

# Salts

A hazy, overcast day hangs over the city of Silver-Heights. A storm moves in from the coast, sprinkling heavy rain down onto the sett-brick streets. Water flows from puddles into gutters and moves through the city like a great river, using bridges like great aqueducts.

Under one such bridge, a man in a cloak walks into an elvish café.

Opening the door to the chimes of a shopkeeper bell, he steps onto the linoleum floor of the café. He sighs, pulling his drenched hood off his head and deactivating the set of magic runes that kept him dry with a firm press of his collar button.

He is middle-aged, on the line between youth and wisdom. His curly hair is cut into a flattop, with two grey streaks emanating back from his ears like lightning. A trimmed and well-maintained beard frames his face, but it does nothing to hide the creases and lines that cover his face. Above all, the laugh lines that framed his mouth gave his face a jovial shape. A set of spectacles ride across his nose, enhancing his already verdant eyes.

The man steps up to the counter and leans onto it, throwing some silver onto the counter. A tired looking elvish woman works the counter, staring absent-mindedly out towards the dining area behind the counter. Her sunny blonde hair is highlighted with streaks of grey. That combined with the crow's feet that frame her gaze put her squarely in the curious phase of elvish age where she could be anywhere between 40 and 140.

The man clears his throat, and the woman whips around, saying with a raspy voice "How can I help you- "Her milky eyes widen, and she continues excitedly "Langston!"

She leans onto the counter next to him, snarking "You know we don't serve hobos in this establishment."

Langston stands up, feigning shock and disgust. "Well then Samryla, I guess I'll just have to take my business elsewhere!" He reaches down to pick his silver back up, before the woman swipes his silver off the counter

“AS IF you would! I’m the only café in the borough who carries Koht Salts.” Samryla sticks her tongue out, before bursting out into a giggle. “Seriously Lang, you have an addiction. This much coffee isn’t good for you.”

Langston walks away from the counter towards the diner, shrugging. “Guilty as charged.”

As he turns the corner into the dining room, Samryla yells from the counter. “So just bring this to your booth then, I guess?”

The last thing she sees before he turns the corner is a thumbs up rounding the corner.

Langston walks past the counter facing the door to the dining area seated directly behind. The diner is relatively spacious, being mostly empty at this hour. In each corner is a raised area with a booth, looking out onto the street. The diner light casts a haze over the tables, intermingling with the early morning air to create a fine musty smell.

Langston takes a seat at one of the raised booths, setting his bag on the table next to the window and opening it to reveal a set of pens and ink bottles, magically sealed to prevent spilling. Nestled below them is a spiral notebook with “Langston’s Masterpieces” scratched onto the durable leather cover. He pulls out each of his tools, laying them horizontally in front of him. With a quick movement, he uncaps the ink bottle and dashes his pen into it, moving his pen to the top of his page before stopping suddenly.

He stares at the page, trying to make sense of the whirlwind in his head. The pen floats barely inches from the page, but Langston cannot muster the force to push it down.

He leans back, sighing and putting the pen down. His eyes wander the diner, gliding over chairs and linoleum, over elvish art and tapestries, under hazy mana lights and vents blowing elementally cooled and pushed air. They continue their journey, venturing from the diner to the street, witnessing the people walk by from their raised vantage point. Rain hurtles itself down from the grey skies and impacts the brick paths with a barely audible thud, pooling and channeling through gutters and cracks in the sett. Feet stomp through the water, marching onwards in a rhythm that powers the city.

The eyes glide upwards to see people going about their morning, all covering themselves from the rain uniquely. One woman holds her purse over her head. Another has unfurled a delicately crafted and expensive umbrella, styled in gold and black with glimmering dwarvish. One man even casts a small charm before stepping out into the rain, the rain bending in the air as to avoid his step. Each of them protects themselves from the sky in a way that says something about them. Their *story*.

So why can't he write his?

