

Kubikiholt: Bad Teeth And Worse Decisions

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Dark green grass and long, dry thistle stems filled the spaces between sharp, black rocks. Stones that grew in width and stature as they climbed the rolling waves of earth that formed the foothills a trio of bounty hunters were navigating. A tall and buxom Elfess of red hair and red-on-black leathers. A Dwarf woman in armor of bronze and purple, bearing a sturdy metal spear. Ahead of them, a male Coyote wearing a cloak of green over earthen robes and many pouches on his belt. The foothills rose higher to their left, leading to a series of caves and stone-lined pits. Scattered among this rocky moor were large shards of curved gray carapace. Coated on their outer curves with harsh, soot-black hairs and on the inner with peachy scraps of flesh and fat. It was these remains that held the majority of the team's focus.

The Coyote, Ash, directed his nose to the ground slowly sweeping it side to side as he picked a path through the scraps. By the curvature of the exoskeletal half of the piece nearest him, it had belonged to an adult. Plenty large enough in life to have carried a fully-armored soldier to war. "Is anyone else peckish, or is it just the ravenous creature that's been eating its way through all the spider ranches in the county?"

"We don't know it's a 'creature'," The Dwarf cautioned. She used the butt of her weapon to turn over one of the shards and observe the state of the meat within. Which he had already determined to be nearly fresh. "It could be another Were deserter playing feral."

"I could eat," the Elf said, side-stepping Ijaoui's second statement alongside another piece of riding spider. "Maybe on the way back, when this meat's had more time to soften up." By which, Miri meant 'spoil.'

"Wife of mine, you think up the loveliest dates." Ash slipped a few roasted coffee beans from one of his pouches into his mouth. Careful to chew them with the teeth located just behind his fangs and use his cheek muscles to direct the grinds towards the back of his mouth. Numbing cold washed over his gums along with the lovely brown mash, chasing away the dull throbbing that had camped itself within his molars. But for how long? "One of these days, I'm going to rent out a butcher's back room and treat you to some quality offal."

"How romantic!" Miri's voice dropped an octave. "Assuming you won't have to beg the coins off Ijaoui again."

'Oh, lovely. I went and walked back into it.' Ash's hackles would have raised in worry, but the caffeine got to his neck muscles first. Dulling his skin, but not his recollection of grievances and counter-arguments that would soon need to be pulled from their mental quiver.

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"Please don't start this again, you two," Ijaoui groaned. She stepped a little higher up the hill, as if to get out of the crossfire.

All the better for Miri to direct some very necessary comments towards her husband, whose back was now fully in view. The lazy droop of his tail told her that he hadn't taken any of the previous morning's 'discussion' to heart. "If you hadn't insisted on staying in that fancy tower suite, we'd

have had the coin to rent out a cart to bring us out into all of this.... This!" She waved a frazzled hand across the horizon. As beautiful as the land was, there had been an awful lot of it to trek across in their search. Three ranches and the surrounding feeding grounds.

Ash set his shoulders in a cavalier posture which was un-mistakenly his mother's. "We'd have lost all our coin and more if we'd brought a horse out here to break a leg on this terrain. And learning to drive a spider-team would have cost us as much as hiring a professional. Either way, we'd have been serving up a nice, plump meal to our quarry ahead of the fight. Unless you were planning on staying back and watching them when we hit the caverns? Them and some of these torches you had to buy." His mouth practically dripped honey, the sarcasm was so thick. "Thank you for that forward-thinking purchase, by the way. I do so enjoy guessing my way through pitch-black tunnels with little more to guide my way than an overgrown match-stick that takes up one of my hands in the bargain."

"Oh, don't go there again, husband mine!" Miri double-timed around a pair of stones, and what amounted to a giant spider's severed foot, to close the distance between them. "If I had bought that light-spell box when you angled for it, that would have been the *only* thing we'd have with us on that dancing necromancer job. Or the three after!"

