

## **stop me if you've heard this one before**

by iztopher

So a half vampire walks into a bar...

For Galahad, a conversation in the Harburg tavern was life-changing. For the bartender and his favorite regulars, however, it was just another Thursday night. Maybe a little more memorable than most.

Content warning for alcohol/drinking.

The idea for this fic came from talking in a group chat about how like, yes we're all very thankful for Morten indirectly saving Te'ijal's life by talking to Galahad, but like, also, Te'ijal stole Galahad's soul and forced him into marriage so what's Morten's excuse for hating his wife? And my friend Storm was like "classic straight people humor?" and I was like you know what. I want Morten and Silas's perspective on this scene.

...

"So it's a Tuesday night, right?" Silas says to the two people currently willing to listen to him, the same two people he can always count on to listen, even when they were there for over half his stories, "which means there's a live band. And there's this gal sleeping on top of the piano. Completely conked out. So the pianist of course is like, well, what to do, and tries to wake her up. Snaps his fingers in her face. Calls out in her ear. Shakes her shoulder. Even plays a few bars. Nothing does it. So eventually they decide, hey, what the hell, we'll just play anyways, and she manages to sleep through the entire set."

It was early enough in the evening where the bar was mostly empty and the drinks were mostly water. The sun was still shining through the windows, and Morten and Silas were there to gossip and not cook their own dinners rather than drink. The bartender didn't mind; he would have looked for a different job by now if the chatter bothered him, and business was business. "I remember this woman," he said thoughtfully. "It took me ten minutes to wake her after closing. When I asked her how in all the world she managed

to sleep through all that, she claimed she was training in Mysten Far to protect the Dreamworld."

Morten laughed. "Mysten Far, eh? I've always wondered what was up with her."

"How many of these people do you find out the scoop on after the fact?" Silas asked.

The bartender shrugged and picked up a glass to polish. "More than you'd think. Less than you'd hope. Goddess knows there's still some head-scratchers in there."

"Did you ever find out about that new grad from Thais who came in looking for a fight?"

The bartender rolled his eyes and clicked his teeth. "Silas, if I had a gold penny for every person who came into my bar looking for a fight, I could close this place and never see you again. You'll have to be a bit more specific."

Silas laughed and raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. He came in yelling about how he wanted someone to come at him with everything they had, because he had to prove somebody wrong. Air was real uncomfortable; everybody felt too bad for him to try to fight."

The bartender chuckled a little under his breath. "Okay," he says, "that sounds better. I think I remember this kid. Long black hair?"

"That's the one! Was it a bet?"

"No, actually," he said, remembering now, "he was from the Collegium, right, and I guess he had some sort of complex. He was a mage and somebody told him he was nothing without magic, and he wanted to prove them wrong."

"Poor kid," Silas mused.

Morten interrupted him. "The weirdos are fun, sure," he said, "but my favorite are the people who come in with stories."

"Because those people are so normal." Silas laughed.

"They could be! We'll never know."

"You just like to dissect them until you can guess what parts are real or not."

"Guilty as charged. Do you remember the lass who claimed her great-great-great-grandfather was actually born before the fall of Thais, but was turned into stone and just sat there as a statue for hundreds of years?"

"I still believe that one," said the bartender, before he was waved over by another customer and turned on his heels.

"You shouldn't!" Morten called after him.

"Says the man who believed the woman who claimed she got in a fight with a bunch of talking squirrels," Silas said.

"Militant squirrels are extensively documented," Morten shot back.

"Well, sure. As folklore in Western Arishta! But in reality? On the Mainland? Come on, man."

"Okay, okay." Morten waved his hand dismissively. "Fair enough." Watching the bartender start to step back towards them, he waited until he was in earshot before continuing. "But I've got one I have a feeling we all have the same thoughts about. Do you two remember the guy who insisted his wife was some sort of bloodsucking demon?"

Silas's eyes lit up and he pounded his fist on the table. "Like we were supposed to believe that one. I mean this guy comes in, no fangs, blue eyes, red in the face from how upset he is-"

"Or how much ale he drank before he got here," Morten says wryly.

"-right, yelling about how his wife is a vampire and she turned him into a vampire and now he can't stand the taste of ale because it's not blood."

"My ale does not taste like dirt," the bartender mumbled under his breath.

"It sure doesn't," Silas said. "Pour me another one?" The bartender obliged him. He took a grateful sip, then turned to Morten. "You'd told him some ridiculous timeline about Nora, if I remember correctly. Claimed you hated her until the day she died, then realized you loved her. Why in the Goddess's name did you say that?"

Morten shrugged. "The reason I believe so many of these people is because I believe there's a kernel of truth in them. Do I believe that man's wife was going to burn to death when the sun rose? 'Course not. Was I a little worried she might have been in trouble and he was trying to convince himself he didn't owe her any help? Well."

"Maybe she was a blood-sucking demon, though. Just not literally."

"Well, that was his problem to figure out when he sobered up, not mine."

Silas took a thoughtful swig of his drink. "So did you love Nora in the end?"

Morten waved his hand. "Of course. I just loved her in the beginning, too."

"I don't seem to remember that," the bartender said.

"Oh, quit your snarking. It's a bit of a bell curve; we hated each other for a while in the middle there. That's when I started coming here so often, so you didn't know me before it." Morten sighed. "When she died, I regretted how many of those years I wasted arguing with her. None of it seemed to matter in hindsight. But that sort of thing is inevitable for a married couple."

The bartender opened his mouth as if to disagree, but Silas beat him to it.

"See, this is why I never married."

"Smart thinking, my friend."

There was a beat of shared laughter. "You gotta wonder what happened to that bloke and his wife," Silas said.

"Well, he seemed pretty resolved to help her, in the end, so I guess we have to hope she wasn't a blood-sucking demon, literal or otherwise."

"What changed his mind, anyways? It sure wasn't what you said about Nora."

"You started quoting proverbs at him and one of them stuck," the bartender said.

"Bark worse than her bite!"

"Exactly." Morten frowned. "Wonder what that was about."

"Maybe she talked shit a lot. Threatened people. Maybe one of them finally took her seriously and was going to do something about it. Husband didn't want to help, figured she should face the consequences of her actions."

Morten shrugged and downed the remaining contents of his glass. "Well, it's good a guess as any."

"Maybe she was a vampire," said the bartender, with the amused tone of someone presenting an argument more as a thought experiment than a genuine belief. "You said this was a few months ago, right? That's when

there was that string of murders in the city. You know, the ones where the victims were drained of blood through the neck. There were rumors a vampire was doing that."

Silas guffawed. "You can't possibly believe those."

The bartender shrugged. "Dragons are factually, scientifically, proven real. Are vampires really that unbelievable?"

"No," said Morten.

"Yes," cut in Silas. "But you might be onto something." His expression darkened and he rose his hands to flex his fingers in front of him, mock-menacingly. "Maybe she was the serial killer! It'd explain why he was so insistent on the vampire metaphor."

"Huh," said Morten, leaning back on his bar stool. It scraped unpleasantly against the floor. "Well, if she was, he certainly didn't let her die, because they continued a few weeks after."

"Well, yeah, because you convinced him not to!"

"Oh dear," murmured the bartender wryly, trying not to laugh at the false accusation. "What trouble have you caused us now, Morten?"

"We don't know that..."

Silas reached his arm out to punch Morten on the shoulder. "You really ought to stay out of other people's business, Morten."