They dragged us from our separate cells into the village square, leading towards woodland forest. The twilight sky cast an evening glow over the taller buildings, with the church’s spite burning in an orange haze. As if the God Almighty set the cross atop it on fire.

Arnolf and I inhaled the stench and refuse piling around the streets. Dead bodies contaminated by the Plague decayed as a dressed doctor, one who did not decide to partake in our executions, continued trying to remove the corpses. He didn’t turn his beak towards the two half-starved goats being dragged to the center of the loud square.

Two rough paws gripped our arms, making us face the path leading into wilderness. Our rabid neighbors and former friends—our own disappointed families—pelted insults upon us like stones, while a few preferred the latter. In fact, one pebble struck above my forehead, causing red liquid to drip over my right, teary-eyed vision. The wolf gripping Arnolf’s wrists behind his back kicked my fellow behind his knees, causing him to collapse. The same wolf returned my friend to a kneeling position, painfully clutching a horn to keep his head level.

The hoarse, growling voice of Father Armine carried over their shouts.

“Rejoice, for we shall end this curse they have wrought upon us!” The mad ursine priest proclaimed to his silencing flock. “For too long, the Plague has scorched our land and beyond! It has taken the local lord, taken the archbishop, taken our children, because of these two!”

The large, albeit gangling brown bear glared at us, pointing his claw at Arnolf and me.

“Arnolf, Baldram, you have been committing the highest sin of all!” He bellowed angrily, the sky matching the seething red in his bloodshot eyes. “You are Sodomites, sent by Lucifer to bring death and disease. It is not sheer coincidence neither of you have been affected by the Plague, while having the disgusting urge to fornicate! This curse must be purged!”

The villagers surrounding us cheered. None of them questioned the bear, who spoke truthfully about us committing the highest sin as well as being unaffected by the Plague currently ravaging the known world, but not of us being responsible for it. Had any of them listened, they would have known what Arnolf did with me in private happened long before the first death. We’d known the risks of being discovered, but not truly understood the volume of consequences.

“Sodomy is the highest sin, dating as far back as the Old Testament, which is why we must purge it from a ritual of the Old Testament,” Father Armine told the roused mammals. His words transformed into a deeper, darker mirage of a holy man’s speech. “I am talking about the scapegoat ritual, used by the people of Moses to cleanse their cities of hoarded evil. One shall be sacrificed to the Lord and the other driven away into the wilds to carry our sins. We have prayed, we have fasted, and we have called for a sign. None have arrived until this moment!”

The villagers and us immediately understood as Arnolf and I listened in silent horror. We both attended the father’s sermons ever since childhood. Most of our village did. Never had we heard of such a ritual before. Did the father even recite it from Holy Scripture?

The mad priest smiled deliriously, stepping aside next to my friend. He nodded to his wolf captor, announcing to everyone, “Thus, His will shall be done!”

“Get fucked, you vile excuse for a priest, Armine!” Another cheer as Arnolf, frothing and struggling to break free, shouted, “Your soul will be the one to burn! All of you will still burn! This will not end the Plague! All of you will still burn!! All of you!!!”

Pleading for Arnolf to be let go, crying for them to choose me instead, I tried breaking free too. Arnolf shared a final defeated look with me. His blue eyes filled with defiant tears. The wolf behind him drew a hunting knife. Using one paw to still grip my best friend’s horn, the gleeful canine used his other to hold the sharp tool.

He placed it to the shaking throat and sliced.

Crimson everywhere. Bawling too. Cheers echoed everywhere.

Raw screams bellowed from my throat like a dying animal, yet I didn’t feel the cold steel to my throat. Rather, I was pushed to my feet, then struck repeatedly by fists and stones. The insults became fluid to the absolute pain being experienced. I could only see the approaching dark trees and the awful tapestry of Arnolf lying in a pool of his blood.

I ran. I ran. I ran. I ran. I ran until the villagers of my previous home faded into nocturnal shrieks. Branches became the claws of feral beasts. Crunching leaves resonated like encanting choruses in a cathedral. Glinting moonlight revealed demonic grins and serpentine fangs in the darkness. They transformed into abominations that attacked me laughed at me, surrounding me, devouring me until—

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I let out an anguished gasp. My forehead ached at the memory, as did my limbs.

