

Writer's Block

Horace closed his journal with a frustrated scowl. Its blank pages were begging to be filled, but the badger believed nothing spectacular had transpired in the past few weeks – if not the entire month. The closest past event that had any semblance of an adventure was when he encountered some interesting travelers one winter afternoon. He made friends with a diverse group consisting of a youthful, energetic bunny named Barnaby, an upbeat squirrel lady named Twiss, and a witty rat lad named Mercurio. The group desperately needed to find a place to stay the night while a snowstorm was imminent. They almost had to pile into Horace's place as a last resort, but were fortunate enough to find a quaint tavern just in time.

Although that night was one to remember, the quest paled in comparison to Horace's prior escapades. The badger knight used to fearlessly march throughout the kingdom of Armello with the goal of bringing peace to the land. It was once a frightening, perilous place for anyone who dared to venture outside its settlements. Horace's journal highlighted his heroic deeds, but he made sure to log any blunders for the sake of honest record-keeping.

It felt like years since Horace needed to traverse Armello's vast plains, eerie swamps, or treacherous highlands. The kingdom was no longer enshrouded in darkness with its central castle surrounded by an ominous purple fog. Nowadays, Horace kept busy conducting patrols around Blueberry Town, where he resided. His fellow guards were almost like family as he rarely took a day off from his line of work. He would be teaching others combat lessons whenever he wasn't on patrol duty. Horace was busy with neither of those tasks as he sat before a marble table back home. He thought he could unwind for the day, and perhaps write something interesting, but was having no luck so far.

Horace headed to the entryway of his humble abode and reached for a container that was in the shape of an acorn. It was a gift he had received the morning after the unexpected winter adventure, and it housed a few dice belonging to each of the friends he met. Horace rolled the dice from the container into an open palm as he considered paying one of his pals a visit.

First, he recalled Twiss mentioning her forest life in Cedar Vale while examining an “Oaken Glory” die that was gifted to him. It was certainly a manageable walk to the quiet woodland village, but there was no guarantee she would be bored at home much like himself.

Horace tumbled Twiss' die back in the container to study the remaining two dice. He took a quick look at a yellow die gifted by Barnaby, and a dark red one from Mercurio. Barnaby's whereabouts were unknown to Horace, so Mercurio was his last option. Luckily, he knew Mercurio ran a tavern called “The Grinning Blade” since he was conducting an ingredient run for it during his visit to Blueberry Town. He also remembered the fellow handing him a coupon for a free drink at the place, when the two parted ways.

The bored badger figured taking a trip to Arrowrest was better than trying to wrestle his writer's block. He wondered if Mercurio's coupon was still in his possession, and found it safely tucked away at the bottom of the container. Horace's simple blue tunic featured a small chest pocket, so he secured the slip into it before searching for something else. He retrieved

two gray dice from his collection and dropped them into a pocket of his equally basic slacks. He figured they would be a suitable, small gift before he left Mercurio's place. Finally, Horace made his way out the door to take the rare trip beyond Blueberry Town.

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Mercurio was spending his morning right where Horace had hoped. The workaholic rat was shining a glass with a cloth although it appeared to be already spotless. It was apparent Mercurio was having a dull day similar to Horace. In addition, the lad had hours to kill before he would be serving drinks and chatting with his regulars. He was completely zoning out when he heard some rhythmic knocking at his door.

"Who could that be?" Mercurio snapped out of his trance and rushed to the door.

Mercurio tried to muster up a guess as to who might be visiting him, but came up empty handed. He couldn't recall anything out of the ordinary happening at the tavern, so he decided to greet whoever it was with a smile. His eyes met nothing but a deep blue tunic when he flung the door open. The gentlerat tipped his chin upwards, and nearly had to take a step back to see his tall guest's face.

"Good morning, Mercurio." Horace's brown eyes eventually met with Mercurio's uniquely light brown, almost orange ones as the shorter fellow looked up at him.

"Ah! Horace!" Mercurio greeted warmly. "It's a pleasant surprise to have you stop by. Please, come on in!"

"I'm glad you're not out and about today." Horace let out a relieved sigh as he entered Mercurio's place. "I wouldn't know what to do with myself otherwise."

