

Maw of Avris

By: Indigo Rho

Marc examined every inch of the heavy wooden door. It was plain, lacking any etchings or paint to distinguish it from any other door in the guild house. That made it a poor source of procrastination for the nervous fox. He could only ponder the same small crack for so long before his thoughts returned to the matter at hand.

Damir, the leader of his guild, had sent for him. Had Marc been anyone of importance, he would've considered the call an opportunity. But he was the newest member of the guild, not someone Damir would normally bother with. They'd only interacted with each other in passing, as mentors handled his training and guidance.

He feared he'd done something wrong. He never skipped his chores, but he never put his all into them, either. Maybe the mentors had decided he lacked potential. Maybe the guild needed to cut costs and was letting him go. They'd suffered plenty of setbacks lately.

Marc had come up with dozens of different scenarios for why Damir would request his presence, and each was worse than the last. And so he'd stared at a door for what felt like an eternity, wondering what awaited him on the other side.

Loud belching startled Marc. He quickly knocked on the door.

"Comerrrrrrrrrp in!" Damir bellowed from the other side.

Marc shoved aside his hesitation and entered.

Damir's office wasn't any grander than the door that led into it. A large desk took up a far corner of the room, barren aside from an inkwell and some scrolls. The fireplace in the back was made of simple stone. Above it hung a battered wooden shield with a prominent hole in the middle, its paint chipped. The only other decoration was a tapestry of a boat.

Damir stood before a small cabinet covered in liquor bottles, pouring himself a drink. Even from behind, Marc could plainly see the immense curve of the sturdy lion's belly. The misshapen ball of yellow lurched from side to side. Bulges pushed outward, the faint impressions of hands and feet.

The lion's belly swayed as he turned. He took a gulp of his drink and

closed his eyes. His middle shuddered, a muffled curse barely reaching Marc's ears. He didn't seem particularly bothered by the rowdiness of the prey within his stomach. A weaker pred would've been stumbling around or even floored. They'd be groaning and belching out all the air they could to quiet their meal before they threw them back up. Damir merely looked irritated, though with his prey or his guest, Marc didn't know.

His tunic was pulled up over the massive curve of his gut. Faint touches of gray streaked his brown mane, the only hints of his age. He adjusted his pants with a paw, jiggling his middle.

"Marc," Damir said, giving nothing away in his tone.

"Sir," Marc nodded back. He wasn't sure what level of formality Damir demanded, so he erred on the side of caution. Try as he might, he couldn't keep his eyes off the guild leader's gut, though.

Damir was muscular, but also soft around the middle. Regular training could only do so much to counter the sheer amount of ale the lion loved to guzzle. Live meals were rarer, but all it took was one to plump a person up.

Marc looked upon Damir with a mix of nervousness and admiration. He couldn't see a bulging belly without imagining himself trapped inside it, which terrified him. Packed away in a dark, wet pit, waiting to be churned. It was a messy way to go.

Predation wasn't considered proper or civilized in the city. It was the sort of thing bandits, pirates, and other criminals partook in. So merchants denied service to those who waddled into their shops obviously engorged and voracious guilds were shunned. Naturally, there were parts of the city where folk didn't care who you ate, mainly because they too were eager to gulp down any prey they came upon.

In the not too distant past, predation had been considered a respectable way to assert one's strength and cunning. Public opinion would no doubt shift in its favor again in the future. But for now, preds were better off indulging in private for the sake of their reputation.

Which was why Marc rarely hunted, and only when he knew he could sneak back to the guild house without being spotted. Sure, no one ever mistook the cause of his overnight weight gain, but he didn't make an embarrassing spectacle of it.

Marc's ears angled back. The fox had eaten someone a week ago, his

first live meal in months. The prey had been a lone drunk. Thin, disheveled, and convinced they were near the river and not in an alley. He'd consumed them on impulse because he was hungry and saw an opportunity. They'd left him with a bruise on his thigh and a tear in his shirt for his efforts, but both had been a small price to pay to fill his belly.

He'd waited until his stomach had shrunk a little before returning to the house, but the streets hadn't been completely empty. What if someone had complained to Damir? Predation wasn't banned outright in the guild, but Damir frequently reminded them to be discreet about it. Was he being kicked out of the guild? Was he going to join whoever was already thrashing about in the big lion's belly?