Ash didn't turn to her. Rather, he turned his eyes away, showing her their whites. "At least we would have known what to do with that box. We still haven't found a use for that black goo you picked up on that shopping spree in Tharkholm!" He pointed towards a corked bottle hanging in one of the lady's own pouches.

"I remember that day well," Miri retorted. "You had your greedy gray eyes set on some pendant, but had pissed away too many coins on fancy ale and exotic foods and trivial entertainments to--"

"Both of you, shut it!" Ijaoui spoke in a harsh stage-whisper. Not unlike that of the previously mentioned bard-turned-necromancer when they'd caught him monologuing to himself. "We're trying to sneak up on the cause of all this, not call it over to us! And that's assuming you haven't driven it off with your incessant nattering!"

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The marrieds both stopped and stared at Ijaoui for a short moment. Time she spent planting the butt of her spear into the tall grass, refusing to give an inch of ground under their darkening glares. They looked at each other, quite briefly, before looking to her again. "Stay out of this!" they both scowled.

"How can I?" she harrumphed. "I'm in it. I'm up to my thighs in it. Out here. With you. With no idea what I'm walking towards because the eyes, ears, and nose of our party are too busy snipping at each other to pay attention to our surroundings. And it's a pointless argument, anyway, because the truth of it is, you're *both* bad at keeping hold of coins. Only difference is you let them slip out of your hands in different ways. And don't come calling for any of my share of our last catch with your hats in your hands. I sent most of it back home while you two were tavern shopping."

"Now there's a silly thing to do." Regardless of who she was talking to, Miri always tried to get the last word. "You have no idea what can happen to your possessions between the moment you hand them to one courier and when the last courier brings it to the intended recipient. Ash and I caught a fair number of highwaymen before we made your acquaintance, you know. We certainly

didn't catch them all..." She let the comment drift off into the shifting breeze and an uncertain future.

"It's practically gambling," Ash agreed. "And you don't even get the thrill of doing something fun before you lose everything."

Miri tapped a finger against Ash's arm. "And speaking of loss, just how much went up in that pot incident?"

"Hmm? What pot was that?" Ash's wagging tail gave away his pretense of memory loss. "Ah! You mean the magic cooking pot that didn't need fire to boil and burn anything that went inside of it."

"Yes, that's the one." For all her ability to hold a grudge, Miri had suddenly and very conveniently forgotten several things. First, that it was Ash who had bought the very expensive item. Second, the purchase followed a very similar row over Miri's tendency to buy second-hand cooking kit which tended fall apart after a few weeks use. And third, that Ijaoui, the team's treasurer, *hadn't even been informed of the purchase before--*

"You came screaming into our tent one night, rambling about our cover being blown and an assassin on your tail" Ash continued. "Throwing everything into a go-bag and -- *pwoof!* -- Into the pot went all our evidence on the target --"

"And half your own supply of healing packs!" interjected Miri.

Ash shook his head with a patronizing clicking of his tongue. "The very night I bought it, too! We never got a lick of use out of the thing."

"A complete waste of coin if ever there was one." Miri gave a sharp nod of her head, which was seconded by her husband.

The Dwarf took in a very measured breath, her hand tightening around the spear. "In my defense, the assassin was very real. And his hide almost paid back the cost of the pot."

Having both delivered their retorts, Ash and Miri began walking again. Their tiff of just a moment before having been, to all appearances, forgotten. All the Dwarf could do was roll her eyes and follow after. Thankful for at least one aspect of the over-priced rooms they had rented out; thick walls. *'At least I won't have to hear the make-up sex through the walls.'*

The indignation of having her own economic strategies mocked was worth it, though, if it put her partners back on track to the next payday. The pair even held hands briefly, before Ash got distracted by some odor and started drifting sideways.