My crusted eyes stared blindly at the ceiling until sunrise peeked through the shuttered window. I remained on the inn’s bed but dared not to move. Harsh memories reenacted continuously at the forefront of my mind, tormenting me. When I turned my head to the left side, facing away from the wall, I surveyed the solitary room while wiping my eyelids. Daylight reflected from the dirtied, cracked mirror hanging above a wash basin.

I glanced at the foot of my bed, to the window. The sounds of city life trickled in with the day, while I grimaced at the smells of the emptied chamber pot. Then, my eyes widened.

“Don’t worry,” he told me. “It’s still there. It hasn’t been stolen during the night.”

Sure enough, I reached underneath my bed to feel the leather satchel and found no sign of anything being emptied from it. A nervous sigh of relief was replaced though by anxiety.

“You cannot stay here for another night, Baldram.”

“I know,” my lips let out a whisper.

“You need to get up.”

I grumbled in agreement, ignoring Arnolf’s worried smile through one of the shards of the mirror. The clothes he wore were no longer stained in his own blood, nor did he have a jagged scar across his throat, not unless I stared too long at the ghost. If I did, the horrific image of his death would flicker in and out of existence, like a candle flame. So, I tried my best to ignore him, as always.

He didn’t look away from me, not as I stared at the dark circles pooling beneath my eyelids, nor when I splashed water from the basin all over my face. Not even when I went to empty my bowels into the chamber pot, let alone when I tossed the foul excrement into the closed alleyway where the other guests abandoned their pots’ contents. I only saw him disappear when a gust of autumn wind burst inside the door, compelling me to close the shutter.

The affair left me shivering. Moreso than usual, despite my clothing.

Arnolf was right, as always. I needed to find extra money. If not for the innkeeper to let me stay another fortnight, then to save up for the journey.

I stretched my ankles and arms, then snatched my satchel and coat from beneath the mattress. The contents—a bag of coins, a map, and a sheathed knife purchased from the Romani merchant wolf who first found me all those months ago. He’d given them to me after allowing me to help him sell his wares along the Rhine, before making my way to Holland.

“Do you think there will be a ship?” Arnolf asked me, to which I didn’t reply. Rather, I fished for the bag of coins from inside the satchel. “Will you have enough for a meal?”

I paused, feeling my ears lower and my horns ache.

The tavern beneath the inn’s rooms didn’t provide free nourishment, but the lynx innkeeper, a middle-aged man with greying fur named Jon, said I would be allowed to stay in one of his rooms if I was able to help serve drinks in the evenings, as well as pay for half of what a room normally cost. Otherwise, he’d have me stay in the stables with the other travelers and wayward pilgrims. Doing so risked losing everything I had left.

I gripped the satchel protectively, gripped the tiny, almost weightless bag of coins in my other paw, then set the former back underneath the bed. Without acknowledging Arnolf, I ventured downstairs.

Laughter and chatter and scents overwhelmed my senses. I carefully placed my coin purse into a pocket before stepping in front of the corner fireplace, already roaring with a burning log. Others, including a weary badger shivering in his cloak, held their paws to the fire beside me, while the rest circled tables while already drinking the day away. The badger required more warmth though, leaving me to stand up and walk to the bar counter, where a deer stood.

“What’s your poison today, sir?” He spoke in a heavy accent I couldn’t recognize.

“It is an hour after sunrise,” I informed him, to which the deer shrugged.

“Tell that to them,” he motioned to a group of large bears raising their cups. “I take it you would wish for a morning meal then. What can I get for you?”

After a hesitant moment, I reached into my pocket. “How much will this give me?”

From the tiny purse, my paw pulled out one half-penny. Within the pouch, I held approximately six half-shillings, one half-penny, and seven individual pence coins, but experience taught me not to reveal one’s (lack of) wealth. Weeks previously, the purse had been fuller with more shillings, as well as pennies too.

“One half?” The deer mused, then examined the half-coin in my fingers. “Half a pound of roast, some cheese, and perhaps a cup of water.”

“Perhaps some bread instead of roast?” I requested. “P-Please?”

He relented after thinking for longer than usual. I didn’t object when he snatched the currency away. Instead, I counted my blessings as minutes later, the warm bread’s scent wafted over my nose when I inhaled it. The chunk I’d bitten into was stale, but the cheese helped me ignore the taste in favor of the dried curd’s flavor.

Around me, tavern guests talked as I sat silently at my lone table. Topics of discussion included sultry women as well as current affairs. Among them were hushed whispers of ongoing civil wars and anarchy that filled Holland and the surrounding rural counties of the Holy Roman Empire. Though I did not care for meaningless politics compared to survival, I was aware of the consequences. While William V, Count of Holland, quarreled his with own mother and her allies over the right to the title, the peasantry needed to contend with the Black Death.

