

The Garden

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 3

@dressupgeekout

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Boss-squirrel and associate-skunk had just clocked out for lunch, food in paw in the damp, shadowy and impossibly narrow back alley they called “the garden.” No one could remember the origins of that inside joke, but they figured it probably was something that Joyce said several years ago. In reality, the alley had no name, just “the back” for several shops on Port Avenue. The alley wasn’t officially a one-way street, but in practice it certainly was, because it was barely wide enough for a single delivery truck to make its rounds. Joyce still didn’t believe Bisky’s report that she once witnessed two trucks going in opposite directions at high speed down the cobblestone street, practically a game of chicken.

They were both obligated to stand today, since it was too wet to sit on the stoop. Bisky desperately wanted to rest, but Joyce would have stood, anyway. The overhang of Carmen’s took up nearly half of the width of the alley, and so did that of the barber on the opposite wall, but somehow it still wasn’t enough to stop the rain from making everything in the garden appreciably miserable. Down the alley were the bats who worked at the bat restaurant, hanging from the ceiling of their overhang for their lunch break, their wings wrapped around themselves to preserve warmth. Bisky on the other paw needed her sweater.

Bisky pried open her container to reveal the leftover taskiak she prepared the other night. The aroma of octopus, sporzo from the family bakery, and sunflower sauce hung in the air for a moment. Indeed, it was the ultimate Mephitidae-an-Azuaverian meal. Comfort food. Meanwhile, Joyce defaulted to her two Alondras with a spinach pastry and a bottle of water from Carmen’s Coffee.

“Want one?” Joyce offered. Bisky declined politely.

The squirrel proceeded to the barber’s wall, while Bisky stayed on the stoop like she preferred. Joyce’s regular lunch, in stark contrast to Bisky’s highly

irregular one, prompted her to ponder out loud: “Seriously, though, babe, what’s up?”

Bisky was awkwardly rummaging through her bag for chopsticks while holding the taskiak in the other paw. She looked up. “I got like two hours of sleep.”

“Well, then, why?” Joyce cupped her paw to protect the lighter’s flame from the wind.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Click. “Yuh-huh.” The tip of her Alondra crackled.

“...It’s a skunk thing. We’re nocturnal.”

After Joyce finished her drag, she simply flashed that toothy, stupid grin. Bisky could hear the accompanying “heh, heh” in her head. She took a bite of taskiak. The octopus and sourdough sporzo was cold and rubbery and familiar in her mouth.

“Well, then, are you okay?”

“You asked me that already.”

“That was seven o’clock. It’s eleven now. Anything can happen.” She inhaled.

“Can’t change the world in four hours, boss.”

Exhaled. “Somebody’s world could have changed, though.” She inexplicably looked wiser while chasing clouds.

“I mean, yeah, I guess,” Bisky remarked.

Joyce took another drag in silence. She looked at her associate. “You don’t wanna come in on Saturday, do you?”

Saturday was Marlsay Day. “Ha, no,” she proclaimed. That was the most energetic she had been all day.

“What if I gave you tomorrow off? I’ll ask Suey to fill in for you. Go to fuckin’ sleep, babe. You’ll be good for Saturday.”

Bisky just mumbled in reply.

“I’ll be here,” Joyce said in the most reassuring tone she could manage, which was still raspy and monotone.

Being there for her friends was all that the shift leader wanted to do, but Bisky was acting extra strange today. She wondered how long she would have to keep that up. Turns out that it can be rather draining when you care so much about

someone else. Silently, Bisky decided the Saturday thing would be a net positive, and she smiled in earnest for the first time today at that prospect. But Joyce didn't notice, her eyes closed for taking an extra deep breath, lost in a cloud of Alondra.

Just another beautiful, rainy and stressful day in the garden. Micro-pressures everywhere. That's the life, isn't it? Five or six days a week at a café, where animals come to relax and treat themselves, but you're there working your tail off, the perpetual slog, fending off the morning rush, constantly cleaning the restroom, answering stupid questions from stupid animals ("No, you can't have a soy latte with oat milk!"), shielding yourself from the inevitable angry customer, sometimes it was your fault, but usually it's theirs — *that's* what friends are for: navigating the treacherous, uncharted waters of a comfortable café chain with its excellent couches (for customers only).

Aye.

Bisky wrinkled her nose. "Is that raspberry flavor?"

"Yuh-huh." She tossed the Alondra into a puddle, but stomped it out with her boot anyway. The splash traveled further than she intended. "Sweet, right? Fruity. That's how they get ya. Don't smoke, babe, it's bad for you."

"Aye-aye."

There it was. Normal Bisky slowly began to crystallize. Joyce was pleased, and felt warm inside. Or maybe it was the other cigarette she just lit.

"Do you have a favorite flavor? Something that just makes you feel good?" Bisky inquired.

Exhaled. "Raspberry."