolt would spread, but if only they had their way of things.”

“Oh you got that right. Though maybe not specifically peasants.” Lawrence concurred, thinking of his time back in the university. “Sadly, despite all those luxuries, it ain’t all cracked up as you think it is. We’ve got the same corrupt assholes in charge at home as the nobles you described that reside in this world.”

“Certainly, but at least you can overthrow them, as you so claim with everyone being armed.”

“Eh,” Lawrence dismissed, “Most people didn’t want to anyways, no matter how ludicrous things got with crazies being in charge.”

“It can’t be all that bad, whatever kind of crazy do you refer to?”

“The kind of crazy that would lob off their own genitals and claim they were women, and if you didn’t agree with them they’d ruin your life, take your livelihood and your children to brain-wash, and a bunch of other horrid things.”

“Oh!” The demoness exclaimed, the negative side quickly coming to light. “Oh...I assume that even with this ‘technology’ of yours, it wasn’t a...perfect process, shall we say?”

“If you mean like something you could pull off, hell no.”

“Why that sounds like an utter headache to have to deal with.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a migraine.” Lawrence agreed, a new topic popping into his mind. “Hey, on the topic, I’m curious about something actually. Mind if I ask you a more personal question?”

“Go ahead~.” The demoness playfully agreed.

“I get you’re like a shapeshifter and all that but, are you actually like this or are you just catfishing me?” The demoness stared blankly in response.

“What?”

“Ach, sorry, slang.” Lawrence corrected. “I mean, is this like,” he motioned towards the demoness, “your true form? You’re not actually a man and this is a disguise or anything like that?”

“Oh? Why do ask?” The demoness, with a preternatural speed, shook its head from side to side as its face took on a more masculine look, emulating one of the nearby bodies. “You wouldn’t happen to be more comfortable or, god help you, attracted to your own, would you?”

“No!” Lawrence loudly denied, having not expected the response. The demoness let out a hearty chuckle at her own accusation.

“It’d be a crime you know, fornicating with one of your own.”

“No. God no. I’m just asking since it’d be awkward to get along with the wrong impression. Beer with a pal versus wine with a lady and all that.”

The demoness gave a playful little chuckle, before altering her face back to its usual, feminine charm. “How very refined of you. Yes, it is. As you can surmise, I am quite adept with shapeshifting and transmutation. A bit of my own specialty, compared to many, many others.”

“Ah. And that includes clothes?”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re like a succubus or something like that?” The horrifically sour glare he received in response told him what he needed to know. He backed down in his seat, turning away at his social faux pas. “Alright, sorry. I didn’t mean anything insulting if it was a slur or something like that. I hardly know where I am beyond some other plane of existence, this stuff’s still fresh and unknown to me.” The demoness let out a sigh from the apology, small twitches in her body dissipating any annoyance that might have sparked from the comment.

“It’s fine.” The demoness reassured him. “You don’t know anything about this plane, let alone the kind of harlots they are, and you’re far more accommodating than anyone else I’ve met. Though take heed of my advice, you’d do well to pick your words more carefully in the future. Just as it was traversing this ‘mine-field’ as you described it in your plane, so it is here with nobility, as they are not likely to be as forgiving as I. Take it from one who has mingled with them time and time again.”

“I’ll...keep it in mind.” Lawrence answered.

“Good~.” The demoness quipped, regaining whatever traces of her smug visage had slipped. “Now, I am curious about those horseless carriages you talked about, and those little, metal things that attract to the opposite and not their own—” The demoness stopped, her sultry demeanor dropping for an alerted scowl. She shifted her focus elsewhere, to some unknown thing or object that might have been nearby.

“Is something wrong?” Lawrence asked. The demoness glanced back to him, before pushing away from the table they had been sitting at. She shifted back to sultry demeanor with a small smile forming as she took her leave.

“I’d love to stay and continue our little chatter here, but there are other matters that demand my attention. I’d recommend taking whatever you wish from this place and leaving. Quickly. You wouldn’t want to be caught flat-footed less you find irons about your wrists.” Lawrence shifted in his seat, unsure what to make of the development. She obviously sensed something, but how close was it? How much time did he have?

“And Lawrence?” The demoness called from the door. “For what it’s worth, I thoroughly enjoyed our little conversation of where you came from. It made for a nice change in pace to the usual manipulation that I’m so used to. If we ever run into one another again I’d love to pick up where we left off~.” With a final blown kiss, and a wink, the demoness stepped outside, the flapping of wings signaling her departure.

“Didn’t even wait for me say goodbye.” Lawrence mumbled. “Wait she didn’t even give me a name!” Standing up from the ta-

ble, Lawrence stumbled over rubble and bodies towards the door, hoping to catch her in time. “Hey, I didn’t get your name!” He called out, but it was no use. The demoness was already gone. It was a shame, he thought. He had hoped for a name to the face, especially one as alluring as hers.

Such as it was, such people come and go in life, as Lawrence well knew. At the very least, at least he figured out that he wasn’t back home, and it was doubtful he’d be able to get back.

Taking the demon’s advice to heart, Lawrence eventually left the dead husk of the town behind; every nook and cranny investigated for valuables, and a sack of goods and sundries over his shoulder in a burlap sack.

* * *

“Halt there!” A gruff voice called out. Lawrence paused in his tracks, holding his hands in the air, nearly reaching the thick forest canopy. “You! Drop the sack and turn around!” Complying, Lawrence released his bag of loot and turned about, not knowing what to expect in the suffocatingly thick forest.

Behind him on the path, hidden in the thicket, emerged a squad of several armored men, their leader being an older man with short, grey hair and an eye patch. All bore the heraldry of some unknown lord, kingdom, or organization, the oldest of them being the regalest with various decorations and marks upon his armor of gold and silver that glittered in the dying light of the day. Before Lawrence could begin to speak, he was immediately assaulted by the oldest marching towards him and barking question after question in his face that he barely had time to answer.

“Who are you?”

“Lawren—”

“Where do you come from?”

“I don’t think it’ll really—”

“What is your strange looking clothes and your hair?”

“Could you please let me speak—”

“You just came from Grenwald, I know what remains of the place! What’s happened, what did you do?!”

Such was the barrage that he couldn’t get a word in edge wise. For every accusation that was hurled at him, he could scarcely explain his position. Hoping to escape the incessant barrage of blame and judgment, Lawrence tried his damndest to break eye contact to look anywhere else beyond the old man interrogating him, his mind blocking out the screaming. The man’s coterie were all similarly gruff looking men, though much younger than the elder blasting Lawrence. All were either blonde or brunette, no black hair at all. And, sadly, any hope of support from any of them was a forlorn hope, as all wore stern looks as they looked in his direction, bordering on contempt.

As forlorn as hope was amongst his “fellow” man, however, hope still lie in other, unforeseen places.

Quietly and decisively, a familiar, spear-like tail whipped from the canopy, impaling one of the men in the neck and hauling him upwards and out of sight, despite his brief struggle. Then, an elongated arm bearing wicked black claws reached downwards towards another, digging nails into flesh and dragging another gurgling upwards. All that remained was one last alerted soldier, desperately looking upwards in panic for where his comrades might have gone. The older man, still focused on Lawrence, continued his onslaught, and forced Lawrence’s vision back to him with a mailed hand.

Still ignoring the elder’s condemnations, something about the mark of witchery and demon magic, Lawrence could only catch a glimpse of the last soldier being dragged upwards into the canopy like his compatriots. Shortly thereafter, the forest echoed with a sickening crack as some poor fate befell the unlucky soldier. The elder’s attention, like the bone seconds before, finally snapped elsewhere, leaving Lawrence to his own thoughts.

The elder looked up to the canopy, a great mace drawn as his hand carried some strange symbol attached to what was some sort of rosary. Slowly he turned, keeping ever vigilant as to the

threat that awaited him. He did not need to wait overly long.

From the canopy came the tail again, slick with blood and whipping directly towards the elder soldier. With a swing of his mace, he deflected the whipping appendage and, with his free hand, grabbed hold of the wicked thing. With a great huff and heave, the tail's owner came crashing through the thicket, through branches and leaves, to the ground and laid out in a sprawl.

The demoness, taloned hands clad in blood, quickly recovered her stance with a grunt, bracing her tail above her as she did with Lawrence earlier. Replacing her haughty attitude with animalistic fury, she quickly lunged back at the elder, her tail spearheading the advance as she bore her claws. Her tail quickly deflected by the mace, she took to trying to claw at the elder's face like a tiger. While splashes of blood flew, the elder seemed undeterred as he brought his fist back up to roughly push the clawing woman away from him. Laid out again, the demoness tried to recover, only to freeze in her tracks as the old soldier shouted at the top of his lungs.

"MIRIEL, WRETCHED SHIFTER AND SEDUCER OF MAN, HALT! TAKE NOT ONE FURTHER STEP YE SPEAKER OF LIES!"

The demoness, Miriel, stood in place as the elder bellowed his command. Though struggle contoured her face, she seemed unable to move as the soldier advanced towards her, mace in hand.

Snapping out of his shock, Lawrence moved before thinking, drawing his sword to...what exactly? Could he even take this guy on in a fight? His question was answered quickly as the soldier snapped his bloodied face back towards him and held up rosary laden hand towards Lawrence. With a quick motion of the fingers and a chant of some unheard sentence, Lawrence stopped with a flinch, freezing in place as the soldier glared daggers at him. "I'll deal with you after I deal with the whore once and for all." The soldier growled. The soldier turned his back to Lawrence, and began to approach Miriel, who bore sharpened teeth like a cornered animal. Lawrence, awkwardly recovering from his shock, slowly lowered his arms from their guarded po-

sition and looked back towards the man who had simply left him alone.

“You think you’ve won then?!” Miriel exclaimed. “I’m not the only one you know. There are so many others who’ll be more than happy to move in once I’m gone!”

“But the world will be rid of one less monster terrorizing good people.” The soldier replied.

“Thinking you’ll be better off?! You need me more than you know captain. Once I’m gone, you’ll have to contend with much more of those vampiric harlots who’ll want to claim my stake!”

“I’ll deal with it as I have to. At least here I can correct one mistake.” The soldier raised his mace to his head, holding it in front of him in reverence. “In the name of blessed Hyra, for the good of Threnfollow, I condemn thee to—” The prayer was interrupted with a THUNK as Lawrence’s blade found itself embedded into the soldier’s head, splitting his skull open. With nary a sound but a raspy breath, the soldier faltered, his legs giving out as he dropped the mace to the ground. Miriel, seemingly free of whatever restrained her, quickly pounced upon the now dying man. Claws digging into and crushing steel, her mouth contorted and distended into a savage, worm-like maw full of razor-sharp teeth that quickly clamped down on the soldier’s exposed neck.

The soldier’s healthy, flushed skin began to blacken as he started to shrivel up like a sundried raisin. Within seconds, he was another dead husk left out in the forest, devoid of life. Miriel detached from him with a satisfied sigh before staring down on the broken body in front of her. “Oh captain~” she cooed, “thank you for bestowing me with one last meal for old time’s sake. Even if it meant providing it yourself.” Tossing the body to the side, she raised up her arms to the air with her eyes closed in victory, a throaty chuckle rising into a cacophonous roar of laughter as she experienced the euphoria of what was likely a major personal victory. Lawrence could only stare at the scene before him, mortified at the events that had taken place and of its aftermath.

What had he just done?! He could feel his heart beating in his

throat, his stomach floating like a balloon. Actually, scratch that, it wasn't his heart in his throat, it was something else.

Miriel calmed down from her excitement and looked back at the scene before her, seemingly noticing Lawrence in the moment. "Ah! I almost forgot you were there Lawrence." Lawrence could only keep staring, mouth a gape as Miriel continued in her self-indulgence. "I hadn't thought that we'd be seeing each other again so soon. So, immune to more magics than just charms huh? To think that even magical force doesn't affect you. You've quite the boon y'know, wizards would kill for that sort of protection..." She left behind the body and sauntered up to Lawrence, frozen in shock. "Is there something you mean to say? A question or a topic you'd wish to discuss?" Lawrence could only stare back in response. That ireful look came to her face again, obviously indignant at the lack of a response.

"Well?" She questioned. "Spit it out!" Lawrence's body could only oblige. With a sudden gag, Lawrence ran away from the scene to the side of the road before falling to his knees. With a tremendous heave, he hurled a ball of his previous meal to the ground, followed by a small, steady stream of bile as he struggled to process that he had just murdered someone in cold blood. Certainly, watching someone get drained to a raisin was a horrid thing to bear witness to, but it was something else to feel the impact of a sword hitting a man's skull, or to see blood spatters on his arms, or the smell of soiled undergarments...

Reminded again of the sensation, Lawrence redoubled in his vomiting as, Miriel, stood idly by, disgusted at the display before her. When, finally, Lawrence finished evacuating his guts, several spits required to clear the remnants from his mouth, he turned his head to Miriel with ragged breath. "Gah, sorry," he muttered, wiping his mouth, "I've never uh. Hmph humph. Did something like that to, to anyone. It's...it's not great." Picking himself back up, he turned back fully to the demoness. "Liveleak helps but...ugh."

"Well," the demoness started, awkwardly trying to keep the ice broken. "It's something that happens to humans the first time

around. It's the ones that start early, or feel nothing from it, that you have to look for, I've noticed."

"I figured. Anyway..." Lawrence spit out another bit of vomit from his mouth, prepared to move on from the subject, "that was kind of you."

"Oh? Draining the very life from a man is something you consider kind?"

Lawrence shook his head. "No, no. The fact you helped out. I think it's kind of needed with folk like us, honestly." Miriel raised a brow in response. "Well, strangers, I mean. Strangers to lands like us need to stick together, help each other out!"

"What, you think I..." The demon tilted her head upwards and let out a haughty laugh, her amusement echoing through the forest. "How ludicrous! You might be the most unique man I've met in this land Lawrence, but you're still just another human I couldn't care less about living or dying."

A bit rude, Lawrence thought. "Then why'd you bother intervening if I wasn't so important?" He countered.

"Because!" She shot back. "Your situation just so happened to play into my advantage. These men just so happened to be a problem I was dealing with, and now, I have!" She motioned around to the scene she had created, and more specifically to the body she had discarded.

"So what, you're just going to leave now that your problem is dealt with?"

"Why yes, I am." Miriel responded matter of factly.

"Not even to shoot the shit a little bit?"

"Is there a problem with me keeping to my own schedule?" The demoness accused. Clearly a shit test.

"No," Lawrence answered, wary of his words, "no problem at all. By all means you can leave to wherever, whenever. I'm not gonna stop you." A toothy smile.

"That's what I thought." The demoness turned about to leave, only for Lawrence to spring his trap.

"Just remember that you owe me a favor!" Hiding a smirk, Lawrence watched with satisfaction as Miriel stopped in her

tracks. She turned her head about, her smug looked tainted with the faintest glare as she stared back towards him.

“..Whatever do you mean to imply by that?” She asked, her tone low and almost murderous.

“I mean, if you didn’t mean to save me then clearly you killed these men for yourself, right?”

“Go on.”

“Then, since you got caught out and all by that old guy, whom I imagine you’ve had quite a history with—”

“Get to your point.” Miriel snapped.

“Because I saved you from getting your head smashed in, you owe me one.” Lawrence quickly finished. “Granted I don’t have any problems at the moment, I...uh, just kind of want to bust your balls a little bit. Tease you a little bit y’know? Have a little fun, take the piss out of it, that sort of thing.” Miriel remained silent for a moment, before turning her head away, in what was most definitely a tactic to hide any displeasure she had at the claim.

