

The Gator Head

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At one of the most lavish taverns in the city, merchants and nobles gossiped over expensive drinks and exquisite meals. A trio of musicians played a piece popular at the royal court, devoid of the raunchy tones most bar songs were known for. Some danced but most were content to listen, their attention as much on their companions as the music.

A second floor ringed the main room of the tavern, offering a handful of private tables for those who wanted them. The area was lonely that night, with only a single table taken.

Edric drank deeply from his goblet. The plump, purple cobra barely tasted the quality wine washing over his tongue and into his belly. He'd stopped taking his time with the wine a few goblets ago, and now only drank for the sake of drinking. His many silver earrings and bracelets jangled as he leaned back in his plush chair.

A poorly-muffled belch got his attention. The rotund zebra sharing the table—Otto—was busy plowing through another plate of food. Otto didn't know the meaning of restraint when it came to food; he'd glut until he couldn't move if given the chance, and his wealth gave him the chance often. Edric never discouraged his companion's appetite, though. The massive zebra always made him seem thin in comparison, even after his flat middle had started to plump up from indulging in wine and the occasional delicious servant. As long as Otto continued looking fatter than most elephants, no one would bother mocking his merely plump middle. Not that he thought he looked bad. If anyone could pull off having a gut, it was him.

"This place has really good food," Otto said between bites, as if his bulging belly didn't reveal his feelings more than any mere words could.

"It's passable. I was expecting more based on the recommendation." It wouldn't be the first time a tavern had disappointed him, and it wouldn't be the last. "And despite this spot being 'the best in the house', I haven't seen a single server even peek up the stairs to see that we're being taken care of."

"We could find a table downstairs if you don't like it," Otto said half-heartedly, his attention more on the food than the conversation.

"Then I'd have to put up with all the noise. Besides, if I abandon this

spot now, then I won't be able to complain to the barkeep who talked it up and get my bill comped." Or at least a few bottles of wine. He didn't quite care if Otto had to pay for the smorgasbord he insisted on packing away. Otto nodded, and returned to eating.

Bored, Edric looked around the upper level. Less effort had gone into decorating it. The paintings on the wall looked old and sloppy. Obviously the cheap work of apprentices. A few blunted weapons and a dull shield were on display, relics of battles the area hadn't seen in decades. The oddest decoration in the room by far was an alligator head mounted on the wall just a few feet away. The wooden mount was embarrassingly plain. It lacked a carved border or paint. The head itself looked chunky. Catching the fat beast must have been a breeze.

"Even the decor is below par." Edric brushed a drop of wine from his lip and flicked it at the mounted gator head. He swore he saw the thing's eye twitch, but quickly admonished himself for such a foolish thought.

"Seems fine to me," Otto said.

The zebra's opinion didn't surprise Edric. Otto had never had good taste in everything but food.

Otto finished the last bite on his plate and patted his belly in satisfaction. "I'm going to grab another bite. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"No, I haven't had much of an appetite today. But make sure to try as much as you can so you can tell me all about it later." Edric spoke with as much fake sincerity as he could muster. He needed his companion to continue fattening up, after all.

"That was the plan," Otto replied, oblivious to the intentions behind Edric's words. He eagerly waddled away, vanishing downstairs.

Edric tired of sitting alone almost instantly. The cobra stood and tugged down on his doublet so it'd cover his belly back up. He picked up his goblet and lazily wandered around the table. He found himself drawn to the terrible gator head. It looked worse up close. The scales needed a fresh coat of paint and the fangs could use a good polishing. "You're the shabbiest gator I've ever seen," he scoffed, gaining some pleasure from insulting the inanimate gator.

Bored again, he turned around. He couldn't see anything on the floor

below from his position, but he could hear the music and all the pointless jabbering. They were all going on and on about which servants they'd gobbled up recently and how fat the King was looking. Just a room full of gluttons, little better than Otto. Thinking about them made him peckish, though. He began to wish he'd asked Otto to grab him something after all.

A faint, warm breeze suddenly hit against the back of Edric's neck. Startled, he turned to find the jaws of the mounted gator head hanging wide open. He rolled his eyes. "And now you're falling apart. Honestly, I don't see what anyone sees in this place."

As Edric stared at the gator head, he couldn't help but notice how slick its maw looked. A low murmur echoed out from it. Was something behind the wall? Curious, he leaned in close to get a better hear.

The jaws snapped shut over Edric's head and plunged him into darkness. His goblet clattered to the floor once he let go of it. Warm breath pelted his face and a moist tongue brushed against his chin. The mounted head now felt horrifyingly real.

Edric pressed his claws against the back wall and tried to push himself free, but the gator kept a tight grip on him. He felt the jaws loosen and, for a moment, believed he'd secured his escape. Instead, the jaws lurched forward, swallowing him up to his shoulders. Shocked and confused, the cobra's shouts were too muffled for anyone to hear them.

The gator, meanwhile, couldn't believe his good fortune. Pitch's target had practically walked right into his jaws, not for a second suspecting the mounted head might be more lively than it looked. Swallowing Edric with his head alone was a challenge, for sure, but he had plenty of practice managing the feat. With another ferocious gulp, he pulled in Edric's shoulders and part of his chest.

