

Innocuous things always caused him the most trouble. It was because they were disarming. A town, perched on the edge of the escarpment, once a portal and now a doorstep, losing bits of itself with each grinding motion of the door. No business to be done, no competing interests, no rising passions, ninety-eight percent safe to walk at night, as he had been doing then, thoughts boiling through his brain about a lot of things that turned out to be much less important than one thing he paid no attention to.

It was right then and there, right when they opened the door of the tavern. Some might call it supernatural, those two men walking out of this bar exactly at that moment and seeing him just now passing by. These two men whose town this wasn't, seeing him, whose town this also wasn't, passing by complete serendipity through that other two percent.

He began to feel the fist's impact almost at the moment he hit the bricks down below. The hand that had been the fist joined its partner and clenched over his shoulders, dragging him upright, then farther up against a stone wall until just the white bristles on the end of his tail tickled the ground. The stars hadn't yet cleared from his eyes, but he smiled, burnt vanilla incisors slimy in the filtered light of a nearby lamp.

"Mr. Keets-nay!" The man's scent was tangy. Alcohol, chicken, some kind of peppers, barley. "Drailey, you see this shit? Fucking lucky shit. You think he's got that money? Ohhhh, I fucking hope he has that money."

Drailey coughed, or laughed, or both. "If he doesn't...."

It wasn't clear if he didn't know how to complete the thought, or wanted to let it permeate Qiitsneh's imagination. Regardless, after violently bringing his back to the wall again, his friend completed it for him. "I haven't skinned a fox in a while, but I bet I could still do it. Don't have to be a pretty job. So what do you say, Keets-nay? Have a taste for a sharp knife?"

He glanced at Drailey. The man had materialized a large blade and was bouncing it on his palm. His eye was nearly covered with a cataract, he saw. An artifact of their mutual past, perhaps,

and maybe even something to do with this nebulous missing money, but the gap was a long one. That was, of course, another aspect of the supernatural.

"I got money. No worries."

"Yeah?"

A standstill. The man was waiting for something. Drailey's good eye crinkled. "Yeah. But... well, you gotta' get your hand off my cloak where I keep my satchel."

Both men laughed. "Fox is almost as stupid as his name! That supposed to be clever, or what, then?"

"Hey now. Squeeze your hand a bit."

The man raised an eyebrow, but did as requested. Metal scraping on metal, a rustling of lighter coins as the fabric shifted.

"Well I'll be a goat's cunt. He ain't trying to be clever."

He sighed, and looked to Drailey, who just shrugged. Slowly, he began relaxing his grip.

Dark claws dug into his wrists to finish the job quicker. Qiitsneh found his feet on the ground and shot forward at the man's legs, locking his knees and tipping him off balance. Through its drunken blur, it must have taken his brain a moment to understand it was moving swiftly toward the street, for he made no effort to protect his skull when it cracked on the bricks. Only his chest continued moving.

That knife came at him. Sloppy swing, very wide; Qiitsneh twisted out of the way. As Drailey cocked it back again to have another go, his genitals suddenly found themselves connected with Qiitsneh's toes, and the base of his nose met his palm shortly thereafter. Eyes rolled to white as he, too, fell backward.

His heart pounded. He turned to flee.

"Halt!"

Halt. Yes, the voice that said it was nearby. Lamps along the passageway, light glooming out from the tavern's cracked door, clear skies, bright stars, and the Nebula, that chalk smudge, hung almost

directly overhead, draping its own ghostly aura on things. He sniffed, quick, and realized that yes, of course, he should halt. Because who knew just how long the man had been watching, and who knew what all he had heard and seen? And after all, the trial had been far too simple. So he halted, and turned to face the new voice.

The soldier was caeman. He supposed. He was at least one of the various species of bald primates that dominated most of the civilized world, and this was in the end a city more of caeman than human. And he had that clean smell to him, though that may simply have been a mark of his rank. Very clean, actually; his armor shined and wafted piney oils through the air with the slightest motion, and as the man approached, they sucked into Qiitsneh's throat with each breath he took to calm himself.

His eyes fell upon the two downed men, then rose back to meet Qiitsneh's. "And what, pray tell, happened here?"

"Ah...." He took a gulp of air, and expelled his answer. "Drunks, sir. Came out of that public house." He jerked his thumb. "Tried to take my money."

"Mm." The soldier stepped nearer the two forms, tapped one with the heel of his boot. Emblazoned on his back was an insignia, an old tree with mirrored branches and roots -- the symbol of the Crown, if he had his heraldry right. He knelt by Drailey, turned up his nose, and sniffed at his mouth. When he rose, he nodded. "Hm. There is a jailhouse nearby." He pointed to a stocky building a short walk away, half-obscured by a bay-window jutting from the building next door. "May I ask for a hand in dragging them there?"

Qiitsneh kept himself from eyeing the soldier with skepticism. A noise emerged from the lighted door, then a laugh, and shortly a stream of vomit particulates floating as an invisible toxic haze. It may have just been that kind of tavern, after all, but still.

