

Pineapple, This Time

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 9

@dressupgeekout

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Despite being entirely Joyce's own doing, she was still surprised to find herself interacting with Suey, of all beasts, in The Garden on a Friday. Armed with her typical lunch of two Alondras, a spinach pastry à la carte and a bottle of water for dessert, she assumed her usual station on the opposite wall of the narrow alley. The cigarette lit readily. Deep breaths. Suey would return with his own meal from the bat restaurant in a minute or two.

Wasn't nearly as miserable today as it was yesterday. If this weather kept up all the way to tomorrow, which was unlikely, then Marlsay Day would be quite a beautiful day indeed. Joyce didn't mind either way, she'd be working her tail off. She considered not going through the trouble to fluff it at all before work tomorrow morning, weighing the sheer inevitability of it literally falling off by the end of the day. It was gonna suck. Big time. She hoped Bisky was alright.

Joyce propped up a booted hindpaw against the barber's cinderblock wall, which was painted in an inviting shade of periwinkle. A sudden draft rushed through the alley, which made Joyce shiver as the clouds of Alondra were smeared away from existence. "The fuck?" Joyce wondered. She looked around. No one was in sight. She took another drag.

But the gust was only a fleeting interruption. Joyce's mind magnetically snapped back to Marlsay Day. She already craved the bottle of rum which she knew she was going to desire at the end of the day, despite it being forbidden. No rum, no mead, no sabal, not even beer, nor Frisky Fizz. They were against The Plan. All of them. Great. Maybe a shot of dioxylicin would be acceptable. She would have to consult *The Manual* to make sure, which she could dig out of her purse at this very moment if she desired, but the desire wasn't that strong. She couldn't read now, anyway. The massive clouds of Alondra were thick as North Azuaverian fog, a portable, sweet-smelling sauna forming around her head which

granted her a little time and space to close her eyes and think. Pineapple, this time. She had run out of raspberry flavor.

“Th’ well, matey!” she heard a bat voice call.

“See ya!” she heard Suey in response. She heard that little chuckle of his, too.

The amiable wolf exited the bat restaurant at the other end of the alley and sauntered towards Carmen’s. Joyce finally opened her eyes when she detected the fog had lifted. He was always so fucking cheerful. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but she did have trouble identifying with it. He was so young. Just out of high school, perhaps?

“Ahoy, Joyce!” he announced in a free-spirited, airy song akin to the flight of a butterfly. He smiled.

“Well, then, ‘ahoy’ you,” she responded in a low, gravelly rumble akin to road work on Port Avenue. She almost smiled. “Want one?” she extended a pack of Alondra in his direction.

“No thank you! And you didn’t need to wait for me and my food to start your lunch,” Suey remarked.

“This *is* my lunch,” Joyce said flatly, arm still extended.

“...Oh, uh, that’s cool!” Suey barked, after a beat. Chuckled. He readjusted his glasses. The frame was very thick, a style inspired by Waterwheel Era. The Waterwheel revolutionaries had lots of ideas—political, economic, scientific—but the only ones which stuck around to the present day were merely of the aesthetic kind.

Suey sat on the stoop and unpacked the plastic bag which contained the bat food. A take-out tray of mango, kiwi, durian and fried grasshopper, all drizzled with honeysuckle nectar and a light sprinkling of roasted termites. The durian smelled somewhat strong.

Joyce tucked the pack into her purse. “Fuck me, that looks pretty good,” Joyce beamed in her deadpan manner, “even though I’m not an entomate.”

“You’ve never had insects?” Suey asked as he broke apart the cheap chopsticks.

“Yes, I have, when I was, like, a baby. But I saw a news report on TV when I was little, which showed industrial beekeeping. Pretty gruesome. I dunno, I guess it traumatized me. Even if it was just bared-teeth journalism. But it made an

impression.” She nodded lightly and inhaled, not looking in Suey’s direction.

“I see, I see,” Suey said through a mouthful, his head bobbing excitedly. The grasshopper was audibly crunchy. He flicked his tail in enjoyment.

Exhaled.

“Suey, thank you for filling for Bisky. Seriously. Be sure to stop by the office before you leave today so that I can cut ya your overtime check.”

“Yeah, anytime, boss. Lately, Bisky’s been looking really — *Wait* — ... Overtime...??” His eyes inflated like a beach ball.

“...Yes, Suey. You’re not supposed to be working today. I’m legally obligated to —”

“Oh, well, that’s cool!” Suey interrupted, seemingly enthralled at the idea of making money while on the clock.

“Hold it,” Joyce protested. “You... ya *knew* this, right?”

“No!” He was genuine and unperturbed.

“You didn’t realize this is a thing?”

Suey smiled and shook his head. “No!”

Joyce flicked what remained of the Alondra onto the cobblestone street and carefully extinguished it under her booted paw. “Suey.”

“Joyce.”

“Something I’ve wanted to know for forever. How old *are* ya?”

“Way-way-wait,” Suey sputtered, raising a paw. “Are you asking me for my age, or for my *real* age?”

Joyce’s eyes darted every which way. Suey then discovered Joyce actually had within her *two* emotional states: dead by default, but, apparently, she was additionally capable of island-splitting incredulity.

“...Wait, what?” Joyce blurted. She tilted her head nearly to a corner.

“How many years you’ve been alive can be misleading,” Suey explained. “On the other paw, if someone says they’re x years old, if they act x years old, then they’re probably x years old. That’s their real age.”

“Well, then, uh, what’s your real age?” Joyce inquired calmly.

“Eighteen.”

“And how long have ya been alive?” She cherry-picked a fresh Alondra.

“Twenty-three.”

The lighter *clicked* and now it was Joyce's eyes which inflated like a beach ball. "You're kidding," she said, a cascade of pineapple-infused smoke pouring out of her mouth.

"But it doesn't matter, right? I'm *really* only eighteen."

"Yuh-huh."

For a moment, the only sound which could be heard was Joyce's deep breathing. Suey's wisdom, while unintentionally profound, struck Joyce anyway. There is a peculiar feeling, one step from serenity towards dread, in having just learned something about someone else—for you always discover something about yourself, too.

Time to chase some clouds again. It bought her time, and she wanted to think. She regulated her breathing to produce vapor of the maximum volume and density. Joyce frequently played games with herself while enshrouded among the swirling, fruity mass. One of them was a poetic superstition—stupid, really—where the true love of a smoker's life would be revealed to them if they were to prematurely swat away the clouds. The first animal they saw—that would be them. She wasn't sure if she made up that game, or if the idea originally hatched long ago from her classmates who hung out with her behind the high school gymnasium after the bell rang. Aye, it was definitely one of them. Such a puerile notion, like the obligation to marry the pup who manages to swing on the swing set in synchronization with you. But still. That's why Joyce never swatted away the clouds, always waiting for them to die on their own accord. It was a silly game of restraint. Just a little bit of pup-like fun. And did she ever restrain. Not because she didn't like Suey, the only other animal in sight. But because, like a pup, she was afraid of what the real answer was. What a fuckin' stupid game.

Suey was twenty-three but was really eighteen. Joyce was thirty-one but was really sixty-two.

She desperately pleaded for a bottle of rum. But, when you're locked in the Alondra cloud-prison, nobeast can hear you.

Once liberated, Joyce asked Suey: "Ready for Marlsay Day?"

"Yes, I'm ready," Suey announced enthusiastically.

"Well, then, I certainly hope so. You'll be turning twenty-four at closing time tomorrow."