"Oh, is that so?" A curious Mercurio asked while rushing back to the main counter.

"I have a day off from my typical guard duties and combat training classes," Horace explained. "I have been spending my morning struggling to come up with something interesting to write about."

"Ah, I see." Mercurio idly inspected a mug as Horace seated himself.

"How has your day been?" Horace asked.

"I've been alright, but I'm afraid I don't have any interesting stories to bring up that could help inspire you." Mercurio spoke while removing his fancy silken vest since he didn't need to look spiffy just yet.

"Don't worry about it." Horace patted his knees while taking a look around the tavern. He felt he was already interfering with Mercurio's day whereas Mercurio was more than happy to have him over.

"Maybe a refreshing drink will get the creative juices flowing," Mercurio suggested. "Would you like me to mix you something while you're here?"

"Actually, I do have this on me." Horace reached into a front pocket of his tunic and presented his coupon for a free drink.

"Wow, is that what I think it is?" Mercurio held both ends of the piece of scrap paper as he examined it thoroughly. "I can't believe you held onto this silly thing all winter. It's delightful to be reminded of that night."

“It was the perfect excuse to pay a visit to someone,” Horace shrugged.

“Well, you can always come to The Grinning Blade anytime you'd like, my pal.”

Mercurio flashed his signature grin at the badger, making it difficult for Horace to tell if the clever rat was merely buttering him up for his business. In actuality, Mercurio was simply being playful towards a stoic Horace. He could tell Horace was a little suspicious of his intent, so he cleared up the confusion by speaking up.

“In all honesty, I'd welcome a friend like you to a free drink with every visit.” Mercurio's muzzle displayed a gentle, more genuine smile after reaching for a glass. “Now, sit back and help yourself to whatever your heart desires.”

“I'd like a Grinning Blade's Delight, please,” Horace requested without hesitation.

Mercurio seemed to light up with excitement as Horace asked for the drink. It was something he had mixed for Horace on the same night he had scribbled up the coupon for his newfound friend. The rat drummed on the counter a few times with his index fingers while his tail swished joyously.

“One Grinning Blade's Delight coming riiiiight up!” Mercurio announced.

Mercurio got right down to business and gathered the necessary ingredients. He began by mixing some blackberry juice with a hint of plum juice together, but turned his back to Horace to add the remaining parts of the beverage. He snickered quietly, keeping his special concoction a secret to his friend.

“All done!” Mercurio revealed two glasses. One for Horace and one for himself.

“Thank you.” Horace nodded and accepted a glass.

“To our friendship,” Mercurio decided to perform a quick toast while raising his glass off the counter.

“Indeed, to friendship.” Horace also raised his glass.

Mercurio and Horace clinked their glasses together, then took a swig of their drinks. Mercurio remembered the first time Horace gave the cocktail a try, and hoped he had mixed it better this time around. However, Horace's expression didn't seem to change one bit. Mercurio could tell that the badger's slump in creativity was bugging him, so he decided to make it his mission to cheer his friend up. Mercurio broke the awkward silence with the snap of a gloved finger.

“It may come as no surprise to you, but I live right above my wonderful, lavish tavern here,” Mercurio said with a cheesy smile. He oversold his place in an attempt to make Horace crack a smile just like his.

“Ah, is it a cozy place up there?” Horace responded.

“I can show you around if you'd like,” an eager Mercurio said. “I even brought in a new addition to my room. I can't wait to show it off to someone.”

“My curiosity has been piqued,” Horace notified Mercurio before guzzling down the remainder of his beverage.

“Great!” Mercurio also chugged his drink, then rose to his feet. “Let's just hang out for a little while. That's what days away from work are for, right?”

Mercurio chuckled and was more lively than ever, but Horace still seemed so-so. The rat had no worries though, being confident that Horace's spirits would lift upon spending time with him a little longer. Horace tailed behind Mercurio up a rickety spiral staircase and had to duck under the door frame to enter his bedroom.

"Make yourself at home," Mercurio said cheerfully as Horace began to take in his undeniably small, yet cozy living space.

