

Oceanside Picnic In Paradise

By: A.X. Bueno

I've been looking forward to this all week. It's not too often visitors come around here, much less recurring ones. I'll have to go on land for both of them which is something else that doesn't happen too often but honestly it's more than worth it even if I have to do a little extra preparation. I grab my carved scallop comb and comb my head fur into the right shape, making sure my skin is clean which can be hard because of how rough it is being half shark, brushing my teeth mostly for fresher breath and then grabbing some dark blue shorts, a beige polo shirt with tiny green turtles on it(both protected in airtight plastic) along with dark brown sandals. Then I go about bottling up some surrounding water to stay hydrated, grabbing my kelp basket and putting some goodies I scavenged from around in it.

Feeling as ready as I can be, I swim away from the coral reef near the cave I call home up to the surface in no time and leave the ocean behind me. I comb my head fur again, put on my clothes discreetly behind a palm tree and then I set down my sandals to put them on before doing so while my kelp basket sits on a previously airtight bagged towel and then I try to shake some of the salt water off me before grabbing the basket again and stuffing all the airtight plastic bags inside one another for use later. Then I proceed to sit down and wait for about 10 minutes before I hear the familiar flap of two separate pairs of large wings. I turn around to see a regular colored lion with a tan mane trimmed kind of short for his species, a pair of bright white angel wings, a red shirt with an orange collar, a black wristwatch and denim shorts. Along with him is the other winged figure, a big gray rhino with his noticeably chipped smaller horn just above his undamaged bigger one, a beige shirt with some tropical looking fish on it, green camo pants, and a blue cap that covers his black head hair. Both of them are smiling happily as they stop flying and softly arrive on the ground next to me and then the lion, Keith, approaches me first with Wade, the rhino right beside him.

"Whew, finally made it! I forgot how hard it can be to actually spot this island from sometimes even from the air. So how've you been Andos? We didn't keep you waiting too long did we? I know you like to be early." Keith says as he comes over to ruffle my head fur with Wade again just behind him looking ready to give a warm hug.

"Hey Wade and don't worry about it dude, it was like 10 minutes tops. I've been good by the way, how about the both of you?"

"Been good. Was helping a navy vessel earlier in nearby waters that was being battered and driven off its route by some rogue waves find its way again. That's part of why we took a few minutes longer getting here."

“I was helping deal with a fire that was burning through an apartment building somewhere much farther away. Helped put it out and saved a couple of people who needed saving, then me and Keith managed to meet up on the way and came as fast as we could. Helping people may keep us busy but I know I could never miss making it here for these picnics”

“Same here, Wade. They’re always amazing and just the kind of break we need” Keith says with a nod

“Well I’m flattered that you enjoy spending time and relaxing here with me on this little island. You wanna see what goodies I’ve brought with me this time?”

“Always!” They say it in sync and then Keith is the one who speaks by himself. “Then aside from what we’re bringing to the table we’ve got something special to share with you too. You know, once you’re done sharing of course.”

“Okay then” I reach into my kelp basket and pull out two things to start with, one for each of them and each hand. They eagerly hold out their own hands and I put the gifts in them and wait for reactions.

“Woah! This necklace is awesome! Where’d you find it? It looks ancient.” Keith says admiring my find for him, running his fingers along the pure although slightly rusted gold chain in his plush brown padded paws.

“These coins will be a fantastic edition to my collection! Thank you so much, Andos!!” Wade exclaims while looking over the paw full of coins before flipping one of them in the air, it lands on the tails side which has a tiny image of a deer on guard leaning against some old castle wall.

“Glad you both like them. I got them both from the wreckage of a sunken ship pretty close by that has a lot of spots to catch unwary fish. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to find things to impress you two given everywhere you’ve been as... what are your roles in heaven’s hierarchy again? I ask genuinely, they keep having to tell me their roles but when they do it never sticks for some reason.

“You’d be surprised. Heaven can be sparse on things depending on where you are and doesn’t really have let you have many worldly possessions up there anyway and Hell doesn’t really have much good stuff and what I would be able to take from there... wouldn’t actually be tasteful if you know what I mean.” Keith says while adjusting his wristwatch before looking at me again while he finishes.

