

Just Deserts

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(Inktober Prompt, Day 5: Chicken)

Content warning: Violence, death, gore, vomit, vore, crushing, cooking, digestion, and cruelty.

“Another new one? Really?”

Glancing back at the ghostly figure whose head seemingly rested upon her shoulder, Sasha pouted. “Look, you’re the one who suggested this,” she whined, tail curled in disappointment at having once more exasperated her companion. “If we’re gonna go on adventures, we kinda need a party. And if a party’s busy, we can’t go with them!”

“You realize the only reason they’re ‘busy’ is because they’re leaving on new missions before you can ask to come along, right?” the spirit muttered, closing his eyes and sighing. “We’ve not had a party bring us along a second time, much less add us to their roster yet.”

“Well it’s not my fault!” the tigress stammered, “They all were doing scary things or wanted me to be some sort of magic master!”

“Chasing off a goblin encampment isn’t supposed to be scary to an adventurer!” Lumnar barked in reply. “They’re literally one of the weakest and least coordinated things in the world! An angry dog poses more of a threat than them!”

“But...they had all sorts of bodies and blood everywhere!”

“From civilians! Not tribal princesses with a powerful dragon tied to their very essence!”

Sasha threw herself down upon a nearby bench, massaging her face. “I just wanted to learn and see new things. Enjoy life before I start having to do all that diplomacy stuff with the rich people.”

“And you would,” the ever-present spirit grumbled, sinking lower into her body in his equivalent of a brooding position, “if you weren’t such a damn coward without at least two people simultaneously holding your hands, not including me.”

The early morning hours of Oreath left the outer market streets comparatively barren when considering the lack of breathing room during the early afternoon. Sasha’s eyes wandered the cart- and foot-worn sandstone streets, tracing where the slabs had been placed and filled with sand and heat. The streets, as a result, glistened with the sun’s sharply angled rays, the first light of the day managing to slip through the people and animals running daily chores to highlight the veins of glass that were so iconic of the desert city’s riches. Within these walls, Sasha had found countless dreams. Fulfilling those dreams, though, seemed to require someone else other than the highly inexperienced tigress.

A hand ruffled through Sasha's brown hair, coaxing a surprised *mrowl* from the girl. "You must be Sasha," a voice observed. Looking up, the angled muzzle of an exotic-looking person met her eyes. Across it, a smile stretched, the narrow, amber eyes making the smile almost seem threatening despite the expression's softness. "My usual partner's out sick, so it'll just be us three. That alright with you?"

"Three?"

"Well, yeah. You got your buddy there sunk into your back, don'tcha?"

Lumnar sighed, pushing his form back out, settling his lizard-like form once more along the striped back of his bound summoner. "For once, you'll not be the only person with magic. Already an improvement," he commented to Sasha.

Sasha seemed preoccupied looking over the muscular yet shapely drake in leather armor, marveling at how the feathery scales that covered his body in different sizes shone white in the morning sun with almost as much richness as the glass in the street. "Oh! Um, if you're okay with that, I am too!" she eventually remarked, offering her own bright, toothy smile in greeting. "The receptionist said your name was....Gareth!"

"That's right," Gareth chuckled with a nod. "And even if this wasn't an easy mission I'd be alright with it. All I need is an extra pair of eyes and I'll be able to handle most everything. Now, let's going. We've got at least eight hours of desert travel ahead of us, and I think both of us don't want to be still on the road when the cold night air hits"

Sasha was used to the desert sun; her exposed midriff, arms, and legs revelled in the warm, relaxing sun, and—were she not told it was considered improper on previous occasions—she would've been tempted to unwrap the patterned red and tan fabrics that wrapped about her breasts and over her hips. The beads around her neck rattled as she stepped across the increasingly hot sand, bare feet only needing the slightest touch of magic to enjoy the feel of the grains compressing beneath her paw pads.

However, the tigress marveled at the drake. Without the shimmer of magic, he walked across the desert, guiding the fox merchant and his beast-drawn cart. A set of thick leather armor and a codpiece surely didn't help with things, and the metal of a large gunblade couldn't have been comfortable against his lower back either. Perhaps his brilliant white color offset much of the heat?

When the merchant fell asleep, Gareth waved Sasha up front. "Your eidolon's got rear watch, right?" he asked. Sasha nodded, Lumnar silently repositioning himself on her back as to face the opposite direction.

"The name is Lumnar. Don't call me 'her eidolon'."

"Right, of course. My apologies."

