

In the Dark

The moon smiles through the grate above.

“Come,” it whispers, mocking me.

“It’s too high,” I mutter. “Too high. Too high. Too high.”

I look down, staring at the muddy puddle before my chained feet. The moon is there. No escape. I dash the water with my bare feet, the shackles clanking dully against the bones of my ankles.

“Too high. Too high. Too—”

“Please,” a voice whispers from the dark corner.

“Too high. Too high.”

“Please stop.”

“Too high. Too high—”

“STOP.” The voice bites the cold air.

Silence follows.

And then a whisper: “What is too high?”

I breathe deeply, smelling the mud and metal and my own excrement.

“The moon.”

The dark corner sighs. “You are a fool.”

The words ring across the smooth black walls over and over, and make ripples in the moon on the water, which whispers “Fool.”

The last echo escapes through the iron bars above us. Then there is nothing.

A dim thought drills the back of my head. *Thirty-one. Thirty-one.*

“Do you remember the last time we...?” I cannot bear to say the word.

“The last time we *ate*?”

I wince. My mind fills with the swirling smells of strawberries and vanilla, roasted chicken and potatoes, cinnamon and sweet breads...

“We will never eat again,” the dark corner spits. “And this shall be the Thieves’ Lot” it recites. “To be thrown in a pit with no doors. To be driven to hunger and to death. And to be left no respite but for the sight of the stars and the company of fellow criminals.” A chilling laugh emits from the corner. “Some company, you are.”

I hang my head.

“Ironic, isn’t it?”

I will not satisfy the voice with a response.

“Steal food and you end up—”

“Don’t.”

“Oh, we’re talking now, are we?”

“Don’t say the word...”

“What? Food?!”

A shiver slithers up my starved spine.

“Food! Food! Food!”

Raspberry jam and apple pie and honey ham and bacon.

“Food! FOOD!”

“*Enough!*” I scream, hurling myself from the wall. I forget the collar around my neck. It yanks me back to the wall. My head bashes against the stone.

The voices wheezes and coughs with booming laughter. “Fool!”

My body curls back to the muddy floor.

I sit still, staring intensely at the moon, trapped in its water.

Leaning forward, a warmth trickles down my forehead, down my nose. Wet, it drops onto my lips. I lick it.

Blood.

Mutton and pork and raw steak. Meat.

Down my chin it drips and falls into the puddle.

The moon turns red.

I run my white tongue over my teeth and taste blood, salty and sweet. And warm.

A smirk takes over my mouth.

Screaming, I hurl myself away from the wall, pulling towards the dark corner with all my might. The cracked stone bursts and my chain rips free, falling into the mud. With one swift move I wriggle my shrunken wrists out of their shackles, my knuckles ripping. And then I run, gleefully shambolic, into the darkness.

At last I stand over him as he shields his face with his hands.

“What are you doing, you mad fool?!”

Snarling, I grab hold of his wrists. His wet eyes look up at me, begging.

I move my face inches from his.

“Food.”

Thick blood bursting from his jugular and soft flesh between my teeth and tongue ripped from the mouth.

Behind me, the red moon smiles.