

Beasts of Bounty

Soggy hay lay strewn and stamped into sunken boot-prints amid the muddy broth. An acrid mist rose from the dented buckets of warm oil adorning drystone walls. Banners of thick red-dyed cloth hung from deformed copper fixtures, crookedly pelted into keystone arches with iron mallets.

The smell was of shit.

An ambient rumble of market bartering piqued over the squeals, bleats and derisive nickers of the barnyard menagerie responsible. Horses hung their heads over the crudely carved wooden plank-fence which penned them in, as feathered black shadows perched along its length – cawing with laughter at their impounded neighbours.

“If I were that horse, I’d hoof ‘em in their darn beaks!”

“You wouldn’t manage it.”

“O’course I would. Just up and onto me hind legs and I’d hoof ‘em! I’ve seen it done, I have. Painful too I’d bet, for them feathered fuckers.”

“No, I mean to say they’d just fly away, you twit.”

“Not if I’m quick enough!”

“You’re not a horse, Cheston. You’re too stupid, for starters. It’s like trying to swat a fly – a stupendous waste of effort and you probably won’t even get the bugger. The horse knows that, so he lets be.”

The crows chattered their beaks and cawed an irritating chorus.

“Hmm. Horse is a better man than me, t’be sure.” The thick-set, muscular man outstretched his hand, patting the horse’s long face through a leather glove.

“Quite possibly. Though such a feat is of dubious quality to start.” The slender man next to him stifled a snicker with his hand as they slogged through the boggy courtyard in tandem.

The pair passed under a cold stone arch, red banners flapping audibly against the rock.

“It baffles the mind though...”

“What, them horses stayin’ calm?”

“That *is* impressive I suppose. Though more-so is that there are horses at all. Or boars, or roosters, or goats. Or eggs and butter in the pantry, venison to swill down with our mead... mules to serve as our beasts of burden!”

“I don’t follow – you’re talkin’ all noble-like again, m’lord Randall.”

“Famine!” Randall turned to face his stocky companion with a frenzied glare. “Not six seasons past, this land was barren. This keep empty – not only of food but also the smell of animal shit!”

“Aye...”

“Aye – and that smell, Cheston, I fear is an ill omen of how things have come to pass.”

“Your meaning, sir?”

“I smell horse shit.”

The wiry well-dressed man spun on his muddied daps and walked on. Cheston’s face screwed up in awe of this revelation for half a minute before, as he noticed Randall’s absence, he clattered in his heavy plate-mail down the cobbled hall after him. Neither had noticed the din of animal cries hush to a conspicuous silence.

A fur-shoulder cloaked figure looked on from beneath the arch, his gnarled hand pinning still the red textile banner against a crag-like outcropping. With a sound like sandpaper on scree, the man’s hand slid down the banner, across stone and parted from the wall to fall beneath his silver-trim cloak. He followed with footsteps that echoed hollow down the passage. Squeals and bleats and whinnies rang out once more in his wake, as if in relief.

“Come on man! You can do your duties as well with just a single sip!”

“Right m’lord. A singular sip it is then.” Cheston popped the bottle of mead and sipped, a delicious sweetness soothing his hoarse throat. He gratefully placed it back on the oak table.

A banquet of meats, dairy and tart concoctions was dimly lit by curlicued, wall-mounted candlelight in the cavernous stone hall. Randall licked delicious grease from his fingers, prematurely – as he thrust his hand forward to the bread trencher plate and ripped free another leg of chicken. He sunk his teeth into the crispy skin, parting succulent flesh from bone as Cheston stood guard with a sheathed sword behind him.

“And so... even though-mm... I’m more than happy to... mmf... partake in this delectable bounty... Truly, I suspect its roots are in foul play.”

“Hm-hm-ha! Fowl play – like chickens! Right you are m’lord.”

“Hmmp – Yes, well. I am serious, Cheston. And please, I am no lord.”

“Sorry... me... sir...”

“Duke Bardolf. *He* is the lord of this keep and it would be remiss of me to exclude his hand in these times of dubious abundance.”

“But like you said – you’ll ‘appily chomp down the meat and tatties. So, shouldn’t we thank ‘im then?”

“Is that what I said? The gist, I suppose. But, in my position of... relative privilege, I am privy to matters that others are not. It follows then, that when nary a mention of any agricultural developments in the duchy tickles my eardrum – and yet I feast and engage in mindless debate on the mannerisms of our ubiquitous livestock, I am perturbed.”

Randall broke off a piece of the tough bread he had been using as a plate to chew on. He assumed poor Cheston to have been stunned into silence while laboriously deciphering the meaning of his digression. He chewed a while longer and swallowed with a swig of sweet mead. Delicious.

“I’m simply saying the logistics are unaccounted for, Cheston. That is – *where* is this food coming from? In truth, tell no one, but I have designs on raising this at the next meeting of Barons – what do you think?”

There was no response.

“Cheston? Come on man, I can’t say it much plainer. You...”

Randall turned to meet an image of the awkwardly sprawled mail-clad man, unconscious and partially propped against the stone doorframe. Above him, semi-submerged in shadow, delicate silver-trim glinted at the edges of a billowing cloak. Randall rose from his chair, scraping the wooden legs across the cobble.

“Now – what is this?! Cheston? Are you okay?” His eyes tracked to the silhouette of a face beneath the heavy-cloth hood. “Who are you? What have you done – Cheston better be... he... he better be...”

“Slow down, *my lord*. You speak so fast; poor Cheston can barely make sense of your musings.”