"I assume you're aware of the healing shortage the guild's been dealing with lately, right?" Damir asked. He finished the rest of his drink and set the glass down. He reached for a bottle, before changing his mind and putting his full attention on the fox.

The question dragged Marc free of his silent downward spiral. It was the last thing he'd expected Damir to say. "Yes. It's, uh, it's unfortunate." He winced at the understatement.

"First, we lose Ferand to the belly of a dragon. One of the best damned druids I've ever known, and a fantastic healer." Damir shook his head and eyed the liquor again. He snatched a bottle and took a swig.

Marc nodded with what he hoped was a proper amount of reverence. He hadn't been on the job, but he'd heard the stories, not all of which were flattering. The dragon had been a client, and Ferand had taken advantage of their hospitality and glutted a great deal. Then he'd tried to renegotiate the contract after having a few bottles of wine. The furious dragon had scarfed him down in one bite and let him linger in the pit of his stomach for the rest of the evening.

"And if Ferand had still been around, then he might have been able to free Destrian from that carnivorous plant." Damir sighed and scratched his belly. "The two never got along, though, so maybe Ferand would've let him become plant food regardless."

Another tale that'd been retold plenty around the guild house hearth. Eager vines had kept the other guild members from coming to Destrian's aid. They'd been unable to do anything aside from watch the bulge of their

comrade slowly shrink as the plant converted him to nutrients.

“Losing Ferand and Destrian was bad, but at least we still had Nell. He still had a lot to learn and didn’t know when to keep his mouth shut, but he could heal, and a proper guild needs healers. So of course he leaves for a drink one night and never comes back.”

“Three clerics gone in as many months.” Damir scoffed. “At least I found out what happened to Nell.” He slapped his gut hard with a paw, causing it to bounce back and forth. The struggles within kicked up. “Rory, you had a whole tavern to choose from, yet you pigged out on the only damn cleric we had left!” His voice rose into a growl that cowered Marc.

A bulge rose up and down from the thumping of a hoof. “Please, Damir, it was an honest mistake! I was drunk and didn’t recognize him, I swear!” The voice was faint and hoarse, but definitely Rory’s. The zebra loved talking.

“It was such an accident that you gloated about getting away with it. I’ve had cravings before as well, you fool, but I know when to hold back.” Damir balled his fists and looked ready to pummel his own gut. Instead, he took a deep breath and grabbed his middle, shaking it violently. Lion pudge alone couldn’t cushion the rattling Rory endured.

Marc watched Rory’s squirms slow some. He was too new to the guild to know Rory well, but the zebra had nonetheless been a part of his life for well over a year. Soon they’d be lion fat and discarded bones. And a story to be passed around on boring nights, one of warning or amusement depending on who told it. Thinking about it didn’t exactly make him feel uncomfortable, just strange.

Commenting on Rory’s mistakes and ongoing punishment felt inappropriate to Marc, so he limited himself to nodding in agreement. If Damir wanted his opinion on the matter, they’d ask for it. He hoped they didn’t.

“We can’t bring back those who’ve been digested, unfortunately. We’ll focus our recruitment on replacing them, but that’ll take time. Until then, we’ll need to rely on other methods to keep our members in good health during and after jobs.” Damir seemed to have trouble focusing on Marc. His eyes would remain on the fox for a while, then dart away in a random direction, before returning. There was a chance he was drunk.

“If we don’t have healers, we can use elixirs and scrolls. They’re less efficient and a bit weaker than a true healing spell, but they’re better than nothing.”

Marc continued nodding along, though he didn’t understand why Damir was lecturing him on the guild’s healing situation. At times, he felt like the lion was talking *at* him, not to him, repeating a memorized speech.

“Elixirs and scrolls cost money, though, and our coffers have been dire lately for various reasons.” Because important jobs that should’ve secured their funding had failed. Skill couldn’t always overcome plain bad luck. “But I have a favor I can call in. I don’t want to, but I don’t have a choice. Sometimes you have to swallow your pride and work with what you’ve got.” The lion let out a harsh, one-note laugh that shook his belly. “You know of the Maws of Avris?”

Marc shuddered, an answer as good as any nod of his head. The maws were clerics dedicated to the god Avris. They were exceptional healers and alchemists. But their methods were considered unsettling—especially to those who cared little for predation—for they consumed people and churned them into powerful elixirs. They had to fill their bellies to fill their shelves with products. Shunning them was the only way to lower their demand and ensure the whole city didn’t end up sloshing in bottles and vials. Or so Marc had heard.