“..So it would seem.” She flatly answered. “You have me there Lawrence, and I will keep it in mind in the future.” With the crunching of cartilage, a pair of batlike wings sprouted from the demoness’ back. She was about to leave again and was obviously dead set on it.

“Alright, well. That’s fine.” Lawrence conceded. “I hope, at least, to be able to see you again Miriel.” A brief pause.

The response was swift, immediate, and terrifying.

Before he could blink, Lawrence found Miriel’s hand wrapped about his throat and forcing him to the ground and on his knees. Her grip tightened, cutting off his ability to breath. Left with no option, Lawrence clutched at his attacker’s arm as he struggled to not lose consciousness. Her gaze drilled into his very being as she stared into his eyes with murderous intent.

“Don’t you *dare* repeat that name.” She snarled, her outlook having changed to utter savagery. “I have labored long to ensure that my name was forgotten by mortal kind. I have burnt thousands of your years in knowledge to ash, utterly destroyed the

lives of countless men and women, and instigated entire social upheavals to see the orders that knew about it annihilated. Do not think that I will hesitate for a second to flay you alive should you happen to merely utter that name to the thin air." She tightened her grip, practically cutting off the flow of Lawrence's blood to his brain. "Am I understood?" On the verge of blacking out, Lawrence nodded, at least understanding the gravity of the situation.

"Good." Miriel promptly released him from her grasp, leaving him to gasp for the air that was denied to him. "I will not be having this conversation with you again."

"Fine," Lawrence coughed out, "fine. That's fair. Didn't know it meant that much to you." Miriel, seemingly satisfied with her little demonstration, prepared herself to leave once again. "Hey," Lawrence rasped out, trying to get Miriel's attention, "for what it's worth, I apologize Miri. I didn't realize that the true name clause was a thing with your kind." Miri quickly turned about, Lawrence's new nick name for her having gotten her attention once again. "Nicknames are still fair game, aren't they?"

"You are pushing the limits of my tolerance, fellow stranger. You would do well to remember that advice I gave you." Without a further word, Miri took off with a flap of her wings. The snapping of branches and twigs (and the splatter of the bodies that were previously hidden up in the canopy impacting with the ground) postmarked her departure. Left once again to his own devices, Lawrence saw no other course than to scavenge the bodies for whatever valuables they had before setting off.

In this strange new world, he had been given a most colorful welcome, and a nagging question that ate at him as he walked along the road, to the nearest town he could find. A question he sadly would not be able to answer on his own.

II

Speaking Easy on Local Drama (and Deadbeats)

DONG, DONG, DONG.

The town bell rang out, marking the impending evening curfew hours, a period where only vagrants, cutpurses, and other nefarious creatures still roamed the streets.

“Alright everyone, that’s the evening bell. Finish up your drinks and get your lanterns ready. It’s closing call.” There was a collective groan between the patrons that were still left in the bar interior. No one had bothered to drink outside in the patio tonight, it was just too chilly out. “Ay, no groaning, it’s not my decision to make. Believe me, none of us want Mr. Tarrant to wake up from his nap to have to deal with anyone who disagrees with it. But I tell you, I’ll see what I can do to have our hours extended.” One by one, the patrons left their respective coinage on their tables and filed out into the night, their thirst for alcohol begrudgingly sated. No one was left inside the bar but Lawrence and the completely empty mugs and glasses on the tables.

Lawrence let out a sigh and adjusted the cap on his head, relieved of customer expectations. Despite the lack of prying eyes, however there was still Tarrant’s strict expectations to deal with. There was cleaning the bar, ensuring that stocks would be ready for tomorrow, and, of course, counting money and ensuring not a single coin of it went missing. Little by little he was clawing his way out, but there was still tonight to get through. One thing at a time.

It had been a mercifully quiet evening, and Tarrant had gone to sleep an hour before, leaving Lawrence to manage everything. He turned down how much the lanterns burned to a dim light; it was enough to see what he was doing, and to put on a front

that the place was closed for the evening. He quickly set about cleaning the establishment, wiping down the bar with a rag and moving to clear mugs and glasses away to be cleaned later. “No sticky spots!” Tarrant had scolded. “This establishment is a place of refinement for the appreciation of fine liquor, not some hovel for lowborn to act as swine.” As if.

He honestly preferred working alone like this. Though it left him alone to clean up everything, it gave him a semblance of liberty that he so desperately craved. The façade of running and managing his own little place in a medieval city. Though, granted, there wasn’t much he could talk about with customers. Listening to the gossip and drama of the city and surrounding lands did make for decent entertainment, at least. There was all the buzz about that recent invasion or something about how one count was attacking another, it was all a blur, really.

As he set about wiping down the bar, Lawrence spotted a dark silhouette against one of the windows out of the corner of his eye. The silhouette was of a man, with bushy hair and a hunched over frame that stalked and towards the side of the building.

Towards where the side door was, which lead directly into the backroom storage.

“Son of a bitch,” Lawrence muttered. It was Chauncy again, the vagrant that had been the bane of his existence ever since he started here. An utter nuisance, he was a complete alcoholic who seemed to constantly scheme at getting his thirst for booze satisfied however he could. Between harassing customers and begging right next to the bar, he had been a thorn in Tarrant’s side and, consequently, Lawrence’s as he was inevitably assigned to deal with him. Yet even by driving him away by daylight, he’d only got worse over time. Now he couldn’t even let him just pass by without paying him mind, especially at night. The last time it happened he walked directly into storage and drank himself into a stupor, right in the middle of it. Though the door had a lock on it now, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he decided to try and break in.

The worthless guards didn’t bother helping since they had apparently thought the most moral option was to just let him-

self drink into oblivion. They failed to understand that was money they expected to be given away, and money that specifically came out of Lawrence's pocket. Damnably altruism. Of course it was the same here as it was back at home.

At least they had the decency to not care when he took matters into his own hands, or more specifically an axe handle, to drive him off. Not quite as dangerous as the sword, but it was more legally acceptable to scare someone with a club than with sharpened steel.

Taking his trusty baseball bat adjacent with him, Lawrence quietly stalked to storage with a lantern in hand, ready to repel the repugnant booze raider. He worked quickly to unlock the side door and stepped into the darkened alley. Chauncy was immediately to his left, sitting slumped against the wall, naturally. All that was left was confrontation.

"OY!" Lawrence growled, tapping the axe handle against the door frame. "How many times do I have to go over this with you, you booze hound? You aren't going to stink up the place with your vagrancy, and you're sure as hell not going to waltz in whenever you please to drink yourself stupid. Beat it, before I beat you!" Chauncy did not respond with his typical muttering and slurred speech and didn't stumble off when the threat was issued, as was the routine. More disconcertingly, he simply tilted his head slowly over and looked at Lawrence out of the corner of his eye before looking away. Afterwards, he sat unmoving in his position, practically a challenge.

Despite the lack of action, Lawrence took a step back from the scene, put off by the lack of a response. Something was wrong, something horribly wrong. He's never been like this, every single hair on his body was standing on end. Still, what could that drunk even do? Lawrence still had the handle, as good a bat as any, and he should be covered legally, if what Tarrant told him was true about property and driving folk off. And hey, if he fought back, he was perfectly fine to deal with it as he saw fit! His grip tightened on the handle as he stepped forward.

Between losing on his salary and having to beat off a drunk,

he preferred the latter.

He raised the handle upwards, delaying his swing for a moment to wait for a reaction, before bringing it down as a hammer of order. Mid-swing, Lawrence noticed the gleam of steel emerge from one of Chauncy's hands as it was thrust towards him. Aborting his swing, Lawrence awkwardly brought the handle back upwards to deflect the blade going for his belly. With deceptive speed, Chauncy stood up and grabbed Lawrence by the cuff of his shirt, bringing him face to face with the vagrant's unusually sharp gaze. For a moment, the two locked eyes with one another, each trying to intimidate the other. So this was the bastard's plan, Lawrence thought, then fine.

Dropping the lantern, Lawrence brought his own hand up to cup the vagrant's skull, before shoving his thumb in his eye socket. With a startlingly high-pitched grunt, Chauncy released Lawrence and shoved him away with fierce strength. Recovering his footing, Lawrence thought nothing but to end the fight, now that Chauncy was off balance. Chauncy seemed surprisingly brutal when he seemed sober, a strength he couldn't allow to regain its bearing. When Chauncy made a wild swing with his knife, Lawrence was quick to punish him, swinging his handle to strike at the knife hand to get Chauncy to it. With a dull clink, Chauncy's arm went wide across his body as the handle made impact with it. The knife, shockingly, was still firmly in his grip. Hoping to pin Chauncy with his back turned to him, Lawrence moved to smash his hand against the wall, hoping thusly to disarm him and to teach him manners.

Grabbing his wrist, Lawrence noticed, with horror, that Chauncy's wrist was not as thick as he remembered it to be. In fact, it seemed as if his arm had *ended* with the knife, as if grafted upon a stump! Repulsed by the visualization, Lawrence thought to bring the bat about to strike Chauncy across the head with a backswing, hoping the shock would be enough to end the fight. But as he brought it around to swing, he spotted another gleam in the darkness, hurtling straight towards his head.

Jerking his head back, he flinched as he felt the handle shatter

into splinters in his hand, something metallic impacting against the stone wall as he made distance from the beggar. He looked to the remains of his weapon, now utterly destroyed, as he looked back to Chauncy in fear. Now, not only did Chauncy have the knife for his hand, but now something else lurked in the darkness with him, a spearhead like appendage that trailed downwards behind him like a snake. Of course it wasn't Chauncy, of course there was something wrong about all of this!

Slowly, in the brief pause of the conflict, Lawrence debated between trying to run and standing his ground and drawing his sword. He couldn't hear anyone coming down the street, but he'd probably be better in the open than in this alley with whatever was glaring murderously at him. Unconsciously, Lawrence took a step backwards as he tried to contemplate a plan of action; it was the excuse the thing before him needed.

Quickly closing the distance, the thing launched the spear at his head, as the dagger in its sleeve disappeared from sight. Deftly ducking the spear, Lawrence reached for his sword, only to have his wrist grabbed midway across his chest and shoved against his body. The Chauncy-thing's other hand shoved against Lawrence's face, pushing him down to the stone street as he felt his leg pulled out from beneath him. The side of his face being pushed against the ground, Lawrence reached out with his free hand to push away at Chauncy, only to witness the tail transform into another blackened hand before it pulled his own away. It was over. He was done. Pinned to the street, Lawrence just knew death was standing over him, whatever it was Chauncy was.

"Stupid, stupid man." The Chauncy thing spoke, its voice not Chauncy's own. "You could have just listened to your instincts and walked away, but no. You just had to go and get my dander up!" The thing pressed Lawrence harder into the street, as if to emphasize the point. "You chose the wrong person to slight with your poor excuse of a threat. But don't worry, when I release from whatever sad life you led up to this moment, you may rest knowing that I will be the last one to enjoy your little life." Out of

the corner of his eye, and through the Chauncy-thing's fingers, he could see it.

The gleam in the eye, that familiar look of superiority, that familiar line, that horrid, crunching of bone as his jaw distended into a worm-like maw of razor-sharp teeth...

Christ alive, was that-

"Christ!" Lawrence muttered through gritted teeth, "Miri?! Ish...that-"

The Chauncy thing paused, its mouth returned to normal as the pressure against Lawrence's face subsided. Its face contorted to confusion at the expletive, and the name that was muttered. "How do you..." With a sudden shock, the thing stopped pressing against Lawrence's face and gripped it, forcing him to look directly into his eyes. "...Lawrence?!"

"Hey! Miri!" Lawrence joyfully called out, his fear quickly dissipating for however dim a hope recognition was. "Hey! Sorry about the handle and all that, I, I didn't know it was you! I mean, you understand the need of protecting one's business endeavors I hope right? Hey, it was nothing personal and I'd really appreciate it if you let me up and please, God, don't kill me." The Chauncy-thing, Miri, withdrew from her stranglehold on Lawrence, who took the opportunity to sit up from the ground. Miri characteristically put her...his...her Chauncy-like hand up to her chin as a feminine, more familiar chortle escaped her chest. More and more of those haughty mannerisms reared their heads as she looked upwards, amused at the entire situation, as her tail wagged behind her.

"My, my~! Lawrence dear! I hardly recognized you, wearing such a dumb little hat at this hour!" Miri flicked a finger at Lawrence's brimmed hat, teasing him for his choice in attire.

"Uhm, well, I like thank you very much!" Lawrence deflected. "But hey y'know, for dumb as it looks, it looks even dumber with you having mounted me like this out in public." As if remembering where she was, Miri quickly dismounted from Lawrence and helped him back up. "Thank you." Lawrence continued. "I know this seems a little quick, but how about we catch up on this con-

versation inside? We'll look a lot less suspicious than talking out in an alley at this hour and I'll even close the door behind me this time." Miri pursed her lips in thought and crossed her Chauncy-arms.

"Hm, I'm not sure..." She mused. "I was hoping to find one more easy meal before I moved on tonight. Things have been getting a bit touchy around here as of late."

"Ah c'mon, you're starting to sound like me. Surely you've enough time for a drink or two?" Miri looked off elsewhere as she mulled over the offer.

"...will you be covering?" She asked. Lawrence stopped himself from cringing as he considered the potential cost she might run him.

"Of course! Only right for a host to provide to a guest he invited!" She gave a toothy smile (what was considered toothy, for whatever teeth Chauncy had had left) at the response.

"Why that sounds lovely~." Despite the positive answer, Lawrence could feel a sense of static on the breeze, an air of suspicion that filled the alleyway.

"Great! Just, ah, keep your voice down while we're inside." Lawrence warned, hoping the disclosure would help keep Tarrant out of things. "The last thing I need is a complaint about noise." With a cheeky gesture to her mouth, Miri followed Lawrence into the back storage, and into the main bar area. Halfway inside, Lawrence stopped their entrance and asked, "Oh, uh, would you happen to know where Chauncy is, by the way?"

"What the beggar?" Miri asked. "Yes. They'll probably find him when they comb the city tomorrow for bodies on the witch hunt. Most likely to figure out who belongs and who doesn't."

"O-Oh..." Lawrence shakily replied. He had heard about the hunters that were staying in town recently, supposedly on the lookout for some sort of doppelganger, as they put it. To think, Miri was probably the one that was responsible for bringing them around! Though he also breathed a slight sigh of relief. At least he wouldn't have to worry about dealing with Chauncy any-

more; and, of course, that it was her to begin with. He doubted any other kind of impostor would quite as welcome to conversation.

Locking the side door, and dimming the lights further to near darkness, Lawrence showed Miri to one of the clean bar stools available. Lawrence asked, keeping his voice down the entire time, "So is there anything I can—" before stopping himself as he looked back at Chauncy's face staring back at him. A disconcerting situation, knowing the man who it belonged to was probably a mere husk at this point. "Miri, I'm sorry. Can you...turn back to your regular face or something? Seeing his face like this is just hitting me right in the uncanny valley." Miri raised a brow before silently shifting her face back to its true, infernal form; horns, fangs, and all.

"The 'uncanny valley?' I presume you mean it's that point where shifters such as myself are frustratingly close to emulating one of your kind, but off the mark just enough to the point where we're instantly recognizable as nonhuman."

"That's the gist of it." Lawrence replied. "Ah, but before we get too far into me, let's get into you. Anything in particular you like?"