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Ash had let go of his wife the moment he felt his hands starting to tense up and sweat. The tiff, if nothing else, had provided another escape route from the pain. Pain which was returning all too quickly. And from which he was reluctant to retreat with another dose of caffeine. *'Wouldn't want to start any bad habits, would we? I've got plenty enough to go around already. Like pissing off the party healer, for one thing. Sound tactical planning, that.'*

He resisted the impulse to look over to Ijaoui. Not so soon after having aggravated her so. He could imagine the face she'd give him, and the thought of it was deterrent enough. Besides, there was nothing the warrior-healer could do for him. He'd let the problem with his tooth linger for too long. Found too many things that were more important than something that wasn't really bothering him *yet*. Surely his tooth, or part of it, was dead. Rotten on the outside as a massive cavity, or from the inside as an abscess. Past any aid from her limited portfolio of spells, either way. He had only himself to blame, of course. Now, there was nothing for it but to have it pulled. Which wasn't going to happen any time soon, out in the back country.

Thank goodness for that stash of coffee he'd purloined from the team's last target. And a Were-Dragon's multiplied susceptibility to its chemical embrace. Not that he wanted to enjoy it again so soon. *'No, find something else to take your mind off of it...'*

Fortunately, one of his very favorite diversions was on its way to him! He sensed the bobcat before he smelled it. And he smelled it before he saw it. Or, rather, saw the telltale sway of grass processing a small gap in the stalks. Within which stalked the small beauty, on its way to scavenge one of the spider-bits the team had already passed. It froze still the moment Ash began studying it. Aware, in spite of the cloak of grass, that it was being watched.

"No, no. Don't be afraid, my little friend." The Coyote -- the Animagist -- waved his hand gently, sending waves of sympathetic energies the feline's way. They encircled the predator's mind, lulling it with promises of friendship and safety. She came confidently bounding out of the green to sit atop a rock and look over her new favorite being. Blinking her eyes slowly in the universal feline way of expressing friendship.

Miri and Ijaoui, long used to this sort of thing, stood quite still until Ash reached the rock to give the molly a scratch on the head in order to cement the temporary bond. "So, how's every little thing with you? Did your sister apply for that big promotion? Did those noisy neighbors finally move out? How are the kids doing? Lots of spider-scrap to feed them now, isn't there? It must be such a treat. But where is it all coming from, I wonder? Come across any hungry monsters lately? Any caves you try to avoid?"

With an arching back and a low growl, the bobcat crouched low on the stone. There was more flight than fight in her posture, her back half curled tightly to bolt or jump. She scanned the sky for whatever terrified her before turning her attention up the hills and hissing loudly.

"Hard to argue with a recommendation like that," Ash smiled. His eyes went where the bobcat's had indicated. A wide-mouth cavern lined with boulders, up above a few smaller openings. His smile lost all pretense of mirth upon realizing that he might have to go underground. "My new friend says that our quarry lives up there. And that they fly."

Ijaoui looked upward, then slowly down at one of the scraps. "Messy eater."

"Explains your trouble sniffing out a trail," Miri mused. "The chunks that are falling off might not have been touched by it."

"Yes, let's go with that," Ash answered. He thanked the bobcat for her time and released her from his influence. He was having trouble enough lidding his own rush of fear without trying to soothe hers. She bolted off into the grass, fear of a greater predator over-riding her hunger. And he trotted off towards the hill.

His feet were headed right for the cave, but his head was zipping around in a dozen directions. To uncertain futures, where his Dragon form could be trapped within too small a space, or a lethal liability around weak walls. Or his Coyote form crushed under a collapsed tunnel. To recent events in zombie-infested catacombs. And all the way back to the war, and a group of soldiers who'd tried to sneak under enemy lines through an underground river crevice that turned out to be far too thin. *'They had to crack Corbett's collarbones to get him out. It could have been me!'* Ash hadn't actually been part of the operation, but he'd seen the results. The unconscious Human's upper chest caved in in a most disturbing manner, wheezing weakly atop a stretcher. The empty look in the eyes of the soldier who'd had to apply the chisel to him.

He grimaced at all the ugly possibilities. Driving an innocent tooth right into the bad one. "Ssssss!"

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Miri came running to see whatever had drawn such a shocked reaction from her husband. Drawing her knife in one hand and drawing power from the grass and flowers around her with the other. "Eh? What is it?"