Aside from the usual moral excuses, most were simply wary of working with anyone who needed to regularly eat people for a living. What if the maw suddenly decided you’d be more valuable as product than as a customer? And you could never be certain of who had gone into the elixir you drank. Rumors had spread throughout the guild that Nell had been snatched by a maw and turned into elixirs. Though now that Marc thought of it, Rory had been the one who’d spread them.

“There’s a local maw who owes me a favor. If I call it in, we’ll have a sizable stockpile of free healing elixirs.” Damir looked back to his liquor supply. “I can’t go myself. I have to remain here until Rory’s fully digested. We can’t afford to be deemed a voracious guild and lose job opportunities. Or potential recruits. If people think we spend all our time eating each other, they’ll want nothing to do with us!” He squeezed the sides of his gut hard in frustration, causing it to bulge and wobble.

Marc reminded himself to never give in to the temptation to eat a fellow guild member.

“To be blunt, Marc, you’re our newest recruit, and thus the least recognizable. I need you to visit the maw and secure the elixirs for me.” Damir lumbered over to his desk. His belly bounced up and down with every step, interrupting Rory’s frantic pleas for forgiveness. He had to hold his gut back with a paw as he leaned over and picked up a small cylindrical container. “This scroll has a message to the maw with my request. The favor is a private matter between us, so it’s for his eyes only, you understand.”

Damir’s intense gaze locked onto Marc. The lion looked ready to swallow him if he breached their trust. Thinking about being crammed into their stomach alongside Rory made him dizzy. “Of course!” he blurted out.

“Good.” Damir’s intensity faded, and he suddenly appeared exhausted. Unsurprising, considering how much energy eating people took. “This is an important job, Marc. Those elixirs could mean the difference between a wounded guild member making a full recovery or being crippled for life. Remember that.” He held out the scroll container.

Marc accepted it without any outward hesitation. Approaching a maw of Avris unnerved him to no end, but he was willing to do anything for the guild. The guild was key to building a good life for himself. Maybe the simple task would be his great breakthrough and prove his worth. Every story had a beginning, after all.

Damir gave Marc directions to the maw’s shop, repeating over and over again the importance of discretion in between belches.

The movement in Damir’s middle slowed. Rory’s shouts became too quiet to hear, indistinguishable from the gurgles coming from Damir’s stomach. The bulges dwindled and the lion’s gut settled. Damir released a long breath, his eyelids closing halfway. “Get going, Marc. We both have work to do.” He padded over to his chair and lowered himself into it, ignoring the creaks.

“You can count on me,” Marc said. He hurried out of the office, making sure to shut the door tightly behind him.

* * *

Marc's confidence wavered once he reached the outskirts of the Gullet, the neighborhood the maw of Avris resided in. If the neighborhood had a respectable name, no one bothered remembering it. It snaked its way through the long, shallow valley between two hills, a crack in the city's foundation. Shoddy, inexpensive boarding houses filled the Gullet, serving the desperate and the disreputable. There were taverns overflowing with cheap booze and shops selling questionable goods. But what actually worried Marc were the appetites.

While the rest of the city publicly turned their noses at predation, the Gullet thrived on it. For those with little to their name, it was more sensible to eat a stranger than spend coin on a meal. When shady deals fell apart, jaws opened wide. Strutting around with a fat purse on your belt could lead to you becoming nothing but fat as someone else waddled off with your wealth. Already shunned by the rest of the city for merely existing, the Gullet's denizens had nothing to lose by preying upon those who intruded upon their realm.

Marc kept his sword in plain sight at his side and endeavored to show no hint of worry. He needed to appear as a hassle to any would-be thieves or gluttons. So he strode ahead with his head held high, periodically scanning the street ahead for potential threats.

Signs of recent predation were hard to miss. Boots and belched-up bits of clothing lay abandoned on the road, kicked to the sides along with other refuse. There were bones as well. Marc watched a rotund cleric pluck them up and toss them into a sack, where they rattled together. His belt dug tightly into his waist and he looked ready to burst out of his robes as he muttered quiet prayers for the consumed. He stopped and his round cheeks puffed up. A thunderous burp echoed out, and a fresh bone flew from his mouth and clattered into the street. He chuckled, before leaning over to add the bone of his most recent meal to the collection, repeating the same prayer he had for all the others.

Despite being a pred himself, Marc realized he didn't belong in a place like the Gullet. It'd eat him alive if he lingered too long.