"Well..." Miri replied, considering her options. "What do you have?"

"Well, if it's something you can find in the Empire or the Theocracy, I probably have it." Miri's expression lit up at the presumed variety.

"Oooh, do you happen to know how to make a thing called 'Eternal King's Last Sup?'" Lawrence racked his brain trying to remember if anyone has ever ordered something like it, to no avail.

"I don't believe I do." He answered.

"Ah! Don't worry about it. It's a special drink mix anyways. If you can't do it then I'll have some Taganair wine if you have it." Lawrence winced at the alternative. Taganair wine was expensive, and a missing glass would certainly be noticed. Noting

that it would put a dent in this week's salary, Lawrence decided to inquire on the other option.

"Well, what's the drink mix? If I have the booze needed for it, I can try my hand at making it." As if on cue, Miri began to list off the specific recipe details of the mix.

Lawrence almost wept. Miri listed several expensive liquors that were required for the mix, along with various little embellishments that were imperative for the overall taste. Of course she'd have the most expensive tastes it really was he was back at home. Miri must have noted the distress on his face as she stopped her recounting of the exact number of swirls needed to mix the booze together. "Is everything quite all right Lawrence? You look rather wan. If it's the mix I can help cover the cost; money's a means to an end for me."

"No, no, it's fine." Lawrence rebutted. He had offered, after all. "I just, need to get the stuff from the back." Lawrence excused himself from the bar and took his time gathering the liquor, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to hide the difference later. He could probably fill them part way with water, which should fool Mr. Tarrant. It's not often that anyone ordered them either, so he could probably get away with explaining away the taste by adding a drop or two of grain alcohol from the alchemist. Not that the customers would notice the difference.

Hopefully.

Lawrence made several trips for the bottles (and the odd orange), not wanting to risk clinking them together and making unnecessary noise. The ingredients assembled on the bar, Miri asked, "Will you need me to recount the recipe, Lawrence?"

"No, no I should have it all. Uh, it's Worsely before Faifnar right?" Lawrence clarified.

"Yes, it is." Miri replied, straight backed in her seat. Without a word Lawrence got to work, combining the spirits in the specific order requested in a glass. That old feeling, that sense of danger Lawrence had when he first met with the demoness before him, was back. Not quite as pervasive, but still a spike in his chest as he kept to his own work. But despite the obvious fear, there

was something else present, a dull, hollow throb in his chest he couldn't put his finger on. It was just adrenaline, from the tussle in the alley, he thought. Standing across a bar little less than arm's length from the patron before him, a mass murdering demoness, probably didn't help matters any.

"Y'know Miri," Lawrence started, hoping that conversation would calm his nerves. "I, y'know, it—you seem to not mind me calling you that nickname I've noticed."

"You're traipsing closer to the edge on that than you think." Miri responded. "But I'll admit you're tiptoeing it well. The fact you didn't use it when I was about to kill you is very telling that I might not have to deal with you— watch your elbow by the way."

"Shit!" Heeding Miri's warning a little too late, Lawrence accidentally elbowed one of the bottles near him, knocking it off the counter. The conversation wasn't helping at all with his nervousness. However, with sharp reflexes, he managed to catch the bottle just before it could shatter on the ground. He certainly didn't remember ever being so fast. Maybe it *was* adrenaline. "Well," Lawrence declared, looking between the recovered bottle and Miri, "seems I'm quick on the draw in general tonight."

"Very impressive~." Miri commented as Lawrence continued on with mixing her drink. She let out a little gasp as she leaned into the counter, the Chauncy-esque clothes ruffling against what was probably just Miri's head on Chauncy's body; a mental image Lawrence did not enjoy conjuring. "That little display reminds me Lawrence. I thought about your situation and, as a lark, decided to consult an acquaintance of mine about an outsider such as yourself."

"Really? And what'd that turn up?"

"Basically, just as there are certain outsiders like my kind that manage to force their way in, so too can more divine ones, angels and the like. Though it seems that, on occasion, there are certain other individuals, such as yourself, that manage to make their way in, though it's usually not without divine intervention that it happens. Apparently, they benefit from certain boons that sprout from their unique presence or mana."

“Hmm.” Lawrence contemplated the implication as he poured a particularly fruity liquor from on high, as instructed. “Yes that is very interesting...wait,” He set the bottle down and looked Miri in her half-lidded, playful eyes, “are you here to kill me?” Miri let out a throaty chuckle as she leaned into the counter, her tail once again playfully swinging above and behind her. Like a cobra.

“Maybe~.” She coyly responded. “Maybe I just find you too enjoyable to just do away with. Maybe I’m just enjoying a brief pause from my work before I get back to it. Who knows~?” She knew what she was doing, teasing him like that. It seemed par the course with her, but the fact she didn’t end him despite recognizing him was probably the better answer to his question.

“Lovely. Well, enough about my strange little situation,” Lawrence started, his confidence returning as he thought on how to divert any further discussion about his person, “why are you in town? I imagine a place like this is a little too large for you to drain yourself.”

“You’d be right. I’m just checking in on my own little stake of territory since I heard there was trouble recently. You know of succubi, right Lawrence?”

“To an extent,” Lawrence answered, counting the swirls of the drink. “Demonic, sexual predators that drain men and women or something right?”

“Yes, but unlike a lady such as I, those harlots don’t know the beginning of restraint. They find a nice little nest area to dwell in, and instead of biding their time between meals, letting things breath for a bit, they devour any and all they can. No sense of decency or of a long-term plan, just seduce and drain. Day in, day out.”

“Like you’re one to talk,” Lawrence prodded, testing the waters for how far he could go, “did you not drain an entire village not too long ago?”

Miri scoffed at the accusation, scolding, “That’s hardly comparable! It’s not like I had a—” As if catching herself, Miri lifted her body from the bar, holding her hands up to create an in-

visible barrier for herself to stop at. A very telling answer for Lawrence. She got angry, certainly, but it was of a different shade of fury on the spectrum.

It wasn't murderous, or even savage, but rather that of annoyed embarrassment. She didn't seem quite as liable to tear his throat out for saying the wrong thing. Though what was more interesting was her answer to it. Not like she had what? A choice? Restraint? Either he had inadvertently called out her hypocrisy, or poked at some other, personal problem of hers.

Recovering her standing, Miri leaned into the bar, not seductively but certainly more exasperated as she rested her arms across each other. "As I was saying, they have no restraint at all, draining any and all who fall for them. In fact, they're the reason the hunters are in town as we speak. And me, for that matter."

"Oh?"

"You were there when I had that dour conversation with the captain. Those gauche opportunists are constantly trying to creep into my territory and, as a result, ruining the nice little food supply I've available."

"And you're here to kick them out?"

"Did. Ordinarily I would've slaughtered them and been done with it, but with the witch hunters in town I had to get more creative to get things to die down. Rather than dirty my hands with it I thought to help them with their little investigation; give them a false sense of accomplishment. After that, I was thinking to lay low for a while, maybe draw them away by draining some unfortunate traveler elsewhere to have the place to myself. Unfortunately, because those whores' loins are always on fire and they can't stop their emotions, they came after me directly."

"I take it they weren't successful." Lawrence noted, seeing the lack of injuries on the demoness.

"Ugh." Miri rested her head in her hand and looked towards the barren wall of the bar. "They were successful in being a thorn in my side. Going and forcing me to end them instead of waiting to die at the hand of the hunters. Now the hunters will be searching until snowfall and I'm out of a hunting ground. Is that drink

ready yet?" She cast a sideways glance to her bartender, visibly bored at the conversation.

"One more thing, that orange topping I think." Corking the last bottle and setting it aside, Lawrence moved onto the finishing touch of the drink. Taking a knife, he skinned the fruit of its outer layer, a fine mist erupting from the orange as the blade pierced its quarry. Choosing the most promising section of the orange, he quickly retrieved the seed from within and placed the slice on the rim of the drink glass. It was veritable fruit basket of a drink, made up of several fruit-based liquors mixed into a rainbow of various shades of red and violet. If he had to guess, the orange slice was more for presentation.

"Here you are," Lawrence presented, "One 'Eternal King's Last Sup.' Though I'd be damned if I know why it's called that."

"Ah, it's a little drink I picked up while mixing with the nobility of the Theocracy. It's something they whip up whenever a new pope is coronated or something like that." Miri took the glass in hand and brought it half-way to her lips before pausing. She let her eyes trail to the drink before trailing back to Lawrence, that look of suspicion ever present.

"Something wrong?" Lawrence asked, playing things coolly.

"I've just had a thought Lawrence," Miri mused, eyeing the glass, "this is your first Eternal King...why don't you taste it first?" She offered the drink back, putting forth a façade of playful confidence. "It'll help you get the taste for it in the future, as well as a little sample in case you like it."

It was a bullshit excuse and Lawrence knew it. "What's the matter?" He teased in response. "I figured poison didn't work on your kind. Does that mean alcohol don't work either if that's the case?" Miri wordlessly set the glass down on the bar in response. "Suit yourself." Taking a small spoonful of the mix with the mixing spoon, he dropped a sample onto the side of his thumb near the wrist before supping it down.

The taste was as expected, a vitriolic punch of alcohol that was accented by a veritable grab bag of fruity flavors, of apples, oranges, grapes, and cherries. Physically wincing at the taste, he

cocked his head to the side as he took in the flavors of each of the alcohols mixed with one another. Worsely, the orange focused spirit mixed glumly with the Faifnar apple, and the combination of cherry from the Banai and the grape taste from the Neutone served as a bittersweet capstone to the entire affair. Overall, it tasted as a gluttonous, overpriced drink special you'd see in a cheap bar.

"Certainly fruity. I'll give it that."

"Never hurts to test the waters, Lawrence. Yes, poison has no effect, and I'd truly have to try in order to get drunk. Not that I ever look to do it, mind you." Miri took up the glass once again and took a sip from it. Upon letting the liquor touch that devilish tongue of hers, Miri swooned with pleasure as her eyes rolled upwards in satisfaction. The glass, now, was a quarter empty. "Mmh, goodness. It's been so long since I've had one of these."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it." Lawrence responded. "Sad to hear about your, uh, territory thing, but cool to hear you're doing well overall." Without anything else to add to the conversation, the ball essentially in Miri's court, Lawrence restarted his nightly duty to clean the bar. Grabbing the previously discarded rag, he started to idly wipe down the bar to rid it of sticky splashes of spilt alcohol and ale as he let his patron partake in her drink. He didn't pay her much attention, in all honesty. He was satisfied enough to give her a moment of rest and a relaxing drink to enjoy.

It's why he jumped when Miri suddenly asked, "What do you want from me Lawrence?"

"Eh, pardon?" He stammered. Miri was looking directly at him, her drink resting against the bar. Her eyes were stern, with an equally serious expression that sent a chill up Lawrence's spine.

"Quit with the sweet talk Lawrence. What are you buttering me up for?"

"I've absolutely no idea what you're talking about." Lawrence denied. " 'Buttering you up?' I'm just being nice is all."

“That’s what irking me. Why *are* you being so nice to someone who’s nearly killed you on several occasions? What are you hoping to get out of this?” Miri demanded.

“That’s...actually a really good question.” Lawrence paused his wipe down of the bar and held his own chin in thought. Why was it he was being so kind with his money that he so desperately needed? And why Miri, who has nearly slaughtered him several times in the past, let alone the past couple of minutes, and not towards someone like Chauncy? And why is it that, even with everything calmed down now, why did it feel like his heart was going to pound out of his chest? Why was his chest still throbbing?! Why did it feel so, so, *empty*? “Let’s see...actually, I got one. As much as I hate to say this, I think you’re the one person who bothered listening to me about where I was from or the crap I put up with, and with interest at that! And, as dopey as it’ll sound, it was kind of you to tell me where I was, as well as regaling with your home, in exchange.”

Miri was visibly taken aback at the answer. “What, you think I’m...” After an amused scoff, she let out a loud “HA!” before quieting herself down as Lawrence hurriedly shushed her. He glanced upstairs, waiting to hear the creaking of floor of Tarrant waking up over Miri’s prattling. “A ‘kind person.’ That’s rich of you. Wiser humans wouldn’t dare to call me a person Lawrence, for good reason. I think you’re mistaking a passing interest for genuine concern.” If Tarrant had woken up, he’d hear the floorboards creaking, Tarrant was fat enough that he should hear it. At least, he thought he should hear it, from when he went upstairs earlier tonight.

Sure he didn’t hear Tarrant wake up, Lawrence turned his concern back to Miri. “I think you’re being too grand with how inhuman you are. You’re thinking and talking like anyone else, so the fact you listened to me warrants some respect, at least to me.”

If you say so.” Miri took another drink of her Eternal King, her glass only half full, half empty. A bemused look came across her face as a thought came to her. “I say...on the topic of you, how

ever did you come into a place such as this Lawrence? I didn't take you as one to quickly learn about alcohol, let alone to hit the ground for running a business."

"What? Ah, nah, nah!" Lawrence quickly attempted to deflect. "I mean, it's nothing. There's really nothing to it really. Nothing at all."

"Come now. You can't expect me to believe you just had the knowledge to know what to stock in a place like this, or the contacts to get them in the first place."

"Hey, maybe I happened to find a book or something about how to run the place or what to stock for a fine establishment such as this!"

A masculine voice called out from the staircase on the other side of the bar, "You mean the fine establishment that I *let* you run, Lawrence." Lawrence tensed up in utter fear as his worst-case scenario began to play out before him. He looked to the stairs, to the bulbous, perpetually red-faced owner, Mr. Tarrant, his boss. His owner. How on Earth did he not hear him coming down the stairs?!

"*Mr. Tarrant!*" Lawrence stuttered, withdrawing his arms closer to his body. "I was, Uhm," Getting caught with Miri was assuredly a death sentence, what with her infernal nature. He quickly glanced to Miri, trying to figure out her reaction to things, as well as to look to her for direction, only to find that Miri had shifted her head to look like Chauncy once again, completing her disguise.

"What is he doing in here?" Mr. Tarrant demanded in a low, serious tone as he waddled down the rest of the stairs. "And moreover, what is *he* doing with a glass of *my* liquor?!" Turning the lights down on the interior lanterns had been a good decision, he couldn't see Miri's true face clearly from where he was.

Ok, he was safe from being burned at the stake. Though there was still the matter of serving liquor after hours...

"He uh, he came in while I was closing." Lawrence replied, leaning against the bar and putting a hand in his pocket. He still had his pocket gold on him; he could use this! Maybe he could

bribe him, in a way. "He had coin enough for a drink, so I figured he'd be fine with no one else in here." Tarrant, with an ever-present glare, made his way over to the bar and stood next to Miri who kept to her hunched over look in her seat, eyes wide like a guilty party caught in a crime. She glanced over to Tarrant, much in the same fashion as she did Lawrence earlier. Dear god what was she going to try and pull?

"Get out of here you *drunk*." Tarrant growled in Miri's face. "I don't want your stench anywhere near this place. So help me if Lawrence won't take the handle to you I will! Get lost!"

Miri stared at Tarrant for a brief moment, casting a glance over at her drink. Lawrence could practically see the wheels turning in her head, as if she were considering every little option for what to say, or to say anything at all. Was she considering if Tarrant would recognize what Chauncy should sound like? Abruptly, Miri gave a curt, bum-like "Yes'm." before pushing away from the bar counter. Lawrence watched, with a sinking heart, as his only potential collaborator for a deception walked right out of the door, leaving him alone to deal with his ogre of an employer.

