

Paying the Tab

By: Indigo Rho

A hush had fallen over the tavern. August stood before the hearth, flames licking at the gray and white deer's back. He took a sip of ale and continued his story. "After that, it was just me and the bandit leader. He was a big cougar with a scowl that could crack your jaw and a belly so big it could shatter your bones. His one good eye watched me like a hawk. He'd seen me take out the best members of his gang without taking a scratch, and knew he was next."

"He came at me, but I deftly dodged around the blubbery brute." August reenacted the fight, the lean deer jumping around as he dodged his invisible foe. "The second I saw an opening, I struck, taking him down with a single blow!"

August swung his empty mug right into the mounted deer head. It lurched forward and came loose from its mount, falling right into the fire. Embers flew up as the deer head unexpectedly added to the kindling.

The audience burst into laughter at the messy conclusion to August's story. August quickly recovered his composure and pretended he'd intended to wreck the mounted deer all along.

"Ah, another foe defeated, I see." A plump, white goat waddled up to the crowd. Despite the destruction, he maintained a friendly smile.

"I barely touched it, Levi, and it came loose," August lied. "Whoever put it up in the first place did a poor job."

"I'll make sure to reprimand myself later for that," Levi said. "But congratulations on taking in that bounty. If your wonderful stories are anything to go by, you've been very successful recently."

"I'm just doing what any good adventurer would do, keeping the city safe from harm," August said.

"Of course. I assume that with all the money you've made taking in bounties, you'll have no trouble paying off your outstanding tab, then?"

August frowned. He *had* built up quite a tab over the last few months. He always brought enough coin for a drink or two, but inevitably indulged in far more than that. "Well, I don't have much on me at the moment, unfortunately. It's not safe to go around with a bulging coin purse, after all."

“August, you seem to forget to bring enough money all the time. I can’t help but wonder if you’re taking advantage of my fine establishment,” Levi said, his smile never wavering.

There were whispers among the other patrons, along with nods of approval. August took too much pride in his reputation to let it be tarnished, even justifiably. “I’m always short because of your devilish prices!” he boldly claimed. “I don’t know why I keep letting myself be swindled here. I think it’s time for me to take my business elsewhere, and you should all consider the same,” he told the customers, hoping he could win some over. None spoke up in agreement.

August turned to leave, but nearly stumbled into the tavern’s bard, Lance, instead. The arctic wolf dressed in bright clothes of red and gold, and wore a half-mask that covered his eyes and the top half of his muzzle. He held his fiddle at the ready and played a swift, jaunty tune. “The hero had felled many a bandit and pirate, but found himself faced with a far more fearsome foe: a barkeep! And so the cunning hero conceived of a plan to escape his insidious tab, and go to a land where none knew his thirst greatly outpaced his purse.” Snickers echoed from the audience at August’s expense.

“I am *not* running away!” August insisted in a huff. “I’m making sure I don’t get cheated any further.” He tried to go around Lance, but the bard matched his every move.

“To be cheated out of free ale—how foul!” Lance bellowed dramatically.

“Get out of my way, or I’ll break that damn thing right over your head,” August growled.

“Like the poor old deer who once guarded our hearth.” The other customers laughed.

“Go take its place and fuck off!”

“Ah, but a wolf would make a terrible replacement for a deer. I’d scare away all of our beloved customers! Perhaps you’d be a better fit?”

“You’re gonna regret ever opening that—”

The fiddle bow swung too fast for August to do a thing about it. In an instant, he felt himself falling, yet he also swore he continued to hold his ground. He hit the wooden floor head-first and shouted in pain. He came to

rest looking straight up at Lance—and at his headless body.

Gasps and whispered curses spread around the room at the deer's decapitation. August stared up at his body in horror. On instinct, he tried reaching up to feel where his head should've been. His arms moved just as he commanded, but they only found a smooth stump. There was no blood or gore; it was as if he'd never had a head at all.

"What have you done?!" August roared. Having his head on the floor disoriented the frantic deer. His body stumbled around like a drunk. People hurried out of its way, as if touching it would cause their own heads to topple off. August slowly started to lose the feeling in the rest of his body. His body swayed erratically, then fell onto a stool and slumped against a table.

Levi knelt and picked August's head up by the antlers, bringing him to eye level. "No need to be alarmed, you've just been temporarily split in two. It's a fun little party trick Lance knows." Lance bowed, and a few chuckles came from the other customers. The initial shock of August's decapitation had passed now that they knew he was still somehow alive and well.