Edric was a lot fatter than he'd been led to believe when he'd taken the job. If it weren't for his jewelry and his round zebra companion, Pitch wouldn't have believed the plump snake was actually Edric. Then again, it wasn't difficult for people to pack on the pounds fast. Scarfing down targets had certainly taken a toll on his own waistline. At least the money was worth it.

Pitch excelled at making others disappear, and not only because of his stomach capacity. He'd found unique ways to disguise himself and catch

unsuspecting targets off guard. Like pretending to be a mounted head, for example. Though it wasn't exactly *pretending*, considering his head was genuinely detached from the rest of his body. Jesters and eccentric bards weren't the only ones with a use for modular magic. While his head stood mounted on the wall, his body sat safe in a storeroom. He'd paid the barkeep well to keep it safe while he worked. They'd mounted his head and directed Edric to him, just like planned.

Pitch lifted Edric off the ground and swallowed, his jaws wrapping around the doughy snake's belly. It was as soft as it was fattening. Another gulp pulled in Edric's rump, leaving only his flailing legs and tail on the outside. If anyone had stumbled upon them, they'd have thought Edric was slipping into a hole in the wall.

In reality, Edric was halfway in the gator's distant gut. Pitch felt his belly balloon outward with every swallow. The straps of his armor groaned as they stretched to accommodate his bloating middle. The scaly, armored gut clanked and wobbled from side to side, Edric's struggles serving only as a deep massage. A belt snapped and a strap loosened. The arms of his headless body moved to rub his rowdy belly. The perks of his methods were undeniable. He was practically paid to eat.

Though Pitch would've loved to savor the meal, he needed to finish Edric off before the zebra returned. Greedy gulps and the assistance of gravity caused Edric to slide down Pitch's gullet and into his stomach. Edric squirmed till the very end, still ignorant of what was happening to him. Pitch slurped his wiggling tail up like a noodle.

He sighed in relief as he finished sealing his target away. He could feel his stuffed belly shaking in the storeroom, and congratulated it on a job well done with a happy pat.

The sound of heavy footsteps reached Pitch's ears, and he froze in place, donning his disguise as a normal mounted head once more.

Otto ascended the steps with a heaping platter of food. The round zebra grinned as he looked over the feast. He didn't care what Edric said, the food there was delicious and well worth the visit. He'd practically had to drag himself away from the barkeep, who'd been eager to give him a sample of everything they had to offer. It wasn't until after he'd placed the platter on the table that he noticed Edric was missing.

keep his tail as still as possible, but it still bumped into stuff along the way. He flinched when heard another chair fall over, hoping it hadn't broken. The payment for the job would cover replacing anything his clumsy body accidentally broke, but he didn't like wasting it on nothing.

At last the barkeep and his body reached the stairs, the hardest part of the journey. They both took one step at a time. *Thunk, clank. Thunk, clank. Thunk, clank.* Pitch saw the wolf first, then his body.

Pitch had known how fattening the cobra and zebra would be when he'd decided to eat them, but his eyes still widened when he saw the results. The pair had gone straight to his gut, which bulged out huge and round. It looked twice as wide as the wolf at least. Multiple armor straps had snapped and his breastplate dangled atop his chest. The armor pieces covering his arms and legs bulged, leaving wide gaps that hadn't existed the night before. He'd outgrown multiple suits of armor before, and doing so flustered him every time. He'd have to endure the armorsmith scoffing at his heft yet again as they measured him for "their biggest suit yet". As if he hadn't seen how round the town guards were.

"Here you are, safe and sound," the wolf said. He glanced down at the two skulls on the floor. "If I'd known you were going to, uh, take care of the zebra as well, I'd have loosened some of your armor straps."

Pitch shook his head. "Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Pitch positioned his body in front of his head. He reached out and grabbed the sides of his head, then gently pulled it free of the mount. He closed his eyes as he turned his head around to avoid the usual disorienting feel of his field of view being spun around. Then he plopped his head back on his body. He waited a few seconds before letting go. His head stayed on.

The gator smiled as the reattachment proved a success. The magic tended to be reliable, but every so often he'd have to force his body to accept his head again. Or perhaps it was the other way around. He didn't think about it much.

Whole again, Pitch smacked his doughy gut. Making an honest living is more fattening than you'd imagine," he winked at the wolf.

They nodded, trying to avoid lingering on his middle for too long. It tended to intimidate anyone small enough to be enveloped by it. "A pleasure doing business with you, as always."

“A pleasure,” Pitch replied. He scooped up the two skulls and hid them in his bag. He couldn’t leave evidence lying around the tavern, after all. He sluggishly waddled down the stairs, still adjusting to being in one piece again. Now that he’d eaten his target—and a bonus snack—he could get his payment and start worrying about the next job. Hopefully it wouldn’t be for a long while. A blubbery gator head mounted on a wall would stand out too much. Or maybe it’d stand out just enough, and lure in future targets. Sometimes there were perks to being hard to ignore.