

"I *really* cannot thank you enough for your help, Mr. Cross... I am forever in your debt."

Leon Cross waved his mechanical paw dismissively at the black panther who was dressed up to the neck in stiff, military coat. "Really, it was nothing, Colonel. The worst is behind us, and I think you can sleep well now without anything burdening your mind."

Colonel Achilles Graves nodded, a puff of air appearing as he exhaled. Leon had never seen the colonel looking so relieved and elated during his one week stay in the panther's seaside villa. The colonel certainly looked ten years younger compared to when the detective first met him.

"I wouldn't know what to do without your help, Mr. Cross," said the colonel. "It is most fortunate that you came quickly. If not... well, I would never have known what was going to happen to me. All those plans being made behind my back...."

Leon smiled tiredly, twirling the loose thread of his scarf with his paw fingers. "Your letter itself suggested something was afoot, and so I found myself the need to come here in haste." He said.

It was a stroke of luck that Leon had managed to get to the city of Hieropolis within the week. Travelling by train would take longer, especially with the cold wave that was coming down from the north. Snow would cause ungodly amount of delays. Travelling by air would be the most sensible one, since it was much faster than train, if not the most expensive.

He was lucky that he got ahold of a berth in an airship with a flight path directly from Hesperica to Anatolia before the airfields closed down all flights due to heavy snowfall in the north. However, despite the finely appointed cabins with wide windows that gave impressive view of the sky and the land passing below them, the smooth, uneventful two days of flying was an absolute bore to the detective.

Thankfully, once he arrived at Hieropolis International Airfield, things begun to look interesting. The colonel had already been waiting for him with his chauffeur, and Leon was personally brought to the colonel's seaside estate, which was located right by the western coast of Anatolia, all with the splendid view of the Inner Sea and the beautiful beaches. Along the way, Colonel Graves explained his peculiar case in detail while Leon listened attentively.

After hearing the colonel's explanation first hand, Leon quickly set to work by doing a series of interviews to the household staff and the guests whom the colonel was entertaining. That very week, Leon unveiled an assassination plot involving the colonel's valet, a coded Rosvenian manuscript, and a small, antique blade belonging to the colonel's vast collection of ancient swords and daggers.

The panther had been immensely relieved and grateful that he gave the detective a rather large sum of money, far more than what was promised in his telegram beforehand. It was certainly more than enough to make Leon able to live very comfortably well into the next year. After all, it wasn't like he could refuse the payment... especially not from an old friend.

With the matter resolved, Leon decided to spend a few days in the city to get some relaxation and a bit of sightseeing in before he returned to Hesperica. As the capital city of Anatolia, Hieropolis was renowned for its allure. A perfect mix of the intrigue of the orient and the fine tastes of the ancient west.

Colonel Graves was only too happy to take him sightseeing the city's famous landmarks and historical sites. Leon couldn't really blame the panther's enthusiasm. He really enjoyed the colonel's good company and also his exuberance. After all, he did save the colonel's life.

On his last day playing the tourist, Graves brought him to see the famous Pearl Temple and a cruise across the Basieran river. It had been an interesting experience for the detective. Leon hadn't thought so many pearls could be used and fitted into one grand place. It had been a rewarding excursion, even if it was a tiring one. Touring the entire temple took the better part of the day, and Leon was ready for a good bath and some sleep when he and the colonel made their way into the hotel where Leon had opted to stay for the past few days.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cross!"

Leon, who was making his way across the hall into the elevator foyer stopped in his tracks and regarded the bear, who was clad in the hotel uniform. "Yes? What is it?"

"There's a telegram for you, sir. Just came in." The bear said in his usual polite manner, handing Leon the said letter, pausing a split second to stare in surprise at the paw shaped mechanism that was in place of the cougar's right paw. The bear quickly composed himself and went away with a parting bow the next second.

Used to that kind of reaction by numerous people, Leon ignored the bear and looked at the grey-green envelope. It was addressed to him, sent just a few hours ago. The cougar tore it open and unfolded the letter inside. He blinked and chuckled with a shake of his head as he read the short message.

DEAD END FOR CASE IN BRETONIA = NEED YOUR HELP = MEET YOU
TOMORROW ON THE AERION-MERCURIUS EXPRESS = 5 PM AT CENTRAL
SAFIRA STATION = YOUR BROTHER GIDEON

"Something the matter?" asked the colonel.