Of course, nobody talked of the Black Death. Not in public. Doing so attracted attention. In the east, those who discussed it aloud often met critical gazes. These often led to rumors, which transformed into paranoia that engulfed unfortunates like fire. However, some still discussed the rosy-boiled pestilence in subdued whispers that couldn’t be heard by those looking to blame the wrong mammal. Some spoke of Constantinople being empty. Others said a literal wave of feral rats swarmed Rome. Those monstrous creatures dripped and oozed through every crack, flooding every home, devouring their occupants to bone, then evaporating away to other locations when nothing else could sustain the legions of hungry mice. The Pied Piper of Hamelin would sooner die of fright than deal with such infestations!

“Morning to you, Baldram,” Jon appeared behind me, slapping my shoulder after I finished my last morsel. “How did you sleep? I have a task for you, if you are finished?”

“Morning to you too, sir,” I spoke up, stiffening in my chair. “What is it you need?”

“I have a new horseshoe from the blacksmith that needs to be collected, but I cannot leave Henri unattended.” He motioned to the deer from before, already providing drinks to the same group of excited brown bears. “Bring it here in one hour, and I will add another day.”

How could I not say yes? Scarfing down the cup of water in a single gulp, in turn ignoring Arnolf in the water’s reflection that appeared for two seconds, I happily accepted the offer. Jon provided directions for me, gave the shilling to pay the blacksmith, then mentioned the possibility of two free nights at the inn of I helped his wife shovel manure out back later. Again, I accepted the offer, then walked out onto the street.

Compared to the rural outlands east of the Rhine River, Amsterdam felt crowded. The buildings and structures jutted higher into the sky, and the presence of too many mammals often caused discomfort to my nostrils. Heavy scents and foul smells struck without warning, to the point I preferred covering my mouth with the sleeve of my coat.

On the upside, Amsterdam’s diversity of mammals surprised me when I first arrived. I’d been half-starved, hopping from village to village, town to town across the Holy Roman Empire, but it wasn’t until I reached the city that I encountered more herbivores than ever seen in the confines of my village.

Memories threatened to resurface again. Armine’s growls, Arnolf’s gurgling as he choked on blood, our friends’ shouts, the pain of being struck on the forehead, and seeing crimson. So much crimson, it hurt.

Slowing my walk, my left paw reached up to caress the healed scar. It throbbed like a bruise, even months later. Somewhere behind me, an impatient mammal grumbled before walking swiftly around me. I didn’t open my eyes to see who it was.

Gritting my flat teeth together, I sighed to myself, then held the shilling in my pocket. A selfish thought encircled my head like flies around manure.

“Don’t consider it, Baldram,” Arnolf’s gentle voice reminded me. “It won’t be worth the consequences. Just go to the blacksmith, pay for the horseshoe, then return.”

The urge resided. Heaving another sigh, I again ignored the fellow goat in the shop window’s dusty glass reflection and returned to the day’s task.

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A few whispers talked of England and Scotland being unaffected by the Death. Due to the pestilence spreading though, no boats ventured across the Channel. None would dare to face the English Navy’s wrath. Which made life ever more surprising when I spotted white sails peeking around the corner of a building leading towards the city’s harbor. Glimpses of its flag on the tallest mast revealed the standard colors.

My heart went aflutter, while my tail wiggled delightedly at such a sight. Then, both slowed still. Still gripping the acquired horseshoe in my paw, I strode in the opposite direction back towards the inn.

“What are you doing?” Arnolf’s voice echoed from somewhere. “Baldram?”

A chill shivered up my back, and I gripped the horseshoe harder. Almost until the metal dug into my palm. Memories again tried resurfacing, only for them to be quashed the instant I started walking faster.

“Baldram. Baldram, you cannot do this again.”

Biting my lower lip, the flat teeth inherited by my species didn’t allow me to pierce the skin. Even so, it helped to distract me from giving the ghost another reply. Doing so would not only force me to endure another one of his pointless queries, but consider the possibility—

“Baldram, please! Baldram, you cannot discard this new chance!”

The fast strides transformed into desperate running. I found myself shoving between the shoulders of men going about their day, shouting or swearing at me if I startled them. The horseshoe in my paw nearly slipped once or twice, then fell free on the third instance as it fell on the ground with a loud *CLANG*.