A hand slams onto the booth table, startling Langston and sending his pen flying. As he barely catches it, he looks over to see Samryla cocking a devious smile. "Don't let the fey grab ya' Langston!"

Langston chuckles putting his pen next to the notebook. Samryla places a mug on the counter, showcasing the elvish rune for fire emblazoned into the coffee with cream. She pulls out a small shaker, sprinkling a glowing red powder onto the coffee. The rune shimmers, then bursts into full red light, sinking into the coffee and letting out a blast of hot air.

Before Samryla can pull the shaker away from the mug, Langston grabs the mug and takes a long swig of the coffee. He sets it back on the table with a sigh, revealing half of the coffee suddenly missing from the mug.

Samryla sits down in the booth, staring at the cup wide eyed. "Zeron's tits, you absolute monster. Did you taste it while it was going down?"

"Every drop" Langston takes another sip. "That's what the salts are for Ryl."

"You know Langston, I'm pretty sure you are the only person on the face of Nevarine who enjoys Koht Salts with your coffee. It's pretty much just condensed fire, why would you want spicy coffee?"

"If its weird to enjoy this, I don't want to be normal."

Samryla leans back into the booth cushion, running her hand through her hair. "I think it tastes like dragon piss, but what do I know."

Langston leans in, looking at Samryla over his glasses. “You can’t possibly understand how advanced my palette is.”

Samryla laughs “I think your tastebuds are shot and you don’t want to admit it.”

Langston leans back with a smug look, gazing through the steam emanating from his coffee. “Perhaps.”

He sets the mug down, before grabbing his pen and tapping it against his temple. As he stares into the empty page, he mumbles to himself, trying desperately to find a decent starting point. Samryla leans in, looking at his page before furrowing her brow.

“Still in your rut?”

He sits up, running his hand over his face. “Well, you know, ideas don’t flow as easily as they used to. Especially when they are about me.”

Samryla leans in farther, placing a hand on the mug next to his. “I find it hard to believe you don’t have anything to write about yourself. I mean, you are *Langston Mercutio* for En’t’s sake.”

Langston pulls his hand back, furrowing his brow and taking his spectacles off, thumbing the bridge of his nose. “I know, I know. Famous bard and poet, I should have a million tales to tell. Gods know that’s what my earlier work makes it look like.”

He puts his spectacles back on and looks out towards the street. “I can’t help but feel like I have this weight of expectation on me. A sort of ‘*Langston you are so skilled at telling stories, you must have a few of your own*’. Truth is, Ryl, I don’t. I was so invested in telling the stories of others I forgot to make my own. At this point I keep asking the question: Who is Langston but a vessel for others?”

They sit quiet in the empty café. Rain hits the window arrhythmically. The clock on the wall ticks on, keeping the silent moment between the two anchored to time. In those ticking seconds, years pass.

Langston places his hand back on the coffee. “I’m sorry, I know you are trying to help.”

“Don’t give me any of that shit.”

Langston looks back at the now furious Samryla with a look of extreme confusion.

“Langston, you have travelled the world. You’ve seen volcanos and deserts, jungles and tundra. I refuse to believe the horseshit that you are trying to sell me now. I have never left the city, never stepped foot from the streets of S-Heights, but I know I have stories to tell.”

Samryla stands up, gesturing with her hands.

“You have told me these stories! The yeti that chased your party, the time you stole from a dragon hoard. Hells, you must remember the time we first met.”

Langston blushes, before staring into page. Samryla smiles and sits back down.

“You have so much going on in that bushy head of yours. Even if you are running out of whatever powers that automata up there- “

“Coffee” Langston interjects, smiling weakly and taking a sip of the coffee.

“EVEN IF you are running out of whatever powers your brain, I know you can produce something amazing with those last drops. You haven’t failed yet.”

Langston smiles broadly, looking at Samryla while fidgeting with his mug. A sudden jolt runs through his body as he feels her hand wrap around the mug, barely touching his fingers with light grazes. The moment lasts what feels like a lifetime, his thoughts rushing in like a flood. They crash around him as he restrains a symphony in his head, a deluge of rhyme and rhythm that yearns to break free from my mind.

