

Jera took it for thunder at first. Wet and rumbling, it echoed through the large cavern in a rippling roar, ending in a gratuitous sigh. The man across the table heard it too and, after a shared moment of confusion, Dahl smiled.

"That was a good one!" he cried, his own voice bouncing between stones that glistened with their perpetual dampness. And then, quiet and conversational, "We should push for rations like theirs, they got it good."

Jera wiped a small puddle from the table with the back of his hand. He thought, momentarily, and threw down a card before reaching for his grog. "You joking? It sounds like they ate a horse."

Dahl frowned, but nodded in agreement. "Who do you think that was?"

The sound still lingered in the air, muffling into the eddying gurgle of the seawater that flooded the cave floor. Something didn't seem right. Jera strained his ears and latched onto a peculiar element of the sound. The sigh. It sounded almost feminine.

There were no women in their band.

He drained his tankard. "Grab your axe," he said as he rose, "I wanna investigate."

"Investigate what?" Dahl bemoaned in stationary protest, "I don't give a fuck about another man's belch, sit down."

Jera leaned in close, knocking cards out of place with splayed fingers. "That wasn't a man's belch."

He watched as Dahl's lips parted, eyes seeking some form of incomprehensible explanation. When he found none, he grabbed his axe, and followed his partner along the slippery dug-out path that hugged the rockside. Sconces lit the way with flames that spat and spluttered at the moisture in the air and the indoor raindrops that occasionally dripped from the ceiling. Their amber light reflected in the drink below, a body of water not deep enough to disappear into, but which was strong enough to wash you out to sea and swallow you up out there instead. A long, pale shaft of moonlight broke against tame waves, blinding.

"D'you really thi-

Jera cut him off with a sharp noise and a raise of his hand. The cutlass in the other hand had split the bellies of so many sailors, but Dahl didn't feel safe. The night felt raw in that moment, as if ghosts watched them from the water with cold eyes and dared each other to drag the living down. He shook the thought from his head.

They passed beneath a natural arch and into the cave that lingered within. However it had appeared, the natural room it formed had become the quarters of the newer bandits, specifically because the path that led through it also led to the cave's maw. The screams of the less important would tear through to the guts of the cove and warn of dangerous intruders.

But that hadn't happened. There'd been no screams, but there was the distinct *feeling* that something wasn't right, lingering in the air like a bad fart. Actually, that's exactly what it was like.

"Jesus," Jera spat, recoiling as he smothered his nose in the crook of his elbow.

It sent Dahl back several paces too. Whiteknuckling the handle of his armament, he felt the panic in his chest, "What?" he hissed, "*what is it?*" When Jera said nothing, he slunk forward reluctantly to peer inside, and near vomited.

Steam poured up from the floor as what looked like gallons of mud sat piled in thick, heavy sausages. As his eyes adjusted, watering from the stench he realised that the smell in the air had that quality of human shit after a particularly rich diet of meat. Heady and pervasive, it filled his lungs and he too stumbled back as he snagged the collar of his

sweat-stained shirt up over his nose. “*What the fuck is that?*” he yelled, incapable of quelling the terror. “Are they... *bones?*”

“Shut up,” Jera growled. The weave of muscle beneath his skin was tight and ready to explode. “Maybe a... bear found its way in?”

Dahl grabbed the other man by the jaw and forced eye contact. “That’s a skull,” he said, nodding at a cracked orb jutting out from the mess. “You’re telling me something ‘snuck in’ and devou-”

A sharp snap thrashed the air. Jera jolted, near falling into the water below before catching his balance.

No, Dahl realised; he was held up by a beam of shadow that had penetrated his chest, and come out on the other side with a dripping blade like a harpoon barb. There was a window of two seconds to absorb this before Jera flung backwards, deep into the cave and out of sight.

Dahl screamed, caught between fleeing and pursuing until he heard the monstrous, wet gulps that drowned out thought. He swayed unsteadily.

When the second belch came, he ran.

He tore back the way they came, doing his best not to slip on the wet rocks. The water felt far darker now. He chanced glances down into it unwillingly; his subconscious weighed up his options of facing the unknown or drowning. Dahl wanted to live instead.

But as his attention flitted between the shadows ahead and the waves below, he saw fleeting wisps reflecting in meagre light, like a swarm of bats or some great spider that skittered across the roof of the cave. It sank the seeds of dread into his spine and, when he could hold out no longer, he looked up.

Pale and round like a fat moon, a woman lingered unnaturally in the air. She swung dexterously from two black shadows that snaked up to dig into the stone and bear her considerable weight. More troubling than her extra limbs, though, was the shape and size of her belly. It spilled out from her dark clothes and lurched between her thighs and, Dahl knew, contained the near-corpse of his friend. He could hear her digesting him.

“H-Help,” he croaked, “*Hel-!*” He lost his balance, tumbling from the path and towards the gently churning water that yawned up to seize him.

But there was no splash.

Instead of ice-cold, he bore a wound hot as blood that punctured a cavity through his chest, slicing between his heart and his lung and damaging neither. The blade bore *his* weight, too. As he looked up, he saw her, sitting precariously on the edge as the fat black tendril sunk somewhere into her back. Inch by inch, she pulled him closer. Up. Higher.

He prayed through the tears, looking up into her fathomless scarlet eyes as she licked her lips for him.