Horace poked around with his hands behind his back, eyeing various items Mercurio had on display. Some looked like genuinely expensive antiques while others probably just held sentimental value to Mercurio. The badger seemed completely out of his element, and did not know how to relax as Mercurio had suggested.

"Here's what I've been dying to show folks," Mercurio grinned while patting an armrest on a chair that loosely resembled a throne fit for a king. "Go ahead, have a seat."

"Interesting choice of furniture," Horace commented as he approached the unusual "king's throne".

Horace backed his posterior into the cushion of the king's throne and rested his hands on its armrests. The seat let out an elongated squeak as the badger sat down. Horace eyed the sides of the throne and the floor below, wondering if it was even safe to sit down in.

"It's a bit old and squeaky, but it's a comfy spot right?" Mercurio inquired.

"Yes, I suppose it isn't a bad addition to the room after all," Horace answered.

Mercurio rubbed his chin, still trying to figure out the best way to boost Horace's mood. He then scampered over to a wooden trunk that was tucked in a corner of his room to fetch something specific from it. He knew Horace was an artsy fellow, and he basically sang him a lullaby when he was feeling restless during the night of the reunion. Mercurio felt he could return the favor by playing some music. Horace turned his head in time to see Mercurio victoriously holding up a mandolin. The fellow then quickly found a seat at the edge of his bed, facing the king's throne to play.

"How about a tune to liven the place up a bit?" Mercurio offered.

"Sure, that sounds pleasant." Horace closed his eyes in anticipation.

Horace felt somewhat awkward sitting in the silly throne, and he wasn't quite sure why Mercurio was being so solicitous towards him. Meanwhile, Mercurio took a deep breath and plucked one of the strings for the first time in a long, long time. Unsurprisingly, the instrument was terribly out of tune as a distorted twang filled the room. Horace opened one of his eyes to the sight of a frantic Mercurio trying to quickly tune the strings. Horace reclined in his seat, closing his eyes once more when his friend was ready to try again.

"Okay, for real this time," Mercurio snickered nervously.

"Twaaaang. Bink! Plink!" The mandolin was still out of tune by a long shot.

"Bane breath!" Mercurio cursed.

Horace opened his eyes and extended his arm towards the direction of an increasingly frustrated Mercurio. He snapped his fingers twice and waved them towards himself, urging

Mercurio to hand the instrument over. Mercurio obliged with a soft sigh, wishing he could have tuned it properly without any assistance.

"Let's see what we're working with here," Horace spoke up.

Horace examined the mandolin's front and back. The back of it had some scuffs and scratches in it, but it was merely cosmetic damage that had no effect on the instrument's performance. He did, however, notice a missing string.

"This old mandolin seems well-loved," Horace commented, admiring the item all the same. "Did you know you're missing a string here?"

"Ack, no I did not," Mercurio said as Horace waved a digit up and down the neck of the instrument to point out the missing high 'E' string.

"No worries, let's get these uncooperative strings to behave a bit, shall we?"

Horace began to him in his low baritone vocal range while repeatedly plucking the mandolin one string at a time. He easily made each string sound the way they should. It was almost as if the instrument was brand new.

"Ah, using your voice!" An impressed Mercurio said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Horace smirked at his pal before returning his attention to the instrument. Mercurio smiled as well, noticing a slight increase in Horace's mood. He wished he could have done it all on his own, though.

The badger was unsure what to play on the freshly-tuned mandolin. He did his best to recall a tune Mercurio would be familiar with, strumming a few notes of a popular song among the Rat Clan. Horace was primarily a writer and bookworm, with music not exactly being his forte, but he played what he could remember with a fair amount of skill. Mercurio clapped appreciatively when Horace paused.

"I forgot how the rest of the song goes," Horace admitted as the last note he plucked resonated throughout the room for a few seconds.

"That was really good either way," Mercurio complimented his buddy.

Horace closed his eyes with a calm smile finally on his face as he continuously played the first three notes of the Rat Clan tune over and over. The two snickered as Horace was obviously just toying around with the mandolin. He plucked the notes forward and backwards in a rapid arpeggio, and the duo found themselves bobbing their heads to the sound it created. Coincidentally, the repetitious notes sounded like something way ahead of its time.