Before he could let this poetry take form, Samryla rips the coffee from his hands and takes a massive swig of it. In less than a second, she spits the coffee onto the linoleum while wiping her mouth. As she stands up next to the booth, trying to excise the taste from her mouth, Langston doubles over in the booth with crippling laughter.

Samryla tries to step down the stairs to the water pitcher but stumbles and nearly topples the glass onto the floor. After successfully washing it from her mouth, she gasps for air and

decisively states “En’t above Langston how the hells do you drink that? It tastes like a Fire Golem is punching you in the teeth.”

Langston shrugs while Samryla rampages in the background, ranting about the taste. As she describes her fuming hatred for his coffee order, he smiles and turns back to his page, writing across the top in large lettering *A Poet’s tale of Salts and Samryla*.

He leans over the page, dipping his pen into the well and furiously writing onto the page, dashing line after line onto what had been empty canvas. As he focuses intently on the story, he begins to take small and quick sips from his coffee.

Samryla manages to cool her tounge, gazing back to see Langston in his furor, churning out his art. “Someone got their lightning bolt.”

Langston gives her a thumbs up, and mutters “Thank you, muse.”

Samryla blushes, her milky eyes going wide. She shakes her head, walking back to the front with a goofy smile framing her face. “Muse...” She whispered.

Langston’s quill formed a rhythm against the rain, creating a symphony of rhyme and rhythm.

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A few hours past. Afternoon light filters in through the clouds, and the rain has ceased its beating on the windows of the diner. The golden light paints glowing streaks across the linoleum like an artist’s paint spilling onto the canvas.

Langston walks back up to the front counter, shyly sliding a set of folder papers onto the counter. The sound of shuffling paper causes Samryla to turn around, gazing down at the set of papers with surprise.

“Wow, uh, I’ve never seen you write that much during a single day. You here for another shot of dragon piss? Get that lightning bolt moving again?”

Langston nervously chuckles, scratching the back of his neck. "No, uh, I'm here to give you my... piece."

Samryla's pointed ears perk up, as she reaches down to the paper. "Your piece?"

"Just please read it."

Samryla unfolds it, a smirk on her face. "*A Poet's tale of Salts and-*" Samryla's face flashes purple, her ears flaring back and her eyes widening with surprise. She reads on, slowly flipping through the papers and scanning each line.

As Samryla continues, flashes of poetry jump out at her. Colorful descriptions of coffees well-made, recounting of emotions and thoughts that swarm Langston's head. Vivid descriptions of his views on the papers subject. Vivid descriptions of her.

She whispers. "You... wrote this?"

Langston stammers out "Y-yes! I mean, yeah. It took a bit but... there it is."

She stands there quiet for a moment, before cracking a wide goofy grin. "You know Langston, there are easier ways to ask a girl out."

Langston's eyes widen, before responding "W-what? I mean-"

Samryla lets out a loud chuckle, before leaning over the counter and giving Langston a kiss on the cheek, stuffing the folded papers into his front cloak pocket.

"You know Langston, you used to be so smooth. For a human, I mean."

Langston held his hand against his cheek, red flushing his face.

Samryla leaned onto the counter. "How about this. You come in again tomorrow at 8, and we'll have coffee." She smiles, turning back to the coffee machine. "Oh, and I guess I can try that dragon piss you like so much again. Maybe it'll grow on me."

Langston steps back from the counter, smiling. "Yeah, that would be great."

He pulls his cloak over his head again, and rushes from the counter. As he bursts through the door of the café, he waits till it closes fully with the telltale ring. After it closes, he lets out a loud holler and pumps his fist in the air, cheering and congratulating himself. He turns back around to see Samryla still watching him, giggling to herself.

He collects himself, clearing his throat and walking away quickly. He plays with the paper in his pocket, the taste of his coffee still on his tongue.