Tarrant turned to Lawrence, standing directly across the bar from him. "You say he paid?" He asked.

"He did." Lawrence replied.

"Show me." Quietly, Lawrence took out his gold pouch and began to count the amount he would need to give over. He'd need to be careful; he hadn't had the chance to put away any of the liquor bottles, let alone to refill them. If he knew Tarrant any, he'd already have the total calculated in his plump skull. Looking at the amount he had on hand, he was going to have to use all of the gold in his personal spending money. He'd just have to go the month without a visit to the bathhouse.

"There you are." Lawrence dutifully answered, handing the gold over to Tarrant for inspection. "That's just about all he put in. From what I've counted it should more than cover—"

The slap was sudden and powerful, and made ever more painful with the adage of the karat gold.

Lawrence fell to the ground, the clatter of coins following him as he was momentarily stunned from the blow. "That's for letting the booze hound drink in here." Tarrant scolded. As Lawrence stood up from the blow, Tarrant helped him up by pulling him upwards by the collar of his shirt, before sending him back to the ground with another powerful slap. His hat flew off from the force of the blow, exposing his buzz cut head. "And that's for letting anyone drink in here after hours, despite my strict directions!" Yet again, Lawrence felt himself pulled up by the collar as Tarrant practically dragged him across the bar, bringing him face to face with his fury. "Are you trying to ruin my establishment Lawrence? What have I told you time and time again?! Image is everything for this place! And I can't have someone like Chauncy polluting it with his stink! You're not purposely trying to ruin this place are you? You *do* remember the debt you owe me don't you?!"

Fighting back the urge to gag from Tarrant's breath, Lawrence forced himself to shake his head and to spit out, "I haven't forgotten, Mr. Tarrant."

"Then you know that what you did was wrong, right?" Lawrence gritted his teeth. "Right?"

"Right."

"Then you know you'll have to pay to fix this wrong." Damn it! If Lawrence knew Tarrant any, it was going to be a week's salary that he'd be taking! A week's worth of time for the debt to rack up!

"Of course, Mr. Tarrant." Lawrence responded.

"Good. Then clean the bar and get ready for tomorrow. I'll have no more of this nonsense tonight." As Tarrant released Lawrence, he turned to leave before pausing where he stood. He turned back to Lawrence and once again grabbed him by the collar. "Actually, one more to make sure the point sticks." Lawrence braced himself for another blow as Tarrant brought his arm upwards to wind up for his final strike.

A strike that, thankfully, never came.

A clawed hand grabbed Tarrant's wrist from behind, stopping his arm mid swing. As the bar owner turned to face whatever had so rudely stopped him, his expression turned from incredulous anger to utter horror when he realized the injector was a horrific demoness. Another hand gripped his throat, forcing him against the bar as the demoness glared into his eyes, some unknown power forcing the fat bastard to go limp in her grasp. Wordlessly, Tarrant stood up from his slouch against the bar and was allowed to slowly trudge back upstairs to his room, like a puppet on string. Miri had dropped all pretenses of her disguise, her true form laid bare for Lawrence to take in. That same wily, womanly form.

"You did it again." Lawrence quipped, rubbing at his cheek.

"Nonsense," Miri denied, lacking her usual suave tone, "I simply didn't finish my drink." Miri sat back down at her seat and collected her drink glass, taking another sup of her order. "I can only assume you haven't been at all truthful with me."

"Gee, what gave that away?"

"Come now, we're well acquainted with one another Lawrence. We shouldn't be hiding such minor details from one another. I told you what I was up to, didn't I?" Lawrence, feeling as though he was being disarmed of any wittiness he had stored up, let his shoulders slump in defeat.

"Ah, what the hell." He admitted, caving in to the probing. "I'm going to be honest, things have gone to complete shit." Lawrence leaned into the bar as Miri idly tended to her own glass of booze. "The stuff I picked up from where we met didn't sell well at all; not the gold, the blades, nothing. Nobody would give me any deals or hire me for anything either, due to being a complete stranger. With the weather getting colder and colder, I couldn't stay in the vagrant camp any longer and made the mistake of begging for shelter in exchange for service."

"Hmm." Miri hummed. "Fell for the indentured servitude trap, did you? I assume he's providing a bed and food, which he deducts from your pay, if it's even enough to pay for it. Is that why you cut and tried to hide your hair?" Lawrence reached a

hand to his head, just now realizing he wasn't wearing his cap.

"Yes, actually. Tarrant forced me to cut it. Said that it would scare customers or something like that. Anytime I 'mess up,'" Lawrence bent his fingers for emphasis on the sarcasm, "or even appear to slight him, he either hits me or docks my pay and I can't do anything about it." Lawrence looked down at the bar as he recounted his dreary experience working with Tarrant, and of tending the bar in his stead. "For fuck's sake, I can't even talk to anyone else about it. It seems like everyone either just brushes me off or ignores me. Almost like they can tell that I don't belong here and, as a result, want nothing to do with me. Even the regulars that come in barely wish to talk to me at times. And even when I *can* talk to them, I barely understand what it is they're talking about in the first place. From politics to whatever drama is going on in town, I just, can't connect to them whatsoever."

Lawrence paused in his account, almost on the verge of tears, as Miri idly stared at him, expecting him to continue. "But you want to know the worst part about all of it though, Miri?"

"Worse than the beatings?" She mused.

"Yeah, worse than that." Miri, seemingly interested now in his plight, set her glass down on the counter and leaned inwards to absorb every word. A glass mostly empty. "It's not enough that I'm stuck here, practically a slave, that can't even connect with other people. It...it feels like I'm right back at square one."

Miri raised a brow. "Square one?"

"All my life it's felt like I've been getting led along. From following in someone's footsteps, living in their shadow, or being told every little thing I needed to do. It's as if I've never gone in a direction that I've wanted." Miri cocked her head in curiosity, a very visible tell to elaborate. "I mean, I just, want to set out on my own path, for once. I don't want anyone else lording over me, telling me what to do with my life. And now I'm in the exact opposite of where I want to be." Slumping fully against the bar, Lawrence resigned himself to wallowing in the misery of his situation.

“Sounds like you’re stuck in a place you don’t want to be.” Miri commented.

“I just don’t know what to do. It’s not like I can get another job or even just punch Tarrant. He’ll just call the authorities on me for trying to evade my debt and they’ll throw me in prison.” Lawrence let a half-lidded eye drift back to Miri who took to finishing her drink. Sitting up straight, she set the empty glass on the counter and filled it with a shot from the nearby Faifnar bottle before pushing it closer to Lawrence. A glass empty, but now refilled, if only partially.

“I don’t suppose you’re hinting that I should call in that favor?” Lawrence questioned.

“Not at all.” Miri answered softly. “But I do have an idea of what you’re going through. Tell you what Lawrence, I’ll help you.” Lawrence raised his head from his arms, looking at his infernal companion with suspicion. “Keep the favor. Consider this a free blessing.”

“Really now.” Lawrence questioned. What was she getting up to? “What exactly are you thinking?”

“If memory serves me correctly, then the laws of inheritance of property here in Threnfollow go as such: blood heirs first, then to whomever is closely associated with the deceased. This includes servants, indentured or not, whose debts are doubly forgiven due to the passing of whomever holds it.” Of course that’s what she was getting up to.

“I see. I assume you’re not worried for any investigation?”

“With what I plan to do his death will be so unnatural that no one should suspect you. I don’t believe anyone’s seen me entering this place or conversing with you, so no worry of an investigation there. Do you know if the fat man had any distant relations or family?” She was looking at him with a neutral expression now. Not angry, not devilish, not even self-satisfied. It was as if she were merely discharging a duty of service that she had done time and time again. Lawrence shrugged in response.

“Never talked about ’em.”

"I see. It's not a problem, I'll ask him myself. Where do you typically sleep?"

"A room separate from where he typically sleeps."

"Alright. I'm going to deal with him while he's in bed then. What's your typical routine from this hour onward?"

"I typically clean up the bar, get it ready for tomorrow, then go to bed. I usually work quickly so I don't go to bed too late. I presume I'll tell them of my usual routine?"

"Exactly. When those witch hunters inevitably ask you what you did tonight, and if you've seen Tarrant, you'll tell them you closed up, as per usual, and you went straight to bed and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Don't add any details you don't need to; they'll look for anything that can contradict your story. Understood?"

"Got it." Lawrence nodded.

"Good." Miri moved to stand but stopped herself as she looked at Lawrence's face. "Goodness, you're already starting to swell up." As if remembering what happened, Lawrence winced as the soreness in his cheek swelled up all at once.

"Damn it that actually smarts." He cursed, tasting the blood pooling in his mouth.

"Let me see." Miri reached across the bar and pulled Lawrence's hand away from his face, getting a better view of the bruising. "Oh my, that's actually starting to welt up. Did he strike you with those coins you were giving him?"

"He did."

"Such a brute that man. Here, I'll help make it feel better." Before Lawrence could react, Miri gently pulled him forward over the bar and planted her soft, velvet lips upon his cheek. With a soft peck, she kissed the site where he had been struck before pulling away. Lawrence clutched at his cheek as Miri gave him a small grin as she pulled away from the bar. "Take care Lawrence. Oh, and say a bottle hit you on the cheek as you were putting it away." Miri, in all her seductive glory, sauntered towards the stairs and upwards to Tarrant's room.

Who did she think she was? Giving a man a random kiss on the cheek like that? Recoiling from the sudden display of what had to be faux affection, another thought crossed Lawrence's mind. A question he had been meaning to ask ever since that day in the woods. "Hey, Miri," Lawrence called out. Miri stopped where she was on the stairs, a hand resting on the handrail. "Just one more thing."

"Yes, Lawrence?"

"Why did you leave me alone that day?"

"...What do you mean?"

"When I learned your name. You said you worked hard to have forgotten. Why didn't you just off me then and there?" Miri, who had not been one to break eye contact from distress, turned her head away from Lawrence and towards the wall. She stayed in that position for some time, as if contemplating how to answer in a fashion as Lawrence did earlier. With how haughty she was, it struck Lawrence that she was being exceptionally careful with the words she chose.

"I...did mean it when I said I enjoyed our conversation. I thought it'd be a shame for such an interesting outsider such as yourself to perish so quickly in this world. Good luck in your future endeavors, Lawrence." A cop out answer, but a safe one.

"Take care Miri." Lawrence responded, eager to say farewell on this occasion. Miri didn't turn back to Lawrence as she ascended the stairs, leaving Lawrence to nurse his hurts and his bar. Seeing no other course, he took the glass Miri had filled for him and downed the shot in a single gulp. The taste of the alcoholic apple was sharp, to be sure, but a refreshing boost as he continued with his regular cleanup of the bar. Once he had finished and locked up, he journeyed upstairs and past Tarrant's bed, deathly silent from his usual snoring, into his crummy little closet of a room. Slumping into his own bed, it took some time for sleep to come over him.

A glass empty, but eager to be refilled.

* * *

Lawrence awoke the next morning to find Tarrant a dried husk in bed, the window leading outside fully open with curtains fluttering in the chilly fall breeze. Because of the preternatural nature of the barkeep's death, and Lawrence's "ignorance" as to what happened, no indictments were given. Blame, therefore, was instead levied on the same fiend that had drained Chauncy and so many others in town. Frustrated by their lack of progress, the witch hunters eventually left, pursuing the trail of infernal influence that led elsewhere in the kingdom.

Several days later, the only blood heir to Tarrant's bar and Lawrence's debt, Tarrant's son, was found on the side of a far distant road. He was found dumped in a ditch, his throat slit and missing his gold pouch. As a result, Lawrence was the sole inheritor of the bar, for lack of anyone better. Not that Lawrence complained.

III

Heart-To-Heart in a Frozen Wasteland

In the fall, just some time ago, the meadow had still been in full bloom. Thousands of white petaled meadow flowers would have acted as the blanket for the ground, mixing with millions of blades of healthy emerald grass. Now, with the arrival of winter, the land was suffocated by a cover of snow, crushing the flowers until they withered and died. It wasn't long after, that the snow would serve as a mattress for even greater death, an overcast sky serving as a top cover.

The armies of the kingdoms of man fought hard, but there was only so much that could be done against an army of infernal pikemen, and the tide of the walking dead. The forces of man had been sent back in a complete rout. It was every man for himself as opportunistic demons and those under their service sought to sacrifice and devour those unfortunate enough to be caught. The only salvaging quality of such a massacre was the crippling of the demonic host, which stemmed its advance into the land of man.

The battlefield itself was littered with blood and destroyed war machines. Bodies of the mortal and diabolic were in the process either being raised to fight again (or devoured, depending on what got to it first) or dissipating into nothingness, their æther retreating to the abyss from whence they came. It was a veritable land of death, where only foolish but wily scavengers, or ferocious predators still roamed. The two appellations, however, were not mutually exclusive from one another.

She slinked quietly through the battlefield, carefully but fearlessly darting between the shadows of the various wreckages scattered around the field. While the few remaining ghouls or the imps wouldn't be of any consequence to one of her stature, she'd still prefer to not have to deal with their dribble if they

saw her. Always “Who do you serve” this, “What do you need here” that. Not to mention that the last thing she wanted to deal with was announcing her presence to their leader, Thalbolga, a wretched fat lump of a demon.

The man she was looking for, the prince, still had to be around here somewhere. His honor guard had to have died to a man for a reason, they’d never have left his side in battle for any reason, not even against suicidal odds. But she’d already checked the body pile, he wasn’t amongst them, and she’d already looked over the congregation of the raised dead. It meant he was either still alive, or...

She pushed the thought from her head. She didn’t want to have to consider the possibility that the fool could be dead, or that Thalbolga had ignored the missive she’d sent. If that meat-head Thalbolga had captured him, she’d have a hell of a time getting him out without giving her demonic influence away.

Groaning in frustration, she perched herself atop the remains of a diabolic trebuchet, its ghastly crew having long abandoned it. She needed to calm herself down, to think on the situation. If he made it out, she’d hear about where he was later, but sitting still for so long waiting for news did not fill her with confidence. The High Lord would want to hear something productive...

The roar of galloping hooves and bouncing wagon wheels broke the demoness, Miriel, from her rumination. It was a covered, mortal wagon, made of wood and being dragged by two draft horses of mundane origin through the field at a moderate trot. It’d be easy enough to dismiss it as a runaway wagon, but there clearly had to be someone driving the thing forward.

What *buffoon* would be foolish enough to still be here when the battlefield so clearly belonged to the dead and the damned?!

But maybe such a buffoon had more wits about him than she was giving him credit for...

Miriel crept down the tower and quickly moved to get ahead of the wagon’s path. Along the way she worked on a suitable guise she could adopt to get close. An injured soldier would work,

she'd seen enough of their armor to adopt an accurate recreation of it as well. There was the matter of a face to adopt, she could just take the face of any random man she'd seen before, and it could work. A broad chinned man with broad shoulders and short cut blonde hair would do fine. Just generic enough to not raise suspicion. Oh, but there was the matter of helmet! If she just showed up without a helmet...well, she could just hand wave it away as it got knocked off in the fighting. A head wound, however superficial yet visible, should sell it.

Yes, she would be a soldier that got separated from his unit in the rout. That would work! And of course, she could wave off any trouble answering questions due to the head wound.

She was ready!