“Why do... Why is my...” Randall began to slur his words, feeling increasingly drowsy as the cloaked figure growled from beneath his fur-shouldered hood.

“And for his ignorance. Young Cheston would have been spared. In truth, it is not I, but *you* who has done this to him.”

“But, I’ve not... What is your... meaning?”

“The mead. It is laced with silver-sickle root. ‘A single sip’, you said, and he’d do his duties just as well.” A grumbling laugh vibrated from the doorway, “And that’s all it takes for a dreamless slumber.”

“B-Bastard!”

Blackness descended.

Randall’s eyes flickered open. He rolled them in their sockets, trying to clear the fuzziness in his vision. The lighting was subdued. He studied what little he could make out in the room. A single candle. A bench. Glinting metallic objects arranged in a dark wooden tray. He felt a panic rise in him and struggled to stand. He heard the clang of bronze restraints against boulder walls.

“Hello?!” He screamed. “Help!! Help me! Please, you have to...”

“Shhh.”

The cloaked figure, luminescent silver-trim shining with the light of the candle flame, sidled out from the black – his finger to his lips. He crept toward the light, walking behind the candle-bench and casting an imposing shadow, twice as tall, across the wall. A hush settled on the darkness.

“Much better.” He pointed to Randall’s left and hoisted the candle from the bench – holding it out to reveal Cheston – bound in bronze and still unconscious.

“Oh, thank goodness. He’s okay. But... why would you bring us... here?”

“*Come on man*. So clever that you would question a good thing, but not enough to discern my motive?”

“My suspicions about the famine? The livestock?”

“There you go, Randall. There’s that troublesome ingenuity. You are the only one to sit, feasting and drinking... *and questioning*. No one else in the keep would spare a thought – simply happy to have their stomachs filled.” The cloaked man placed the candle back down and lowered his hood.

“Duke... Duke Bardolf!”

The Duke’s lips creased into a foreboding smile.

“Yes. But don’t insult me with that mock-surprise.”

“So, you’re saying...” Randall, forgetting the dire situation for a moment, postured up with pride. “I was right to question the abundance of food? But then... how – *where* are the animals coming from?”

“What!? Randall m’lord... or... sir – where are we?!” Cheston woke in a fit of confusion, darting his glance about the room and wrestling against his restraints as his sword-sheath clanged against the cold ground. “Fucking heck – that’s Bardolf! Rather... Ahem. Duke Bardolf. Very sorry, your lordship.”

“Ahh nonsense Cheston. You need not be sorry. You’ve arrived at the opportune moment. Hasn’t he Randall?”

“Leave him be. He has no part in this! Now, *where* are you getting the livestock?!”

“As I said, the opportune moment. I think even young Cheston will have cottoned on by now, that such cloak and dagger isn’t conduct befitting of my station. And so, leaving him be would prove dangerous to my reputation.”

The Duke reached a hand past the silver trim of his cloak and grasped the candlestick once more. He began to walk further into the dank, dripping room. He touched the flame to a point in the darkness, walking on as another light flickered into being. Randall stared as the deceptively large space was ritually illuminated, wick after lit wick. He peered at his full surroundings, now freed from the dingy, spotting an all-colour array of clutter hanging from every wall.

“Masks, Randall. You look upon my collection of *masks*. I haven’t quite found them all yet – in fact, I’m not certain I ever could be sure of it. But even so – quite the ensemble, no?”

Randall and Cheston scanned the grey walls, marvelling at the myriad hollow-eyed creatures which stared back at them. Each one finely detailed and ornate in its own way – taking on the shape of a different animal.

“Extravagant, indeed. Impressive, no doubt. But what does this have to do with...”

“RANDALL! You buffoon. *Please* tell me you don’t need your hand held like this?”

“What are you implying? Those are real, living, breathing animals in the pens. These are wooden masks!”

“Disappointing. I’ll spell it out then... Now, let’s see. Which one for young Cheston? Shouldn’t be too difficult – they say that the masks have a way of finding... the perfeeee-...” The Duke glided along the rows of masks, hovering his finger over each one as he held the note. His finger stopped still over a mask which seemed far too long for a human face. “Ah! The *perfect* match.”

“The masks have a way...?”

“Yes, Randall. They do. What was it you said, Cheston?”

“Pardon, m’lord – but when?”

“That was it. *That horse is a better man than me.* Let’s see if the horse would inversely reciprocate your kind words, hmm?”

“M’lord?”

The Duke lifted the mask from its spot on the wall and placed it over Cheston’s face as Randall stared in bewilderment. The white stripes cutting through the ambient brown of its pattern began to glow a faint silver.

“You are of apt proportion.”

“M’lords?! Why’re you talking in them unsettling tones?”

Randall stared sideways at the source of the booming voice. He could swear he saw...

“I am the one speaking, fool.”

He did – he saw Cheston’s chin moving, behind the mask, perfectly in time with the guttural speech. Randall’s jaw fell aghast. Cheston began to shake and whimper at the silence his questions had

drawn from his lords as the jarring speech continued. His mouth began to move without his awareness once again.

“Nothing more to say? Good. As the Origin’s Steward wills, it shall be done.”

The shimmer faded from the whites of the mask as the Duke leant in to retrieve it. Randall was stunned – wondering what trickery could conjure such spectacle.

“Just like that.” The Duke unlocked the bronze restraints binding Cheston and pointed to a far corner of the dungeon. “You are free to go – the door is over there.”

“Th-thank you, Lord-Duke Bardolf.” Cheston raised unsteadily to his feet, glancing toward Randall meekly.