"It's just my brother." Leon answered, folding the telegram back into his pocket. "He's been looking after my office while I'm here. It sounds like he's picked up a case only to run into a dead end, so now he needs my assistance. He's currently on the Mercurius Express to take me back tomorrow."

"Right, your twin brother." Graves nodded. "I remember you telling me that he's terribly impatient."

Leon chuckled. "That he is. And he prefers to do the physical work rather than the thinking. Usually he leaves the solving the puzzles to me while he went off and capture the perpetrators."

"So he's the muscle and you're the brains." The corners of Graves' muzzle quirked up in amusement.

"Well, in a way, I suppose so."

"Well, meeting your brother tomorrow on the train will be most interesting." The panther said with a small smile. "Speaking of which, have you booked a ticket for the train?"

The detective went to nod before he paused. "I guess I'll have to cancel my berth and book a new one." He uttered and quickly headed for the hotel desk, with the colonel following the detective at a slower pace.

"Good evening, sir." Said the uniformed weasel concierge.

"Evening. I would like to ask, what time does the Aerion-Mercurius Express depart tomorrow?"

The concierge hummed thoughtfully. "Usually around five in the afternoon, sir. Would you like to book a compartment on-board?"

"Yes please. Oh, and if you could cancel my berth on the Continental Express, reserved under my name, Leonidas Tyrell Cross."

If the concierge thought the cougar's full name was peculiar, he didn't show it and simply nodded professionally. "Very well sir." The said, writing it down on a paper. "There should be no problem. How far are you going on the Mercurius Express, sir?"

"To Valmagne-sur-Mer, Gallia."

"First class or second?"

"Second, please." Leon answered, but was suddenly interrupted by the colonel.

"Nonsense!" The black panther exclaimed, startling the weasel. "Put this gentleman into the first class compartment if you please." The panther told the concierge, who opened his mouth, closed it, and nodded.

"Very well sir."

"And the expenses will be borne by me. Colonel Achilles Graves, 12th Royal Centurion Regiment."

"Oh! V-very well, sir. Right away," said the weasel before he went to the telephone.

Leon was quickly turned to the colonel. "You know, you really didn't need to do that Graves."

"It's the least I can do for you, my friend." The panther replied with a fond smile. "After all you've done to save my life."

"But I can't—"

The colonel was having none of it.

The feline detective could only concede with a small sigh, sensing that it was an argument which he wouldn't prevail. "Ah well." He said, shaking his head with a smile.

"At the very least, let me thank you for your generous hospitality, colonel." The cougar smiled meaningfully.

A small smile grazed Graves' lips. "I would appreciate that." He nodded.

The concierge returned soon after, informing that he had successfully booked a First Class berth on the Mercurius Express, departing at 5 pm sharp tomorrow. Graves then paid the fares with his cheque, and Leon went back to his room briefly to place the souvenirs he had bought today, and then went back down to the lobby, joining the colonel for a dinner in the hotel's restaurant.

"Well then, it would seem I will keep you company until Ansburg." Graves mentioned while they were going through a particularly delicious steak.

Leon blinked in surprise, the fork halfway to his mouth. "Sorry?"

"Oh, right. I never told you." The colonel said apologetically. "As you have deduced when you first arrived at my estate, I was on an extended leave. I will be resuming my duties in Arlemany starting in a few days."

The detective nodded with a hum. "Ah, right. You'll be overseeing that joint military exercise between Arlemany and Bretonia, I take it?"

"Yes, that's correct." Colonel Graves affirmed, sipping his wine. "You will be continuing on the train with your brother to Valmagne, I take?"

Leon nodded in confirmation. "Yes, and then we will board a liner to Bretonia to settle Gideon's case." He said before he sipped his own wine, swirling the glass and then putting it down. "Travelling on a ship in the middle of winter is always such a chore."

It took a moment for the panther to digest what Leon was implying. "Ah, then why not take the air route? Airships are faster and you won't be able to get any seasickness of any kind." He chuckled good-naturedly.

Leon returned the smile somewhat wanly. "I do not have sea sickness, Colonel, and airships tickets are quite expensive." He said, conveniently not mentioning how he had spent two months' worth of savings to get to Anatolia in the first place. "Also, all flights to Bretonia are currently suspended due to constant snowfall." He explained.

