

The Worst Thing She Can Say

The man sat at the bar had a long coat, with black fabric that acted as a red carpet to the main attraction – a cloud of black wavy hair framing planet Marble's most punchable face. The bachelor suprême had his attention entirely directed at a disinterested woman in a tank top and an enormous light blue winter fur tied around her waist by its sleeves. In both of their cases, the coats were unnecessary for the season, but for very different reasons. In her case, it was because she was a foreigner from some place much colder than this one, making a temporary stop in a dive for cheap food. In his case, he falsely believed the floor-length flasher-chic trench coat lent him an adventurous and mysterious aura that would make him appealing to naïve tourist women who didn't know better.

His 'bit' was simple – pretend to be a local, an expert in cuisine and history who knew all the best spots frequented by the people who live here, and oh but he could show you if you'd just follow him and oh but he has to make a quick stop by his home first and he'd hate to leave you outside – yuck.

He was nineteen minutes deep into a speech about local legends, and she was three hand-signs deep into covertly signaling the bartender for virgin versions of whatever crap cocktails he offered to buy for her.

“The entire subcontinent of Luwall is quite the hot-bed for mysteries, you know. Experts like myself still don’t know what became of the former kingdom which ruled it.”

“Yeah?” dead-eyes from her.

“Oh, I mean it!” He didn’t catch her tone. The bar silently groaned knowing he was going to extoll his ‘expertise’ on the subject.

“For starters, no consensus exists on what caused the kingdom’s downfall – it’s like the whole population and its cities was swallowed into the aether in a single night. No descendants, no fossils, no burned out buildings – the whole thing reclaimed by nature without a trace of warfare. Spooky, right? The Trails, or what remains of them, is all completely unnavigable to the magically uninclined these days – without a well-prepared and friendly guide, anyway! I happen to be –“

And so on. Beside the man at the bar, in the stool opposite the woman with the woolly coat, was an actual expert. She balked, scoffed, chuffed and rolled her eyes as the wannabe pickup artist continued swinging for a hole he was never scoring.

For starters, she thought, it isn’t Luwall, as the eksteruloj call it. It is Arcadia. Second, she’s not going to fuck you, buddy.

A few more minutes passed, and the northern woman stood up and pressed her thumbs into her back to pop her spine. Straightened up from her bar-slouch, the lady was quite a bit taller and more muscular than the daft twink she’d just mooched a meal from, a fact which he seemed not to have noticed until now.

“Ah, wait. Where are you going? I was just about to –“

“Eh? I’d love to stay and chat, kid,” she said as she pulled the sleeves of her immense coat free from her waist and slung it over her shoulders. “But I really gotta head out. I was only supposed to grab a quick snack, I really shouldn’t keep my wife waiting on me.”

He practically fell out of his seat. The breath completely left him as though he’d been punched in the gut. “Wife? ...Y-you hadn’t mentioned that.”

She flashed him a quiet, polite smile, like one shows someone else’s nephew. “You didn’t ask. You just seemed so interested in all that history junk, I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Well, I-“ as he began an attempt to embarrass himself further, he felt a paw swat at his side.

The expert raked her claws across his sleeves. She was a black cat, with a tail that forked to two red tips.

“What is it, Anjean?” he said, looking down and back at her with impatience.

“Mrkgnaa.” was the reply he received.

“I’ll call her in a moment, I just... s-sorry, ma’am, I’ve actually got a quick call to make, if you’ll –“ but when he looked up, his date had left already, slipping out the bar door and leaving him with a bill and the eyes of all the other patrons snidely grinning at him behind their drinks.

“I...have got to step outside for a moment, before I settle the tab.” The man gave a sheepish smile to the bartender, who only sighed in response.

Outside, it was summer. Sunny heat bore down on cracked paved roads and dry grass. Too hot for a black floor-length coat. Turning around the side of the building to use its shadow for cover, the boy pulled out a white and gray slab, folded in half like a clamshell. A telecommunications device – a foldable phone, in other words. Its smooth innards, all lights and magic, connected across distance sound cannot carry. With an awkward glance around, the boy held it close to his face in some vain attempt to keep his conversation private. Anjean stood beside him, eyes narrowed, the nekomata having seen this too many times before, an embarrassing show always performed the same way.