The drake's amber eyes aimed down, looking at the smaller, awkwardly-fidgeting tigress. "So, you're new to all this, right?" Sasha looked up, finding herself nodding once more. "Thought so. Most casters bring along a weapon even if they're not good with it. You travel lighter than anyone I've seen, though. Grew up around here?"

"Yeah, my tribe lives southwest of Oreath."

"That's...one of the T'myin, right?"

"Mhm," she confirmed. "You must travel a lot to know about us."

"Enough, I suppose" Gareth said with a shrug. "Still, I didn't know they had summoners."

"It's part of our more private traditions. Only certain kinds of people get bound with a spirit from the aether. I just kinda happened to be one."

A white finger pointed down to her midriff. "Thus the mark?"

Sasha looked down, her finger instinctively drawing the lines that now permanently marked her body just left of her bellybutton. "Yeah, if you look carefully, Lumnar's tail usually is attached there unless I'm giving him physical form," she explained, her green eyes following the faint wisp of magical smoke that eventually coalesced into the magical form of her companion upon her back.

"That makes sense. Guess it wouldn't do either of you much good if you summoned him still attached to your back."

"I'd do fine if I simply had my breath back," Lumnar retorted.

Chuckling, Gareth leaned back, hands up. "Feisty, ain't he?"

"I've heard opposites attract," Sasha hummed. "Maybe that's how it works with spirits too?"

ftwi-THUNK

Gareth span, instantly drawing a heavy two-handed blade from his back. "Fuck!" he cursed. By the time Sasha turned to see what had happened, the drake was already sprinting up a nearby dune. Droplets of red coated one of the boxes near the front of the cart, and a small pool of it forming below the merchant's head. Lodged within their former client's skull was the shaft of an arrow, streams of blood running down where the head of the arrow had drilled its way in. The barest glimpse of grey matter within the twitching man's skull was enough for Sasha's stomach to turn. As the sounds of metal against metal rang out over the side of the dune, she heaved her digested breakfast onto the ground.

"Sasha! To me!"

The cry was automatic from the drake, but the response from the tigress was not. Clambering over the newly moistened sand, she tried to will her legs to support her. "Sasha! Let me loose!" the spirit shouted into her ear. Sasha's head turned away, the girl wincing as she continued to climb wordlessly, coughing at the stinging sensation of stomach acid where it had hit the top of her throat.

The sight above the edge of the dune wasn't much easier to handle. A bisected lizardman trembled in death throes as his insides sloughed out. Another screamed, a hole seemingly blown outwards from his right side. Gareth spun between six or seven others, swinging the large blade with one hand even as the other flipped a capsule out from his studded tunic's pocket and into the firing chamber at the hilt. His color had changed from white to pink where the scales hadn't been colored by dark blood. The drake's body coursed with magic as he seemed to dance on air. It was only when he turned that Sasha noticed the drake was keeping his tail tensed and squeezed tight; a deep gash from a lizard's pike was preventing him from using the large, girthy limb as counterbalance, his own muscles dedicated to keeping the wound kinked.

"Sasha?!" he gasped, not having the time to cast his eyes about to find his party member. Another jab a pike forced Gareth to parry, batting away the weapon's reach while trying to move back and away from being encircled.

"SASHA!" Lumnar shouted, his form rippling and shifting, losing form from the sheer anger he felt. "DIRECT ME, YOU IDIOT!"

"Sasha?!"

"SASHA! **NOW!**"

"F-fuck! Sasha! Please, any summon will do!"

"**SASHA YOU CUNT!**"

Sasha's chest heaved, and she stood up. Then, she began to run down the dune. Down, faster and faster, and away.

As his head began to spin from blood loss, the last thing Gareth saw was a club swung from out of a blind spot.

A chill woke Sasha up, forcing the tigress to sit up. Her head slammed against wood with a *thunk*. "Ow!...ugh, ow." she spluttered. Her mouth felt dry, and her eyes gradually began to collect evening light to piece her surroundings together.

A small stream of bugs crawled nearby, nibbling off of pieces of dried-out food and mush that sat near where her head had been laying. Wincing, she brushed away at her lips, a few small insects cast to the ground. Above her was thick wooden paneling, and to her sides rested worn wooden wheels. "...the cart?" she groaned, eventually crawling out on all fours and hoisting herself upright.

The evening air was eerily quiet, devoid of even the sweeping winds that often coursed through the desert. The cart was empty, every last box having been either smashed open or

removed entirely. The waterskins were gone, too. The merchant's body was also missing, though some scuffing marked a trail where it and the boxes had likely been dragged away. Stumbling weakly up the dune to one side, she looked around. Below, on the other side, plenty of insects roamed, nibbling off the small bits of dried viscera that had been left behind and crawling over the tiny dots of red-stained grains of sand. Time had scattered and shifted the top layer, leaving less of a readable pattern and more a scattering of freckle-like dots upon the ground.