Graves nodded. "I've read the news." He said as he ate through his steak. "I never got to ask, what got you into the private investigator business? I recall you were headed for the police academy after you passed the national service."

"Ah, you see..." Leon shifted on his seat. "I did get into the police force, got myself up to Sergeant Detective, but it doesn't really suit me, you see. Ran into several troubles with my stuck up superior, and so... I handed my badge after a particularly demeaning case and went freelance ever since."

"Your superior must not be pleased." The panther chuckled. "I recall you were the quite opinionated cadet."

Leon smiled dryly. "On the contrary, he was glad to see me go."

They continued to talk through dinner, mostly about the colonel's history in the Bretonian military and Leon's work in his private detective agency along with the cases he and his twin brother had solved together.

After they were done, the two felines then made their way back to Leon's room, where the topic of their conversation shifted into something more... intimate.

"So, do you spend the night with your clients often?" Colonel Graves asked with a quirk of his muzzle as Leon went to lock the door. The panther was already taking off his jacket.

"Only if they happen to catch my eye and if they are receptive enough." Leon replied. The cougar detective then closed the distance between him and the panther, his paws slowly working on the buttons of Graves' vest.

The panther guided Leon's paw down to his backside once his vest was now unbuttoned. "I guess I'm one of the lucky ones hmm?" He rumbled, looking directly into the cougar's eyes.

"I'd say so, yes."

Graves brushed his muzzle against Leon's. The cougar reciprocated by nuzzling against the panther. Their lips soon met and Leon threw himself into the euphoria of the pleasure, kissing Graves passionately before pulling back, grinning slyly as he wormed his hands down to the panther's groin, undoing the belt.

He could feel the colonel's paws on his body as he pushed the jacket off Leon's shoulders and began to unbutton his shirt. Leon was barely aware that Graves was tugging on his tie, pulling it loose.

Soft moans were exchanged as the two felines nuzzled and feverently released each other from their clothing, which fell into a heap around their ankles. Their malehoods, alert and throbbing for attention, straining in the confinement of their underclothes, were pressed against each other as Graves held Leon close, locking their lips once again in a passionate kiss.

Breathless from the intense making out, Leon ran his paws through Graves' muscular chest, feeling the hard musculature underneath the soft fur.

"It's been awhile since I'm this close with a client." Leon murmured, letting out a soft purr as Graves nuzzled his neck.

"If you're worried, then let me do the work." Graves gave him a small smirk. "Now... I think it's better if we get more comfortable, hmm?"

Leon gestured for the colonel to go ahead, and he quickly found himself being pushed to the bed, with Graves clambering above him. The cougar moaned softly as Graves trailed his tongue over his chest, before he went further down and took a long sniff of Leon's musky privates. He leaned in and carefully lapped at the erect member, now poking out of the soft, furry sheath between Leon's legs.

"G-gods... Graves..." Leon panted as Graves went to suckle his sacks.

"Mmm... still sensitive down there, Cross?" The panther rumbled, dragging his tongue from the base of Leon's length to the barbed tip.

"Mhrmmph..."

The cougar was in bliss as Graves proceeded to engulf his manhood inside his maw. He had forgotten how good the panther was with his tongue. His entire body shuddered from the pleasure alone, moaning as Graves lapped and squeezed his shaft almost lovingly with his maw. Leon let out a breath he hadn't known he had held back when the panther released his shaft.

Graves chuckled, clasping his paw around Leon's throbbing rod. "Got you all excited, hmm?"

"H-heh... just like old times, huh?" Leon gave the panther a breathless smile.

"Old times indeed. Now, do you have something I could use to ease us in?"

"Yes... in my briefcase. It's there along the rubber."

Leon shuffled on the bed, getting himself into a more comfortable position while Graves got himself primed and ready. It didn't take long for the panther to get back on the bed. Leon shuddered when Graves applied the oils to his backside, his deft fingers working their way inside. The way Graves loosened him up was quite sensuous that Leon couldn't help but moan.

"Mmm... I think we're good to go."

"You think?"

Graves flashed the prone detective a toothy grin. "Why don't we find out?" He murmured, lifting the cougar's legs and holding them above his shoulders.