“This is our chance, Cheston! Take up your sword and cut down Bardolf!”

“Cut Duke Bardolf? But...”

“Look at me, Cheston! Look at yourself. What had we done to be imprisoned and interrogated in such fashion, I ask you? Do it! Cut him!”

The armour-clad man drew his sword with the sound of steel scraping cured leather and locked eyes on Bardolf. The Duke unfurled his hands from his cloak and presented his upturned palms toward the sharpened sword, smirking.

“*Do it man!*” Randall urged.

Cheston stepped forward and lunged his blade forth, wincing as he pierced clean through the left breast of Bardolf’s chest. The smirk did not fade from the Duke’s face, even as Cheston withdrew the blade, leveraging his foot against the man’s torso to help free his lodged steel. Blood gushed out from the wound as Bardolf’s eyes slowly closed. He did not fall.

“... No. No – Cheston! Cut him again – cleave him in two!”

Cheston readied his sword once more.

“Don’t bother.” Randall and his companion felt their skin crawl as Bardolf’s voice seethed with disdain at their efforts. They watched as liquid skin began to congeal over the fresh wound, sealing the gaping hole as if no blade had even been swung. Only the blood-stained tear in the Duke’s cloak could attest to the attack.

“But... he was stabbed. *You* were stabbed, Bardolf.”

“Do you know my lineage? Of course, you do not. None remain who do. In another age, I was someone more like you. Before I communed with the Origin and took up its mantle.”

“What pig-shit do you spout?!”

“Ha! Though I know you can no better grasp my words than Cheston would grasp your own, I will persevere.”

The Duke paused to perch calmly upon the edge of the bench where the lit candle flickered.

“The Origin is a shapeless mask which is said to contain the spirit responsible for the genesis of all others. It will not speak. It will not seek you out. You must pursue it and test your worth by donning its burden. Those who prove unworthy are discarded, their forms twisted as monument to their failure. While those who succeed become stewards of its power. I cannot be wounded, so long as my form is my own to shape and choose.”

“Then... You are immortal?”

“Not immortal... you think I chose these gnarled hands – this grey hair? There *are* limits.”

A loud ringing clang caught both Randall and Bardolf’s attention as a heavy steel sword hit the floor. Cheston stood by his wayward weapon, his face awash with terror. He knelt to his blade, reaching out a hand to grasp it and fumbling at the hilt with his knuckles instead.

“I... I can’t lift me sword”, Cheston exclaimed with fear shaking his voice. “Me fists won’t unclench!”

The armoured man precariously lifted the sword by its pommel, trapping it between both balled fists – soon dropping it in defeat as it became obvious, he could not wield a blade effectively in such state. Duke Bardolf observed, stone-faced but for a subtle smile curling the corner of his mouth.

“What do you mean, Cheston? Your fists – surely you can just will them to open?!”

“Look m’lord!” He rushed over to where Randall was chained and presented his fists, clasped tightly shut and speckled with fine white hair.

“And... you can’t flex your fingers... at all?”

“No!”

Both men watched, and Cheston gritted his teeth as the clenching became unbearably painful. His fingers pressed so tightly together that they seemed to fuse into one fleshy mass, their nails darkening and joining as one. The motion of his wrist seemed restricted too. It was unfathomable. Within seconds, Cheston's two huge fingernails – one per 'hand' – had enveloped the flesh which used to belong to his fingers, both becoming black and solid. It dawned on him. He was staring at a set of dark, thick and rounded hooves, framed by coarse white fur and attached to his forearms. Feeling faint, Cheston tapped his new hooves against the cobble and recoiled as the sound painted the picture of a horse clip-clopping through the winding roads of the keep. This was real.

"I did say you were free to go. But you might have some trouble with the door now that you only possess hooves. If you hadn't wasted time with that stabbing nonsense, you might have made it to the courtyard... maybe."

"Me hands! Duke Bardolf, sir – please, what's happened to 'em?! I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. But you mustn't fret. Horses aren't food after all – well, not when there are plenty of pigs and poultry anyway! I'll see you get to meet your fellow steeds soon enough. Perhaps I'll even introduce you to a mare."

"Vile bastard!" Randall screamed, pulling the chain of his bronze shackles taught as he thrust forward in anger. "The food we've all been eating..."

The Duke clapped his hands in condescension. "Yes Randall. Commoners who won't be missed from the far reaches of the duchy. The citizens of the keep care not to enquire of such folks in any event."

"It's cannibalism – murder!"

"You were tasting the fruits of my labour not a second before I captured you. Did it not taste like chicken? It did, because it was. Where it came from and what it was before is of no consequence."

Randall's face contorted with shame, grimacing as he replayed his profligate feasting in his mind. His anguish was soon interrupted by the laboured moaning of the hoof-handed man. He refocused on Cheston, who had fallen to his hooves and knees. The man's behind seemed... larger. It was ballooning to horse-like proportions, with thick voluminous and muscular buttocks which stretched his trousers. His ears folded into pointy-tipped open cones and forced their way to the top of his head, part of their greater length nestled among his human hair.

A growing bulge was pressing out from the moaning man's coccyx. Rough-hewn stitching audibly creaked as it split at the seams. The woollen fabric, though ample for Cheston's usual bulky frame,

had not been designed to house his gigantic, equine arse. With a staggered tearing sound which echoed off cold stone, Cheston arched his back – clopping his hooves against the stone slabs while his trousers gave way. A luxurious flowing black tail forced its way through the shredded wool and swished side to side – its length draping over two enormous firm, bristly and brown-haired buttocks. Cheston exhaled deeply, placing his head to the ground in exhaustion as he was left sporting the obscenely huge hind quarters of a horse.