"I don't know where I'm going with this," Horace chuckled softly.

"That actually sounded pretty neat," Mercurio also laughed a bit. "I think I'll start practicing that pattern and maybe it'll catch on."

"Or maybe it'll give everyone headaches," an honest Horace replied back.

The room quieted down for a moment with Horace handing the stringed instrument back to Mercurio shortly after. Mercurio scurried over to the trunk to tuck the mandolin away, and returned to the edge of the bed. He felt as if Horace was feeling better out of sheer chance rather than by his own actions, but he was running out of ideas.

"Would you like me to fetch a snack for you downstairs?" Mercurio offered.

"Oh, I'm alright, but thanks for offering." Horace politely declined.

"Hm, how about we trade places?" Mercurio then suggested. "You probably had quite the long trek to get here. Why not rest your tired legs for a while?"

"That doesn't sound bad," Horace nodded and rose from the silly king's throne.

At first, Horace sat on the side of Mercurio's bed in the spot Mercurio had been sitting at. Since Mercurio seemed to encourage him to take a load off, he soon decided to ease the rest of himself onto the quilt, sprawling out on his back. He was unaware that his pal chose not to head to the chair. Instead, a pensive Mercurio stood close by.

"I'm here if ya need me, buddy."

One of Horace's feet received a few gentle pats as Mercurio's voice came from the foot of the bed. Horace let out a brief, puzzled "hm?" and propped his upper body up with his hands behind his back. His typical, serious expression was on his face as Mercurio stood frozen in mid-step.

Now he's done it. Mercurio smiled sheepishly at the quiet badger. He regretted conducting the overly-familiar gesture as a bead of sweat formed on the side of his head. He let out a soft sigh as he finished his current step. A defeated Mercurio was then about to head to his chair when Horace spoke up.

"Thank you," a grateful Horace said.

"F-for?" A still-worried Mercurio stammered. He spun around and headed back to the foot of the bed to face Horace.

"For your hospitality," Horace answered. The tall fellow tucked his knees to his chest to sit upright for a moment.

"D-don't mention it." Mercurio fidgeted with his fingers before fessing up to something. "Honestly though, I feel as though I've been failing miserably at cheering you up."

Horace let out a hearty laugh that was unsurprisingly as deep as his voice. He patted the side of the bed, beckoning his friend to have a seat next to him. Mercurio gladly headed over to crash rump-first beside the badger guy.

"My sour mood caused by my writer's block must have followed me all the way here, didn't it?" Horace realized. "I sincerely apologize about that."

"Oh, there's no need to say sorry," Mercurio understood Horace's frustration. "You must be really passionate about your work."

"Indeed I am," Horace nodded. "Now, if I may ask, why were you so determined to cheer this old knight up?"

Mercurio's typical devious, and almost annoyingly confident expression was missing while he looked up at Horace to answer his question. There was a more vulnerable look on his face as he decided to unveil his true emotions.

"Even though I exchange pleasantries with my regulars at my tavern, good friends like you, Barnaby and Twiss are hard to come by," Mercurio explained. "I just want to do my best to keep them by my side, that's all."

"I see." Horace gave Mercurio some comforting pats on his far shoulder. "It's wonderful that you care a great deal about your pals. Keep in mind that simply letting me into your place for the afternoon was more than enough."

"Thanks Horace," Mercurio rubbed the back of his neck. "To be honest, I was thrilled to see you again. Things have gotten pretty mundane, and you helped spice my day up."

"Boring old me spiced your day up?" Horace chuckled softly. "Perhaps your routine has been getting stale just like mine. However, Blueberry Town will be holding its springtime festival pretty soon. I'm looking forward to spending it with you and our other friends."

"Oh! When is that happening?" An eager Mercurio asked.

"In exactly two more weeks," Horace disclosed.

"Excellent, I can't wait for another change of pace that's for sure."

Horace and Mercurio snickered as they looked forward to the upcoming festivities with the same amount of enthusiasm. Even though it was only the second time the two had crossed paths, they felt as if they knew one another for years.

