

Honey and Harmony

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 5

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Julius Marlsay discovered music when he was seven years old.

For the first thirteen or fourteen years of his life, he actually didn't own any musical instruments. And neither did his parents, nor anyone else in the litter. They weren't even particularly musical. They just didn't have the time. Marlsay Senior laid bricks all day (this was some 150 years ago when it was easier to build buildings that way) and his mother must have been busy, too (there's not much we know about her — this was some 150 years ago when animals didn't care about the female of any species, even foxes).

The way the story is usually told, Julius first discovered the symphony when he and his parents were walking through town, shortly after moving to Port Sokuit from a nameless hamlet near present-day Baharitan, in the desert. His father probably did not find his bricklaying profession yet. It may have been Julius's very first stroll through downtown in any major city. We know from his well-preserved journals that he felt self-conscious being in the central plaza like that, because his family seemed to be the only beasts in the area who didn't wear fancy Stanyan hats and colorful taffeta scarves, or carry parasols or fashionable mustaches. Their splendor sparkled under the warm, golden lanterns hanging across the plaza, that "miniature lighthouse" variety particular to southern Azuaveria, which can still be found there to this day. But the lanterns also illuminated the foxes's drab, formless Baharitani clothes, brown and gray and dull.

"Huh, I guess we'll stay 'way from here, then," Marlsay Senior remarked.

So the plaza shone brightly in the night, but it was nowhere near as bustling as it would be shortly, because most beasts were politely watching and listening to the various shows in the four main performing arts venues which circled the plaza. Senior led them across the plaza to explore a hopefully more suitable part of

town. The other Baharitani folk obviously would not be found here.

But that's when Julius heard the music.

As the fox family pawed past the symphony hall, Julius could hear the orchestra through the back walls. It wasn't even all that muffled. He would later learn that Parsi Plumford was conducting the second movement of Tennekes's Symphony No. 9. And it was the most beautiful coincidence—if it were any passage other than that famous fortissimo coda, he might not have heard the music through the thick marble walls at all.

Being a young fox, his keen hearing could detect the tiniest of noises, but still, he had never heard anything like this. Nothing came close. Sure, he heard musical instruments making noise before—Baharitani pan pipes and tambourines and the like—but this was *magic*. How could such sweet sounds seep through marble walls like honey? Nothing can get through marble. Ordinarily, you have to carve it with a chisel and a mallet. But this stuff can penetrate stone and come out the other side. The entire back wall of the grand symphony hall was *dripping* with honey. He could nearly taste it. The harmonies compelled him to put his ears and his tongue against the building.

“Junior!”

Julius turned around. His tongue didn't really touch the wall, but he felt as though his dad caught him licking it like some sort of freak.

Julius took a single step back from the wall. The wall suddenly dried up, the honey sucked straight out of it. He wanted to wait for the honey to come back. But, no. Just... silence.

“Let's go, pupper. We don't belong here.”

He would have to come back later. Tomorrow, even. He didn't have the words for it, but he knew for certain that the route which he would take from the family's cramped apartment in the Cargo District back to this exact spot—it would be the shape of his heart, were he to unravel it.

He was seven years old.

Music education wasn't an option in the sort of schools that his parents could afford, at least not at his young age. So that sweet, thick honey had to be harvested some other way. Over the years, he devised increasingly sophisticated schemes in order to sneak into the symphony hall. This was invariably a delicate

procedure which involved lying to his parents to justify himself staying out later than normal, and all manner of antics which took place in and around the performing arts plaza. Sneaking past the box office with disguises, climbing on top the roof and rappelling down the buttresses in order to peek in through the window, and forging tickets were among the myriad of plots he unsuccessfully carried out. Julius's journals revealed detailed maps and tactical diagrams ("battle plans," he called them), but what he really needed was a co-conspirator.

And finally, at the age of twelve, he found the courage to go out and find one. He decided it wouldn't be his fault if there wasn't a single beast on the island who would help a poor fox just listen to some music. Ultimately, he had managed to recruit a small pawful of different animals to help him, but his first volunteer was a border collie girl slightly only a year or two older than him. He noticed her virtually every time he tried to sneak in ("that preppy collie again"). It turned out she was there for a good reason — her grandfather was an usher at the venue, and that meant *free tickets*.

Julius's journals describe a particularly cringeworthy moment in his life where he introduced himself to her for the first time—or at least tried to. The confidence he had amassed was but a fragile tower of cards which comically fell apart as he stumbled over the words. The only thing he managed to say before turning and running away, was: "Taffeta looks good on ya." She was so pretty. Elegant.

They managed to find each other the following weekend, shortly before the eight o'clock performance. He was leaning against one of the posts which held up the ropes to which the lanterns were attached, bare-pawed, in the best-looking clothes he could manage (most of them were too small because of his sudden, recent growth spurt). She noticed him amongst the crowd, tucked her hair behind her ear coyly, and walked inside, escorted by her mother. And he waited there until the performance was over (Plumford conducting Garriona's "Songs from Resanna", a modern work at the time), not able to hear any of it. There was a simple pawsomeness to him.

When the animals finally spilled out of the concert hall, the border collie's mother gave her a small allowance from her purse and said something he couldn't hear. They departed ways and she walked straight towards him, taffeta scarf and

all.

Most Marlsay scholars figure that, at this precise moment, he must have been contending with the pressure that comes with knowing for certain your life is about to change forever, and that there's nothing you can do about it.

"Sorry 'bout last time," he said.

"It is okay," she said. Smiled.

"She just lets ya off the leash like that?"

She chuckled at his unexpected Baharitani drawl. "Yes, as long as it is not *too* late."

"How much money did she give ya?"

"I have enough for two iced creams."

He guffawed. "*Iced* cream?"

"Do you want one, or not?"

"Yeah. Lots."

She was so pretty. He couldn't stop smiling.

"Hey, what're you called anyway?"

"My name is Alondra Calliann Nissita Stafferet."

"Damn, girl." He shook his head in playful disbelief.

"What shall I call you, mister fox?"

"Aw, I like *that*. 'Mister Fox.' Yeah." He nodded proudly. He liked knowing he was capable of being a gentlebeast after all. "But seriously, 'londra. This is *Mister* Julius Marlsay, at yer service."

She giggled a coquettish giggle. She could tell he had never bowed before in his life. But Julius didn't care. This was *nothing* compared to what he was willing to do in order to get another taste of that perfect, melodious honey.