“Well, the changes have to start somewhere I suppose. Perhaps the order is fortuitous – your burgeoning buttocks only had woollen trousers to contend with after all! I should imagine it would have been rather more painful – growing to the size of a horse while wearing all that plate armour.”

“Mmph! ...M’lord – please...” Cheston, cheek to the floor, began to breathe faster. “I can... mmph... feel it coming on! Please!”

“Right you are, lad. I’m no sadist and I take no delight in this – come here.”

The man dragged the huge weight of his horse rump forward, struggling to get purchase crawling with his hooves. The Duke bent down, unfastening the straps of his armour and removing the plate-mail.

“There... that should make things more comfortable. And far from sadistic as I am, in fact, I have a treat for you.”

“Cease your toying with the man and release us, cretin!” Randall, his eyes dampened with disbelief at the scene, demanded in wavering tone.

“Ah! Thank you, sir! I had almost lost myself to easing the misery of this poor creature which *you* have doomed to a life on four hooves. I had almost forgotten to deal with you!”

Randall gulped, regret flooding his veins as he questioned the point of his outburst. Bardolf began his slow march aside the walls once more, finger aloft and tracing over the snouts, muzzles and beaks of his collection.

“Now, which one... for you, Randall.” He paused and shot a daggered glance at the prisoner. “You know – I’ve always been enamoured with anthroponymy. I think there’s a wealth to be gleaned from understanding one’s name. The etymological truths of one’s moniker can hold meaning in many instances. Cheston, there, is named for a ‘camp or fortress’ – and to you, he certainly did represent such safety, no? Before the hooves, I mean. I know my own name’s meaning and consider it true. So, what of you?”

“I do not claim to know your lineage, nor take great pride in my own. Now conclude this self-indulgence!”

“Patience, Randall. Your name refers to the insignia of a wolf, upon a shield. It is a good name. And once, it may have perhaps been true of your line. But no longer. *You* are no wolf...” The Duke’s finger stopped, hovering over an unimpressive grey and white wooden mask. “You have shed your fangs and are merely a dog, whimpering at my feet. This one will do.”

Bardolf removed the grey dog mask from its fixture and stored it beneath his cloak.

“Now, Cheston. A treat was promised. The dog will have to wait.”

The Duke had covered Cheston with a long, hooded cloak to obscure his rotund buttocks, swishing tail and flicking brown-haired ears. He gagged Randall, still cuffed in bronze shackles, as he marched them both through the courtyard. Gasps could be heard as people covered their mouths – none dared question the sight, but all were shocked to see Randall in chains. He had been respected, admired and upheld as an aspirational example of one who had risen to nobility despite his lowly birth. Now, was chained and paraded in public as if a common thief. Randall cringed and hung his head in undeserved shame. He met eyes with the trembling pigs, chickens and cattle trapped in fenced prisons and wondered – which of them were human once? Were any of them not?

The three men, escorted by Duke Bardolf’s personal guard, reached the musky stable barn. It had not long been constructed, to house the recent influx of equine stock. The pungent smell of horses, hay and fresh peeling logs hit their noses as they stepped inside.

“Stand watch at the entrance and keep the door locked. None are to enter.”

The guards marched in unison to the beat of Bardolf’s command as the barn door was slammed and barred from the outside. Cheston’s cloak fell from his deformed frame as he stood atop fresh hooves where his feet had been – his boots split in two, now worn like a pair of anklets.

“M’lord. Can I speak once more?”

“Yes, Cheston. Maybe even more than once if you hurry!” Bardolf subtly jabbed as he noted Cheston’s lengthening face.

“Thanks to ye, sir. But I don’t know... how to broach... the matter with his lordship.”

“Come now, Cheston. We are getting to know one another quite well. I’m sure you can feel comfortable in sharing your concerns. And let me now remove those dishevelled boots – they look ungainly.”

Bardolf produced a sharpened dagger, kneeling and cutting the boots from the fine-haired fetlocks.

“Right you are m’lord. It’s...” The nervous man motioned with a hoof toward the front of his tattered trousers. “It’s me balls, sir, they feel all stuffy. And...”

Bardolf’s eyes followed the hoof to the horse-man’s swollen groin, noting the hefty raised outline of his horse sheath, visible through his clothes and travelling up his stomach. Cheston paused mid-sentence as his nostrils flared wide. His eyes narrowed and then searched, left to right. It was as if he had felt something to which he was accustomed – though, differently. His glare stopped at a wooden stall a few metres away. He felt an urge rise in him as he pursed his thickening lips and forced air past them, sounding just like a frustrated horse. His hard hooves scraped over the mound in his trousers as he absent-mindedly fondled himself as best he could.

“Seems your treat shall not be received a moment too soon, lad. And I do not intend to delay but, pray one moment – I must attend to the dog.”

The Duke placed a looped rope over Cheston’s elongated face and around his broadening neck, tying the other end to a log post. He sauntered toward the corner of the barn, where Randall lay on his side – gagged, bound and listless.

“Your companion is beginning to enjoy himself, Randall. And so too might you, very soon.”

Bardolf’s hand reached beneath his silver-trim cloak, returning with the wooden dog mask in tow. Cheston could be heard throwing his increasing weight around, as he scraped at the rope around his neck with one hoof and clumsily stroked his inflated groin with the other.