The deeper Marc ventured into the Gullet, the doughier its inhabitants seemed to get. Pants clung tight and shirts left small strips of bellies exposed. Some didn't bother with shirts at all, letting their round middles

hang out for all to see.

Noise from an alley caught his attention. A rabbit had someone halfway down their throat. They staggered about, trying to wrangle the frantically kicking legs of their meal. Their belly bounced and swelled with every swallow, as rowdy as Damir's had been earlier. The pair of legs steadily vanished. Marc turned away before he could witness the final gulp, and moved his paw closer to his sword.

He turned left at the tavern with the three skulls on its sign, as Damir had told him. A bear waddled out the front doors, his gut almost too wide to squeeze through. The bulge in it twitched weakly. But while their prey still lingered, the bear's gaze was already drifting to passersby in a way that immediately put Marc on guard. He kept to the far side of the street. The bear looked at him momentarily, but soon moved on to a chubby seagull heading in the opposite direction. He didn't wait to see if the bear got a second course.

After a few more turns and swollen belly sightings, Marc finally arrived at the maw's apothecary shop. An open snake maw—the symbol of Avris—adorned the sign above the door. It was brighter than most signs he'd seen in the Gullet, freshly painted and hard to miss. The front door was shut. Maybe the shop was closed. Maybe the maw was too busy digesting someone to welcome customers. Maybe they'd moved on.

Marc furrowed his brow. Was he truly that desperate to avoid the task Damir had entrusted him with? All he had to do was present the maw with a scroll and leave with elixirs. Or at least the promise of elixirs. He didn't want to think about how vulnerable he'd be lugging a crate around.

He calmed his racing heart and placed his paw on the door handle. It swung open with a push.

The interior of the shop was unexpectedly tame. Shelves lined both walls, no different from those in any other shop he'd visited before. The floorboards looked a little rougher and the shuttered windows let in less light, but it was far from the depraved den he'd imagined. Bones didn't litter the room and images of serpents didn't cover the walls. Ominous blue flames didn't burn in the candles.

But the glow of the numerous bottles and vials on the shelves was hard to ignore. They ranged in color from blues to greens to reds. Some

glowed dimly, while others were bright enough to be lanterns.

Marc thought they were lovely, until he remembered why they glowed and his ears tilted back. Each elixir owed its existence to a living being the maw had consumed. He wondered how many bottles the average person filled. Was he looking upon the remnants of a dozen people, or a hundred? He did his best to avoid thinking too long about how many bottles he might fill.

“Ahem.”

Marc jumped at the sound, his fur poofing up in fear.

A wolf stood in front of a counter at the back of the room. His fur was a mix of sandy brown and light gray. He had a soft paunch that reminded Marc of Damir’s, though the wolf lacked the lion’s muscle. He wore a dark green, sleeveless vest left open. A ring of white fangs was painted on his belly

Marc had assumed they’d be a great deal fatter. His last prey had made him chubby, and they’d barely had any meat on them. The rumors he’d heard told of maws so hefty they could bury a grown person under their belly and deflect swords with their thick layers of fat. They were supposed to be bottomless pits that could cram a whole tavern full of people down their gullet. The wolf simply appeared soft, like a merchant.

“Welcome to my humble shop,” the maw said with a bow that jiggled his middle. “How may I be of service today?”

The warm greeting and smile weren’t enough to placate Marc. All he could think about was the wolf gulping people down left and right to brew elixirs. But Damir and the guild were depending on him to acquire the goods. “Damir, the leader of my guild, has requested a supply of healing elixirs.” His voice came close to cracking. He approached the maw and held out the scroll container, keeping as much distance from them as he could.

If the maw were offended by his sheepishness, he didn’t show it. He accepted the container and pulled out the scroll. “Your guild honors me with its patronage. You won’t find better healing elixirs anywhere in the city—the Gullet or otherwise. How many do you need?”

Marc blinked in surprise. He hadn’t thought to ask before leaving. Now that he thought about it, he hadn’t gotten any details about the order whatsoever. “I’m, um, I’m not sure. I’d assumed the scroll would have all the

details.” He’d assumed nothing. He’d hurried off shortly after obtaining the scroll without thinking. Damir had been juggling a squirming gut and the burdens of running the guild. Had Marc left before the lion had had a chance to stop him?