"Yes... of course. Sir."

"We may fetch a wagon, if you prefer." He said this as he heaved Drailey up by the armpits.

"No, no. Sorry. I can drag him. Just a little flustered, is all." Of course, the one left was the

big one, whose name he still couldn't recall. Getting his shoulders up to about stomach level was the best he could do, so that everything south of the man's chest dragged on the street. The leftover dinner smell on his breath made Qiitsneh hungry.

"Would you prefer I carry that one?"

"Just lead on, please. Quickly, if you don't mind." He smiled again. It looked forced, he knew. It always looked forced, because it always was forced, but humans and their ilk seemed to find it charming, particularly if accompanied by perky ears. Though precisely when to do it, and precisely when not to, was a lifelong ambition.

They dragged the two into the little stone structure the soldier had indicated, and, after an exchange of salutes with the night guard, brought them to an open cell, first door on the right of a narrow hallway. They laid them with heads resting beside each other on the available bed of straw.

Qiitsneh saluted. "Thanks so much, sir." And he turned to leave.

"One moment, Mr. fox. I am going to need to verify your name."

He stopped. The request provoked a long series of altercations in his mind, a battle of cognitive dissonance and reasoning. At the end of it, when he realized his only intelligent path, he hoped the pause hadn't been as long as it felt. "It's... Qiitsneh."

The dissonance wasn't on his side. Instead, like usual, the soldier's eyebrow rose. That name: his mother surely had known it was a curse. Maybe had meant it to be one. Although that would assume she had actually put in some kind of legitimate effort into picking it out.

One always had to strive for ways to make gains against such a thing. As it was, the common questions that followed this curse bespoke of his interlocutors' learning. "You are one of the sea traders?"

"No, sir."

"Hm. Well, in any case, Qiitsneh, I would like for you to come to this address tomorrow morning." He held out a small rectangular card, printed on a kind of stiff, shiny paper that could only

have come from a wizard's printing press. "When you arrive, ask for Captain Grathlund."

Qiitsneh accepted the card and slipped two fingers into the pocket near his chest where sat his little pair of topaz glasses. Same insignia that was scratched into Grathlund's armor on the front, though here the root system wrote out the words "Crown of Therchin" in difficult script. "Jyolin Family Inn" was handwritten on the back with impeccable letters.

Quick footsteps, leading outside. By the time the glasses dropped from Qiitsneh's eyes, Grathlund had already vacated.

"Uh...."

"Well, aren't you lucky." That was the prison guard, another caeman.

Qiitsneh felt his ears twitch. The two thugs groaned from their pillow. "Is that right?" He tapped a black nail on the card. "This isn't just normal police business, then."

"Never when Captain Grathlund is involved. S'how I see it, anyway." His eyes shot at the exit. "I can't claim I know exactly what the Captain is thinking, but you should know that his business here is mostly with the draft office."

His eyebrows rose, lifting whiskers with them. "Oh yeah? He didn't catch my accent?"

"Can't claim I know what he's thinking, but I'm gonna' say he might think it don't matter."

"Don't matter."

He shook his head.

Qiitsneh watched the man's face for a time, smelled for that particular sweet bitterness just before a person laughs. But it wasn't there, and it wasn't coming. He rubbed his eyes with both thumbs, dragged his hands upward, flattening his ears and letting them spring aright. "And we're at this again, I see. Somehow I thought it'd take a little longer."

"Beg pardon?"

"Please, just have yourself a wonderful rest of the night, sir. And stay away from that tavern a few doors down." He paused, considering something else. "But you probably already knew that."

The card joined his glasses in their pocket, he drew his cloak tight around his shoulders, and walked back into the open air. The wind carried drops from a distant storm. It wouldn't take long to get there. Probably before he found his way back to lodging, adding another line in perfect meter with the poetry of his life.

He knew cities, was the thing. The city, any city. How it could mutate from elegant stone manors, temples, plazas and water fountains, to caved-in rooftops, beggars, backed-up gutters, smoky cheap pubs in the course of five paces. And even then, he knew how to handle himself in any one of those atmospheres, to avoid gaining much notice, to avoid getting into fights. But the timing had been so precise, so exact, locking eyes with him the split second they emerged from under the doorframe. Pacified by the dreary atmosphere, considering his recent victories and the steps still laid out before him. It was like that; they just inserted themselves into the gaps in vigilance, without fail. It was either malevolent luck, or an antagonist, and by definition luck could not be malevolent.

Drailey, and his friend... heck, he still couldn't come up with the name. Two reasons they would be here, but their behavior, he supposed, gave away which one. They would say nothing about it, though. Couldn't, unless they wanted to choose between a bad death, a lot of prison time, or a life in hiding. So their presence here just meant he needed to get a move on right away, put as much distance between himself and Kurt as quickly as possible.

Under normal circumstances, anyhow. As thunder began to crawl over the distant canopy, he pulled the wizard's card from his pocket and glanced at it one more time. The Nebula slowly fell behind a blanket of black clouds flecked with lightning.