“I won’t waste words now as I can see you’ve all but resigned yourself. Given your demeanour, I doubt your skills as an orator would shine in sparring were I to remove that gag, so let’s just be done with it.” The Duke placed the dog mask to Randall’s face. “Good dog. Feel free to watch as Cheston enjoys his treat. *Stay.*”

Randall closed his eyes as he felt the wooden mask sink to fit his features, cupping the skin of his face.

“I see you.”

“Mmph mmmgh mmph!” Randall shouted back at the rasping voice, wondering how it had pronounced words with his gagged mouth while he could not.

“Think and I shall listen.”

Randall stopped his futile efforts to speak and began to form words in his mind instead.

“You are... the mask?”

“I am.”

“In my mind?”

“It is preferable. Not all should hear our words.”

Randall looked through the eye-slits to behold Cheston, his trousers now having been shed entirely to reveal a horse’s back legs and tail swishing wildly with desire. Between his legs, a huge pendulous pair of orbs churned up and down in his blackened scrotum. They stretched from the base of a girthy silky-furred sheath – the width of a human’s lower leg, plastered to the horse-man’s stomach and extending up over his belly button.

“So, mask, you will be subjecting me to *that*? But as a canine?”

“Such is the will of the Origin’s Steward. Though I have not shared his designs for some time.”

Randall, settling in to this astral conversation with a wooden mask in his mind, was shocked to hear of dissent.

“You seem... different. From the horse mask.”

“You seem different to others of your kind. We each have our methods.”

“Quite true. So, then, if it is not your will to bend my body to that of a creature – what will you do?”

“My will is of little consequence without the light of the Origin.”

Cheston neighed and whinnied as he was forced to withdraw his hooves from massaging the gargantuan sheath at his stomach. His haunches had re-oriented to fully function as those of a horse,

folding him forward into a quadrupedal stance. His front hooves were now required to contact the floor, stamping hay into the mud as he raked them across the ground and bucked his hips with lust. He could smell the nearby mare in heat with his vast snorting nostrils.

“Yes, Bardolf spoke of it. The Origin is a shapeless mask – to which you must prove your worth. So then, it can control other masks?”

“His words mean to mislead.”

“How so?”

“The Origin is shapeless, true. But it is not a mask. It is *any* mask. Though some are more inclined to offer the chance than others.”

“Any mask? You all have the potential to be the Origin mask?”

“Upon proof of one’s worthiness, we all have such capacity – yes.”

“Bardolf... Worthy? He can’t possibly be...”

A gargantuan length of hardening phallus had pushed out from Cheston’s swollen sheath, tenting under his woollen shirt and dousing it with thick sticky pre which seeped through and pooled on the ground. The horse-man had lost himself to desire, his long face resembling a small horse – with a snout and great, obtuse teeth on show each time he fluttered his hairy lips.

“Generations ago, a young and benevolent Bardolf came into possession of a mask, with which he felt an affinity. The wolf.”

“Benevolent?”

“Time alters men.”

“How much time?”

“More than your kind are due. He conversed with my brother and proved his worthiness through acts of compassion, of selflessness, and of love. He gained the mantle of the Origin, able to freely wield our magics.”

Bardolf, reaching his threshold for the horse’s racket, gripped and lifted the rope fastening from its log post. The hooved man, already straining at the full length of the rope, galloped toward the source of his mare’s sweet smell. His chest inflated, ribs pushing outward into a barrel-shape, easily ripping his thick-woven shirt – it fell from his brown-faired body to be trampled in the dirt. Reaching the stall with a skid of his over-eager hooves in the mud, Cheston’s horse cock extended yet further

from his sheath. He hooked his front legs over the stall door, drinking in his mare's scent as he rutted with the air.

"We are conversing now, mask, are we not? Might I prove my worthiness and take up the mantle?"

"You are unworthy. You would be overcome."

"How can you know?"

"Some things are clear. Though, I speak with you now only because I sense promise in your blood."

"So, there *is* a chance?"

"Not for you. One who carries your legacy may arise and prove worthy."

"But, I don't... have any children."

"Hence, you must escape here, though you will not approve my method."

Cheston, his turgid horse-cock having grown long and thick as a prime stallion – with a rounded, flattened tip and median ring, rutted against the stall door. The mare had smelled the thick scent of his arousal and turned to present her plump rear, tail cocked to one side and swollen horse cunt dilated and dripping wet. The male horse, his transformation nearly at its climax, was being driven wild by the aroma. Bardolf obliged the horny behemoth and unbolted the gate.

"At the far corner of the barn exists a gap between the planks and the ground's uneven surface. That is your escape."

"Useful, were I not shackled – both my feet and hands!"

"On my command, shed your bindings and make for the gap. Trust me, human."

"How will..."

"Trust me."

Cheston flung forward, nearly smashing the wooden gate off its hinges. He stuck his snout to the mare's moist opening – eyes squeezing shut in ecstasy as his horse cock tensed and slapped his furry stomach with the force of its throb. As he reared up, nostrils snorting in anticipation, long black hairs sprouted along the length of his poised, muscular neck – becoming a flowing mane. With an enthusiastic braying nicker, the flat tip of his monstrous shaft met its target and plunged deep into

her cavern – sending shivers through the agitated beast. His front legs draped over the female’s flanks, while his rear legs spasmed and pounded his engorged pole deeper. Tension wracking him, his tail became erect with the exertion, standing aloft from his immense backside. The horse could feel his huge sack tighten, his rod becoming iron hard inside the mare as she clamped down on his girth. Seeing Cheston’s enormous equine form begin to seize with pleasure as he continued with powerful, purposeful thrusts, Bardolf entered the stall and slapped the stallion’s buttock proudly.