From behind a wreckage, she dashed out into the way of a wagon, waving her arms in faux desperation. "Ay!" She called out, taking on the Southern, Empire drawl. "Ay 'old up! Wait up!" The wagon driver, clearly surprised by her sudden appearance, swerved to avoid trampling her beneath his horses' hoofs. She was ready to chase after the wagon, prepared to force the man to stop with constant yelling and hollering, attention he clearly would not want. No such course of action was needed, thankfully, as the driver brought the wagon around and back towards her. The wagon driver stopped a short distance away from her and held the reins to the horses across his lap, occasionally tugging on them to keep the horses in line. The driver wore a shiny suit armor of the Theocracy, and wore a helmet with a chain coif that acted as a veil, concealing his face but leaving his eyes exposed; clearly gear of quality. The driver's gaze was steely and almost unnerving, as if he were judging every move that she made.

If he was a man of the church, then squeezing him for information was going to be more trouble than she initially anticipated. But with such armor, he also stood the best chance of getting the answers she needed...

"You seem far from your regiment." The driver spoke, his accent not one that Miriel could immediately recognize. It wasn't

Empire, and certainly not as refined a cadence as a Theocrat. She'd heard it before...but where?

"Ach," Miriel responded, needing to keep the disguise. "We were in a full 'un rout, I tripped over a few things and wound up getting left behind. Been searchin' fer a way to go between avoidin' demons and the walkin' dead."

"Lose your helmet?"

"Yeah, damn, pitchfork wieldin' devil knocked it off. Would've got me good if it weren't fer it. Hey, mind if I hop on? Seem's you've got your bearings about ye." The wagon driver stared at her for a second and cocked his head as he looked off elsewhere. Did he buy it? Was he about to tell her off?

"No, no problem at all." The driver answered. "Get in the back and I'll get us going." Miriel purposefully widened her eyes as if to show excitement at her supposed chance at salvation.

"Ach, perfect! Gods bless ye." She could see it play out already. She'd climb in the back, and the driver might give another glance to her before pushing the horses forward. From there, she could either jump him there, or she could wait for a quiet moment, either night fall or as soon when they left the battlefield. She'd make sure to get behind him, pinning him down with her tail acting as a knife's edge for a deterrent. Then she could interrogate him at her leisure and figure out what he knew. He'd probably put up a fight, if she got sloppy somewhere, but provided he didn't have any tricks up his sleeve and didn't know better, she could just go for the long hunt.

What she didn't expect, however, was to board the wagon with the driver already inside, aiming a loaded crossbow at her.

"W-wot's this then?" She incredulously cried. "The hell're ye thinking?!"

"Cut the crap," The driver gruffly retorted. "What kind of soldier would bother sticking around this shithole? Certainly you could be sneaking about, but that'd make you very damn lucky. Too lucky. Only way you're still around and breathing is if you're a demon yourself."

“Wha—” Miriel was taken aback. Who did he think he was to be accusing someone of something *he* was guilty of?! “What do ye mean?! The same thing could go fer you! How do I know *you* ain’t a demon?!”

“Because,” the driver paused, as if trying to find his words. “Because I’m the one holding you at crossbow point. I don’t have to explain shit.” The man’s vocabulary was gruff, much gruffer than anyone in the Theocracy, especially a soldier as decorated as he seemed. Where was that accent from? “Either way, I didn’t pick you up out of the goodness of my heart. If you are a soldier, drop your weapon and get out. And if you ain’t a soldier then I guess it narrows down who you are.”

“Then, then if ye think I am a demon, wot makes ye think you’d win against me?! *if*, I were a demon!” The driver shrugged. His gaze didn’t give any hints of worry.

“I get by. If you ain’t got nothing to drop, get lost. Less you feel you can still talk your way out of this. You’re more than welcome to try.” The arrogance of this man! That he thinks he can dictate what she should or could do! That he has control over this situation?!

“If, if ye don’t let me on, I’ll scream. That way we both got a problem.” The driver moved his finger to the crossbow’s trigger.

“Go ahead. See what happens.” Why, the nerve! Miriel let her act of the desperate, injured soldier drop, and let her face stoop to a savage fury. Quietly, she let her tail regrow from the small of her back and crept it out and along the fabric cover on the outside of the wagon.

“How *dare* you,” She growled, making eye contact with the man. “You think you can just talk down to anyone you please? You aren’t in control here, human. If you beg for mercy and prostrate yourself before me, I might consider making your death quick for insulting one such as I.”

“No, I don’t think I will, actually.”

Ha! Directly into her trap! Focusing her power, she projected her willpower against the man, utilizing their eye contact

as a bridge between them. “Then you will *kneel* before me.” The driver...

...merely cocked his head in curiosity. He didn't even break eye contact.

“Did you just try to charm me?” The driver asked. Miriel fought back the urge to retreat from the defiant answer. Who was this man? Some strange, new kind of elite soldier of the Theocracy? Impossible, he was too crude for such a position. “You wouldn't be the first to try that trick on me. It's almost cute that that seems to be the catchall response to person problems for you people.” Cute? *Cute*?!

“You arrogant, theocratic dog!” Miriel furiously roared. If he wouldn't be forced to kneel magically, then she would force him to kneel physically. She drew her tail back before thrusting its spear-like tip through the fabric and towards the driver, who was caught off guard by implement. Frustratingly, the tail was deflected by the man's armor, hitting at an awkward angle and skewing harmlessly off. The man's armor was clearly of quality, maybe even magical. It wouldn't matter, if she dealt with it up close; with his hands full he was bound to be at a disadvantage. With a snarl, she charged forward bearing quickly shifting talons to attempt to gut the driver. Instead of stepping backwards, however, the driver instead charged forward, ramming his shoulder into Miriel's chest, forcing her back with his weight. She was rapidly running out of options.

She needed to run; she lost the element of surprise. Miriel brought her tail about again, hoping to either whip at the man's exposed eyes or to distract him enough to make her escape. With a grunt, the man slapped away the tip as it tried to whip around for another strike, giving him the time he needed to aim and fire the crossbow. Miriel cried out as the bolt worked its way into her thigh, a searing pain spreading from the impact site through the rest of her leg. She dropped to her knee, her leg suddenly unable to support her weight. “How, *dare you!*” She cried out in frustration. Before she could shout anything else, the man's boot planted itself firmly into her face, smashing her nose in and forc-

ing her out of the wagon.

She fell into a heap outside, the impact sending a shock up her back and pulverizing her back. The driver was quick to follow her out, standing at the precipice of the wagon as Miriel gathered her wits. "Good try," The driver commented, "but you should've walked when you had the chance." The driver jumped down from the wagon and began walking to where Miriel lay sprawled on the ground. She tried to crawl away, but the man quickly stepped on the middle her outstretched tail, stopping her escape and sending a shock of pain running up to the base of her spine. The driver drew a sword from a scabbard on his waist, clearly preparing to deliver the coup de grace to her prone form.

"Damn it, NO!" Miriel, desperate for an escape, quickly worked her tail back out of the wagon and freed itself from the fabric, before thrusting it directly at the man's head. She saw the man's eyes shift to his side, before he deftly turned and, with one deft swing, cleft the head of her tail off. She cried out, as the shock of the injury reached the rest of her body, only to have the driver put a boot down on her chest, pinning her and knocking her breath from her chest. She had decisively lost.

She had nothing left. What could she even do? Screaming for attention would assuredly result in her death, and even if she survived it would bring embarrassment and humiliation that she would never live down. Then again, having someone rescue her was still better than spending an eternity back in the abyss.

"You..." she snarled, at a loss for words. Even when the captain was bearing down on her she had something she could try and guilt him with. "You think that what you're doing is for the greater good? You think killing me will make anything better? It won't. There are many others just waiting to take my place." The man shrugged

"Maybe. I don't really care either way." Nothing to work with! What about that armor...a man of the Theocracy would surely care about godliness.

"Oh, you don't care, do you? You must be making the church and your Goddess very proud with that line of thinking."

“You could have walked away, you idiot. You could have walked away or talked, and I wouldn’t have cared less. It wasn’t my choice to get brought to this place, and it certainly wasn’t my choice to get drafted against my will either. I don’t give a shit that I was brought here for some, grander purpose, and never will. I’m content to carve out my own path in the world, one way or another.”

Wait a minute, brought here? If he meant this battlefield, he’d only say getting drafted. Not to mention that there’s no way he’d fit in anywhere in the Theocracy! They’re drilled about duty since birth! No soldier would be complaining about being brought here if that were the case!

But wait, that accent, that manner of speaking, it’s more like he doesn’t fit...anywhere. And carving his own path? She’s heard that before.

No, it couldn’t be! Fate couldn’t be so cheeky as to let it happen again!

“Either way, doesn’t matter now. I’m not going to let myself be known as someone to treat like a dog. Dealt with it with debt, dealt with it with the damn church,” The driver raised his sword, ready to swing it downwards, “no more.” Miriel had no other option, she just had to try!

“...Lawrence?”

The driver paused, holding his sword aloft. His eyes gave it away, he was in shock, but there was still a glint of suspicion about him. Was it truly? Nervously, Miriel did away with her disguise and returned to her true, womanly form. The disguise didn’t matter at this point; her true form might bear greater fruit.

Her heart nearly skipped a beat when the driver, in a softer tone, softly asked, “...Miri?” Lawrence, realizing his folly, quickly got off her chest and dropped to a knee at her side. Closer now, she could see his mana more clearly through his eyes, the window to his soul. His mana was just as dull and small as ever.

“God, Miri, I’m so sorry!” He blustered out. “I didn’t know it was you! If you had just even talked for a bit, I could’ve figured it

out! God, what, what the hell do I even do with this..." He waved his hands about her person, in a clear panic of what to do.

He was genuinely concerned! It'd be adorable, if he hadn't also just put a crossbow bolt in her. "God, Miri! What the hell are you even doing here? I thought you were a social predator!" Miri could only look back at him in shock at such a question.

What am I doing here?! What are *you* doing here?" Miriel retorted. "I thought you had a bar to run! Don't tell me they decided to draft a noncitizen in the Empire, and in *Theocracy* armor no less!"

"Look it's a lot more complicated than, Graagh!" Lawrence looked about the area, wisely keeping watch for anything that might be seeing him. "Miri, I can't stay here for long, I need to keep moving. How do I help fix you? I'm not an expert on demon physicality so you're going to need to help me help you." Great, now he supposes he can just fix her!

"Ergh, there's nothing you can do to fix this Lawrence." Miriel growled. "Besides that, I don't," Miriel tried to stand up on her own, determined to prove Lawrence wrong, "I don't need *anyone's* he—*ah!*" Miriel fell back down in a heap, her leg unable to support her. Even lying still, the pain throughout her leg was intense and pervasive, no matter how she kept it.

"Miri, drop the pride. You can't even stand."

"I'm fine! I'll just find some, some desperate peasant to drain and I'll be back to normal!"

"Yeah?" Lawrence questioned, putting away his sword. "And how long will you be dragging yourself through the snow to do that? Or will you be flying along on strength you probably don't have?"

"I've strength enough. I wouldn't be where I am if I just dropped dead at the stiffest sign of resistance, Lawrence."

"Really? Is that why you refuse to regrow that tail of yours?" Lawrence picked up the detached tip of her tail, already dissipating away into nothingness like flakes of burning parchment (much like her lie). Damn him! He was as perceptive and wily as ever, catching her out like that. "Look, come here. I think

I learned to do this right..." Without any consideration to her pride, Lawrence carefully scooped his hands beneath the demoness' back and knees.

"Hey!" Miriel chided, "What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm taking you with me till I find something to help you out."

"Over my dead body!" Lawrence, obviously not caring, began to stand up, lifting her body with him. "How dare you! Drop me this instant or so help me I will tear your throat out with my bare hands!"

"I bet you will."

"I mean it! Why you're making me so infuriated I could just!" Miriel kicked her legs out, trying to express her anger, but only succeeded in agitating her leg wound again. She hissed in pain as she instinctually scrunched her body closed.

"That's what I thought." Lawrence scoffed. As much as she hated to admit it, he was right. Though the wounds wouldn't be enough to sign a death warrant, it still left her vulnerable to anything opportunistic enough to end her or, even worse, steal her essence for themselves. As it stood, she was at his mercy as much as anyone else's.

Worse still was the humiliation. It was like a, a gaping hole in her chest. But wait, he'd gotten the better of her before. She knew what it felt like. She would feel more of it in her face, like a sour note from an instrument. She didn't feel any of that here, none of the sourness, none of burning either. She just felt...hollow, with only a slight tightness in the cheeks. She was embarrassed, yet, strangely, didn't care either.

"..You could at least help walk me to the wagon." She deflected, searching for her pride. Lawrence gave a chuckle at the request.

"That'd be unbecoming of a lady, and of me to let her hobble like that, not to mention having to climb up too. I'll let you choose your seat if it makes you feel any better." With a huff, Miriel let the topic drop, feeling as though she was plummeting herself down the pit of being coddled. Pits knew that she hated

having to pose as a princess on that one occasion, pretending to be so helpless...

Lawrence, keeping his word, eventually managed to hoist the demoness up and into the cart, giving her a better view of the interior without having to worry about being shot (again.) The inside was barren, with the exception of a chest, a random stool, a blanket on the ground of wagon, and many, many faded bloodstains on the wood. "What a mess. Strange. Could have sworn you gave me grief for draining a village." Miriel pointed out, hoping for some form of amusement to distract her from the searing pain in her leg.

"First of all, that was in regard to succubi. Second, I found it like this."

"Just as empty?"

"...Ok there was like *one* guy hiding in here. He wasn't going to make it anyways; it was a dead wagon or something. Just pick a place to sit." Well, a change in attitude. Whatever happened certainly hardened Lawrence up. Happy she had at least gotten one up on her fellow outsider, Miriel set about picking out which place to sit. The blanket, the cleanest thing in the wagon, seemed to offer the best space for her leg. She moved to set herself down on it before Lawrence stopped her.

"Ok," Lawrence interrupted, stopping her. "Maybe not *that* option. That's all the merchandise I'm going to try and sell."

"What? Merchandise?" Lawrence took a moment to help her sit down on the chair, much to her chagrin, not even giving her the choice of where to sit (though she'd be lying if sitting didn't feel better than standing.) He then moved over to the blanket to unveil what he was collecting. Beneath the sheet was a collection of weapons: various morning stars, maces, swords, and blades all in various of repair.

"I'm working on getting capital to start a trade wagon or something like that. Hopefully, I can manage to carve out a niche to at least have a decent time in this world. Was also hoping to find my army's old encampment for something but I... kinda got

lost. They kind of rushed me out before I could finish learning navigation. Also, no map so double whammy there.”

“But why? I thought you had an entire bar! You weren’t dumb enough to go against my advice, were you?”

“What the— of course not! I don’t have it because of the, fucking—” Lawrence winced just before he could explain why he lost the bar. “Look. I have to get this thing moving to get out of here before things get too dark. I don’t know how well you demon types hear, but I’m also going to need you to stay quiet in case we run into anything. Fair?” Another fair point. Miriel nodded, the best option to get things moving without jumping to another topic. With a nod in response, Lawrence trudged to the front of the wagon and sat in the driver’s seat, before whipping the horses forward.

Though the drive was bumpy, Miriel forced herself to suffer in silence in the back of the wagon as Lawrence kept the wagon moving. She was simultaneously grateful for his assistance yet also furious that she’d been reduced to this.

* * *

Hours passed, and through the back of the wagon Miriel could see the journey she made with her more-than-responsible savior. The bumpiness of that wretched, white and red battlefield eventually gave away to a smooth road, which Lawrence immediately lead the horses onto. Soon, the rolling mounds of wreckage gave way to idyllic, if suspiciously quiet forests. If nothing else, Miriel was at least thankful for the relatively smoother road, at least compared to the field.