“H-hi, mom,” it started.

“Y-yes, mom. Of course, mom. No, of course not, mom”, it went.

“I’ll be there soon, mom. Sorry, mom.” it developed.

“It won’t happen again. Yes. Bye, mom. ...Y-yes. B-bye...love you too, mom. Bye, I- Bye, I’ll talk to you later-“ it continued.

“No, I’m twenty, I don’t need to hear this right now. I’m an adult. I’m – no, mom. I would never. Please, I –“ it rose to denouement.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it. Yes, mom. Love you too. Bye.” it concluded.

The magical implement folded closed with a click. His shoulders tensed. “Fuck!”

“Ugh...okay. Let’s go, Anjean.”

He looked up from his feet, slowly unclenching his fists.

Anjean was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did you go...?”

There was nothing around the front of the building. He poked his head into the bar doors. Nothing inside but a dozen faces and a dozen opinions of him.

Around the opposite side of the building, against the popcorn-textured walls light-splashed by midday sun, a large red stain coated the awning, window, and sidewalk. A red trail dragged behind the bar, only punctuated by clumps of hair.

He heard a horrible mewling.

His breathing quickened, and the anxiety from the call became something else. It intensified, slowly, into a premonition of something beyond horrible as he slowly turned the corner. Gritted teeth and shaky legs.

Behind the bar was her and her. A bulky fur coat soaked in beast’s blood. Amidst the burning stone tiles was a crumpled black mass. Two pleading eyes croaked a noise, but what she thought behind them was obvious to anyone.

Get out. Run.

He didn't. He stood, hyperventilating, not knowing what to think, what to do, not knowing anything. The woman he thought he knew anything about was standing over his familiar with a serrated something. She turned to look at him, too, and she gave him that same, patient smile.

Please. Move. Don't look at me. You have to...

"Oh, hey. You're done calling your mommy?" Her voice was the same, looking down her nose at him, seeing him more as entertainment than person.

For the briefest moment, he wondered if, somehow, this was retaliation for his behavior.

What's happening? No...stay away from him. Shit. I can barely see. I have to do something...but...

"I'm sorry-" he started to say. She interrupted him by putting a large hand on his shoulder, holding him in place as she slid the same blade between his ribs.

"Shh, it's okay, I get it. You don't have to worry. I don't hate you or anything like that."

She pushed him over, effortless. He was a piece of paper on its side. And then, he, too, was another heap of darkness bleeding out at her feet.

Is he dead-!? Damn it. No, no no no.

Her stony hands reached down into his side pocket and withdrew a chain of small pearlescent beads. In his other pocket, she found a little notebook - just a daily planner and agenda, but

she flipped through it quickly and kept it anyway. Clutching both, she stood back to her full height.

I have to do something. I have to. I have to. Now. Now now now.

“This is all. Thank you.” she said, not even looking at him anymore.

*Now now now now now now now now now. Now now now
now now now now now now now now now now now now
now now*

As the woman turned and started away, there was a bright flash. Within the dim view of the world fading from the boy's vision, there was only a glitter of white, a feeling of radiant, scorching heat that overwhelmed the cold feeling he'd felt bleeding out on the burning stone.

From the woman's hand, an immense flash, a spark that roared and grew until it ate the three of them and rocked the bar.

When the patrons inside went out to investigate, all they found was a dark red stain leading behind the building, pools of blood with nary a body in sight, a dropped foldable phone, and a little notebook with weekend plans and a few other scribbles.

Someone picked up the little white and gray phone and sent a message with it. The tone of the person on the other end changed quickly when she heard the unfamiliar voice.

“H-hello, ma’am?” it started.

“I’m...afraid something serious may have happened to your son, ma’am,” it went.

Missionary in Arcadia

II

You Dropped This

“Excuse me. Are you awake?”

Everything feels heavy.

“Hey. Wake up.”

It is dark and cold, and from somewhere far away, there is a salty, chilly breeze. *Is this the beach?* he thinks.