The thought of returning to Damir empty-handed because he’d neglected to ask the most basic questions about the task filled him with dread. Damir would probably send someone else and chew him out. Perhaps literally, if they were furious enough.

The maw’s eyes darted across the message. His grin widened, showing off glistening fangs. “It does in fact have everything I need. I was wondering when Damir would finally come calling. Oh, he swore up and down he never would, but I knew better.” He chuckled.

As curious as Marc was, he refused to pry. He’d already promised Damir he wouldn’t read the scroll. “So, I’ll be able to get the elixirs, then?” He asked.

The maw nodded. “Yes. I’ll need your assistance collecting them, though. I hope you don’t mind.” His eyes flickered in the candlelight.

“I don’t mind at all.” Marc spoke the words before he’d even had time to think about the request. It’d been almost instinctual.

“Excellent.” His eyes looked the fox up and down. “Are you a mage, by chance?”

The question made Marc grimace, though he quickly covered it up. “No, not really. I’m told I’ve got an affinity for magic, but I’ve never received training for it. Right now, all I can do is make things glow, and not consistently.” He laughed, but without much heart. He’d joined a guild hoping they could either train him to be a mage, or at least pay him enough to afford a tutor. Having potential but lacking the means to act upon it was a bitter subject for him. “Most don’t suspect I’ve got any talent at all. How’d you guess?”

“Intuition,” the maw replied. “Though being able to sense the flow of mana through others certainly helps.”

“Oh.” Marc suddenly felt like a fool. Of course a cleric could sense his magic. “Um, what should I do first?” At least he wouldn’t make an idiot of himself moving bottles.

“Nothing too difficult. Just follow my every command without

hesitation.”

The maw’s eyes began to flicker again in a rainbow of colors. Marc couldn’t look away. He didn’t blink, unwilling to miss a second of the mesmerizing view. Even when his head started spinning he continued to watch. The wolf’s eyes were beautiful.

“Relax, Marc.”

There was an echo to the maw’s voice. The words rang in Marc’s ears. Curiosity as to how they knew his name came and went. It was so much easier to focus on the maw’s words rather than his own thoughts. They weren’t as important.

“Shed your unease and ambitions. They cause you nothing but pain.”

Their voice was soothing. All tension fled Marc’s body. The Gullet, his task, and his hopes for the future no longer seemed to matter.

“Place your trust in me, Marc. Allow me to take control. Everything will be better, then.”

The last strands of resistance to the maw’s suggestions snapped. Marc completely gave in. He felt euphoric, as if he’d dumped all his burdens. He had no regrets, aside from the fact he hadn’t submitted to the maw earlier.

The flickering of the maw’s eyes ceased. “Are you ready to do anything I ask, Marc?”

“Of course,” Marc answered. He gave neither thought nor hesitation to the matter. Consequences didn’t cross his mind.

“Good. Now please close up the shop so we aren’t disturbed.”

The maw pulled a key from his pocket and handed it to Marc. Marc dutifully used it to lock the front door, testing the handle to make sure he’d succeeded. He wouldn’t fail the maw with a lapse of judgment. Once the task was complete, he returned the key to them.

“Thank you.” The maw’s praise heightened the blissful daze that’d overcome Marc. “Let’s head into the back, then.”

Marc silently followed the maw into the back room of the shop. More shelves held baskets of empty bottles and vials in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Crates and barrels were stacked high. There was a table against the wall with a large, half-moon chunk carved out of it. Beside it was a sack filled with bones. A cracked deer skull lay at the top.

The bones didn’t stir any hint of fear in Marc. He noted their existence

as plainly as he did the sweet scent of burning incense and the creaking of the door. He lacked the will to care about anything without the maw's approval.

"It's nice passing off all responsibility to another, isn't it?" the maw asked. He nudged the stool in front of the table back a little, eyeing the gap between it and the indent.

"Gods, this is the best I've felt in forever." Marc came close to moaning the words. Joy. That's what he felt. Pure, unfiltered joy. And it'd cost him nothing of importance. He'd misjudged the maws. Everyone had. The world would be better if they all gave in.

"That would be a bit much, even for me," the maw snorted as he overheard traces of Marc's thoughts. "Could you please fill a crate with the rectangular bottles? The taller ones, not the squat ones."

Marc nodded and went to work with a vigor that was the antithesis of his sluggish mind. The maw happily pointed him in the direction of anything he couldn't find, offering the occasional polite correction when necessary. Soon, a collection of empty bottles was carefully arranged in a crate on the table.