It was strange, sitting and waiting like this. She’d always preferred to keep herself busy between various little projects; infiltrating various social occasions, keeping a tab on certain major social affairs, bouncing between various different engagements to keep a social web going wherever it was she visited. But sitting here in the wagon, waiting to either arrive somewhere or to get fixed, with Lawrence wordlessly sitting up on the driver’s seat it

just felt so...surreal. She wasn't working towards anything; she didn't even have a destination or plan for what to do. Oh wait, there was still that matter with the prince.

"Lawrence," Miriel asked, breaking the ice and hoping that they were far away enough from the battlefield to talk, "whatever is it that you intend to do with those weapons?" She couldn't delve into the prince matter immediately, she had to work into it.

"Those things? Honestly no clue. I was thinking of refurbishing them somehow and then selling them off. War panic is a hell of a thing for trafficking weapons."

"Really now? That's your plan? You're going to be a scavenger and weapon merchant?"

"Well, it'll serve as capital to get me going."

"That's it then? Aren't you...at all concerned about certain infernal invasions and the like? I imagine you'd have some stake in humanity's survival and all that."

"Oh please Miri," Lawrence answered, "I've said it already but I could care less what happens, on a national scale anyways. Even then you say that as if they haven't been able to keep them at bay before I got here for however long it's been." He was right there, she had to give him credit. For as long as she could remember, things between man, the infernal, and the undead have always been at an impasse at best, and a destructive draw for all involved at worst.

"True, but it's always with heavy casualties—"

"And despite that they manage to rebuild just in time for the next wave to cross. I've done my research on the matter, and I've concluded that I really don't care. Not that there's much I can do anyways. If they can hold things for the last thousand years, then they can hold it for another sixty or however long it takes me to croak of old age. End of story." Ever a free spirit, it seemed. Before she had the opportunity to pop the question about the prince, Lawrence suddenly hushed his voice down, muttering under his breath. "Wait, there's someone ahead, he looks—wait, no way. No fucking way. It can't be." Lawrence brought the wagon to an abrupt halt, nearly throwing Miriel out of her seat.

“What? What?” Miriel whispered back.

“Follow my lead. HEY! FATHER!” Lawrence suddenly shouted out. From outside of the wagon there was a voice, an older one, one bearing a Theocratic refinement to it.

“Ah, Oh! Good son Lawrence! My word, bless the Goddess for this fortuitous reunion! How ever did you manage to escape the slaughter?”

“I could ask the same for you,” Lawrence deflected. Must have not wanted to talk about it. “I assume it has to do with that *holy virtue* of yours huh?”

“Yes...? I’ve no clue why you said that aloud but yes, my prayers kept me safe from those devils. Is something the matter?”

“Just making sure your strengths are still all well and good! Tis good to know how strong you are against the infernal, good Father!” Ah, there it was.

“I must say Lawrence, you seem to be in an awful jovial mood! Why, it used to be that you’d visibly darken whenever I talked to you but you’re absolutely beaming!”

“Ach, well, I used to. That sordid business is nothing compared to what I’ve experienced in that bloodbath though. Why I dare say that my faith has been sparked anew in the duty that I’ve been selected for!” The father, tried to give another praise to that, but Lawrence was quick to speak over him. “Father! You ought to climb in the back, I’m moving away from this horrid place to regroup with whatever yet remains elsewhere.”

“Yes, yes, of course! The road will be more easily traveled upon wagon, let us go forth!”

Dastardly Lawrence, very dastardly. Content to let her prey come to her directly, Miriel tenderly (as tenderly as she could, with consideration to her leg) moved herself closer towards the back end of the wagon. If Lawrence’s warning held any water, then that priest would be able to repel her and she’d never be able to get close enough to drain him. She didn’t have the strength to freely shift forms with her wounds, so a disguise was automatically out of the question. But if she took him by surprise by grab-

bing him as he boarded the back and tore out his throat before he could start reciting lines from that book of his...

Yes, this could work. Lawrence had managed to plan the perfect ambush for an easy meal. If she did this right, she could devour the priest and dump out of the wagon within seconds. Positioned behind the fabric, she was prepared to hoist up her upcoming victim to their death.

“Yes, hop right on board Father!” Lawrence encouraged the priest. “I tell you we’ll be back home before you know it and wait—whyAREYOUCLIMBINGUPHERE?!” Curses! Even now Miriel could hear the struggle up at the driver’s seat of someone trying to climb up onto the driver’s seat.

“Why, I want to sit up in front with you, good son Lawrence!” The priest replied. “It’s only right as your spiritual trainer that I be by your side on this journey.” The priest, an older looking man with greying hair, sat by Lawrence in the driver’s seat, and in short order, looked into the back. The absolute, worst-case scenario. “By the Goddess! Lawrence!” The old priest started shaking Lawrence by the shoulder.

“Gah, what, what?” Lawrence asked. He looked into the back, facing Miriel and his face quickly dropped to shock, worry, and surprise. “Wha— Oh! Je— uh Goddess! When’d she get there?!” Damn it Lawrence! You opportunist! With no other option Miriel attempted to throw herself to the front of the wagon, anything to try to strike at the priest before he could present that cursed icon of his! No luck, her leg quickly gave out and she fell to the floor of the wagon, and her tail was still thoroughly defanged, and useless as ever.

The natural path of things occurred, the priest presented his symbol and spoke a repelling word of power, forcing Miriel to shield herself with her arms from the radiance before her. She crawled backwards, trying to reach the back exit of the wagon as the priest dismounted the driver’s seat and moved into the back with her. “Lawrence! To me! We must exorcise this demon! Now! While she’s weakened!”

“I mean, uh, I— yeah! Absolutely Father! Just let me, get this

uh, thing here..." The priest was slowly bearing down on Miriel, who slowly kept crawling backwards.

She really hoped that she wouldn't have to fall out of the cart for a second time today.

"Goddess protect us," the priest chanted, "for while we walk amongst the dead, we shall be protected within and witho—URK!" All at once, the radiance was snuffed out, Lawrence had a hand over the priest's mouth, and another at his back, likely with what had to be a knife. The priest reached up to dislodge whatever was in his back, to no avail as Lawrence slapped his hand away, keeping him restrained. Miriel moved to take advantage of the situation, slowly dragging herself back up to stand as the priest struggled in Lawrence's grasp. It wasn't long before she had sunk her fangs into the old man's neck and began to suck the priest's bright, vibrant soul, which quickly worked its way up from his chest and to Miriel's maw.

When it finally touched her lips, Miriel felt that same overwhelming sense of euphoria that could only come from a faithful soul. A life such as this was an utter treat that only came rarely. Just from a mere shard of it, Miriel could feel the wound in her leg healing, the crossbow bolt gyrating painlessly in her wound before being forcefully ejected from her body. The pain washed away from her like a wave, eventually working its way to the end of her tail where a brand new tailhead erupted from the stump with a spray of blood; good as new and ready to kill.

As the priest's soul was drained from him, Lawrence leaned into the old man's free ear, and growled, "This is for taking my bar, you son of a bitch." From those last muttered words, it was only seconds later that the priest was dead, devoid of the spirit that pervaded his body. Seconds after that, his body was dumped unceremoniously out the back, and the wagon was once again on its way.

"Feeling better?" Lawrence asked from his driver seat.

"Yes, as best as I've ever been." Miriel responded. Her chest still thumped with the false vestiges of a good life stolen, she'd be fine for quite a while. Only, now there was the dual fury of being

forced to endure a bumpy wagon with a crossbow wound...and of that bothersome ordeal with the prince. She moved through the wagon and joined Lawrence in the front seat, forgoing any disguise to better express her up and coming anger at him. "Though I believe I'd feel slightly better if I didn't have a blasted *crossbow bolt* in my leg in the first place!" Lawrence threw his hands up in frustration from the renewed hostility.

"Gee, I'm sorry Miri! I guess I was just *supposed* to know that that was you that was trying to sneak up on me, and not some *other demonic fuck* that—" Lawrence reeled his excitement back, physically recoiling as he worked to calm himself down. "Miri, it's obvious to me that we've both had somewhat of an eventful day. I'm going to quit talking for now, and focus on trying to find a place to stay for the night before it gets to be freezing out. Hopefully, by the time I find something we can both, just, chill the *fuck* out. Because my heart is beating a mile a fucking minute." He looked over, his frustrated glare meeting her own. "Deal?"

"Deal." Miriel concurred. Lawrence turned back to the road as the demoness was essentially left to her own thoughts again, arms crossed over one another in a pouty display. He did have a point with being a bit high strung. Escaping from a massacre, let alone getting revenge on someone in such a gruesome way, did tend to have the excitement of getting someone worked up. Maybe she was being too hard on him.

A minute of silence passed between the two, with not a word said.

"...Man, kinda crazy I had to kill my dad." Lawrence idly recounted.

"What?" Miriel replied, taken off guard.

"My dad. Y'know, my father."

"Your...father."

"Well. The Father. I mean." Lawrence looked over to his companion again. "Y'know because he's the only father I've ever known in...this...world I mean."

"...hm."

“Yeah, it, sounded funnier in my head.” He turned back to the road, diverting his attention away from the conversational equivalent to dumping a dead rat on the table. “Was just trying to, I dunno, calm down, I guess.” An awkward silence.

“...Was that a joke on the fact that man was a priest?”

“Yeah.”

Neither of them thought to press the topic after that.

* * *

“Stupid helmet,” Lawrence grumbled, fiddling with the belt buckles that kept it secured. “Fucking thing’s just stinging my face at this point.” Every time he took a breath the chain would flow in and out, grazing his face with ice cold intensity. With a sigh, he eventually managed to free his head from the helmet’s metallic grasp and threw it backwards into the wagon.

“Nice stubble.” Miri quipped, still at his side. “Though I can’t tell if you’d do better with a shave or not. The short hair does look good though.”

“Thanks.” Lawrence replied, feeling the slight sting of sarcasm. “Don’t you feel a draft at all in that get up?” Miri looked down to her get up, that vague outfit of fur and cloth that seemed barely fit to keep one warm in a castle ballroom, let alone a winter landscape.

“Oh please Lawrence. As a demon I’m simply created different to the likes of you.”

“Wonderful.” As he looked back to the road, he spotted a building in a small clearing besides the road, an inn or travel house if he ever saw one. Even with the potential shelter ahead of him, he still couldn’t deny the almost scandalous amount of pale, shapely leg in the corner of his vision now that his helmet was off. What’s worse was just how close she was, he could barely move his arm without bumping it into her she was so close. What was she even still doing here? What was her game...

“Looks like a place to stay up ahead,” Lawrence pointed out, hoping to distract himself from the hole in his chest. He couldn’t

fall for it, she was a seductress, plain and simple. He'd be stupid to fall for such a thing. "Don't suppose you got anything to pay with in case they want money? I'm kinda broke."

"We can deal with it as we need to." Miri responded flatly. In short order, Lawrence maneuvered towards the building before parking it, along with the horses, within a stable. Miri, in the meantime, took to shifting her form to Father Verman, a development that would have been uncanny had Lawrence not immediately moved past her. Opening the door to the tavern, the inside was empty save a few scattered tables and chairs with their own lanterns, a sight familiar to Lawrence from his arrival in this world.

"Place seems empty." Lawrence stated to the demoness besides him. "We ought to look around in case there's another person around. See if we have to pay or..." He paused when he felt the presence just to his side disappear. When he looked, Miri was already gone, with not a single track to show where she went.

Naturally, Lawrence thought. Without many other options, he drew his sword and took a step into the building. "Hello?" He called out, "Anyone home? If you're a demon or something, please leave because I'm not going to put up with it tonight!" Stepping further in, he quickly grabbed a spare chair and placed it in front of the door, still worried for any ambushes. There was the first floor, an eatery and bar, and a second floor, lined with several private rooms, all of them empty.

"Don't bother looking," Miri interrupted, barging into the building lacking a disguise, "Found all the patrons, probably the owner too."

"Oh?"

"Yes, sacrificed and gutted in the woods. As demons are wont to do." Ah.

"Oh, great. Don't suppose any of your kind's still..."

"No, long gone. The bodies were long frozen over."

"Good enough." Changing the focus of his search to drinks, Lawrence made his way to the bar, and from a superficial glance,

cursed as its scarce availability. Miri took a seat across from him as he leaned down to take in the selection.

“Anything good?” Miri asked in a very exasperated tone.

“Well, there isn’t much. There’s a couple of ales here, lot of it already tapped though, there’s also some random hard spirits here...”

“Is there any wine?” Miri asked snappily.

“There’s a bottle here but it’s not Taganair.”

“Hand me the bottle and a glass.” When Lawrence looked back up to Miri, she was visibly impatient, and moreover frustrated with something. Something that likely had to do with her sudden thirst for alcohol. Seeing no other course for the conversation, Lawrence obliged her request and put the bottle of wine and a mug for her to use. “Thank you.” As he leaned back down to serve himself, Lawrence heard the uncorking of the bottle and a long, drawn out pour of wine within the tankard.

Lawrence quickly settled on a cask of ale and brought it to the counter along with a mug to use. Quickly filling up, he could only watch as Miri took a, drawn out drink of her wine. Something was obviously eating her up.

“Something up Miri?” Lawrence consoled, walking back to Miri’s side of the bar. “You seem uncharacteristically out of it. Something happen out there you were dealing with?”

“Yes, getting shot in the thigh with a crossbow.”

“C’mon, you were out there for a reason, and probably trying to clamber onto a wagon for a reason. Beyond the crossbow incident, what happened?”

“Ugh,” Miri scoffed, likely from how obvious she was being. She took hold of the wine bottle and poured herself another refill. “I was looking for someone.”

“Hm, I assume they were someone important.”

“Not really.” Miri sighed, attempting to downplay her goal. “I doubt you’d know him anyways.”

“Oh come on Miri.” Lawrence sat down at a chair besides her, taking a moment to enjoy his drink. “I thought we knew each other enough to not hide such minor things from one another.

Knowing you, you wouldn't waste your time on some small fry soldier or sergeant. You're not one to put yourself at risk for nothing, after all." Miri set down the wine glass and turned her body towards Lawrence, glaring the whole while. She was getting upset that her own game was being used against her.

"If you keep pushing this, Lawrence, I will gut you and leave you out in the snow while I finish my beverage. And let me remind you that my tail is perfectly fine and that you are less than arm's length distance from me." Her tail swayed side to side above her head, adding to her threat. A worrying display, but what may be a harmless one considering she's wasted her one threat about his throat earlier. Despite his outwardly calm appearance, drilled in from the sights he had seen and the brutality he had endured with training, his mind was a race with thoughts on his companion.

She could have left at any point after draining Verman, she didn't have to tag along or to be accompanying him like this. What was she after? Couldn't be seduction, she'd been standoffish this whole time and she wouldn't need to worry about turning him away from his "duty." Was she perhaps biding her time, waiting for a precise moment to kill him? Was there something she wanted out of him? But the problem there is, again, the standoffishness, she'd surely know as a manipulator that a honey approach is better than vinegar.

But maybe that was part of her game...she knew the sultry approach wouldn't work on him, so she'd get directly to the point. Considering how open he'd been in the past, why wouldn't she? Was there something else to it, some baser desire? No, no he couldn't let himself fall for something like that. Lawrence pushed the thought from his head. If she were looking for someone specific that was important, he'd have to try and figure things out. He could count the amount of people important enough to be on that battlefield on two hands, way too many to try and guess at.