“Come on, please get up.”

His eyes open slowly. His back hurts, his mind a blur, his legs aching, every nerve firing at once. *Is this sand?*

Standing over him is a long worm of some sort, with a snout, like a snake, but somehow softer, friendlier. Her mouth moves in pace with the words.

“Can you move? Are you okay?”

He rises, his legs weak – too weak to carry his whole body weight. He looks around, not knowing where this strange place is that he has found himself. Before him is a *medium*, one of the nigh-innumerable varieties of animal-like monster occupying the subcontinent of Luwall and its surrounding territories. Many of these are *familiars*, mediums in close working relationship with individual humans. This one, this...snake thing, was speaking to him. He thought this strange, as no cases of mediums capable of speech yet existed. However, this question quickly became secondary in his mind.

“Where...am I?” He asks, looking around at the soft sands, the ebb and flow of clear waves, and catching the reflection of something in them. “Hold on...”

He crawls to the water. The face that he sees looking back from the other side of the crystalline waves is not his own. It is a wolf’s snout, perhaps shorter. It is unkempt and bears black and white stripes along the face, outlining deep, dark eyes. Large triangular ears. A wreath, like laurels, forming a collar around his neck, with long slender legs with red rings around the ankles, patterned like arrows. A tail, round and fluffy, yet squared to an angle, as though expecting to wrap around something, swings behind that body he sees in his reflection.

“Is this...me?”

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you hurt? Let me see. You don’t look hurt, but then again, it is a bit odd to be passed out with the tide coming in about to grab you. Did you wash up here?” The bluish scales of the wyrm-thing roll against the sand and foam as she attempts to slide back into his sight.

“Why do I look like this? I’m...a human. Why do I look like...” he asks, expecting his answer moreso from the universe than from his present company.

Nevertheless, an answer arrives.

“That’s unusual. You say you’re a human? Of course, you look like a pretty normal *lupercine* to me. In basically every way that matters, yup.”

“W-what?”

“You’re a medium, like me. But you say you’re a human? You said you *are* a human? You’ve been one all your life?”

“Yes!! I’m a human, o-obviously! Have I been...did I turn into *THIS?*”

“Wow... just like Nehema... hey, what’s your name?”

“What? I’m...Dell.”

“Hello!” The serpent waves its tail, covered in a prismatic arrangement of feathers, in a gentle greeting. Its face smiles, insofar as he recognizes a smile on a face like that. “I’m Marie.” She says, friendly. “Do you remember how you got here?”

For several moments, Dell is silent, still staring at himself, at this something else in which his mind now swims. He traces his mind back, as far it will go, searching for...anything. He finds feelings – confidence, rebellion, lust, shame, fear, horror, and a coldness. But images, memories, words, places, none of it still exists. It is only Dell, polished clean in the baptismal tides. Tears fall from his eyes. He can’t remember why, but somehow he knows that this is the first time he has cried in a long time.

“Hey, are you-?”

Dell dips his face into the water. All that is left of the thought is sea water. As it drips from his face, his canine face, something else falls with it.

“Anjean...” the syllables fall from his mouth like drool. Instantly, they, too, sink into the sea, to join the tides like everything else.

"Where am I?" Dell asks, this time putting his voice into it. The words are spoken, rather than merely escaping from his mouth.

"Oh, this is Port Saëns. It's a pretty small village down in the southern part of Arcadia."

"Arcadia...?"

"Oh, you really are a human, aren't you? You call it 'Luwall', I think."

"I don't remember anything about how I got here. My whole life is...just...a blank."

She blinks in surprise. "Oh!! Well, I guess you should probably follow me. You aren't the first medium showing up around these parts claiming that you used to be a human. But first, I really ought to take you to Mom. She'll know what to do. And besides – it's getting a bit late. You might need a place to stay for tonight."

"Y-yeah. T-thank you."

Marie's long body rolls and slides along the sand as she starts away from Dell, her scales and feathers dusting the sand into a wavering path that will no doubt soon be washed away by the incoming tide. "Ok! This way!! Come along!"