The second Graves pushed into him, Leon hissed and yowled, mainly in pain, as his rear end stretched to accommodate the colonel's girth. The cougar was soon moaning once again as the pain gave away to pleasure while the panther slowly gyrated his hips.

There was naught but deep moans and sounds of labored breath as the two felines consummated their passions. Graves was effectively pinning Leon on the bed with his powerful arms and legs. His fangs grazed against the soft flesh underneath the fur of Leon's neck as he continued to breed the male underneath him.

Leon was utterly lost on the euphoria of the pleasure as Graves drilled deep into him with an almost primal drive. After a few thrusts, the cougar finally adjusted once again with Graves' size and girth which was familiar to him. Leon began to move his hips in tandem with the panther on top of him, driving the feline's shaft deeper into him, eliciting a long, languid and breathless moan from the cougar.

A low rumble rolled from Graves' throat as he increased his own pace, pressing his muzzle against Leon, his tongue lashing out aggressively into the cougar's oral cavity. Leon wasn't remotely aware that Graves' paw had snaked between their bodies and had grab hold of his throbbing manhood until the panther started rubbing it up and down, stimulating him further and further into release.

The moment came not long after, which was marked by the increased intensity of Graves' thrusting and humping. Leon felt as if he was going to be torn as the panther's moans became growls. A loud, whimpering yowl escaped Leon's own lips when Graves clamped his muzzle on his neck with a final thrust. The cougar did not need to see to know that Graves had reached his climax and was pumping his rear end with his seed. The pain of the mating bite and the amount of pleasure drove Leon into his limits as well. With a roar, ropes of his semen were expelled from his erect shaft, soiling both of his and Graves' bodies as they fell into mass of sweaty, musky bodies on top of each other.

Leon blinked when he felt Graves pulling him into another kiss. It was slower and less forceful this time, and the cougar relished the moment as he returned the kiss, tongues dancing around between their muzzles as they held each other close.

"Oh... I really needed that."

Leon smiled tiredly as he caressed Graves' cheeks with his paw. "You said the same thing last time."

"You'd remember that wouldn't you?" Graves chuckled. "You're still the sharp eyed Private I remember."

"I beg to differ... Sergeant." Leon grinned cheekily, only to yelp when Graves gyrated his hips sharply.

"Be nice, *Private Cross*." The panther chided with a matching grin as he pulled himself out.

Leon moaned softly as Graves went to embrace him and trailed his tongue over the sore, slightly bloody patch on his neck that came from the love bite. He purred as he nuzzled into the panther and slowly drifted off to sleep, feeling a strange sort of satisfaction that he could rekindle a relationship with an old friend, even if it won't be a permanent one.

The cougar woke the next morning alone, and feeling particularly sleep deprived. The spot next to him on the bed was empty and warm, and still smelled of Graves. With a hint of disappointment, he thought that the colonel must have left early before he noticed the water running from the adjacent bathroom... and that Graves' clothes was still hung on the hook.

Shaking his head, the cougar pushed himself from the bed, still in the bare and noticed that it was half past nine. He heard the shower dying down, and soon enough, Graves walked out from the door, drying his head with a towel. A bathrobe was tied loosely around his muscular frame.

"Morning," greeted the panther. His green eyes roamed up and down Leon's bare form and smiled. "Sleep well?"

Leon chuckled. "I had a really nice night." He nodded. "All thanks to you."

"Glad you found it enjoyable."

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"Who is it?" Leon asked, looking towards the door before he turned back to Graves with a questioning look.

"Room service, sir!" Came a polite voice from the door.

"Oh, I told them to bring the breakfast up here." Graves said somewhat apologetically. "You might want to wear something." The panther added with a chuckle, nodding at Leon who was still in the buff.

Leon quickly threw on his dressing gown which was discarded haphazardly on the floor from their activities last night. He was just finished tying the sash around his waist when the colonel opened the door.

The waiter gave his usual greetings as he placed the breakfast tray by the table, which sent waves of delectable scent into the room, and quickly left after Leon gave him a small amount of tip.

Graves had opened the lid when Leon joined him by the table. There was two servings of Bretonian breakfast and an envelope addressed to "M. Leon Cross". It was his ticket to the Mercurius Express: a double sleeper first class compartment on the Hieropolis-Valmagne coach.