Ash simply gave her one of his glib smiles. "I was just thinking, Miri, dear, about something that poor bobcat 'told' me. Seems some black bird's been tweaking her kits' tails. But I haven't seen any nests about. You wouldn't happen be involved, would you?"

Miri's hand formed an indigent fist Nature's mana crackled against her palm. "What kind of fool question is that? You don't think I have better things to do than tease a few wild cats--"

"Bobcats," Ash corrected.

"I don't give a cat's ass what kind of cats they are," she hissed, "Especially not when there's who-knows-what flying about and it's powerful enough to take things twice the size of a war-horse *and* we're headed into its territory. Why would I even want to--"

"I dunno." The position of his ears marked his admission as false. "Hungry, maybe?"

"You know I like my meat dead. As do most people. Eating meat while it's still alive is too much of a hassle," she snarled. "And what meal would there be in a bobcat's tail anyway? And don't you dare make references to my figure!"

"Maybe you're jealous."

She put her hand to her hip, and returned the magic through her leg before she was tempted to put it to use. "Of what?"

He put his own and his chest. "Of me."

"Ha! Why in Awor's name would I be jealous of you? I *made* you the man you are today!"

He waved a foot sheepishly through the grass. "Well, I mean, it's hardly your fault you can't charm yourself an animal companion like I can. I suppose there are other druids who can't find one..."

She pointed in his direction -- "I charmed *you*, didn't I?" -- and twirled her fingers in circles about his eyes.

“You didn’t?” he gasped in all the theatricality he could muster. He backed away, the grass sliding away from his cloak. “I’m telling the bobcats that you’re picking on me!”

Ijaoui’s reaction, coming as it did at the precise moment her temperature flared out again, was so timely that Miri could have calibrated an hourglass by it. “If you two are determined to do the target’s work of cutting us down for them, would you please just knock the tar out of each other right here now? I’d call it a favor for you to get it over with rather than have to go it alone against a griffin or worse. Or perhaps you could canoodle behind that boulder over there? Either way, just get the slag out of your pants and be quick about it! We have a job to do! And after we’re done, I suggest you two pool your share to buy some time with a marriage counselor ahead of whatever extravagances you’re separately favoring at the moment.”

Miri looked at her blankly, putting on her own show of obtuseness. “Get the what out of the what?”

“I think it was a mining metaphor, love.” Ash cozied back up to her. She could see another change of allegiance running up on her horizon. “Something is probably lost in the translation to Elvish. Has anything ever been *found* in translation, I wonder? Like a net to catch all those dangling participles with?”

She knew she was setting herself up for something, but replied anyway. “Nothing ‘dangles’ in Elvish, dear.”

“What about half the gendered nouns?” Miri buried her forehead in a palm.

To look up and see Ijaoui of all people looking back dumbfounded was a joy in and of itself.

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“You two are unbelievable.” Was working with Weres always going to be like this? This erratic revolution of mindsets? How had Ijaoui managed to put up with it as long as she had?

Because once they were focused on a mutual threat, they were some of the best fighters in the business, she knew.

It was the getting them to the threat that was the trick.

“Will it help you two get to the cave in one piece if I let you make sport of me the whole way? Because I’m not volunteering for that!”

“Are you volunteering to stay outside and watch as we scour the cave?” Ash asked. “Or will you be peeling yourself out of that armor so you can fit into the tight spots?”

“Oh, dear, I hadn’t thought of that.” Miri’s falsely dumb smile vanished, once again replaced by a smile too clever for itself. “That would be a sight to see! Our fearsome Dwarf fighting evil in her skivvies!”

“And what with?” was Ash’s follow-up question. “Tunnels too tight for fancy pauldrons are too thin for that spear.”