“I can't...exactly say I do... having never been to either place but I think I get what you're saying.” I say while rubbing a paw behind my head, sometimes they unintentionally remind me of just how different the worlds we come from really are, the heavens and the ocean.

“Glad you get what I'm saying because I'd hope you're not ready for either place just yet. Also our official positions are Warriors of God and reborn angels in that order but you don't need to worry about those, you're our friend. No need for formal or fancy titles when we're just hanging out together. So can we tell you our surprise now?” Wade asks while almost shaking with anticipation.

“Good to know and hold on! I've still got a couple more things to share. Like these!” I say excitedly while reaching into my bag and pulling out a conch shell, two sand dollars, and some pearls to hand to both of them. Then I pull out the main thing I got for them

“Oh my goodness! All this stuff and then you keep on giving with this feast's worth of fish filets. What kind are they?” Keith asks, staring at the bottom of the basket I'm tilting so he can see the main haul of the gift and also probably the main course. He then wipes away a spot of drool off his thick bottom lip.

“It's mostly yellowfin tuna but there's also a few filets of flounder and halibut along with a few crabs scattered in there too. I had to spend a good amount of time hunting these down but it's more than worth it for great friends like you two. Whatever bit of extra work I have to do is worth it for such great company though I wouldn't mind getting a divinely cooked crab as repayment.” I lay on the charm but add a wink to show I'm not being serious with that last sentence but more teasing and joking around. Whenever I give them food from the ocean we usually share a bit of it anyway before they take the rest with them.

“Hmm, we'll have to see if you're not full from my sandwiches or Wade's famous potato salad. So can we tell you our news now??”

“Umm maybe I should give the news since I was the one who made the move. You are done, right? I can give it now, Andos?”

“Yeah, I'd say I'm done”

“Great! Then I'll let you give the news babe.”

“Thanks Keith. So the news is... me and Keith are going to be married in a few months! I decided to propose to him and he said yes, so we're engaged!!”

“Woah, That’s-That’s fantastic news! A really wonderful surprise! When did you pop the question?”

“Almost three weeks ago. I’ve been looking forward to telling you for a little while along with Keith here but there’s no rest for the weary... or the resurrected dead in our case but anyway...yeah. Me and Keith are gonna have our wedding soon and wanted to ask before we dig in if you’d be up for the role of ringbearer?”

“Seriously!? Of course I’d be up for that!! What about your family though or some other friends? I’d imagine they’d be a little disappointed that one of them didn’t receive the honor.”

“...Uhh the thing is... not all of them took the revelation of our heavenly second chance well. To actually come back from the grave naturally shocked almost all the folks that we told... badly and there’s still people out there we’ve never attempted to reconnect with because of that. The shock can be too much for most and the last thing we want is for anyone to die suddenly because of us, even if it means them thinking we’re still dead.” The lion’s ears and mane droop a little as he says that and Wade is rubbing a thick hand behind his head before a light comes back to his eyes.

“Ooh! Did I ever tell you the story of my coming back to life?”

“Ummm... not that I can remember though Keith told me the story of how he did and you did tell me the story of how you died to begin with. You never really talked about how you came back and I never really got around to asking.”

“Would you like to hear the story while we get to eating?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.” I say as a picnic basket appears from behind Wade’s back and a Cooler also appears from behind Keith’s who offers me a soda, raspberry flavored, my favorite.

I take the soda and take a sip as we all pick a spot to sit, under this wooden tent in almost the exact center of the shore area we’re at. It looks made for tourists and like it hasn’t been touched in years but Keith snaps his padded fingers and while it doesn’t come to look like new by any stretch all the vines and dust on it are gone along with some of the more dangerous looking scars in its frame, the kind that jut out in a way that’ll cut you if you’re not careful. There’s also two towels now just laying there for us to sit on and Wade and Keith do immediately, they know to trust their own abilities. I sit down too as Wade uses some loose wood that’s lying around and his hand, making a circle gesture with it which makes the wood ignite into flames. Creating the perfect fire for sitting around as well as cooking which I just know we’ll start doing any minute. In the meantime we move closer to the fire and start digging in and chatting.