Leon noted that Graves appeared positively sunny as they ate through their breakfast. The detective could only wonder how his old friend showed no signs of fatigue from their escapade last night. Military men and their unending stamina perhaps, he concluded with amusement.

Around noon, Graves left the hotel to attend to his last duties in his estate, and Leon spent the next hour packing his belongings. He didn't bring much when he came here, but it would appear he would need extra valises to pack the extra merchandise he had happened to buy during his free time.

Half past four in the afternoon, Graves arrived at the hotel to pick Leon, who had just finished checking out with the receptionist, to the train station, much to the cougar's surprise. The panther had even brought his personal jeep, driven by the chauffeur of his estate.

"You really don't have to do all this for me, Colonel." He said somewhat exasperatedly.

"Nonsense! Just think of this as my way to repay you for what you did." Said Graves with a small smile.

Leon thought Graves had done more than enough for him, but didn't voice it out.

The chauffeur drove them directly to Central Safira Station; the largest train station in Anatolia which was also the hub for every single railway that crossed from the corners of the country and beyond. It was a grand building, at least six storeys tall with heavily decorative facade in oriental tastes. Grand arches of the portico welcomed visitors right into the cavernous, marble tiled concourse. Sunlight shone from the

intricate leaded glass windows and the expansive glass dome on top of the concourse, filling the entire hall with a shower of colorful lights.

Leon quickly hailed for a porter as Graves and his chauffeur were busy loading down their luggage. After telling the porters which train they would be boarding, he and the colonel made their way through the bustling hall, teeming with travellers from various nations. A huge brass framed board which hung from the ceiling listed the which trains will be arriving and departing, periodically changing with a complicated mechanism of cogs and wires behind the frame. It took no time for Leon to find his train's schedule, as it was the second row from the top.

**Aerion-Mercurius Express | Destination: Valmagne-sur-Mer | Platform: 12 |
Status: ARRIVED | Gate: OPEN | Departing: 17.00 |**

"We have ten minutes." Colonel Graves announced as he looked at his pocketwatch. "Come on. The platform's this way." He said, and gestured for the porters to follow them.

The platform was a hubbub of activity, just like the concourse. It was made even noisier with the whistles of various trains coming and going, conductors shouting above the din of the crowd, and the announcements which echoed from the PA systems set on every corner.

"Your attention please. The Aerion-Mercurius Express will be departing at 1600 hours for Agrapolis, Pallas, Laconium, Romus, Milos, Obersthaven, Ansborg, Luciere, and Valmagne-sur-Mer. Passengers with Aerion-Mercurius Express tickets please proceed to platform twelve."

"Ah, there it is!" Colonel Graves declared with a whistle. Leon quickly followed the panther's line of sight and hummed appreciatively.

The Mercurius Express was quite a remarkable sight. It was certainly the largest train Leon had ever seen. The large, black locomotive itself was very imposing, towering far above the crowd, dwarfing other trains berthed on the neighboring platforms.

Several carriages were linked together with the engine. Leon counted there were at least eight as he walked down the length of Platform 12. The cougar still couldn't take his eyes away from the enormous train, which was painted handsomely in black, white and grey.

"Magnificent isn't she?"

"That she is." Leon replied with a nod, taking in the appearance of the sabertooth that had appeared beside him. Looking around, he realized that Graves had went off to the baggage van, giving instructions to the porters as they loaded his enormous luggage into the van.

The sabertooth smiled proudly when Leon turned back to the man. "Armand Förstner. I work with the Silberfalke Railways."

"Leon Cross." Leon was quick to shake hands with the feline, taking the name card from the sabertooth. "Ah, you're the director I see."

Armand Förstner was a middle aged saber-toothed tiger with twinkling brown eyes, one false saber teeth (made from gold), and generally friendly disposition. He was wrapped in layers of coats and scarves up to the neck in the coldness of the platform.

"Yes." Mr. Förstner nodded. "I usually supervise our trains for each trip. How about you, Mr. Cross?"

"Ah, I'm a private investigator."

Förstner's brow rose. "A private investigator!" He exclaimed and laughed. "Well, I dare say it's not everyday I got to meet one after another."

Leon raised an eyebrow at the statement. "One after another?"