Ijaoui straightened her gambeson, just to remind them both it was there under her bronzed plate

armor. "I don't see that choice coming. One of the few very useful things Miri has said today was just now when she pointed out that we're after something that can take down very large prey. And I figure it's one or two very large things, not a mob of small ones like that mess with the goblins." Ash's capacity to transform into a Dragon many, many times his normal size came in quite handy in the final stage of that battle. Not so much for the owner of the tower they'd been tasked to clear out, however. "If our foe was of the smaller variety, we'd see larger bits of spider. And Ash would have found more tracks to follow." She had already dismissed the option of very small vermin digging their way into said spider, eating them from the inside, and burrowing back out.

"Whatever we're up against will be living in a space plenty big enough for all of us. As for any fighting to be done under a low ceiling..." The Dwarf removed a bit of leather wrap from the center of her spear, exposing a joint which she unscrewed. Giving herself a short-spear for attacking and a baton for blocking. "I spend my coin wisely."

Before man or wife could find something to say to continue the pointless exchange, Ijaoui plowed through them. As she passed them, she bumped an elbow into the belt pouch that Ash had been pawing whenever he thought the other two weren't looking. He quickly turned aside to protect whatever its contents were.

'That ought to shut you up. For a few minutes, at least.' Assuming the lead of the party, she spoke with military vigor, "Come on then, both of you."

As the trio made their way up enough of the hill to get a proper look at the cavern entrance, it became evident that more pieces of riding spider had been placed there. Not dropped, placed. Ijaoui didn't know insects very well, but it was a safe bet that a whole head segment would have cracked upon impact from a drop of any decent height. The way the leg segments and spinnerets were positioned close to the head likewise suggested deliberate action rather than random chance.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared that great many things had been placed well inside of the cave, but not so far that they could not be seen from without. Whole sections of bushes pulled up from some other part of the moor, their stems glistening with drying sap. Bits of driftwood from miles away at least. Scraps of animal hide and odd artifacts of humanoid manufacture. The area surrounding the strange collection had been stripped of grass. Amid the dirt and muck were tracks that the Dwarf could not begin to decipher. All about the scene, but centered on the dirt ring, was a cloying musk. If chalk could rot, it would smell much like this place did.

"What is all this?" Ijaoui asked with a held nose. "And please don't tell me it's another serial killer keeping trophies."

Miri supplied the answer. "What we have here is a horny male hippogriff who's built himself a nest that he's trying to attract a female to. All those spider-chunks we've been following weren't dropped accidentally. If we circle around from this spot, we'll find they're a lot denser around here."

"A hippogriff," Ijaoui repeated. A challenge to fight, but not an insurmountable one. "Didn't we see some at the Meej'Phu'Hoi ranch?"

Ash had his back to the women, sniffing at some claw marks embedded in one of the logs. "That we did. And at the Huan'Eche'Pinn place, too. The one with the rancher's daughter with the

shapely--”

“Finish that sentence and you’ll regret it,” Miri warned.

“You’re so cute when you’re jealous,” he grinned, his ears very droopy. “I was only going to compliment the design of her breaking pen. You know I only have eyes for your shapelies, my love.”

Ijaoui sighed aloud. Once more, she had to direct the conversation. “There might be an additional finder’s fee, if it’s one of theirs.” A branded hide would invite all sorts of legal claims the other ranchers could pursue, if said evidence were to be delivered to the right place.

“Or opportunities for blackmail,” Miri joked.

At least, Ijaoui hoped she was joking. “So, what’s our plan for taking it on?”

Miri circled a hand about the place. “Just stay here. Once he’s done dropping more welcome mats around, he’ll come diving at us to shoo us away. If anybody needs to ‘dig a trench,’ I suggest doing it nearby. And skip the trench. That’ll get his attention.”

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Ash returned to the cavern mouth emptier in his coffee bag if not his bladder. It was the second dose taken -- out of sight under the pretense of relieving himself -- since starting the open-air stakeout over an hour ago. The pain in his tooth was still present, but it was a distant thing experienced as though there were a sensory wall between it and his mind. Or a hedge maybe. A nice, bushy hedge with bright and waxy leaves. The tooth itself an unruly neighbor who had quieted down for a moment. As long as they stayed on their own lawn, the Coyote was content enough to float on a cool deck chair made of caffeine.