"Gareth..." she groaned, her chest aching as she spoke from both hunger and strain. A hand went to her midriff, feeling her bruised diaphragm. Her hand drifted, resting over the black tattoo upon her flesh. "...Lumnar?"

The dragon spirit was absent. That realization made Sasha shiver more than the cooling air did. Lumnar hated the aether. "...Lumnar? ...Lumnar!" she called, looking around despite knowing there was no way he could have simply walked off at her level of ability. The tigress closed her eyes, willing her striped tail to calm and sway in a gentle beat. She concentrated, picturing the form Lumnar so dearly desired, forcing her will through her mar-

"No."

Sasha's eyes snapped open. She glanced up to her orange shoulder, just over the sand-speckled band of red cloth. His voice was there, but the eidolon's image was not. "...Lumnar?"

"I refuse."

Sasha was used to Lumnar being aggravated, angry, or even acidic. Sarcasm was a common tone to hear, and even the occasional chuckle at her misfortune wasn't unexpected. But this voice was cold, firm, and confident. Was this...despising? "...Lumnar?"

"You do not deserve my counsel. You will die, and I will return to the aether until someone else binds me. There is no possible way you will allow me to find purchase in this material plane, and so you are worthless to me. Die in these desolate sands, dry up and die you pathetic worm."

Sasha winced, her eyes cast down towards the sand. Falling to her knees, she ran her hands through the broken-down granules, feeling how they shifted and spilled through her fingers. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"For what?" the voice seethed. "For being useless to me? Or useless to the merchant? Or useless to Gareth? For being a pathetic excuse for a chicken, much less a tiger? For letting vermin and pests crawl up from the sands and prove they're more deserving of food and life than you?"

"...I'm sorry for hurting you. And Gareth," she said, eyes too dry to manage tears.

"Sorry does nothing for either of us, chicken," he spat, voice fading into the air. "You'll inevitably die, and so will he. I'll have hundreds of more years in that state of non-existence. But

eventually I will be given form and rule. I know this because I am strong enough to see my will through. Just as I know you will never amount to anything.”

Sasha coughed as the silence began to grow, tail tucked low as she found herself so alienly alone. Lumnar said not a word else, nor did any of his strength flow through her any more. For the first time in ten years, the tigress had no one to talk to. All she could do is croak out hoarse sobs and cling to the loose ground.

The glow in the sky began to slowly fade, leaving the tigress to mourn in an increasing darkness. The only things she had left was the sound of her own heartbeat and staggered breaths, the pathetic sight of a broken-down cart, the soft shift of the terrain beneath her, and the last vestiges of light highlighting a small rim of solid rock across the desolate expanse where small trails in the sand led.

Already too familiar with three of those things, Sasha stood up. Slowly, she stumbled over the dots of blood-stained sand towards that rocky rim. Her eyes closed as she walked, mentally repeating Lumnar’s words in her mind. Slowly, they became a voice, her imagination clinging to it for stability. It continued to berate her, and Sasha embraced it. She let herself feel the fury and began to despise herself. The guilt built up, and her fangs ground against each other. Finally, she began to let go of the horror of it all. She let go until there was nothing left but her feet moving her steadily forward. Then, she began to fill that emptiness with something else, an emotion the desert tigress rarely allowed herself.

She began to get angry.

Gareth’s head spun. When he had woken up, his eyes could barely focus. The drake was unable to stand and barely able to move, even accounting for the ropes that tied him down to a slate of stone. His armor and weapon were both gone; he could tell from how the air brushed past his exposed groin and over his tender chest. The fact he was coherent at all was likely thanks to the lizards pouring water over him and down his throat.

The lizards had snickered to themselves about the good fortune they had. They had clearly accounted for adventurers, Gareth could tell; the arrow had been fired early, sure, but it had been fired at an arc only a scout looking straight up would have seen. What Gareth hadn’t known was that the lizards had expected more than one undermanned group; the merchant had skimped on his hiring this time, underestimating how long his expensive spice shipments had been watched and awaited.