"I'm bringing a friend of mine along for the journey." The sabertooth gestured to the short, stout looking badger in a thick grey coat standing a bit ways away. He seemed to be in an intense discussion with a tall ocelot in a dark blue coat. "He's also a private detective... but he rarely takes cases nowadays. He's close to retiring after all."

"Well, perhaps you might introduce me to him sometime." Leon replied with a small smile as he glanced to the clock. "Ah, best I go and find my compartment, good day, Mr. Förstner." He added.

"I'm sure, and till we meet again." Said the sabertooth with a wave before he went to join the badger.

"Now where is my coach..." Leon wondered as he looked between the two sleeper carriages before looking down to his ticket and tried to make sense of the small print on his ticket. The only words large enough he could read was his name, his destination, and his class type (First Class).

It was then that Graves came along. A different porter was right at his tail, carrying the luggage which would then be brought to their compartment.

"You know where our carriage is?" The detective asked.

Graves pointed to the conductor who was manning the carriage near the end of the train. "Why don't we ask him first?" He said, making his way to the officer.

The conductor was a uniformed ram with a pair of impressive curled horns. He was currently occupied with a male bull with a thick coat of brown fur when Leon approached. The bull's strong physique was framed in a loose tweed suit.

"Monsieur Kyle Bradford, compartment 9" said the conductor to the bull.

"Thank you." The bull said as a young equine in a more simplified version of the conductor's uniform—the coach attendant—came down from the train and immediately heaved the large trunk which the bull had been carrying. "Hey, careful! I just got that camera equipment fixed!" He called after the horse, who had stumbled as he lifted the trunk into the carriage.

The conductor shook his head and muttered his breath as he watched the bull going after the horse. He looked up when he saw Leon and Graves approaching him, and gave them a polite smile. "*Bonsoir messieurs.*" He said, tipping his hat.

"*Bonsoir.*" Leon said, showing his ticket to the ram. "Can you tell us which sleeping car is ours?"

"Ah, your sleeping car is the Azuré coach, monsieur," said the ram after he inspected Leon and Graves' tickets. "This is the Argenté coach, as you can see." He gestured to the brass plaque spelling out the carriage's name which was located right above the window by the doorway. "The Azuré coach is the first sleeper car on the front, monsieur. Just after the restaurant car."

"Ah, *merci.*" Leon said as the conductor handed them their tickets back.

"*Je vous en prie, monsieur.*"

Weaving back through the crowd, Leon made his way back to the front, stopping just as he was in the right carriage. The conductor of the Azuré coach was a tall, middle aged Malinois, showing polite smiles to every passenger as he directed them to their assigned compartments.

Benvenuto a bordo, Signor di Firenze." The conductor said with a small bow to the finely dressed Doberman who had handed him his ticket. "*Il tuo compartimento è il numero 10, Signore.*" He added before turning to Leon and the black panther standing close to him.

"Good afternoon, sir. May I see your tickets?"

The conductor looked at Leon's ticket first. "Welcome aboard Mr. Cross." He said amicably. "Your compartment will be number 8. Please enter from the back of the carriage." He gestured to the entrance on the other end of the sleeping car.

Leon nodded at the canine. "Thank you. Ah, right. Did you see anyone named Gideon Cross coming in? He looks just like me." He said, gesturing to himself.

The conductor blinked, tilting his head to the side as he thought. "I'm sorry sir, but I don't think I've seen anyone with the name boarding this coach." He replied with a slight shake of his head. "Perhaps you could ask the other conductors on the other sleeper cars, sir."

"Well, alright. Thank you, er..."

"Dupont, sir." Replied the Malinois with a polite nod. "Pleased to be of service." He said.

Leon nodded but did not head to the other end of the carriage. Instead, he waited for Graves, whose ticket was being inspected by Dupont.

"Colonel Achilles Graves... Let's see..." The conductor consulted his passenger manifest. "Your compartment will be in number 9, colonel. Please enter from the back, sir, and welcome aboard." He replied, still smiling, with a respectful bow to the colonel.

Graves tipped his hat at the Malinois. "Thank you."