"This isn't funny, put my head back on my body right now!" August demanded. He could still move his head, but was powerless to escape Levi's grip.

"You'll be whole again in due time. Once you've paid off your debt," Levi said.

"I've got the money, I swear! Just undo whatever this is and I can get it for you!"

"I fear your past actions have given me some trust issues. If I put you back together, you may never come back." Levi put on an insincere frown.

"I can't repay you if I'm just a head!"

"Ah, but you can. A rather vital position at the tavern just opened up, and you'll be a perfect fit." Levi strolled over to the hearth and stuck August's head on the empty wooden mount.

Laughter erupted from the room. No matter where August looked, he couldn't escape the pointing fingers and mocking grins. The humiliation was almost worse than the decapitation. "Don't just stand there laughing, help me!" he begged, to no avail. "You can't do this to me! How will I eat or drink? I'll die of thirst and you'll all be at fault!"

“I would never let such harm come to a valued employee of mine,” Levi insisted. “And if it’s a drink you want, it’s a drink you’ll get.” He waddled to the bar and filled four large pitchers with ale. He brought them back—two in each hoof—without spilling a single drop, and set them down on a nearby stool. “Drink up!”

Levi pressed a pitcher against August’s lips and forced him to drink. The ale poured down August’s throat in a torrent. He expected it to come gushing out his mouth or leaking from the back of his neck, but instead, it seemingly vanished.

Levi didn’t take away the pitcher until August had drained it. “*Uworrriiiiiiiiiiiip!* Stop, damn you!” August whined. His protests were swiftly silenced by the next pitcher. After the fourth pitcher, August felt his head spin. He was drunk.

“Where is it all—*braap*—going?” August asked. He couldn’t understand how his head alone could get drunk.

“Your stomach. Where else would it go?” Levi leaned against the hearth and pointed to August’s body, still sitting lifeless in a chair.

August gasped. His flat middle had puffed out. Lance nudged his belly with their fiddle bow, and a faint sloshing noise emanated from it. “Your head can entertain while your body doubles as a keg. You truly are a deer of many talents!” the bard teased.

“But...but how did it...”

Levi grinned. “As I said, even with your head separated from your body, you’ll be fine. You can breathe and eat and drink like normal. Though if you’re still worried, perhaps more drinks are in order.” He turned to the crowd. “I’m sure our friend here would appreciate any and all ale you can spare. Don’t worry, he can handle it.”

One person stood, then another, and another. The crowd converged on August’s mounted head, mugs in hand. His eyes frantically darted between them, searching for sympathy. He only saw mischief.

“N-No, don’t. I’ve had enough. What if I pop?!” August pleaded with the crowd.

“Then I’ll have a brand new song to sing about the ballooning buck who burped and burst,” Lance said, earning snickers from the others.

August didn’t get another chance to argue for a reprieve. Someone

pried open his mouth and dumped all the ale from their mug down his throat. Mug after mug was pushed into his face, and he could do nothing but chug. His belly steadily swelled as it filled with mugs and pitchers of ale. His tunic rode up the globe of his gut and it spread over his lap. He caught glimpses of his body through the crowd, growing rounder and rounder. Booze drowned his fear, until he began to find his blimping body rather amusing.

Some who emptied their mugs went to Levi for more ale. A few returned with entire pitchers, happy to spend their coin to see how big the annoying deer would swell. Those who were content with only making August chug a single mug moved on to poking and prodding his massive gut. It sloshed heavily, and jiggled in response to their slaps. August felt none of it, though he grinned stupidly at what little he witnessed.

August's gut had expanded over his lap and past his knees by the time the stool beneath him collapsed. His body fell the short distance to the floor and his belly bounced. August's cheeks puffed out and he let loose a tremendous belch. Laughter filled the tavern just as ale filled the deer's gut.

"Don't—*hic*—stop, I can still drink more," August mumbled in a drunken daze.

Levi rested his arm on August's balloon of a belly and smirked. He'd only planned on keeping August mounted for a few days, maybe a week, but he was beginning to see the benefit of keeping him around longer. Much longer. The customers certainly enjoyed being able to tease August, and they'd bought far more ale than usual just so they could watch him swell. They'd no doubt tell all their friends about the tavern with the talking head and the ballooning buck. August would repay his debt a hundred times over. He felt August's belly swell from another round of drinks. Hopefully, the deer wouldn't pop before then.