“So you already know how I died, protecting a kid from gunfire during war times, got sent to the fifth circle of Heaven that’s on Mars for my faith and good deeds, Keith met me up there later on, etcetera, etcetera. So the thing about God is that he feels pretty bad when his ‘children’ die, especially when they die young or through an act of noble sacrifice like I suppose I did. Granted I felt I was just doing my soldierly duty but still God feels bad when our lives get cut short and so he’ll give second chances to those who he feels deserve one. After a while of adjusting to Heaven, getting to spend *quality* time with Keith up there God gets around to choosing both me and Keith along with others to be sent back as some of his reborn warriors. So... **gulp**... hang on a second” Wade takes a break to take a sip of orange soda and I take a sip of my raspberry one while also taking the chance to grab a ham and cheese sandwich from the cooler.

“So Keith sadly came back from an unmarked grave because of where and how he died but while my death was also gruesome it happened more in plain sight so they decided to send my body back home where I got the whole fallen warrior treatment from what I saw.”

“I can confirm. Couldn’t make it to your funeral back home but we definitely honored you as a fallen hero on base and your dad told me all about your funeral proper, even sent a few photos since he knew our bond and that I couldn’t make it thanks to still being deployed at the time. It was the tragic and heartfelt service of a hero from what he told me. Shame I didn’t get the chance to visit your grave or your family again before I died too.” Keith interjects while cooking some of the crabs I brought with me, moving them around on some kind of tray just above the fire as a half eaten sandwich sits on a table that I don’t think was there before.

“Well it’s good to know for sure what happened. You don’t need to feel guilty though for missing the service or not visiting sooner, regardless I know I’ve always been your angel.” Wade sends a wink Keith’s way and Keith sends a smile back. I hope to find the kind of love someday where I can make sappy jokes to whoever I’ll come to love like they do.

“You know it, my eternal light”

“Yeah. Hmm... now where’d I leave off?” Wade scratches his broad gray chin and takes a sandwich of his own, a BLT.

“You were on the part about being buried back home and about to get to the part at the graveyard after being sent back.”

“Right, right. Thanks darling. So... anyway I got a hero’s treatment thanks to what I did happening in plain sight and got buried in a cemetery close to home with a nice gravestone

which I almost smashed right into as I was falling back to Earth after God sent me back, throwing me out of that cross I was part of back on Mars-

“Cross on Mars? Also you fell back to Earth?” I can’t help but interject with this stuff so above my head and Wade simply chuckles before slapping his forehead.

“*Heh heh*. I shouldn’t just throw complicated things like that out there at you and expect you to understand them with so little context. The cross on Mars is the fifth circle of heaven where warriors of faith and god go after we die, where god puts us and we just kind of stand there while also being in god’s presence which happens to be its own circle of heaven. I think me and Keith already explained it to you before and it’s a bit of a big, complicated concept so let’s move on. All you need to know is that me and Keith were there for a while and only got *closer* while we were there.” Wade looks at Keith with a mischievous or maybe flirty look which makes Keith wink and Wade’s gray cheeks get a little pink as I feel like I’m missing something... again. Wade clears his throat with a thick, pronounced *a-hem* and then gets back on track with his explanations or so I think.

“... As I was there at that cross along with plenty of other warriors of god and of course Keith for I’m not entirely sure how long because of how time works differently in heaven but I know it was a while. God decides to send both me and Keith back for our second chances and that means falling back to Earth. I know you’re wondering why we fall back to earth when given a second chance instead of coming back in a less dramatic way like being teleported back or something but I’ve learned that when it comes to the ways of god some things are better left unknown.”

“Seriously? But he brought you back, shouldn’t that kind of knowledge come with the experience?” I say as I go for another drink and Wade finishes his sandwich with a final **chomp**.