"You're welcome sir," said Dupont as he turned to another passenger behind them. "Ah, *Herr Adler! Willkommen im Mercurius Express...*"

Leon and Graves made their way to the rear of the Azuré coach and climbed on-board. Leon thought that he could make sure that his belongings were secure before he went to find his twin brother's compartment, as quickly as possible

The corridor inside was quite crowded, Leon soon found out. The passengers of the coach were standing in the narrow passageway, looking out of the window to say their goodbyes or simply watching the proceedings. The attendant of the car, a harried looking caracal, was heaving suitcases and trunks from the corridor windows, hauled by the porters on the platform outside.

This hampered Leon somewhat as he tried to get across the corridor and find his compartment. Colonel Graves, with his tall and solid build, was also having quite the trouble navigating through the corridor. Both of them kept bumping and stumbling into other passengers' foot and tail, earning annoyed looks and grunts from others.

The detective breathed a sigh of relieve when he finally arrived at his compartment. It was really spacious, with tasteful lacquered wooden panels, decorated with beautiful marquetry, and fitted with brass fixtures and plush furniture. A large window provided ample natural light into the compartment, making the whole room feel bright.

"This is really nice." He mused to himself, before he turned to the doorway where the coach attendant, a harried looking caracal, had knocked.

"*Herr Cross... your luggage.*" The attendant puffed, quickly wiping his brow with a handkerchief before he lugged Leon's carry-ons into the compartment, and were soon hauled up to the luggage rack overhead.

Feeling pity for the young feline, Leon decided to give him a generous tip. He could only chuckle at how the attendant's face brightened and thanked him. Leon had just closed the door behind him when a knock came from the connecting door. Curious, Leon went to open it and came to face Graves' bright grin.

"Now if this is your main reason to insist me travelling on first class, you are *far* more perverse than I originally thought, Colonel." He shook his head in amusement, folding his arms.

"Well now. You getting the compartment next to mine is nothing but a coincidence." The colonel replied. "But... this *does* make things much easier." He hummed, stepping closer to the cougar, grinning widely.

"That is, until I, or even you, gets a roommate." Leon said, quirking an eyebrow with a playful grin.

"Now, don't say that. You'll just jinx it."

"Mmm... I think not." Leon replied, pulling the colonel's tie so the panther was forced to look down at him. Their muzzles are almost brushing against each other.

Just as those words left the his mouth however, there was a light thump as a passenger slid the door open. He stopped short and looked at Leon and Graves in surprise.

The newcomer was an arctic fox, quite young for his species, looking like he was in his early twenties. Fresh out of university perhaps, he was dressed loosely in woolen jacket and suit beneath a thick coat. His ivycap was lying somewhat askew on his head, stark white fur poking out from the brim of his hat and shirt, almost as if he had been running all the way into the train. Judging from his shortness of breath, it might as well he had been.

"Oh, pardon me." The canine uttered apologetically, lifting his hat at Leon and the colonel by the connecting door, looking quite unsure of the situation.

Leon quickly pulled himself away from Graves waved his paw in a friendly manner as he turned to face the fox. "Not to worry, you didn't interrupt anything." He lied. "I'm guessing you're my roommate?"

The uncertainty on the newcomer's face lingered for a few seconds. "Er, yes, I think so." He said, studying the two felines before him, before he chuckled. "Roderick Erichsen." He said finally, giving his paw to Leon.

Leon shook the fox's paw, searching the fox's clear blue eyes. Somehow, he felt that the name was quite familiar. "Leon Cross."

Erichsen smiled. "Nice to meet you, sir."

"Likewise." Leon returned the smile and gestured to the panther by the doorway. "This is Colonel Achilles Graves, my friend."

"I see, pleased to meet you Colonel." The fox made to move towards the tall feline, extending his paw.

"Pleased to meet you too." The panther replied amicably, accepting his handshake.

The attendant came into the compartment again a moment later, this time carrying Erichsen's suitcases, which wasn't much compared to Leon's own luggage. The fox traveled pretty light.

Just as the attendant left to attend to other passengers, there was a whistle coming from outside, followed by a long shout from the direction of the engine.

"Sounds like we're off." Erichsen said as he rounded to the window.

There was a another ear-splitting blare of the train's whistle before the carriage gave a sudden jerk as it was pulled forward with the engine. Slowly but surely, the Mercurius Express rolled away from Central Safira station and began its four day journey towards Gallia.