Mercurio looked over at Horace while he enjoyed the company in silence. The badger was sitting tall with his hands in his lap. Mercurio admired his calm friend almost like he was an older relative, and his arm began to gravitate towards his chum's back. Horace noticed Mercurio looking his way from the corner of his eye, and caught sight of the hovering hand before it made its landing. Horace decided to return a hand to Mercurio's far shoulder in return, letting his digits press into his friend's tunic for a moment.

"I'm such a sap," Mercurio said with a relaxed sigh. His hand rubbed up and down the back of Horace's shirt a few times in a caring manner.

"I'm certain you will make someone special really happy some day, though." Horace predicted. He delivered a light squeeze to his buddy's shoulder before returning his hands to his lap.

"Someone special." Mercurio repeated Horace's words.

The room fell silent, causing Horace to glance over at his friend. He caught sight of a daydreaming Mercurio, clutching his own tail while sporting a dopey expression. The charming fellow soon returned to reality, and the two shared a laugh when Mercurio realized Horace had been quietly watching him.

"Alright buddy, I should probably let you rest those tired legs of yours." Mercurio gave Horace's near shoulder some playful, rapid pats before finally standing up.

"We seem to be running out of topics to talk about, aren't we?" Horace pointed out as they had been simply lounging around for a while.

Mercurio agreed and merrily swooped over to his fancy chair. He swiftly vaulted over one of its armrests, causing the cushion below to let out a quick squeak once he was seated. Mercurio took a peek at Horace, who was already looking comfortable on his back with his eyes closed. Mercurio then prepared himself for a pleasant snooze by arching his back for a moment, then slouching lazily into his chair without a care.

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Horace was the first to wake from the refreshing afternoon nap. He sat up in Mercurio's bed feeling recharged and ready to face the rest of the day. The thought of blank pages on his table at home was no longer lingering in his mind. Instead, he felt a warmth inside him thanks to Mercurio's mission to cheer him up.

Horace slipped out of the bed, wondering what to do next as his buddy was still fast asleep. He felt it would be a bit rude to startle his friend awake, but quietly slinking out of the room didn't seem ideal either. After thinking over the dilemma for a minute or two, Horace headed over to Mercurio's trunk to fetch the mandolin. He plucked two 'D' notes, an 'F' and an 'A' to go along with each syllable of his friend's name.

“Wake up, Mer-cur-ee-oh.”

Mercurio let out a snort, and his foot twitched, but he remained asleep.

“Blast, he's a heavy sleeper isn't he?” Horace noted.

Suddenly, he heard a “hwuh?” followed by another foot twitch as Mercurio came to. The rat lad nearly fell out of the chair, but he managed to promptly grip the armrests to fix his posture. He sat up straight while rubbing his forehead for a second.

“Oh, hello there,” Mercurio said, immediately letting out a yawn afterwards.

“Sorry to wake you,” Horace bowed apologetically. “I figured it was the more polite thing to do as opposed to quietly tiptoeing out.”

“No worries!” Mercurio smiled, rising to his feet. “I feel so much better now.”

“I feel reinvigorated as well,” Horace said. “Thank you for treating me to this wondrous afternoon, by the way.”

“Thanks for stopping by, Horace.”

“Oh! I have something I'd like to give you. It's the least I can do since you made my day much more pleasant.”

“Aw shucks, I hope it's dice. I love dice.” Mercurio guessed as Horace reached for a small pocket that was stitched into the side of his slacks.

Horace nodded, revealing two dice in his open palm. An awestruck Mercurio plucked them from Horace's hand, appreciating the gift immensely. The items were visually similar, featuring white, easy-to-read symbols against an overall dark grayish finish. Mercurio knew the specific name of one of the dice as he held it between his thumb and index finger. He studied it with one eye open as he compared it to Horace's fur pattern.

“Wow, I never realized how well Iron Vein dice suit you,” Mercurio said with a grin. “What a great find. I've heard these are hard to come by.”

“Indeed, they are my favorite.”

“This other one is gorgeous too. Is that real gold flake around the symbols there?”

Mercurio palmed the Iron Vein die so he could point at the one in his other hand. It was darker than the former item, and featured intricate yellow swooshes and swirls around its symbols. He had never seen a die like it before.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Horace let out a quiet, amused chuckle.