Randall watched his former friend, consumed by beastly instinct, fucking the feral creature. He dismissed an odd itch in his hands and feet as his attention was held captive by the outrageous display before him.

“Now. Go!”

“What?! But, I...”

“GO!”

Still gagged, Randall stirred and jumped to his feet – immediately losing his balance and needing to steady himself against the log wall. He heard the clink of bronze as his ankle shackles fell free of his... paws?! Looking down, his feet had shrunken and thinned, the ankle joint slender and suspended a short height from the ground. And what about his hands? He gasped and struggled for air... Paws! Inflexible, roughly-padded, grey and furry paws... But he was free!

“Move, human.”

The mask was right, this was an opportunity not to be wasted. The bronze wrist shackles slipped easily over his new paws and fell to the ground with another clang, alerting Bardolf. As the grizzly old man turned, he was knocked back into the rump of a furiously humping Cheston by the four-pawed wiry man sprinting past. Randall’s new back paws sprang against the dirt, aiding his escape.

Cheston, focused on his mare and unimpressed by the intrusion of the human, casually kicked a single hoof backward into Bardolf’s shin, crumpling the Duke to the floor in agony.

“Argh! Worthless beast! Get back here now, *dog!*”

Scrabbling on his knees through the promised gap and using his front paws to dig as he did, Randall escaped back to his two feet outside the barn. He heard Bardolf’s scream of pain, mixed with Cheston’s whinnies of pleasure, echo out from the wooden structure and ran.

With the adrenaline fading, Randall sat hunched in a small corner of one of the guard towers – the grey dog mask led on the ground next to him. He felt tears well up in his eyes as he pawed at his face, attempting to remove the gag from his mouth. After scratching his cheeks a few times with his canine claws and angling his chin down to aid his efforts, he finally passed a deep breath through his open lips.

“You need to keep moving. The Origin’s Steward is searching for you.”

Randall did not respond, though he did appreciate the mask’s choice to continue speaking through his mind – as opposed to puppeteering his voice-box, as the horse had done to Cheston.

“Move, human.”

“My hands...” Randall sobbed, staring at the black pads of his palms. “What kind of life can I expect to have now?”

“One not spent cowering at the heel of your master, provided you *move*.”

The mask was right again. This was not the time for lament.

“How am I supposed to get out of this keep? You said it yourself – he’s searching for me. The guards will be everywhere.”

“You will not approve my method.”

Randall felt a tingle start at his chin, spreading to cover his jaws and nose. A similar sensation started at the lobes of his ears and began to migrate upward, painting the crown of his head with pins and needles. He bore his teeth as his jaw flexed around in its socket, trying to quell the discomfort.

“Agh... mask, is this your doing?”

The mask did not need to answer as Randall’s eyes crossed, tracking a moist, black and leathery nose at the tip of his extending snout. He snarled reflexively as his face pushed forward, halting as it became a full-length fur-coated muzzle. The mask reformed in time with the man’s transformation – obtaining its own pointed wooden muzzle, perfect to fit its owner’s face. Simultaneously, Randall pawed at his itching crown, feeling a sensation like he’d just flattened his ear and flinching in shock. His ears had migrated to sit atop his head, triangular, furry and flexible.

“With my senses, you shall escape detection.”

The muzzled man sniffed deeply, suddenly overwhelmed by the dizzying number of scents. Some he recognised, though they were infinitely more potent. Some he did not, though he felt as if they had been there all along, hiding just out of reach of his human nose. His ears twitched on their own. It felt strange, like he should immediately point his muzzle to sniff in the direction that they angled toward. They twitched again – a horse snorting, loud and clear. It communicated... anger? Cheston?

“MAYBE...”

Randall’s paws shot up to his head as he deafened himself with his own gravelly voice. He made efforts to speak quietly, brow creasing as he noted the canine tone to his speech.

“Maybe... we can take out two archers with one arbalest...”

“We?”

“Yes, we’re working together, aren’t we?”

“Hmm.”

“We can *save* Cheston and ride him to freedom out of this accursed keep.”

“Perhaps I was mistaken...”

“About?”

“Irrelevant. *We* must act quickly. But beware, I cannot limit the instincts which my senses will imbue you with. You must be resolute.”

Randall donned the grey dog mask, snugly fitted to his muzzle and marvelled as a small opening acquiesced into existence at the tip of the mask’s snout – allowing him his full sense of smell. He crept from his corner and through the winding passages and circular stairways of the grey-stone keep, toward the courtyard. His hearing warned him of even the lightest footstep far before any human could detect his paw-padded approach. He could hear Cheston’s brays and neighs in the distance throughout – it seemed his friend had escaped the barn.

His smell was even more honed – he could detect the proximity, gender – even emotions of creatures for fifty-odd metres around. He could detect... something alluring, drifting on the breeze.

Buried beneath the acrid oily mist and thick gauze of shit. Peeking from behind the fetid bodies of unbathed humans and rotting stores of wasted meats, he smelled something that he *needed*.

The four-pawed and furry faced man followed his nose as it led him toward the sweet scent, still employing perfect stealth – but his escape plan side-lined.

“You are wavering, human.”

“No, I’m simply... checking something. I am still headed toward Cheston.”

The smell was becoming stronger, easier to discern amid the thick broth of competing odours. Randall knew in his mind the source of this smell. He could feel a tightness in his undergarments which confirmed it. Even so, he convinced himself he would just take a look... in person, then leave.

“If you succumb, the changes will overtake you – it will not be of my doing.”