He'd clearly had to press her somehow to find out more. Then he'd be able to try and piece things together.

“Fine then, I won’t pry. I imagine you’d enjoy hearing about my problems instead.” She didn’t say anything, and merely turned back to her drink on the bar. That wasn’t a no.

“Well,” Lawrence leaned back, thinking of how to keep it short and sweet, if only to try and keep the ice broken. Maybe he could utilize his position to get a bit more out of her. “There was the bar thing which, turned up aces, honestly. No suspicion, no indictments, nothing, it was airtight! And if I do say so myself it went pretty well all things considered. Struggled a bit with contacts though, as you can imagine.” He let himself have a chuckle, reminiscing at his own success after Miri’s intervention. “Though...it didn’t last for very long.”

“That priest, Verman, showed up, spouting a bunch of crap about destiny and chosen one stuff and blah blah blah. I threw him out and didn’t think anything of it. Then, I don’t know how he did it but he then got my bar confiscated from me.” Miri gave him a sidelong glance, clearly the topic had picked up. “Next thing I knew I was being given an ultimatum; either shape up and go out and fight willingly or get clinked up and essentially brainwashed about my duty by a religious freak. I naturally went with the former because I’ve seen cult documentaries and that’d basically be the ego death of me.”

“So serve,” Miri interjected, “or be forced to serve...” She took another sip of her drink. The way she hung on the words were telling, he’d found a point!

“Yeah. Didn’t even do a good job shaping me up anyways. Physical training certainly helped but you can only push someone for so long before they break. Ugh, and the constant sermons I had to listen to! I swear I can recite the first paragraph of their book just from trying to drone it out. Anyway, like a month or two after this, that big old demonic push started, and I got shipped out. Was basically given a regiment or something, I was apparently a figure head, so I don’t really know but even *that* didn’t last long.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“Well, the battle started, giant phantasmal skull hit us and

that was one half gone. Uuuh then some spectral bitch screamed at us and knocked the other half down. Naturally, I said, 'fuck that' and ran. Found a wagon for transporting the dead away and now I'm here! Basically, I'm off the leash and looking forward to running the ranges. Cool story huh?" Lawrence took a drink to give Miri space to respond, as well as to gauge her response. She was invested in the conversation again, her exasperation wasn't as poignant now, but it was still present. He could see something in her eyes, a look of hope and curiosity.

"That's very unfortunate to hear Lawrence. But I assume you didn't see much of the battlefield?"

"Not...everything per se, But I *did* interact with a lot of people during my time at the war camp. Lots of important, big wigs who do nothing but talk of political affairs!" Lawrence fibbed. A risky maneuver, lying like this, but one that he could take from being honest with her so much.

"I see. I don't suppose you happened to be involved with planning how the battle went at all did you?"

"Oh yeah, of course! Ah, I was actually supposed to..." Should he overstate his role in the battle? "Uh y'know, be at the center of everything. But, that kind of went out the window, along with everybody else in the formation."

"So you saw where everybody was on the field, yes?"

"I think I recognized some banners and what not yes."

"Then..." Miri shifted in her seat, either out of discomfort or potential excitement. "Would you happen to know where the prince had gotten to?"

The prince? Oh, oh dear. Lawrence did know about the prince. "The prince? Why he must be who you're looking for then."

"I need to have a few words with him, to make sure he's alright." Miri admitted. So there it was! She was looking for information on someone she was probably working on, either to impersonate, or to seduce. Probably seduce, considering her care for his being.

“Well, depending on how you look at it, I actually do have news.” Miri’s face instantly lit up with surprise at the response.

“Is he alive?” She leaned in close, as if trying to receive the words more expediently. “Did you see him flee elsewhere? Which direction? Did his guard stay behind to cover his retreat?” Such energy was certainly new for her. A shame he had to dash it back to dust.

“No.” Lawrence softly answered. “He’s...dead. I saw it happen—”

“What happened? Did he get buried under something? Did you see his body? Was it obliterated into nothing?”

“Right after my regiment dropped dead, I turned to run, but I did spy the prince engaging with a big bulbous demon. Big, fat, beige skin, jagged horns out of his head.” As he delivered his report, Miri’s face sank deeper and deeper into despair. “Right, the thing grabbed him by an ankle, hoisted him up to eye level, next thing I see is the prince’s head on fire. I can only assume he didn’t survive that stunt.” Miri sat there frozen for a second, obviously trying to process the news, and wasn’t doing well.

“Did...did anyone else see it?” Obviously looking for a reason or excuse to say he *didn’t* in fact die and merely got separated. So much for seduction.

“I can only assume everyone on the field saw it. Oh, and I could hear the thing shouting about how he had killed him so any survivors would definitely know.” What happened next could only be described as a complete breakdown of Miri’s usually cool façade.

Mimicking Lawrence from before, Miri threw her hands into the air, shouting in frustration as she brought them crashing back down onto the bar. “DAMNABLE GLUTTON!” She shouted, her voice cracking in frustration. “I told him, I *told him* to leave him alive failing that, to at *least* not make a big deal of his death!” Lawrence was taken aback at the outburst. This was...new. He remembered that demons were more passionate, sure, but all those teaching on their mannerisms hadn’t prepared him for this. “He had to have gotten that missive and seen it. He wouldn’t have

made such a proclamation if he hadn't! That fat, bulbous *bastard!* How does he expect anyone to make any progress anywhere if he keeps *ruining it?!*" Miri tried to take a sip from her mug, but once she discovered it was empty, instead took to drinking the wine directly from the bottle.

The outburst here reminded Lawrence of Miri's problem with succubi and the complications they created. She was annoyed by it sure, but he'd never seen her this angry over something. Something else was at play here, but what? "Sounds like he ruined a bit of a pet project you were working on." Lawrence observed. He hoped such a minor point would allow her to expand, that is, if she wasn't too angry for it. She put down the bottle and leaned heavily against the bar, one arm supporting her head as she looked over to Lawrence.

"That fat bastard ruined it utterly. I was trying to make that do-good prince fall to depravity to show the kingdoms that even the best amongst them can be tempted. Failing that, I was *going* to impersonate him so that I could at least sow chaos from within! Except now I can't even do that because he just *had* to declare," she raised up her arms and looked towards the sky, "just *had* to declare to the Goddess and every other god that he had killed the cretin!" She fell back down into a heap, not even interested in her wine as she knocked away the bottle, forcing Lawrence to catch it before it could spill.

She kept talking, but Lawrence wasn't listening at this point. She could go on as much as she liked, so long as it helped her calm down and get all the frustration out. It gave him another moment to think.

It was certainly an ambitious plan, either causing the prince to fall to demoralize a kingdom or impersonating him to do some damage from the inside. But it didn't make sense. Was she usually trying to pull these grand schemes? No, if she was so content to advance her kind's agenda, why would she get frustrated by succubi encroaching on her turf? She'd be helping them avoid the witch hunters if that was the case! And to expect cooperation from another when she'd be doing that, what a hypocrite!

As he thought on his conversation with her at Tarrant's old bar, Lawrence picked up on something, a detail of the conversation he had overlooked in his own despair. A give-away that Miri had either accidentally or purposefully given to him. That idea...

But it just had to be manner of speaking! There's no way she'd give away something so personal!

Unless...

"A bit odd Miri," Lawrence declared, preparing to paint a portrait of the demoness with the frame given to him. "I didn't take you for being a team player amongst your kind." Miri slowly turned to face him, her eyes glaring at him in a terrifying similar manner to when he had learned her name. He had to be careful, going out on thin ice like this.

"Excuse me?" She growled. She raised a hand, and very violently transformed it into a wicked claw, with bird like talons and sharp, deadly looking talons. It was exactly what he was afraid of; he had accidentally made it sound like a tease!

He'd taken a dangerous risk, and he could practically hear the ice cracking beneath his feet as he felt her fury being directed at him! In this situation, she was likely ready to kill him at the drop of a hat. While he'd be able to put up a fight, his sword wasn't drawn, and she could more than easily overwhelm him up close like this. Even dropping the topic would be a dangerous proposition. She'd probably only be encouraged to take his head to make up for the failure in whatever it was she was doing!

Lawrence would have to choose his words with exceptional care and make his claim with an exact choice of words; the only way out was through. He had to take the risk with his guess!

"Don't take that as an insult or a tease, Miri. It's, merely an observation I've made from talking with you. You seem much more free-spirited than some of your other brethren. Free spirited and prideful. Not knowing better, I'd say you...didn't have a choice in certain matters." Lawrence paused, choosing to let the claim hang in the air and to await a reaction. He didn't get one immediately, Miri's talon was still poised ready to gut him, her tail aimed directly at his head, as seemed routine for the ap-

pendage. But, practically imperceptible to anyone not looking for it, he saw it. The slight release of tension in her hand; relaxation.

He had his portrait.

“Whatever gave you that impression?” She asked in a low tone.

“You strike me as an individualistic type of demon Miri. You prefer to be on your own, and despise working with others, unless they’re helping you with your goals or just entertaining you. Like with me at the town, or the bar, or that old guy, whoever he was. You’re not the kind to do things for some, greater order or whatever, at least not without something to gain from it yourself. It’s why you’ve hidden your true name too, so that no one can ever tell you to do anything, if I’m remembering that brief thing on demonology correctly.” As Lawrence continued, he could see her tensing up again, infuriated at being exposed and systematically unraveled in such a way. The mood of the room was tangibly changing to that of a storm, one that threatened to snuff out his life in its gales. He had to push, push to the very end!

“When those succubi showed up at the town, you tried to get them killed by the witch hunters instead of helping them. While they did attack you, the fact you were trying to kill each other shows me that you were at odds with them, but that’s hardly the most telling part of what you’ve shown me. Back at the bar, you mentioned something to me when I was wallowing in despair at my situation. You mentioned,” Lawrence paused, nervously licking his lips as his confidence paused. What if he was wrong? No, he was at the end. He couldn’t stop here. “You mentioned that you had an idea of what I was going through.” Miri slowly let her claw drop to the bar, and Lawrence could see her eye lids shifting at some inner turmoil within her.

Bingo. Just one more gamble...

“It wasn’t your choice to seek out the prince to corrupt him. Hell, devouring that entire village wasn’t your choice either, was it?” For a tense few seconds, the air inside the room was still. The words hanged motionless in the air as Lawrence finished his

oration, not knowing if he would be fighting for his life in the next few moments, facing a harsh repudiation, or just watching Miri walk out the door in offense.

When Miri sighed, lifting herself from the counter and returning her hand back to its normal form, it was as if the entire building sighed, a great exhalation of pent-up energy. "Want to talk about it?" Lawrence questioned.

"..You should have become a witch hunter, Lawrence. Your social insight and deduction skills are wasted on a battlefield. You're correct. The long and the short of it is that, unlike my many peers, I'm actually noteworthy and as such the High Demon Lord has, on occasion, asked for my services for specific tasks. The village was because he needed attention drawn...elsewhere, apparently. And the latest blunder he's forced upon me was to either corrupt or impersonate the prince to perform whatever acts I see fit to advance his agenda."

"Can't you just refuse his orders? Or is there a thing with hierarchies or something that I'm missing?"

"You have the right of it. The High Lord's position of influence is wide and powerful. To deny it would be suicide. He didn't claim that title by being weak, after all."

"Is there literally any way to circumvent it? Say you're busy doing something else worthwhile for whatever dumb nation building thing he's doing?"

"There is, but it'd have to be a solid excuse, and I'd have to actually show something for it."

"Sounds like you're between a rock and a hard place. A place you don't want to be in."

"Just about." Like a dying fire, the conversation sputtered out, and the room grew colder as the two strangers returned to their own thoughts. Miri went back to looking over her wine, never quite working up the strength to refill her glass as she seemed to broil with inner thought. Lawrence took an idle sip of his ale, his tongue alight from the flat, hoppy taste. He was at the bottom of his drink, with nothing but his reflection in the booze to accompany him, it seemed.

So she was individualistic, she had what she wanted, at least, what she needed, for information. Why was she still here? What more could she possibly...?

No.

No more of this tripe. If Lawrence didn't know better, he was turning into Miri. Always talking with another motive in mind, always carefully weighing what words to say next. He had to do it to get by training with those damnable Theocrats, he'd done it with Miri to get by...but why even bother with that anymore? The throbbing pit in his chest couldn't help but agree.

"Miri," Lawrence started softly, grabbing the wine bottle. "I'm going to speak plainly. I think we've both been speaking with more than a hint of suspicion on our minds. Trying to, I don't know, navigate our little tangled web of speech and desire, crafting a picture of the person before us while carefully trying to hide our own hands."

"Well..." Miri responded. Her demeanor was that of fatigue and defeat, a sullen face from the outburst.

"I remember you mentioned you liked one of our first conversations where we just...talked. How about we go back to something like that?" Lawrence poured the demoness another serving of wine, using it to keep the mood calm even as the wind began to pick up outside. "No lying, no thinking about what every little given word means, no trying to figure out the other. Let's just talk. Lord knows how much manipulation we've been up to otherwise." Lawrence finished pouring Miri's drink, who took a moment to stare at it before taking another sip.

"Your terms are acceptable Lawrence. What do you want to talk about?"

"I...actually don't know." Lawrence admitted, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "That's the downside of this little deal...Wait, I think I have one. Don't you ever...get lonely, going as you do?"

"You mean constantly moving about?" Miri asked.

"No, more like, putting on a fake personality for every new person you meet. Don't you ever occasionally just shoot the shit

with others of your kind? Just have a good time chatting about things without putting on a front or something?"

"Ugh, I almost wish. They're either so far in their own 'grandness,'" she emphasized by cocking her fingers up and down, "that they can't stop thinking of themselves. Or they're so lost in the greater designs of the High Lord that they refer to everything by rank. God, Lawrence," Miri turned to her newly christened confidant, "Am I losing my touch? You managed to read me so completely I can't help but think that I'm losing it."

"I, mean," Lawrence stuttered, unsure of the new direction Miri presented, "I'd heard that demons were more...passionate about things, and you're the infiltrator type. I wouldn't be too shocked if some traits of being a person rubbed off onto you."

"Oh, Lawrence!" Miri turned away and cradled her head in her hands in frustration. "Don't say that! You're just proving my point! I'm losing my edge and that proves it!"

"There's nothing wrong with referring to yourself as a person Miri. It's not like it's a humanity only thing!"

But it's always how the Theocracy refers to it to you mortals! Demons and the like are always some...other." Miri continued on in her tirade about the word person, and Lawrence, shamefully, let his attention drift off in the conversation. Miri was rapidly becoming more vibrant and, however strange it may sound, alive. Her expression was lively, and she actually seemed somewhat jovial, with a genuine smile that actually used the muscles near her eyes. "This is...actually amazing Lawrence." Miri declared. "I feel so free being able to just talk like this, not having to worry about anything! No stories to maintain, no fronts to keep up, nothing."

"Mm." Lawrence hummed, taking another drink of his ale. "Good to hear." Miri, as if reacting to Lawrence's energy, quickly calmed down and took a brief moment to take a sip from her drink. For a while, they tended to themselves, enjoying and refilling their drinks as they saw fit while shooting the occasional glance to one another. As if expecting the other to take the next leap.

He wasn't trying to be dismissive, but he didn't know what to say anymore. There was still one thought, that worry about Miri's situation. The only problem was that he didn't know if he really had the stones to say it. It was a big risk, after all, one his heart probably wouldn't be able to take.