“Oh no,” I gasped out, then whirled around to try and reach for it on the ground. A random wolf within the crowd of people suddenly plucked it up. He began walking away as I tried squeezing through the horde. “Give it back! Sir! Sir, give it back!”

“Baldram! Baldram, forget it!” Arnolf’s voice sliced through the crowd. “It’s gone…”

Emotions welled to the surface, rising from the depths of my stomach. Hyperventilating as if the air from my chest was being pulled out by a hook, I began coughing. The mammals who didn’t care about my plight maintained their distance as I stumbled against a shop’s exterior wall, then knelt against it to dry-heave my breakfast.

His visage appeared beside me, placing a cold paw on my cold shoulder as I wept. It didn’t match the comfort I’d felt when we first kissed in secret, or when I expressed my desires to him in cautious hope. Or after our first coupling, when we held each other in bliss.

“Leave me…” I muttered softly. “Why can’t you…leave me be?”

The memories resurfaced, tormenting me. Crimson everywhere, shouting everywhere, and pain everywhere, with the scar on my forehead burning brightly. Only the sensation of Arnolf’s phantom paw caressing my shoulder pulled me away from abyssal oblivion.

“Baldram, please,” he whispered into my ear, “at least give them a request. One simple request. That…That…That is all I ask for.”

A warmer paw suddenly tapped my shoulder. “Young man, are you quite alright?” A concerned vixen’s voice stabbed through the other noise surrounding us. “Do you require help?”

I turned wearily to find a middle-aged vixen with an outstretched paw. She smiled motherly when our eyes locked, and I accepted her offered assistance. Standing up and thanking her, I didn’t have time to hear her say ‘you are welcome’ before an older fox aggressively murmured for her to be careful, lest I give the plague to them.

“He’s also clearly raving mad,” he told her, pulling her by the wrist. “Come on, wife!”

The stares of other civilians watched us, or rather me. The walls of Amsterdam in the distance miraculously shifted into a forest’s tree line and the cloudy sky became night. Shaking my horns, I covered my mouth with an elbow and coughed, finally noticing the ghost was nowhere to be seen.

My head swiveled back in the direction of the harbor. Having been running fruitlessly, I could no longer see the sails peek above the roofs, but I did remember the general direction from where they’d been. It didn’t take much effort to find Amsterdam’s shipyard, but even as I tried lifting a foot to begin my first steps, they didn’t follow my commands. The toes felt as heavy as lead in my shoes. My legs refused any order. They didn’t listen as I tried stepping away from the wall and back into the crowds.

Rather, they carried me back to the inn. I didn’t consider those leaving the tavern nor if Jon or his workers spotted me during the mid-afternoon rush. I scurried upstairs, sobbing and hysterical, and slammed my door shut before tumbling into the darkened room. Tears flowed freely down my cheek and choked anguish bubbled out of my lips as I collapsed onto the bed.

“Do you enjoy suffering, Baldram?”

Arnolf appeared in the cracked mirror again. He stared at me from across the room, and as soon as I blinked the tears away, he suddenly turned corporeal. The deceased goat still wore the dirtied, blood-stained clothes from that night, and I tried to squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to be awakened from the nightmare. Why wouldn’t he stop tormenting me? Why?

“Baldram, please look at me. You cannot continue this torture on yourself.”

I whimpered in fear. “You are the one who tortures me, Arnolf,” I replied after a moment of heavy, almost suffocating silence. “Y-You continue to follow me from beyond the grave…”

“Because you refuse to let go,”

All around me, reflections and dirty puddles as well as polished armor contained him.

“Don’t do this like in Hamburg, Baldram,”

“Why don’t you take advantage in finding a better life—”

“Because I do not deserve it, Arnolf!”

“I do not regret the moments we shared.”

Baldram escapes from inn window after city officials come to institutionalize him.

I placed the satchel along my back, then opened the shutters wide.

My face wrinkled in disgust. The vapors belonging to months and possibly years of bodily waste wafted over my horns and into my nose as I leaned out the window.

Steal back bag, then run out of the tavern

I escaped the situation, running in the opposite direction of the inn. Everywhere, I felt people’s eyes bore into me, much like that dreadful night in Spring. Some cursed me for bumping my shoulders into them, others paying no attention at all, while most stared at the odd goat fleeing through the crowds.

Baldram hesitates to go on.

“Baldram…let me go…live.”

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Black plague means the populace are desperate and frightened.