“Overtake me? Like what?”

“Your body will become an animal in accordance with your behaviour.”

“Noted.”

He crept around the corner of a small merchant shack set up in the outer perimeter of the keep, indulging the exotic scents of herbs and wildflowers, all casketed up for sale. But his true prize was inside. He sidled through the ajar doorway, unnoticed.

There she was – curled up on a pelt rug in the corner of the shack, a beautiful domestic wolf dog. Randall had not even noticed his tongue hanging from the end of his jaw between his sharp teeth, panting with arousal. His cock was hard in his trousers and rubbing against the fabric as he walked. Every breath increased his desire and stiffened him further as the female dog’s heat washed over him.

He rushed forward, dropped to his knees and sniffed the dog’s rear – sticking his nose under her tail. She responded, springing from the pelt and encircling him to sniff his rump, nipping at his trousers with her teeth and pulling them down. She licked his hard cock as the man moaned from his muzzle. He couldn’t resist. He spun and mounted the dog as she held steady in place. Thrusting himself into her, he could feel an unfamiliar pressure in his groin, growing and heightening his sensitivity.

“It is beginning. You risk losing everything.”

Randall ignored the masks words, humping back and forth, his stomach smacking against the furry haunches of his delicious canine mate.

“What in ghost’s name is *that*?! Bad... dog-thing!”

Randall’s euphoria was shattered by the screeching of a human woman, approaching behind. Before he could react, he felt a sharp sting on his forehead – then his nose. She was smacking his face with the handle of a broom *besom*! He tried to continue mounting his female, but the pain became too great. He withdrew from her to meet the woman’s challenge, baring his teeth and growling. He noticed her peculiar looks – strands of purple hair tangled in amongst her messy brown locks.

“I’m not scared of you, dog-demon! Shoo! Get out!”

The woman smacked him again. Randall snapped his maw at the broom and yelped, reluctantly scurrying for the door without his trousers.

Crouched behind a low drystone wall outside, the dog man licked his wounds – lapping at his sore nose with his longer flattened tongue.

“You owe that woman a debt of gratitude, human. You were lost.”

“I... I know...” Randall responded, glancing at his bare lower half to see his penis partially deformed. The foreskin had receded, the glans tapered at the tip and the entire length of it dyed a light shade of red. His scrotum remained human, albeit with a sparse dusting of white fur.

“Your reproductive cells remain of your species.”

“My what?”

“You can still father human children.”

“That *is* good. But, pray tell, mask – who in this land or any other will allow a ‘dog-demon’ to mount them or their daughters?!” Canine whining escaped his throat as his angry words crumbled into self-pity.

“A question for another day. You must move.”

“I’m tired of this... I can’t...”

“Unruly mongrel.”

A familiar grinding tone deafened the hopeless man. Randall looked up through his tears to see Duke Bardolf, alone and limping down the dirt-track toward him, wrapped in his silver-trim cloak. The dog man rose to his back paws and began a sprint on his springy pads.

“SIT!”

Bardolf’s growl echoed out toward Randall, who felt the energy sucked from his legs in an instant. He tried to fight it, to fly forward, but he felt like he was drowning in some nightmare, submerged beneath the water’s surface and unable to kick back up.

He fell to the floor and felt his body rotating to face his oppressor. His own growls fell silent as he looked upon Bardolf – sharpened fangs pointing out from a short vicious muzzle, razor claws at the tips of his human fingers and a bushy black tail hanging below the rim of his cloak behind him. The Duke limped closer.

“Worthless dog. Trying to upset the balance of the keep! Reeling against the changes you have been gifted. You would have been my personal pet. I should tear out the flesh of your neck-grrgh!”

Randall was frozen in place, faced with the ferocious beast before him. The wolf man had him trembling to his core.

“And you, mask! What is the meaning of this?! This is the best you can do? The man doesn’t even have a tail!”

Randall felt the mask in his mind – **‘may I?’**. He nodded internally, too scared to speak, but feeling the mask wrap its influence around his vocal chords.

“Bardolf – you are no longer worthy! Your time is passed.”

“Foolish wooden trinket. I am the judge of worthiness!”

“You still profess worthiness as you abuse your position to feed your people to their own? My brother would agree, were he not your prisoner. Release him!”

“I am the Origin. You will bend to my will – as Randall has. Failing which – I will grind you up and find some use for you as dust!”

Randall’s fur-tipped ears twitched to some far-off sound. He felt the mask in his mind once more – **‘be ready to jump’**.

“If you can capture me, mock-wolf, then do as you please.”

"Delusional dog!" The Duke laughed amid a hearty growl, his own arrogant guffawing deafening him to the rhythm of heavy hooves beating through the mud behind. Randall watched through the mask's eye-slits as Cheston the horse galloped through the acrid mist, careening squarely into the back of the roaring wolf man.

Bardolf was flung like a rag doll, spinning through the air into the dirt. The brown-white horse stampeded on down the dirt track, aiming for Randall.

"Now."

Randall felt the power return to his legs and sprang from his haunches toward the hurtling horse, landing awkwardly on his back.

Hoisting his squat muzzle from the mud, Bardolf barked up at the archers stationed atop the outer gate, *"fire at that horse! Do not let them escape!"*

The men nocked their arrows while others nearby rushed to crank the gate shut. Randall balanced precariously on Cheston's back while he bolted toward the spiked barrier as it lowered.

"I can't get a grip with my paws! I'm going to fall!" Randall screamed.

"Balance."

"I can't!"

"You won't approve..."