"Tell me, Marc, how much do you know about my work?" The maw smiled at the fox.

"Uh, I know you turn people into elixirs."

"That is only one aspect of being a maw of Avris, but understandably what most associate us with. My training and devotion to Avris have given me access to many of his blessings. I know how to properly bandage wounds to hasten healing and recovery, as if wrapping the patient in Avris' healing coils. I can borrow Avris' enthralling sight, to calm the wounded and turn others into malleable assistants unphased by bloody work."

"And, of course, I can swallow people whole and convert them into elixirs. The process is far more difficult than the rumors make it out to be, by the way. I can make elixirs from anyone, but I have to be selective if I want to guarantee quality. It's just like picking out ingredients for a meal." The maw smiled. "Everyone has a different essence to them. Size can offer a small boost to its strength, but that comes at the cost of excess pounds for a maw like me to shed. Magical ability enhances a person's essence *far* more. They don't need to be trained, either, they simply have to have potential."

Wisps of thought fluttered through Marc's mind. "Would I make a good brew?" he asked, a shadow of concern fighting to be heard in his voice. The trance held firm.

"Indeed you would. I'm impressed Damir remembered that. He seemed reluctant to listen to me at the time." The maw looked amused. "How long have you been in the guild, Marc?"

"A year and a month." Maybe a year and two. The process had been rather drawn out, and a lot of his first year had begun to blend together.

"Ah, then that's why Damir sent you to me. Unfortunate timing on your part, I suppose. Damir must be really desperate for healing," the maw said, shaking his head.

"All of our clerics were eaten," Marc answered. Whatever the maw wanted to know, he'd reveal. "I won't end up like they did. Or Rory."

The maw's grin widened. "I'm afraid you will. The favor I offered Damir was to create a batch of any elixirs he desired, so long as he provided the core ingredient. *You* are that core ingredient, Marc, and a prime specimen at that."

Betrayal cut through the bliss, if only for a fleeting moment. Marc's elation mellowed some, but not enough to wipe the smile from his face. "I thought I was doing alright, though?"

"I'm sure you were doing fine. But Damir needed someone who would both produce a solid batch and be expendable. You're new and probably haven't had much of a chance to bond with the rest of the guild, right?" The maw spoke without cruelty, merely stating what he believed to be true.

Marc nodded. He'd made a couple of friends in the guild, but mainly ran errands and trained. Few knew his name, and he'd grown accustomed to answering to "fox" instead.

"And perhaps there are novices who are less reliable, but they lack your strong essence, and thus would make poor elixirs. Your guild would lose a member and gain a paltry assortment of elixirs. A terrible deal." The maw steepled his fingers. "You should know that Damir included a note that I was to send you back if I didn't believe you'd produce an adequate supply. He may be sacrificing you, but he's not wasting you. He's only affirmed that I made the right choice in granting him the favor."

Marc did become happier, though it was easy for him to get caught up

in joy while under the maw's sway. He leaped at any opportunity to forgo discomfort. "I'll make a good batch, then?"

"You'll make an *exceptional* batch. And thanks to you, your comrades will recover from any calamity fate throws at them." The maw lay a paw on Marc's shoulder. "You may not have a say in the matter, but what you're doing is very noble. No doubt Damir will find a way to honor you in some manner, even if the rest of the guild can never know the truth of what happened to you."

Noble. Marc had never quite dreamed of being a hero. Becoming a mage was a lofty enough goal. Being eaten frightened him, but he'd secure his legacy in the process. He wouldn't be snacked on for being cocky like Ferand or pointlessly snatched by a plant like Destrian. He wouldn't be betrayed like Nell or caught screwing up like Rory. His consumption would have a purpose, and not become a story told around the fire and followed by laughter.

Damir and the maw were giving his life meaning. Final flashes of fear were drowned out by pride and glee. "That sounds nice," Marc said.

"Nice indeed." The maw patted Marc's shoulder. "Now, if you'd please strip down and place all of your belongings in a crate."

Marc did as he was told. His sword, his small pouch of coins, and every last piece of clothing he wore was neatly added to a crate, which he then placed beside others full of similar accessories.

Once Marc had finished, the maw's eyes flickered again. "Remember, Marc, this is for the best. Do not fear your fate. There'll be some discomfort, but it won't be a painful experience. No burning or itching, simply a gradual, eternal rest. You're food now, Marc. And food has no qualms about being eaten."