Ijaoui had reconstructed her spear, and her eyes were watching the sky. Miri had her dagger out, but it was aimed lower. At the spider parts. Some of which had started to sour enough to draw the Were-Raven’s interest. Ash’s eyes wandered low, as well. To trace the outline of her behind, which shifted about hypnotically as she sawed off a piece of spoiling meat.

“You’re beautiful when you’re scavenging,” he told her. His drooping tail might have undercut just how ready he was to take her deeper into the cave and -- Well, no, not the cave!

“Not now, love.” There was only mirth in his wife’s voice. “*After*, certainly.”

“Save it for the tower suite,” Ijaoui groaned.

He sauntered just inside the cavern. Over to a spot where he could appraise both the carcass mound and the nest from equal distance. “You know, if the artist had finished his schooling, he might have put together a stronger composition. I can see the influences of the Kuvuas school, in the shifting use of light and dark. And N(!)saka’s appreciation for the endless interplay of life and death.” The tongue-click that made up part of the famous sculptor’s name came out of his mouth with an oddly slow cadence. He ran his tongue around his mouth, feeling for where the hard sounds might have gone. Delicately avoiding the territory of the troubled tooth, like the good neighbor he was. He found instead a lump of semi-chewed bean and a burst of cold wormed its way inside.

His ears, at least, were still as sharp as ever. Or less dulled than the rest of him. His head turned skyward. "That's our boy. He's on his way." Miri abandoned her meat, and Ijaoui called out for a direction. He pointed to the far left of the cavern as seen from his position. It wasn't long before they all saw the winged silhouette in the sky, and heard a warning screech.

The plan of attack was to rile the predator up with a physical display that Miri believed would convince him they were scavengers out to take his claim. Then they'd lure him into said cave to remove his advantage of flight and put him down. If absolutely necessary, and only if absolutely necessary, Ash was to shift to Dragon form and pursue or finish the troublesome animal.

Ash decided that he didn't like the plan! He'd talked himself into the extra coffee doses because it was the only way to cut through the pain in his mouth and achieve the transformation at all. So why hold it back? He started peeling out of his clothes. Cloak, belt, and trousers gone in seconds. All tailored for comfort and fast removal. (And Miri didn't think he knew how to spend coin! Ha!)

When the hippogriff appeared the size of a fist, it entered into a dive. Its head tucked low and its taloned forelimbs stretched out to grab and rend. He was rust red in color for the most part the interior of its wings speckled black and sand-brown. His crest a mix of blacks and reds. Beautiful as it was deadly. Its golden eyes blazed with territorial fury. His ebony beak opened without sound, wide and imposing. Another weapon brought to bear down upon the invaders.

Miri shouted orders, calling Ijaoui to retreat with her into the cavern. Ash discarded his tunic and walked forward, passing them both as he headed towards open ground. As he did so, Miri called out to him: "What the hells are you doing? Get back here!"

"I know what I'm doing," he declared. "You just think about how you're going to spend your share!" He called forth his inner self, the one granted him by Miri's folk to make the killing of war far easier. His legs thickened and elongated, as did his arms and tail. Within a few paces he was stalking fourth on all fours. Within a few more, his wings had sprouted and he'd more than octupled in size. Cobalt-blue scales having overtaken his fur, accented with a long mane of frost-blue hair that ran from the base of his shoulders to a pointed head filled with many more teeth than before. Black claws, thick as a man's arm and violently sharp, made mockeries of the beast's scent-markers.

By then, the hippogriff had circled about to retreat. The smell of its fear was an elixir that grew stronger in his nose as the caffeine's lovely influence waned, spread too far across too large a form. The Dragon had assumed full shape, but not yet full size. With every further step, he grew in stature so much so that the women were left to scabble away from a snaking tail tipped with blue-white hair. With size came power, and the Dragon directed that power to the sky. To either side of the beast, black portals formed by the dozens. Doorways into a reality of electric death. With a drunken smile and a smarmy thought, he brought that electricity outward into the world he inhabited. The edges of the portal crackled with blue lines of death, as the Dragon's jaw did spark with renewed pain. Sobriety stung harder than the fleeing animal's claws ever could!