III

Open House

As he walked, little muscles clicked into place like gears, tendons slid and rotated like the pistons of an engine, bones stretched like the steel hull of some great flying vehicle in the warmth of daylight.

Muscle memory was almost entirely out of the way, and each motion felt new in a way that Dell could not remember feeling before. Each one of his four legs lifted, compressed, shifted, stretched, twisted, and pressed down into soft sand and wet earth in a way that felt at once entirely novel and at second nostalgic.

He was not merely a person stuck in this new body – he was this new body, its nerves his nerves, its churning guts his guts, its tail his tail. Sand fell out of his fur, stuck between his toes, water flowed around the curves of his skin, skin that was no longer his surface, because now his surface was fur from every angle. Each strand, too, was hair, not just a carpet across his body but whiskers in constant communication with the textures of the air and the curvature of his body. It was something entirely alien to be so aware of how cold it was – to feel the breeze so precisely yet be insulated from it enough to not to be bothered. To breathe and feel the air outline the shape of nasal passages that were simply entirely different. The very weight of his skull and the pressure it exerted on his neck was new. Each beat of his heart and the infinite rivulets of veins around his body in an endless circuit were new.

To have lived in the same body all his life and have experienced endless repairs and renovations, only to move to an entirely new home – that is what this is.

Is. Was. Is. Was. Why did he feel like even his thoughts wanted to put his thoughts on his own body into the past, as though this newness were already nostalgic? This new home had its own creases, divots. Stretch marks and stains, stains and infinitesimal miscolorations from scars long faded or sprains long since worked out. It was almost as if something had been living in this body beforehand, yet this home was undeniably his. He felt no tenant within, felt no resistance to his presence or trace of something left behind that any previous occupant might want him to return. What did it mean to feel this way? How long had this body existed? How long was he unconscious for? How much time had passed in between who he was and who he is now? Is. Was. Is. Was. Is?

It was scary to walk on limbs that were entirely unfamiliar and not trip on his own legs. Where had the memory of how to walk as a human gone? Why could he remember only his own name, only the feelings, but not see the faces of any of the someones he used to care about when he closed his eyes?

Why was the feeling of his stomach turning over, its emptiness telling him he was hungry, different from the way the same thing would happen in his other body?

Why did he notice? Why did he care?

Perhaps this is what it meant to be some kind of wolf – some kind of monstrous dog, some kind of animal, some kind of

something distinctly not animal. Something in the middle. A happy medium.

“Will I be stuck like this?” he asks.

Marie answers, her head rising and looking back, even as her middle continues forward and her tail follows, like an arrow checking over its shoulder.

“I don’t know! Some of us change. I used to look like my baby sister, but I look like this now. And at some point, I’ll probably look like Mom. Most of us mediums are capable of some kind of transformation – we evolve, or we ‘rebuild’, usually around once or twice on average, and it depends on when. Sometimes it’s permanent, sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes your entire body plan changes, sometimes you stay almost the same and just get a little bigger. It’s species-dependent, but sometimes you just discover new things about yourself and what you’re capable of. And sometimes people just...choose not to.”

“...was I something else before this?”

“That’s an odd question. You said it yourself, right? You were a human. I don’t know enough about the *lupercines* to be able to tell you if you were...capable of a previous form, I suppose? But probably not. This is probably your first build. Its quite large and complex, though, isn’t it? My baby sis is basically just a lil blob.”

“Yeah. This...wreath around my neck is a part of my body, I think. I don’t know if that makes me part plant or if it’s just an imitation.” Dell looks down at his chest, and is struck by how much his longer snout gets in the way. And yet, tilt his head to the side and he can see more clearly. His eyes are slightly further to

the side than human eyes. He can see further in his periphery than before...

"Do you think I'll become something else?" he asks.

"Probably. Aside from being common in general, most of the *lupercines* I'm familiar with are quite a bit bigger and scarier. More intimidating, masculine, maybe."

"Gee, thanks..." He sighs, and feels the sigh move the air in his lungs and lift his ribs. This was, this is, still too weird.

"Sorry...I didn't mean it like that. I just meant, if you don't like the way you are now, you'll probably have the chance to become something cooler later."