"I'm food," Marc repeated. "Nothing but food." His awareness receded to himself and the maw, as the rest of reality was rendered insignificant. Food didn't care about anything, so neither would Marc.

Satisfied that Marc couldn't be shocked free of the hypnosis, the maw began to feed. He opened his mouth and slid Marc's head into it. Marc barely twitched, accepting the darkness and hot breath. He gently nudged Marc in deeper, until the fox's muzzle touched the back of his throat and provoked the first of many gulps.

The maw was an experienced hunter. He'd had to fend off other preds with tooth and nail before. He'd endured the pain of swallowing a thrashing prey while his whole body ached from the preceding brawl. Forcing a person down his throat wasn't difficult. He occasionally enjoyed the struggles.

But above all else, he preferred docile, willing prey. The minds of such meals tended to be clouded into submission through magic or liquor, but he cared more about the results than the methods. They gave themselves to him, and he transformed them into a delicious meal and a precious commodity. The city might outwardly shun him and his ilk, but his elixirs were always in demand.

The maw's neck bulged as Marc's head slid into his throat. He pinned his prey's arms to their sides more out of habit than necessity, and to control whatever instinctive jerks they made while being consumed.

He opened his jaws wide and stretched them over the fox's shoulders. Any prey in their right mind would've been twisting and stumbling by now. Shouts would've been echoing up his throat and out of his mouth. Marc kept quiet, faithfully tolerating the slick walls of his gullet. They were food, and food didn't complain.

Marc was chubby, but leaner than the average prey the maw caught in the Gullet. His jaws passed over Marc's chest with ease. When he reached the modest curve of the fox's belly, he hefted them off the ground. They kicked once, startled by the transition from upright to upside down, but didn't prove a nuisance.

Livelier meals had toppled the maw before. There was no safe way to break your fall with a person halfway down your throat. You were lucky if you fell on your back, though you'd rattle your head hard along the way. Falling forwards could knock you out cold. Bones could break and fangs could come loose. Pain would overshadow success. Unless, that is, the tables were turned, and jaws engulfed you.

The maw's tail wagged as he felt Marc's belly stretch his jaws and throat. Every prey benefited from a bit of chub. He would've liked Marc to have a few more inches around their waistline, but his work prevented him from being too picky about his meals. A prey's essence mattered more than their taste.

Marc's head and shoulders pushed into the stomach, causing the

maw's belly to swell. No fabric struggled to contain his middle. He let it grow freely as he filled it with fox, one gulp at a time. Its smooth surface bulged out. The maw placed a paw on his middle and rubbed, grinning as it traced the faint imprint of Marc's muzzle.

A stomach was a dark, wet prison, no better than being trapped within a living cauldron. But while Marc shifted to get his face out of the shallow pool of digestive juices, he showed no signs of panic. He knew he'd never see the light of day again, that the stomach would eventually squeeze and churn him until nothing remained, but he'd accepted his fate. His sacrifice would help others. He would let himself be digested for the good of the guild.

The maw pushed Marc's rump and tail into his mouth. Only the fox's legs remained. Even a hearty prey at full strength would have little hope of powering their way out of a pred at that point. At best, they'd tire themselves and pass out before their doom arrived. Of course, Marc didn't so much as fidget while the maw steadily swallowed the last of them. The maw continued eating casually, focusing on the sensation of his gut growing larger and heavier with each passing moment. He tilted his head up, and let gravity send Marc's feet down his throat. He shut his jaws with a grin. The fox was sealed away.

A pleased moan escaped the maw's lips as Marc adjusted their position down below. Of all the joys in life, he could think of nothing that matched the feeling of a live meal. There was power in turning another person into food. He was blessed to have embraced the teachings of Avris. Every time he engorged himself, he was helping to spread the faith. Every prey became a bottle of hope for someone else, and few could forget the one who'd eased their pain or given them the strength to prevail.

"Bworrpp!" The maw chuckled and patted his belly. He plopped down on his stool. The bulge of his gut fit perfectly in the table's indent. He stuck a finger into one of the empty bottles Marc had laid out and got to work.

First, he concentrated on Marc. He felt the fox curled up in his stomach, patiently and euphorically waiting to be broken down. He sought the fox's essence. It glowed, brighter and brighter, as the maw turned his full attention upon it.