"Lawrence," Miri called, placing a hand on his arm, "I was...wondering about something."

"What would that be?" Lawrence nervously asked.

"I was...thinking back on my little situation...and I think I may have a solution of some kind to it."

"You mean the excuse thing?" Miri nodded. "Yeah, I was...thinking of something about that myself. What'd you have in mind?"

"Well," Miri shifted in her seat, nervous about whatever it was she was going to propose. "There's one exception to having to respond to the High Lord's demands, and that's by being in a pact with someone. Because of certain rules involved in the process, if I get into a pact with someone I don't need to worry about his orders and demands. I think you're noteworthy enough to qualify for it as well..."

"So, you're thinking of a pact?"

"Yes, we know each other enough so it shouldn't be a big deal. I was thinking..." As if trying to finish Miri's sentence, Lawrence spoke at the same time as her.

"I become your thrall?" Lawrence questioned.

"I'd become your minion—" Miri finished.

"What?!" They both shouted, turning to one another. "I could never—"

Lawrence raised his hand, stopping the mirrored conversation. "I'll start," Lawrence stated firmly. "I don't know the big things about that pact thing, but...I'd be willing to take a risk with it. I don't know if you'd have to force me to do anything, but I trust you enough not to. Not like I'm going to be doing anything major in the meantime."

"Lawrence, no." Miri scolded. "By becoming my thrall you'd be tied to me, in life and death. At least if I were your minion you

wouldn't need to worry about me getting you in trouble. And, likewise, I trust you enough to not to call me like some dog on a leash."

"Miri," Lawrence reached out, mirroring Miri by putting his hand on her arm. "I'd..." Lawrence broke his gaze, unable to handle what he was about to say. He almost pondered the consequences of saying something so stupid but pushed it away. He had an agreement to honor. "...I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought of you, on occasion. Wondering about how you've been doing, or what you've been up to. Worrying about you is almost a pastime for me at this point. It's one of the few things that kept me remotely sane during that boot camp." Lawrence's face started to burn up from embarrassment, having admitted to such an intimate thought.

"...I feel the same way." Miri admitted. She reached over with her other hand and physically dragged Lawrence's gaze back towards her own. "Ever since that first conversation, I'd been thinking about what to say the next time we met. From, talking about your world, to maybe how things were going...I've always been looking forward to an opportunity to talk to you like that again. Just two strangers conversing about whatever we wanted."

"Hm," Lawrence chuckled. "Looks like my thing about strangers sticking together stuck, huh?"

"More than either of us know, I think." Miri responded. For a moment, they just looked to one another, staring deeply into one another's gaze. Lawrence himself gazing into what seemed like red rubies in Miri's eyes, and Miri staring at hazel, wooded colored gems in Lawrence's.

Neither of them knew who initiated it, one or the other leaning forward as the other unconsciously reciprocated their movements. For a moment, their lips touched in quick, experimental peck, before reconnecting once again in a slower movement. The two indulged in one another, freely tasting their beverages of choice in each other's mouths as they began to wrap each other in a shared embrace. For the briefest moment, it was pure bliss, but one that was quickly dissipating with the rising pulse of ex-

citement and passion. Eventually, they pulled away from one another, each granting the other a moment of reprieve and the opportunity to speak honeyed words.

“Miri,” Lawrence breathlessly started, “As crazy as it sounds, I don’t want us to be strangers to one another anymore.” He cupped Miri’s cheek in his hand, softly feeling her smooth, chilly skin even through a leathered and mailed hand. She held up her own hand, using it to softly grasp Lawrence’s as she looked longingly at him. Yet another face Lawrence hadn’t seen to her.

“Please,” Miri answered, “call me Miriel.”

* * *

The atmosphere of the upstairs room was dark, but steamy and intimate, even with the windstorm outside blustering snow all about. Inside there was naught but the heaving chests of two momentary lovers, their breathes coming out as clouds of steamy mist as they fought to reclaim their breath by each other’s side.

Miriel shifted in her spot in bed, turning to her side from her back as she calmed down from the fling with Lawrence.

Such an activity wasn’t new to her, seduction was one of the simplest ways to make fools vulnerable. Ordinarily, when someone declared that they wanted to make love with her, she didn’t feel anything; it was a means to an end, after all. Not this time. For the first time, Miriel had felt something deeper than the base satisfaction typical lovemaking brought. It was a burning sensation that felt like gentle, floating sparks, or fiery butterflies in her chest. A lightness she couldn’t explain accompanied with a fierce sense of satisfaction. She brought her hand to her chest, as if trying to reach inside herself to find what the sensation was. Is this what those bards would always sing about, or that those succubi would stir in the hearts of man?

She shifted her body further, trying to find a comfortable spot in the bed and beneath the covers as she tried to think. Lawrence’s hand reached over from behind, resting gently across her belly. “Miri,” Lawrence whispered, a hint of des-

peration present, “wait.”

“Yes?” Miriel responded.

“I think I might have to call it that favor.” A slight stir of worry writhed in Miriel’s heart.

“What do you mean?”

“Miri, I want you to stay for the night. I don’t care if you leave in the morning, but I insist. Please, just...stay with me.”

“Lawrence...” Miriel softly whispered, attempting to comfort the man.

“Miri, you have no idea how lonely I’ve been. Ever since I showed up in this world, I haven’t been able to connect to a single person. There were no guys to be able to laugh and be merry with, and no girls who were remotely worth the trouble of pursuing or trying to get sweet with. You’re the only person I’ve been able to make any meaningful connection with. I just...” Lawrence moved in closer, putting his chest to Miriel’s back as her tail maneuvered beneath his body to avoid being crushed, “I just want to spend a little more time with you.”

Such desperation was usually entertaining to see, but with Lawrence, it stirred something else; that floating feeling again. Miriel gave a soft chuckle as she brought her arm over her shoulder and behind her back to hug Lawrence around his neck. “Lawrence, you should know better than to waste a favor. Especially not after such an embarrassing confession like that~,” she teased. “Didn’t your mother ever warn you about girls like me?”

“Maybe,” Lawrence responded. “Maybe I just find you too interesting to let go of. Maybe I’m into a woman like you. You’ll stay?”

“Of course, I will, Lawrence. But only if you’ll answer a question of mine about humans.”

“Shoot.”

“Lawrence, is this what love feels like? That strange, burning thing that musicians speak about losing to tragedy or another man or something or another?”

“Perhaps, but those guys are usually losers about that sort of thing anyways. Does it get worse when I do this?” He leaned

down and began to plant kisses on the demoness's nape and shoulder, causing her to squeal from the affection.

"Stop it~! Honestly Lawrence, this is so embarrassing!"

"Is it worse? Yes or no?"

"Yes!" Lawrence withdrew from his assault, obviously happy with the response.

"Then yes, it is," he smugly responded.

"Well, in that case..." Miriel turned around in bed, putting her face to face with her apparent lover. "You can expect me to bother you for a while longer than just tonight, then. I hope you don't mind mixing me drinks if we ever find the things needed for it~." The two took each other into another embrace, Miriel having the advantage of wrapping her tail around Lawrence's body like an infatuated python.

"Not at all," Lawrence responded, "Not at all."

Epilogue

Empty Words and Fiery Indictments in a Thawing Forest

Where the hell is she, she should be done by now.

“Ser Lawrence, I hope you understand the gravity of these crises that plague humanity.” The witch hunter chided.

The snow within the remote depths of the forest had finally begun to melt, the emerald grass beneath it rising to sprout new life with the arrival of early spring. Lawrence and Miri had been traveling through the more desolate parts of its interior when the hunter and his retinue caught up with them. The witch hunter’s retinue had taken Miri aside while the hunter himself, Fredrick, spoke with him personally, one-on-one.

“Yes yes, I know.” Lawrence deflected, hoping to start an argument to buy time. “Thalbolga’s horde was advancing and killed many and blah blah blah. You know that the bastard’s dead, which I played more than a substantial part in doing by hunting him down, right?” That was a half-lie. Thalbolga had found Lawrence and Miri when they finally managed to find the war camp that Lawrence was looking for. He’d managed to catch them out while Lawrence was carrying along a chest of coinage; what was supposed to be the army’s pay. He tried to burn Lawrence to ash, but that magic immunity was a hell of a thing to have. That, and the preternatural ability to chuck a magic sword directly at Thalbolga’s fat dome.

“That is true...” Fredrick conceded.

“Not to mention that the rest of his horde got all cleaned up by that general who actually knew what the hell he was doing. It’s a nonissue at this point! I’d be shocked if any other demon gets the moxie to try something like that after that little display.”

“That’s also true,” Fredrick conceded, “but there’s still cer-

tain other problems that may arise from liches and the machinations of the High Lord. There's also certain matters that revolve around you that I and the rest of the Theocracy are worried about."

"Oh do go on." Lawrence encouraged, walking around the cart to check that everything was still in place.

"There's the certain matter of your lack of presence with any military unit that was a part of the general's effort. Having been a part of the campaign for a fair period of time I can say without doubt that morale was drastically low with your disappearance. Having at least the news of your survival would have done wonders with the troops' confidence in their duty."

"But they did it, right?"

"Yes...but there are other disturbing rumors that I've always been hearing." The witch hunter followed Lawrence as he circled the wagon, idly checking and rechecking the harnesses for the new tarp he had fitted onto the wagon and making sure that the newly created pocket dimension within the wagon itself was still working. "For instance, there was the rumor that you'd been traveling in a wagon, hocking the weapons of the fallen to various peasant villages for coin, as well as scavenging old battlefields for valuables without consideration for the dead."

"Mmhm," Lawrence hummed, thinking back to his time in the winter. It had been dirty work, digging up snow, offing lone and vulnerable undead, but it was also profitable. Any piece of the prince's elite guard's armor sold for a fortune with collectors and adventurers.

"There was also the accusation that the horses on said wagon were not exactly alive...nor dead, for that matter." Fredrick stopped by the front of the wagon, where the two reanimated draft horses idly stood, completely still with those high-quality cloth covers still covering most of their bodies. After getting ambushed by Thalbolga, Lawrence discovered that the demon had, in fact, killed the horses on the wagon for some sick sport. He had a soft spot for them, and as such forced one of the imps following Thalbolga to revive them in exchange for his life, since he

was too slow to join the rest of his pack in fleeing.

“I don’t know what to say about that,” Lawrence admitted, “I took advantage of some magics that eased some problems with traveling and beast care.”

“Finally, there’s one much more...disturbing rumor.” Fredrik admitted.

Listening to the knot in his stomach, Lawrence knew that the next rumor was going to be about his and Miri’s little escapades. He was genuinely at a loss for a lie to try and deflect with. Where the hell was Miri, it was just two other people with the Witch Hunter damn it! Maybe she *was* losing her touch.

“There are rumors that, in your travels and ware peddling, you’ve been traveling with one other acquaintance, who’s description has changed on no less than several occasions.”

While he had his sword, it’d take too long to draw, and there was no telling how fast the hunter was on the draw with that rapier of his.

“During and after your stays in different towns, you’d often apparently hire retainers to come along with you on your little caravan, who disappear mysteriously before you reach your next destination.”

He had a blackjack up his sleeve, which he could grab quickly, but it was awful small. If he missed he’d have to deal with the hunter drawing his rapier and potentially skewering him. He felt Fredrik approach him from behind, and turned to face him, his face grim. “I wish to hear it from you, what do you know of where these individuals may have gone?” Lawrence shrugged his shoulders.

“We kept getting harassed by remnants of Thalbolga’s army and bandits.” Lawrence denied. “Roads are too dangerous to stay long on so we had to leave them and keep moving.” The witch hunter, predictably, was not fooled.

“Ser Lawrence were it not for the nature of your presence, I would render judgment on you here and now. The evidence before me and the testimonies surrounding your activities have clearly shown me that you are falling victim to the insidious in-

fluence of the infernal powers.” Just as Lawrence thought to attempt to draw his blackjack to strike the hunter across the jaw, Miri, in all her infernal glory, silently dropped behind the hunter from above. She silently approached, carefully placing foot-fall after footfall in the spots of the ground where the snow had melted to reveal dirt and grass. “I will be taking you back to the Theocracy so that you may be cleansed of your sins and so that you may finish your training as a Warrior of Her Light.”

“Yes yes, I suppose that’s what’s only right huh?” Lawrence half-taunted.

“Sir,” Miri spoke, assuming the gruff voice of one of the hunter’s retinue, the brass covered woman, “we finished our interrogation of Ser Lawrence’s companion.”

“What have you discovered?” The hunter asked, not turning his head from Lawrence.

“She’s clean. As far as we can tell there’s nothing about her.” The hunter’s face, in an entertaining change, shifted to sheer incredulousness at the response.

“What?” The hunter shouted, turning on his heel. “What do you mea—” Lawrence did not hesitate to slide the blackjack from his sleeve and to immediately beam Fredrick across the back of his head. The hunter fell to the ground in a slump, allowing Lawrence to draw a dagger and to finish him off with a stab to the neck.

“Took you long enough.” Lawrence scolded. He leaned down and immediately began to rifle through the hunter’s belongings, hoping to find anything of value to hock later. “Find anything good?” Lawrence asked, assuming the reason for Miri’s delay. The demoness joined him in short order in searching for valuables on the hunter’s body.

“Ah, the usual for his kind. Bunch of charms, some gaudier than others, and silver swords.”

“Full make or coated?”

“Lawrence, please, you should know this by now. Full make.”

“Sweet!” Lawrence cheered, pumping his fist in the air. That was going to fetch a good price at a jeweler’s. “We need to work

on our presentation, by the way. Stories were that you, as my acquaintance, had your description change several times.”

“How do you propose I fix it Lawrence?” Miri sighed.

“I don’t know, maybe disguise as the idiots we pick up for a bit. That sort of thing. Also maybe eat less, that’s apparently leaving too big a footprint.”

“But don’t you think a more lingering description would harm our guise?”

“I mean,” Lawrence shrugged, finishing patting down the body, “I’m the only thing remaining constant so it’s pretty much a given that they’ll figure it out. Oh, hey, since I have the thought, how’d the chat with Aelaz go?”

“Ugh, same old same old,” Miri answered, moving to gather the stockpile of goods she’d scavenged from the retinue. “What are you doing? How are you advancing my reign? How’s that situation with that hero?’ That sort of thing.”

“Did you tell him the Thalbolga thing was incidental?” Lawrence questioned, assisting his companion in organizing things within the wagon’s pocket dimension.

“I did. Also told him that I think I succeeded in drawing you off your path, but I’d need to keep watching to make sure.”

“Did he accept it?”

“He did. So long as he doesn’t demand I corrupt you to do anything more I should be fine for the foreseeable future. Even then there’s still the pact we can mull over if it comes to it.”

“Good to hear.” Chucking the last decorated rosary to the pile of other jewelry in their respective corner of the wagon, Lawrence made his way through the spacious interior. Walking past the wardrobe and bed and assorted crates of goods, he went through the other exit of the pocket dimension and emerged at the front of the wagon. Taking up the reins, the horses were quick to respond and moved without any encouragement. Turning the wagon back to the road, leaving the hunter’s body behind him, he felt Miri mount the wagon beside him.

“Any plans where to go next?” Miri asked, choosing to lean playfully against her companion.

“I was thinking south,” Lawrence answered, a smile taking shape. “I’m good to go anywhere, honestly. Anywhere we want.”