"If I can't turn back soon, you mean."

"Yeah!" Her eyes lift with the sides of her face.

That's a smile? A cartoonish snake like that must smile with her eyes, I suppose, he thinks.

"We're almost there! I'll show you around the rest of town later. Right now...here we are! Mom, I'm home! And-"

Dell follows slowly after, slipping into a cottage of pale wood and amber thatching amidst the shoreline reeds.

"- And I met this boy on the beach! He says he's just gotten turned into a medium, isn't that right?" Marie introduces you in the same breath that the little dragon-worm charges into the house.

"Oh, um...hello, ma'am." Dell looks around the house, trying not to seem distracted or rude.

The house itself is cozy but still a very rustic affair, with slim cracks of light filtering from between the thick board walls. The space seems to mostly consist of four rooms – a front room that also serves as a kitchen, with a dull maroon rug underneath a table at center, and cushioned chairs of varying heights pushed into the corner of the room. Countertops, clean and dustless, line the sides of the room, with pantry shelves above those, only interrupted by doorways or windows. Two to the left, one to the right. Only natural light throughout, yet the whole room nevertheless seemed quite bright.

From one of the rooms to the left stoops a large bipedal pear-shaped dragon. She has short, stout legs, yet a long neck, simultaneously ducking her head underneath the doorframe while also squeezing through it. Her tail is thick, and her arms are feathery – not quite wings, but undeniably avian, and well complemented by the actual pair of wings on her back. Nevertheless, the dragoness, so much larger in every possible way than either Dell or Marie, seems far too large to fly. She tilts her head for a moment, before speaking up with a folksy, warm lilt.

“What’s that? Oh! A guest! My, this is a surprise. Marie, were you out making friends?”

Dell is quick to answer. “She...err, found me on the beach, I suppose. I don’t remember how I got there. I’m a human, but when I woke up, I was...this.”

“Hm! You’re an – one of those...oh what’s the word – agnostics? Amnesiacs, that’s it.”

“Uh, I guess so. I don’t know anything about where I am, what happened to me or why... I barely remember anything about my life. I do remember my name, at least. I’m Dell.”

“Pleased to greetcha, young man. I’m Lora.” She leans an arm on the center island table, and it creaks as more of her weight shifts against it. Meanwhile, the limbless Marie slithers around a chair in the corner, wrapping her midsection around it in a loop and dragging it to the table before springing up into the seat and leaning against the table, as well, in an armless version of much the same gesture. Lora continues. “I’m Marie’s mother, and I see you two have already met!” Lora closes her eyes and develops a pleased look for a moment. “Are you hungry? I could make you somethin’ if’n you’d like. It’s the right way to treat guests!”

“O-oh. Thank you. I hadn’t even thought about it until now. I’m still really lost.” Dell is slow to move any further into the house, nervous and having to look up at Lora’s face.

“Nonsense. It’s no trouble.” Lora says it automatically, seemingly anticipating a different response from Dell, probably some variation of ‘I wouldn’t want to impose’.

She turns around and lifts herself up, her girth stretching out somewhat as she pokes into one of the cupboards, pulling ingredients in thin-skinned bags that he doesn’t quite recognize. Some are, at least, some kind of meat, but most everything else is unfamiliar plant or animal matter that stung his nose – or perhaps his sense of smell was just stronger?

Dell, at very least, thinks better of standing dumbly next to the entryway for much longer. It takes more doing than he had watched from Marie, but Dell moves to one of the chairs in the corner and hooks a forelimb against one of the legs, and slowly and clumsily stumbles with it to the table, before awkwardly climbing into it, too nervous to try the same sort of jump.

“Don’t worry too much about her. She’s always like this. I bring anyone by and she thinks I have a boyfriend or something.” Marie whispers.

Dell couldn’t quite watch Lora work – Her body is large and wide and blocks the view. She hums as something simmers, thick tail sweeping across the floor as she idly works.

After a few minutes, the big dragon turns around and drops a platter of diced and seared meat cubes, garnished and spiced. It was an odd color, but it’s steak, more or less. For whatever reason, Dell looks at Lora’s arm as it retreats from the table – three fingers. She’s more dexterous than he was right now, that’s for sure.