It was due to this that the lizards figured it was only right to try out a little of the spices themselves. The merchant, plump from success, had been the first victim. Even as the lizards poked around the drake’s trembling body, Gareth watched as a slab of stone was slid out of a

large oven; the fox's body had been roasted through, the spices bespeckling his shaved and skinned body. "Hmmm...no breast meat," one had hissed as they passed hands over his flat chest. "Unusssual for a chick." "At leassst ssshe's got a good filet!" the reply came. Weak as he was, Gareth wasn't in a position to talk back. Not like it would've done him any good, either.

As the lizards enjoyed their work—despite what Gareth thought was a wholly inappropriate use of saffron—and feasted upon the merchant's meat, Gareth tested his magic. It was all he could do to harden a single soft, feathery scale on his forearm, the total sum of his energy funneled into that one parlor trick. It failed to even provide a sharp edge, but it was certainly a better idea than being shoved into an oven by lizards that didn't even know what they were doing; so he gradually shifted one rope down his arm, wiggling until the hardened scale was in contact with the hemp, and began to grind the scale against his bindings.

Gareth wondered if the tigress had been taken out by a second arrow. When he charged, the lizardmen had barely gotten arrows up to their bows, and the one who had already fired was further up the dune's other side than his companions. He'd paid with his life instantly, and the previous raiding party leader soon found himself bleeding out from a luckily timed shot of air magic directly into his pectorals. But Sasha had never shown up, and the lizards had been far too happy with the results. Nowhere in the cave did he see a disabled tigress or the form of a roasted feline. Potent red saffron certainly wouldn't look good on such a pretty orange, white, and black-striped feline, anyhow.

Sighing, he rested his head against the stone slab he'd been tied down upon. The cool stone didn't feel unpleasant against his sore neck, and the drake even thought it might feel nicer when warmed by a flame beneath. The warmth wouldn't be stopping at a comfortable point, though, so there was no relief when one lizard came over to begin and hoist the slab up, another one or two out of sight obviously helping with the weight. "Time to cook, girlie!" it sung with a grin, moving him towards the open mouth of the blazing stone chamber.

Two screams issued forth, followed by a third. Growling and yipping filled the air, squishy noises of fresh flesh being rended from the bone echoing in the cave's chamber. One lizard screamed and gurgled the stone slab dropping to the floor, the end with Gareth's head propped up at the lip of the hot oven; Gareth, weak and bound as he was, took the time to find humor in the fact that he was getting that warm neck press after all.

Three hyenas tore through the cave, chasing down lizards into further hollows of the shelter. From around the edge of the kitchen chamber's entrance, Gareth could see a pair of green eyes shining from firelight and a swishing tail deeper in the shadows. A rope pulled tight against his throat, and he gagged at the sudden pressure. His pulse began to drum in his ears, the drake's body spasming as it began to asphyxiate.

"Lumnar, *please!*"

The drake would have gasped if he weren't doing so already; manifesting before his eyes came the figure of a large reptile, spikes running down his spine and smaller ridges decorating his red flesh. Its eyes were prismatic, fired with a sudden surge of energy. It grew out of the air and snapped its forelimbs and neck forward. The rope remained taut against Gareth's neck for only a second more before it was released. Then, a horrified silence allowed the noise of the fire behind and greedy gulps in front to command attention. Descending the dragon-esque creature's neck was the squirming features of the same lizard that had promised Gareth his end. Eventually, it was compacted within the creature's belly, a deep churning noise beginning to eat away at the squirming bulge before the reptile creature's belly began to squeeze tight. One squeeze, and the lizard within gave a muffled scream. Two squeezes, and the flesh within buckled with a *squelch*, leaving a detailed skeletal figure twitching and still trying to breathe. Three squeezes, and the detailed ribs went **CRUNCH**, leaving a formless, lumpy shape of dead meat within.

The fearsome creature hoisted itself atop Gareth and the slate. Its shifting rainbow eyes stared down into the tired yellow of the drake. "...I like you," it rumbled, its voice coming from deep within despite no movement to the creature's mouth. "...consider keeping the stupid cat on board. You'd do her a lot of good." Then, it slashed through the ropes and hopped off, leaving Gareth to slide down and slump against the cold ground.

After a few seconds, the physical form of the monstrous creature began to dissolve. "Someday I'm gonna get to actually keep some of this," it chuckled before looking over towards one of the small nooks of the cavern. A hyena stood guard, growling at two cowering lizards. "Hey. This'll be you if you even think about attacking the tiger or drake again." With those words, its physical form vanished entirely.

SPLORCH!