“You’d think so but there are things even angels can’t know or divulge and secrets god will keep eternally. So back on topic the fall was not as rough as you’d think. I still remember it clearly, like the steep drop of one of those water log rides at a theme park; painless, that sinking feeling in the whole of your body, over before you know it and there’s a wet splash that you somehow walk away from wet but somehow drier than you thought you would. I didn’t wind up walking away right off the bat so much as punch my way... right out of my coffin! Now that was a rough experience with my fingers still reforming their skin and all but by the time I actually got my fist through that thick wood my skin had finished healing back up. Of course a gray fist even if it’s free of decay and a rhino’s is still a uniquely terrifying sight and I ended up scaring the owl on night watch dude. His eyes, it shouldn’t be funny but I still laugh when I think about how wide and goofy looking they got from fear. Thankfully I managed to get him to calm down.”

“How’d you manage to do that?” I ask as Wade goes for another sandwich.

“A bit of angelic charm and a lot of convincing that I really wasn’t some kind of zombie, *ahhehe*.” Wade says while wiggling his fingers to make sparks and my cat eyes become mesmerized.

“That angelic charm isn’t going to save you from me seeing you grab that second sandwich when the main course is done, sweetheart. Come on and grab some real food, guys.” Keith says cheekily while gesturing to both of us as he takes some piping hot food off the grill and onto some nice plates and metal containers that he already set on the table.

“You got it babe. Let’s eat Andos!” Wade rushes to the table and I follow after him at my own pace, not bothering to truly try and keep up.

In the containers are generous amounts of crab, potato salad, more traditional salad with lettuce and onions and tomatoes, and freshly grilled vegetables like corn and peppers. Next to the plates are cold water bottles on one side and napkins and utensils on the other, it’s perfect. The three of us grab and then pile up our plates and start eating this picture perfect lunch. The conversation starts flowing more smoothly like the butter sauce that I guess was also somewhere in Wade and Keith’s picnic basket. We’re in the middle of eating and talking about the ships that typically pass by this island when Keith catches me off guard with a question while I’m cracking open a crab leg.

“So **-munch-** Andos how’s your mom doing? Is she still busy looking for love along the coast?”

“Well uhh it’s been a few days since I last talked to her but last I did she said she was still ‘fishing for good husband material.’ She’s somewhere in the middle of the east coast, I think Tennessee is where she was heading.” I rub my paw along my dark gray headfur as I do my best to recall that phone call between me, my mom and one of my sisters who happened to be with her.

“Ha! Good for her.” Keith almost shreds his luckily empty water bottle with his claws wrapped around it as he laughs.

“Yeah. She told me she hasn’t had much but is having a good time down there with two of my sisters along for the ride though she tends to send them away when she sees a... potential catch of the day.”

“What about your other sister and your brother? What are they up to?” Wade asks while wiping a smudge of potato salad off his larger horn.

“My brother actually stopped by for a visit just the other day, he’s doing okay, still swimming and catching his share of fish nearby. I’m not sure how my other sister is doing, it’s been a few weeks since we last spoke but last we talked she told me she was doing okay though her little ice cream shop isn’t doing too good from what she told me.”

“Oh, well I’m sorry to hear she’s not doing too well business wise but at least your family is doing well for the most part.”

“I guess so. It can be hard to keep track of family and how they’re doing when everyone’s so scattered and always on the move. My mom doesn’t even have a drop of shark in her and yet she never stops but some of us cats just have that kind of energy I guess.”

“Some of us are chill, others have that zoom energy and they never stop, or it switches off and on for them. I have to imagine your dad is more active though right? Most sharks never stop moving.” Keith asks while making a swimming motion with his paw.

“Typically yeah. That’s why he left and it’s... been a really long time since I’ve seen him. I mean he tried to stay still for our sakes; my mom, my siblings and me but in the end he couldn’t do it and left me things like my spots and gills but not much else.” I rub one of my paws over the other hoping I didn’t make this conversation too heavy.

“Oh gosh, I’m so sorry! I forgot you told me that for a minute. I know how uncomfortable talking about that can be. I never really got to know my father either... he left when I was very young, too young to remember him.” Now Keith is looking nervous with both his paws now clasping his legs and some sweat beads appearing on the dark yellow fur on his forehead.

“Ohh. I-I had no idea.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m the one who’s apologizing since I brought it up to begin with.”