“How do I...? Should I just...?” Dell looks down at his own front paws, and the claws at the tips of each digit. He has something a little like an opposable thumb, upon closer examination, but every one of his appendages is shorter than he’s used to.

“Whoa, I guess you wouldn’t know, huh? Don’t worry too much about table manners, we get it. Try bracing yourself against the table, like this. That way you can lean over and not worry too much about falling forward.” Marie curls and unfurls, shaping

herself like an S with the top bump resting against the edge of the table.

Dell attempts to mimic the motion. Every neuron in his brain tells him he would immediately fall over. Yet, surprisingly, it isn't so. He lifts both front limbs. He feels it – even without his front legs supporting, when he's sitting, his tail provides enough counterbalance to keep him upright.

Dell leans over slowly, feeling his tail unfurl outwards to counterbalance with each motion. It isn't instinctual, yet – but there is something intuitive about it. Humans did have a tailbone, so perhaps there is still some part of his brain that knew what to do with a tail, even if he hadn't ever experienced this yet.

With this revelation, Dell is able to rest himself against the edge of the table as he sits, albeit still shaky as he does so. He picks at the little cubes of steak with his claws. He dissociates as he feels the phantom-limb-like sensations of the motions of the muscles he thought would be his arm instead be this paw. Even thinking of the points at each digit's tip as 'claws' feels unnatural. They are *nails*, are they not? Not flat, not broad, but not sharp. He could pinch with them, even, lifting a cube of meat between two and quickly snapping it up with his mouth just as he thinks he is about to drop it.

He continues with this process, so focused on his own little struggle that he misses most of the conversation between the dragon family – about Marie's day and what she had been doing out so late into the evening. About a baby sister who had already gone to bed.

Dell gets better at it as he goes. By the time he's done, it feels intuitive, if inefficient. These are paws, but...hand-paws.

As for the meat itself, it is almost a sickly color, a little more purplish or pinkish than Dell would have liked, but it isn't raw, and isn't terrible. The mouthfeel is normal, as is the taste, but it is his mouth itself that is so distracting. Longer, with a greater proportion of sharper teeth. And simply more teeth to begin with, for that matter.

As he finishes, his mind wanders back outside of himself in time to rejoin the conversation.

"I suppose you don't have a place to stay, do you?" Lora tilts her head.

"I...I don't. I don't know who I would contact, even. I don't even know where I am, really."

"Alrighty, then. We have a spare guest room. You can feel free to sleep in there tonight, y'hear? I can certainly provide while you try to figure things out."

"R-really?" Dell feels himself blush, though he isn't even sure if his face could show it past the fuzz. "Thank you."

The room in question is the room on the right, as it happens. In the center, slightly elevated on a wooden frame, is a sprawled mattress, taking up most of the floorspace of the small room. Lora enters with a blanket, warm to the touch, and tosses it over the bed. There's a low dresser on the same level as Marie and Dell's head level, not even up to Lora's stomach. She sidles out of the room, as she barely fits there to begin with.

“Is this really okay? I can stay here?”

“Sure! You’re not going to feel better without rest. Maybe you’ll remember somethin’ in the mornin’.” Lora says.

“Yeah. Plus, we can always ask the Corps if they have any information that might help you out. Plus, there’s that stranger lady, Nehema. I reckon she’d know about your situation.” Marie starts, then stops, interrupting herself. “Don’t worry about that tonight, though! You look exhausted. Like you haven’t slept in days, really!”

“A-alright.” Dell agrees. “Thank you again, really. And...uh, good night.”

“Good night!”

“Good night!”

The sliding door to the room shutters over the threshold. It’s dark in the room, and quiet. The sun finished setting in the time during which Dell had been eating. Now, he still draws a curtain over the room’s window, careful not to snag at it with his...clawtips. He stumbles into the bed. There’s a sneaking delirium in him. He feels like he’s been awake for days, despite having been unconscious not more than a couple hours earlier. He feels restless, yet sleep comes extremely quick.