With a sickening, soggy noise, a mass of shattered bones, melted flesh, and acid-burned organs fell to the ground below where the creature's gut used to be. Many features were still distinguishable, down to the pulverized eyes leaking pulp and still screaming jaws containing a loose, half-melted tongue long ripped from its base. In all Gareth's time, he'd never seen a more twisted sight; all for the better, though, as it caused one of the two cowering lizards to faint, the other doing his best to not chuck the fresh merchant meat he'd just eaten.

"C-can you walk?"

Gareth looked up, seeing the tigress almost exactly as he'd seen her hours before minus some cracking along her dry lips and a terrified, apologetic look in her big eyes. "...I could, but you wouldn't happen to have a little healing in the-"

"Right! Right." Sasha bent down, a surge of green light flowing down her arms like a pair of hazy gloves, the cloudy energy pressing out from her palms as they rested upon the drake's chest. He began to breathe deeply, encouraging his body to accept the temporary surge of adrenaline and productivity, cleaning the blood out from his bruised muscles and giving him an extra spark of life. "There," she said with a sigh, "that should do well enough for the night."

Brushing himself off, Gareth stood; he waved his broad tail behind him as he regained balance, letting his mind grow accustomed to the new orientation. "Thanks, but I don't think we should move anyway," he mumbled. "Need to try and recover what we can from these guys, stay warm until tomorrow. We'll tie them up and cut them free once we leave in the morning. Did you see my gear in another room?"

"Yes, next to the merchant's clothes."

"Good," he sighed. "Because I at least want my codpiece back. Seriously, you'd think even raiders would have the decency of picking up on gender cues...."

When they made it to Limirian Outpost, the reception was notably mixed. The merchant's contact was grateful for the return of most of the merchandise, but she refused to pay due to the missing spices, day late delivery, and the death of her colleague. "You're lucky I won't make the guild pay for this," the hawk had told them. As much as Sasha felt cheated, Gareth seemed unmoved. "It's the best we could've expected. Sometimes you just fail a quest. That's how things go."

Gareth paid for a single room and two basins of soapy water at the inn, hoping the both of them could rest more, take a bath, and get some palatable food in them before making a return trip. Sasha was initially worried at sharing a room, but Gareth knew better. "You don't have any special attachment to clothes, and you've already seen me naked. Anyway, I'm not wealthy or prudish enough to spring for two rooms just to ignore rumors."

So there Sasha was, body submerged in her own basin while the drake relaxed in his own thankfully larger tub. Lumnar, still frustrated, brooded in the aether, but at least Sasha knew that he thought she'd made progress. Fur matted-down with cool water, she flipped herself to lie belly down, hands and nose peeking out over the edge towards the resting drake.

"...Gareth?"

"Hm?" He opened one eye in response.

Sasha breathed in. "I'm...sorry for running away and putting you in danger. I was being a big chicken and I even failed at keeping watch. If I'd have been more alert, maybe I-"

"Woah, stop right there," Gareth said with a wave, shifting positions to mirror Sasha's and leaning his head atop his folded arms. "First, that was an excellent shot that lizard made. An enemy's success isn't always your failure. And almost every adventurer I know wouldn't have been looking up, much less consistently so. The fox's death ain't on your head. If anything, as the experienced one, it's on mine."

"Secondly," the drake continued, "I didn't know you ran away. Suspected it, but didn't know it. But you coming back to their hideout to fight takes a lot more guts than fighting them on neutral ground. So thank you for overcoming that."

Sasha swallowed nervously, her own eyes welling up. "But...what if I run away again?"

“Then you turn around and fight again. If you’re the sort that worries about what you’re doing to others, forget it. They got their just deserts for planning to kill and rob innocent people. And the deserts around here do tend to be just.”

Sasha paused, then grimaced. “But...Lumnar didn’t even get to keep his!”

Gareth blinked in confusion at the tigress’ comment. “...what?”

“His dessert!”

Gareth paused, raising a finger. Then, he reconsidered, beginning to laugh.

“What? What?!” Sasha asked with a pouting expression, tail sunk down into the water.

“Oh geez, you are a card,” Gareth chortled. “I can’t wait to introduce you to Emaire. She could use a good laugh every once in a while.”

“Emaire?”

“My partner. You’re going to have to meet her sometime if you want to go on quests with us, right?”

Sasha’s jaw dropped. “You’d...want me to come along again?”

Gareth reached out, taking one of the tigress’ paws. “Of course. You’ve got to get stronger so Lumnar can get to keep those desserts, right?” he said with a grin.

Sasha gave her trademarked bright, toothy smile back. “Right! Thank you. I won’t run away any more...for both of your sakes,” she promised. And, from within Sasha’s mark, Lumnar smiled too. Finally, it was nice to have a summoner working for him.