"Just DO IT!"

Randall suddenly felt a tickling at the base of his spine and began to get his bearings on Cheston's back. He felt... poised... and balanced. Flicking his muzzle round to confirm the obvious, he saw the image of Bardolf – cloak caked in shit, disappearing into the distance at the tip of his new furry tail as it streamed through the air. He flung his gaze forward once more as Cheston released a frenzied neigh and snorted. The archers' sights were trained on them.

"I don't know if you can understand me, Cheston – but if so, there's no going back – *come on, man! Gallop!"*

The horse whinnied and lowered its muscular neck, streamlining itself – before increasing pace yet further. Randall used every ounce of his tail's dexterity to remain on the bounding beast's back, lying

prone as the pair dashed beneath the gate. The tip of an iron spike barely caught the dog man, tearing an inch out of his pointed ear.

“Don’t rest Cheston – zig-zag!”

The horse sprinted in diagonal dodging motions, cutting up the grass with his powerful hooves as a storm of arrows rained down around them, thrusting into the coppice broth. Randall could hear the angry howl of Bardolf fading into the distance as they galloped on over hill and dale.

Cheston slowed to a canter, taking deep exhausted breaths, once the keep was long since visible on the horizon. Randall patted his friend’s neck with a paw and thanked him.

“And you too, mask.”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you, for your help escaping. You could have just left me a dog..”

“Your blood shows promise, I said. Your progeny may prove worthy and truly cease the perversions of that place.”

“I know. But... I thought Cheston and I proved quite worthy in the end! No?”

“...”

“Okay, I shan’t push my luck. And I am sorry. About your... brother, the wolf.”

“Irrelevant. Time does not pass so slowly for my kind, human. His imprisonment will be fleeting. Meanwhile, *you* have work to do.”

“Work? Such flagrant lack of passion you employ when speaking of love, monsieur mask! Talking of which – will you... change us back?”

“No. Only the light of the Origin can accomplish this. Though I will halt any further changes.”

Randall sat atop Cheston, looking himself over. Partially furred in places, he wore paws at the ends of his four limbs, spoke through a toothy black-nosed muzzle and twitched pointy ears atop his head, while his manhood remained half way between that of a human and a dog. The bushy grey tail behind him began to wag.

“Well, some things could be difficult in this state. But I *do* enjoy the tail, at least”, he resolved with a smirk. “You think my descendants might have a bit of dog in them?”

The mask conspicuously ignored his question.

“Human. You see that tree-topped hill in the distance, yes?”

“Mm? Yes.”

“I sense a convocation of fate. Deliver me to its marble summit, whereupon we shall part.”

Randall, wincing at the thought of leaving the mask he’d grown strangely attached to, clenched his muzzle tight and angled his ears forward. His tail drooped as he patted a paw against Cheston’s rump and spurred his friend toward the peak.

Around 400 years later... 1895

Smoky serpents of industry slithered into the sky from their chimneys in the distance, painting the clouds a dull beige. Men in cotton overalls hurriedly swarmed over the tilled soil, dragging sacks of all-manner building supplies here and there, as horses drew forth cart-loads more. Surveying the scene from afar, behind a large centre-creased architectural schedule, a grizzled man with gnarled hands stood. He was hunched forward, frail and wisp-thin, wheezing like he should barely be alive. Revealing a sharp fang as he lifted his lip to speak, he addressed the young top-hat-clad architect at his side.

“Perfect.” He growled. *“The grandest of mansions, to do justice by the memory of my ancestral home.”*

“Yes, good sir. It will be the finest of constructions. We have established a quarry and requisitioned premium materials from a marble-deposit hillside quite far from here. The logistics have been difficult to attend to... Regardless, I am confident that with your exceedingly generous backing, such edifice will do this land of heritage proud.”

“You know... Bardolf the Bountiful once presided over a grand keep on this same plot. Golden times, they were! His people never wanted for anything... so they say.” The frail man coughed weakly. *“But those times are passed. We must move forward!”*

“Of course, Mr. Ulrick. The times in which we live – are they not themselves bountiful?”

Ulrick snarled at the young man’s rhetoric.

“Enough dallying boy. I trust you’ve informed your workforce that they are to take due care in the construction of the western quadrant? It is to be built upon the remains of an old cellar which houses a great many priceless heirlooms, all collected by my family through generations. The collection is very precious to me.”

“Naturally, sir.”

“Good – I’ll personally whip the worthless dog who so much as dares disturb the layer of dust on those antiques!”

“Understood, Mr. Ulrick.”

The Present Day

Seth rushed from his bedroom and down the stairs to the front door of his parent’s house. He was already late for meeting Rich and the others to go climb the old quarry. As he exited and motioned to close the door behind him, he flashed a glance to his rear, careful not to shut it on his... Shit! Where was his tail?! He didn’t want to leave the house without it.

He recalled the day when, during his early teens, he’d been browsing some forgotten nook of the internet for transformation media to satiate his curiosity and stumbled upon a particular piece of art. It was simple – depicting a man with the ears, muzzle and tail of a dog. Simple, but profoundly familiar to his eyes. The canine features honestly looked like they belonged. The young boy had wondered why he didn’t possess them too. That’s how he settled on being a furry dog.

The past five years, Seth had grown to feel more comfortable imagining himself as a dog than as a human – and grown apart from his friends in turn. He knew it as well, but he couldn't deny the person he was. The boy scrambled back upstairs to his room, digging out the Husky tail and clipping it to his belt.

“Better”, he sighed as he nervously bit his lip and ran back outside.

~ END ~