“Besides I think we all have a bit of baggage from our parents so none of us are trying to open those wounds intentionally. Even before my death I had a relationship with my mom that was... strained for years, we barely spoke and I couldn’t really see her and vice versa. I know that’s not quite the same but like I said there’s baggage there.” Wade says while looking down at his plate like he’s lost in sad thoughts.

“I see. Sooo... did you both pick the venue yet or...?” I ask to try and change the subject, not expecting to have brought down the mood this much by answering a few casual questions and with two guys who have literally been to hell and back.

“I think we have, actually! We’ve narrowed it down to about two-” Keith starts getting excited but is cut off by Wade.

“Three, we’ve narrowed it down to three places. I still think you gave up on the park too soon.” Wade corrects him.

“Well we’ve still got time to see about that. I know you want a more outdoorsy style wedding but we’ll figure out how to make this all work.”

“I’m not too worried about if it’ll work, I’m confident we’ll make it work. I just don’t want the experience leading up to the wedding to be rushed or stressful, I want us to consider each other’s wants and needs. It took dying to make me realize how much I cared about you, missed you till you joined me in heaven and I’d die all over again if I ended up making us both miserable.” Keith grabs Wade’s paw with his own to comfort him as Wade finishes putting his thoughts out there and then he starts talking too.

“I don’t want you to have doubts... to have worries like that. You make me happy just by being you, I want you to know that. I love you, I always have. I just didn’t take the time to realize while I was alive. You’ve been the one making the first moves but I don’t want you to feel like I can’t make moves on my own or that you need to take on the pressure of making all the moves or the first move every time. I’m here for you too, we’re a duo, a damn fine duo.” Keith says as his paw goes away from Wade’s own to start gently rubbing his back, they start to lean each other like they’re about to kiss but then they both look back to see I’m still here.

“.... *Ahehehe*... We sure are. Sooo I’m glad we had this talk. Let’s keep the conversation going or at least let’s get back to eating, I’m still hungry.” Wade is now the one trying to nervously lighten the mood back up after all that but I don’t say anything about it and instead pick my fork and knife back up and Wade and Keith do the same.

Soon enough we’re back to talking about more trivial things like where Wade bought his cap or where Keith got his watch or how the purple of my ears, tongue and some of my spots mainly comes from my dad. It’s a fact about me that surprises almost everybody since few would think a bill shark could be purple but he definitely was from the vague memories I have and the photos I’ve seen. We continue to eat while we talk and then just continue talking when the foods we intended to eat is done, for at least another hour. Things are peaceful and pleasant till the light of halos starts to burn brighter than usual on Wade’s first then Keith’s and they both have a look of disappointment on their faces.

“*Sigh* I can’t believe it’s already time to get back to work, it’s easy to lose track of time when you’re enjoying a good time with a friend. Still, duty calls so we’ve got to get going but we’ll see

you again soon, Andos.” Keith is already hovering off the ground as he says goodbye, stirring up some sand with his wings but not enough for it to be a problem.

“We’ll call you when we’re free to meet up again. Just check the phones and keep your clothes clean and dry. Till then catch ya later.” Wade says as he and Keith fly out of sight meeting up halfway in the sky to hold paws as they vanish out of sight. Before they do though I just barely catch one of them whisper “can’t believe you really said all that...what do we...” and while my hearing might be pretty great I can’t determine which one of them said that or the rest of that sentence.

“Okay... talk to you both soon then! I’ll keep an ear out for that next call!” I shout to the sky unsure if they heard me but the odds are strong they both did.

This is how our meetups typically end, them flying away to do warrior angel stuff and me heading back into the ocean to wait till next time. Waiting for them to call and tell me when they’re coming, for a picnic like today or sometimes other things like bowling or whatever they can make time for. I look to see the stuff they made and brought like the table, plates, cooler, soda cans gone leaving no mess to clean up and just my now mostly empty kelp basket and plastic bags for my clothes behind for me to take back. I do just that, taking off my clothes and shoes before resealing them in the airtight bags they were in previously, preserving them once again till next time and after I do that I grab my basket and return to my home in the water. With this picnic in paradise over I leave this island behind preferring my underwater home overall though I know I’ll be back on shore in due time.