The beast rose up to get clear of his killers, beating its wings in desperate defiance of gravity, but death was inevitable. A dozen, two dozen, three dozen bolts of lightning exited the portals and raced towards the closest ground at their disposal: the hippogriff. Brilliant blue lines danced across the beast's body, ravaging fur and flesh and wing and even bone. The killing was done in less time than it took for the smoking briquette of a corpse to crash into the moor. Rent against the

jagged stones of the foothill that it rolled down with momentous force, the fallen foe was torn into torn slabs of blackened meat.

The Dragon would have smiled for his victory, if not for the renewed and enlarged agony that erupted from the back of his jaw. Multiplying the size of his tooth had multiplied the pain. Where there had been calm, there was now pure and nauseating agony. He roared a deep, baritone wail of regret at having not considered this in his plan. At not having had a plan at all! The rumble of air across his gums only made him feel that much sicker.

A kick to his back leg brought him back to the world he inhabited with others. "Are you insane, stupid, or just clumsy?" Miri demanded. "Either way, you damn near knocked me and Ijaoui into the back of the cave!"

Ijaoui was already on the move, hustling fast as her short legs could haul all that metal. Under Ash's belly and between his legs towards the kill. The first section of it, really. "Why did he have to fry it like that?"

Ash did not answer. He could only turn his head away from them both, to heave and hack and try to vomit away the sea-sick grip in his belly. But there was nothing in his cave of a stomach but a thin, brown mash mixed with his stomach juices. It seemed to take ages to clear a yards-long throat.

Miri recognized its smell upon contact with the grass. "Coffee! From the bandits' hideout, no doubt! I didn't want to have to suspect you were up to something when we were clearing that place out, it looks like I should've!" She gave him a look that might have killed the animal all by itself, and then shook her head and stormed off towards more meat.

Had Ijaoui ever been told of caffeine's effect on Dragons? If so, she hid any concerns or angers well. Or, rather, she kept them limited to what the hippogriff's remains told her. "This hide is a burrow-map of burn scars. Criss-crossing each other and trampling whatever was there to start with. There's no telling if this animal was branded, or if it had an owner at all." Her voice was calm and cool, but she smelled of angry sweat. She directed her next words to Miri. "Your husband probably just cost us a finder's fee."

Miri had found the head. Half of it exposed and cracked skull. "Well, that's just lovely, isn't it? This had better do for a trophy, then. And we know who'll be carrying it." She looked back to Ash, still very much the image of Elvin fury. "What were you thinking? You're smarter than this! You know damned well what those beans will do to you! *Make* of you! You *saw* it happen in the war!"

"I... But I just wanted to... It was so... I mean..." Just trying to explain himself made the pain worse, even without having the right words at hand.

Miri threw a ragged bolt of mana into the ground. "You mean *what*? What could possibly have made you think numbing your brain with caffeine was worth the risks?" She stalked close to his head, tearing up the grass underfoot.

What could he do but confess? "The pain! This tooth! It wasn't this bad before! It's clawing me up! Ijaoui can't help! Magic can't help! I needed.... something! I couldn't think straight!"

“You still can’t.” Miri scowled. “Not with that garbage in you. So I’ll do your thinking for you. Change back, or get out of that cave before you destroy the nest. It’s the best proof we have left that we did anything worth being paid at all for.”

With a weak shrug of his fore-shoulders, Ash did as he was told. There was no changing back, not the way he felt in spirit and body, so walking away on gigantic limbs it was. Every step was a hammer of inertia crushing down upon him. Soon as he was clear of the evidence and the women both, he slumped down and lay his belly and head along the hillside. Soft grass and fragrant flowers did nothing to take away the pain he was swimming in, or the humiliation that would cling to him far after that damned tooth was finally removed.

Ijaoui was quick to add a caveat to the latter. “The costs of any dental procedures are coming out of *your* end of the profits. Assuming there are any.”