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No Better Remedy

By Matthew Schnell

Black marble eyes, full of judgement and accusation, glare at him as Gaist looks up at the towering church. Swallowing hard, he strides up to the heavy, intricate double doors and steps inside. The nostrils on his snout twitches as a musty combination of wood, parchment and a touch of old sweat assaults him as he crosses the threshold. *Well, I haven't burst into flames yet, that's a good sign.* However, after his second step lands on the old wooden floor comes an angry shout. “You! What do you think you’re doing here?”

Gaist halts and looks around, seeing a clergyman giving him the stink eye. Padding over to him, his sandals muffling his steps somewhat, he reaches into his vest and removes a small pouch. Untying the string, he pulls out a small, gold pendant and holds it out to the clergyman. “My buddy died, and there was no priest to give him his burial rites. He asked me to deliver it here. He said his soul wouldn’t be able to rest otherwise.”

The clergyman's expression softens, a bit, but he still glares at him. He opens his mouth, but is cut off by a soft, elderly voice. "My! Such a noble gesture, seeing to the needs of the faithful. We will say a prayer for your good fortune, it is the least we can do," says a priest dressed in ornate robes and flanked by two other priests.

As the old man turns to leave, Gaist pushes past the clergyman, “Wait, there’s more! Eric always said that if you want to know about souls and the afterlife, you should ask someone in the church. Humans have a place to go when they die, right? The same for Elves, Dwarves and the Beastkin.”

“Indeed. The Lord provides peace and rest for all.”

“So, what about us? My brothers and me. What happens to us when we die?”

The massive draconian stares down at the short old man before him. The priests behind their superior give Gaist impassive stares. The Deacon himself looks at him the same.

“You are an inquisitive... creature, aren’t you? It’s not something one would expect from your kind. You are a creature of darkness, a weapon of the enemy. Only darkness awaits you and your masters in the Abyss.”

Gaist flinches and takes half a step forward, stopping when guards from the corner of the room level their lances at him. “But that’s not our fault. We can’t control how we were born any more than you can!”

The Deacon turns around and walks past his subordinates, “Nevertheless, you are a perversion. A twisted form created by corrupting what God has laid down. Your very existence is a blasphemy, and there is no forgiving a mockery of the Lord’s work.”

Gaist’s fists clench at his sides and he turns to leave. The heavy tail dragging behind him swings wide and knocks the head off a praying statue. White marble splinters and shatters as it breaks over the floor.

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The burly brute sits motionless on his bed, his hands resting on his knees. A pit in his stomach as he digests the priest’s words. His reptilian eyes glance up at the fire, dwindled to nothing but smoldering embers. *Someday we’ll be just like that fire.*

Moonlight creeps through the window, washing over the half-spilled sack of coins on the round table.

Gaist bares his teeth and hisses, his hands balling into fists. Getting up from the bed, he throws off his tattered robe and pants and changes into what passes for his good clothes, a red robe and baggy pants tied at the waist with a sash. Snatching his money pouch from the table he storms out the door.

A cold wind whistles through the cobblestone street, illuminated by the full moons and the red lamps. The wind carries the scent of his destination, a sweet, spicy aroma of incense.

People speed up the pace of their stride as they pass him.

He stops when he spies the hanging wooden sign of a woman clutching sheets over her body with one leg uncovered. He clicks his teeth and opens the double doors, ducking into the doorway.

A blonde comes down the stairs in the arms of a patron, who hands her three coins. Taking a seat at the bar, she hands the bartender the coins and looks about the room.

Gaist pads through the common room of the Lonely Widow, his talons digging into his sandals with each step.

To the left of the counter in a separate room sits a long table low to the ground. Booths are arrayed around it, filled with rowdy patrons eating and drinking with at least one woman in their arms. He takes a deep breath, smelling the mind-numbing incense, the smell of humanity and food cooking behind the doors of the kitchen.

A bald man standing in the corner watches Gaist, and puts a hand over the dagger on his hip.

Gaist eyes the lone female sitting at the bar talking to the bartender and slips behind her. A burly arm wraps around her waist as he dips his head down. Pressing his snout to the back of her ear, he gives her silky locks a quick sniff, and shudders. She smelled of jasmine and daisies. “Hmmm, what’s your name, and how come you’re all alone over here?” he says, his rumbling voice coming out as a soft boom in her ear.

The girl puts a seductive smile on and turns her head to him, but startles when his scaly grey snout comes into view. “Priscilla... and it’s a slow night.”

“Oh, is that so?” he says and sidles up next to her. She puts her hands to his chest and meekly tries pushing him away. “Since you’re not busy, Priscilla, how about you spend the night with me instead? How much for a room for the night?” he asks, rows of sharp teeth flashing as he speaks.

Priscilla swallows as she looks him over, biting her lip. “Twelve silver pieces for the night. Ten, if you buy me a couple of drinks first.”

Gaist turns to the bartender. “Pear cider, and keep’em coming,” he says and slips the bartender a silver. Six tankards later, the two of them head for the stairs. The big brute clutches the small human to his massive frame as they walk.

Before he makes the first step, a hand pats his back. “Are you the one they call Greyskin?”

Gaist turns his head and looks to see a short man standing in full body armor, with his hair tied atop his head, a club strapped to his back and a sword at his side. “Yeah that’s me. What’s it to you, topknot?”

“I was told to find you and bring you to Bara Boglath. You will come with me.”

“Yeah, well I was told to order you a tall glass of ‘fuck off.’”

The man draws the club from his back and drops into a squatting stance. “Is that final?”

Gaist pulls his arm from around the woman and guides her behind him before he shows his teeth at the man and makes a series of sharp clicks from his throat. He reaches for his knife. Before he could draw, the man’s club glowed with light and the last thing he remembered before losing consciousness is it impacting on his head.