Uncovered, Marc's essence radiated out like a roaring flame. They had

an astounding amount of untapped potential, more than even they had likely realized. Certainly more than Damir was aware of, otherwise the lion would never have given up such a prize. With proper training and time, Marc could've been molded into a capable mage, a possible cornerstone of the guild.

Instead, the maw would convert them to a hoard of elixirs. A tragedy to the guild in the long run, but a boon to him. He'd no doubt produce far more elixirs than Damir expected. Some of the excess would be set aside for his own stock, and Damir would be none the wiser. Those who only called upon the maws of Avris as a last resort weren't afforded the respect reserved for regulars. If Damir decided to return, then perhaps he'd offer the lion a few extra elixirs here and there to make up for it.

The maw reduced his mental image of Marc to a blubbery mound of essence. They were no longer a fox or even a meal, simply a bountiful source of mana ready to be tapped. He flexed his stomach, tightening its grip on Marc. The fox twitched as the pressure squeezed him from every direction. A shining droplet of blue formed at the tip of the maw's finger and dripped into the bottle.

"Let my claws act as Avris' fangs, spilling the nourishing venom of life." The maw muttered the mantra out of habit. The words reminded him of the divine purpose of his task and fended off the carnal distractions of consuming another.

Drop by drop, the maw drained Marc of his essence, squeezing it out of him like juice from fruit. Marc's head spun, worse than it ever had when he'd gone drinking. His limbs felt heavy, and he couldn't bring himself to move an inch. He just slumped in the pit of the maw's stomach, drifting aimlessly between bliss and a daze.

The maw pulled his finger out of the filled bottle, corked it, and then moved on to the next. His elixirs didn't require him to completely drain the life of a person. He *could* drain them merely to the point of exhaustion and free them, tired but capable of making a full recovery with rest. But such a merciful method would require precision, and it was far easier to cram someone into his stomach than to get them out. Too few would trust him with their safety to volunteer, and too many would seek revenge if conscripted. Better to ring them out completely and plump up a little now

and then.

Besides, he didn't want to give up the excuse to have a filling meal.

As the digestive juices rose around Marc and began to tingle, the fox blacked out with a confused smile on his face. At long last, he'd proved his worth to the guild.

Bottles filled and prey churned. The fangs painted on the maw's bulging belly glowed faintly, hastening the digestion process. Messy *glrrrrrks* and *gurrrrgles* echoed from the maw's bubbling gut. Digestion was noisy work.

Slowly, the maw's belly began to shrink. What didn't go into the bottles ended up on his waistline, layer after layer of fat. His rump grew wider and his face rounder. He felt a stirring deep in his belly, and belched out a bone. It clattered across the table, stained by stomach acids. He plucked it up with his free paw and dropped it into the sack of bones. Necromancers would buy them in bulk for their rituals. Intact skulls held the greatest value, but they found a use for everything, and the maw always had plenty to spare.

In time, the flow of elixir and the belching up of bones slowed. He sucked the last wisps of essence from the soup that had been Marc, flicking the final drops off his fang and into a bottle.

The maw stretched his arms and rolled his shoulders. He breathed heavily, holding back a yawn. Brewing elixirs was taxing.

He glanced down and smiled at the gap between his belly and the table's indent. He prodded his gut with a paw, feeling nothing but doughy pudge. A memento of Marc. Before long, it'd be buried beneath his next meal, and the one after that. And perhaps those pounds would be shed when he inevitably lost weight. As much as he enjoyed being fat, he needed to be just nimble enough to catch prey.

The collection of glowing bottles was equally wonderful. Marc's essence had filled not only every bottle in the crate, but half of another. The extras would make repaying the favor worth his while.

The maw yawned again, and forced himself up. According to Damir's message, another guild member would be sent the next day to pick up the elixirs. No questions would be asked, and it was to be treated as a normal purchase. The rest of the guild could never know Damir had sacrificed one of

their own.

People vanished without a trace all the time. Some fled to start their lives fresh. Others slid into a stomach. There'd no doubt be a half-dozen different rumors about what had happened to Marc, so long as anyone cared to create them. Some might come close to the truth, but the exact details would elude them.

The maw picked up one of the bottles and swirled the contents around, admiring the glow. He wondered if Damir would be able to find a new cleric before they ran out of elixirs. If not, then there was a chance he'd find another hapless guild member wandering into his shop with a scroll signing their doom. He guessed it'd be whoever showed up tomorrow. He looked forward to sizing up the next potential brew.