“Thanks a bunch, I'll definitely cherish these and keep them safe.” Mercurio's tail swished happily as he pocketed the dice.

“It's nearing the end of the afternoon here,” Horace realized. “I should grab lunch and let you tend to your tavern business.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Horace's stomach let out a long growl as Mercurio finished his sentence, causing a slightly embarrassed Horace to put his hand on his tummy.

“Oh dear, pardon me,” Horace said.

“There's plenty of little shops in Arrowrests to fill up.” Mercurio stifled some giggling due to the perfect timing of the stomach growl. “Get yourself a heaping bowl of tasty noodles before heading home.”

“Excellent, I will definitely do that before making my way back to Blueberry Town.” Horace stretched with his arms in the air for a moment. “Alright, I'm heading out. I might visit Arrowrest again next week before the fun goes down in Blueberry Town.”

Mercurio nodded happily as he fell back into his chair. Something popped into his mind as Horace was just about to head out the door.

"Oh, one more thing." Mercurio suddenly perked up and held an index finger in the air.

"Yes, what is it?" Horace turned around.

"You'll be passing through Cedar Vale to get back to Blueberry Town, right?" Mercurio asked while making a walking motion with his fingers. "If you see Twiss, would you please tell her I said 'hi' for me?"

"Certainly." Horace smiled.

Mercurio smiled back, looking somewhat bashful due to the request. He found himself getting to his feet once Horace began heading down the spiral staircase. Mercurio figured he did enough lazing around for one afternoon, and would be tending to his tavern within an hour or so. Furthermore, he wanted to get the door for his pal.

Horace looked over his shoulder as he heard Mercurio's hasty footsteps, and nearly missed seeing him entirely as his friend whizzed by to beat him to the front door. Mercurio grinned proudly after putting his swiftness on display. Horace nodded appreciatively as Mercurio opened the door for him to head out.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening Horace.”

“Have a fantastic night as well Mercurio.”

Neither Horace nor Mercurio budged after saying their goodbyes. Instead, they snickered softly, knowing what was on each other's minds. Mercurio did his best to stand tall with his heels off the ground while Horace squatted down in order to make a quick hug possible between the two. Mercurio fell back onto his heels while Horace stood upright, and the two were finally ready to part for the day.

“Thanks for the dice!” Mercurio called out to Horace as he began his march to snag some lunch. He waved while his tail swayed happily from the pleasant afternoon.

“You're welcome, and don't forget the festival!” Horace reminded Mercurio, walking backwards for a moment.

A cheerful Mercurio returned inside to tend to his business once Horace was out of sight. Meanwhile, Horace followed his nose to an aromatic and cozy-looking noodle shop known as “The Wyld Tiger”. The establishment's owner, an energetic raccoon, quickly invited Horace to some outdoor seating and was eager to take the towering badger's order.

Horace was soon indulging in some flavorful noodles, and the raccoon was delighted to hear the hungry badger politely ask for a second helping. Horace then left a generous tip, as expected from him, when his belly was satisfied.

“Thanks very much, come again soon!” The raccoon clasped his hands together with a pearly white smile on display.

“That was delicious, I will certainly consider visiting again.” Horace smiled back.

Horace was prepared to head home although he wished he could have wandered around Arrowrest for a little longer. It definitely felt worth it to venture out of Blueberry Town every once in a while. The badger began his march towards Cedar Vale, remembering Mercurio's request if he encountered Twiss on the way home. It would certainly be delightful to chat with another friend before the night ended.

Arrowrest's sights and smells were replaced by less exciting surroundings, causing him to think about the journal on his table. Instead of dreading the empty pages, Horace was looking forward to jotting down various writing prompts to tackle. Perhaps he could write a fun short story, or maybe even take a crack at composing some music.

Horace began humming the tune he was playing back at Mercurio's. It dawned on him that he never mentioned exactly where he resided in Blueberry Town. Fortunately, he knew Mercurio could check his place out during the springtime festival, if he'd like. Barnaby and Twiss would be likely to attend, as well. Horace definitely looked forward to having a fun adventure with his favorite pals. He closed his eyes with a smile as a light breeze hit his fur.

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