

ELANCIA CHRONICLES
THE ORDER OF NEW GODS
BY WOOFLE

SEASON I
BLISTERED SKIES
EPISODE IX
ILLUSION

— ILLUSTRATIONS BY FORTUNA, CAINE THE LONGSHOT AND SORCERER LANCE —

THERE'S A PLACE SOMEWHERE ON THE EDGE OF SLEEP, WHERE THOUGHTS BECOME ABSTRACT, AND COME AND GO LIKE THE TIDES. A PLACE WHERE ONE ISN'T QUITE AWAKE ENOUGH TO DIFFERENTIATE WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT ISN'T. IT'S A PLACE WHERE THE CLEAREST MEMORY MIGHT COME ACROSS YOU—A MEMORY SO VITAL AND DESPERATE THAT YOU REMEMBER WHAT THE AIR SMELLED LIKE.

AND THEN YOU'LL REALIZE THAT IT NEVER HAPPENED. IT'S JUST AN ERRANT THOUGHT, A POSSIBILITY. A STORY YOU ONCE HEARD, OR DID NOT HEAR.

OR MAYBE IT ISN'T.

I GUESS THE FUNNY PART ABOUT ALL THAT IS THAT I JUST DON'T REMEMBER MUCH OF ANYTHING FROM BEFORE I JOINED THE KNIGHTS. LIKE, AT ALL. I DON'T KNOW IF WHAT I REMEMBER IS WHAT HAPPENED OR NOT. I WAS REALLY TINY, BACK THEN. THERE ARE BITS AND PIECES, BUT THEY'RE SO SMALL AND SO RANDOM. I HARDLY REMEMBER BEING A CHILD, BUT I KNOW I ONCE WAS ONE. EVERYONE WAS ONCE.

IT ALWAYS FEELS LIKE EVERYONE ELSE REMEMBERS THEIR LIVES CLEARLY. I LIKE TO BELIEVE I TOOK A BLOW TO THE HEAD, AND THAT'S WHAT DID IT. MAYBE THAT BROUGHT ABOUT LYRIKOS, TOO.

THAT FEELING CAN COME UP WHEN I'M AWAKE, TOO. IT CAME UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT LAST NIGHT, AS THE DEW SETTLED ON THE ROOFTOPS OUTSIDE, AND I REALIZED I WASN'T ALONE.

The attic room Verse had been given within Castle Pulf was small, but adequate. It had things a room such as it should have—a bed, a desk, a chair, a lantern. The room (and those Basil and the others occupied,) was crammed into a corner of the castle above the library, and could only be accessed via a ladder. Better yet, men sympathetic to Regando guarded it at all hours.

Verse watched the moons both appear through the clouds, their light sparkling off of rain soaked avenues and roofs. It was something calm and peaceful. Something to center and anchor him. He hadn't even been able to meditate, let alone sleep. He and the others would be leaving again the next evening.

He'd almost begun to feel tired. Almost.

Someone was sitting in the chair. It had creaked. Whoever was sitting there might not know he'd heard them yet, and he didn't want to tip his hand just yet. Best to see if he could smell anything—

Cecelia.

"D'you 'ave any idea of the toime?" the fox said.

"Half past three," said the bat girl. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Do you ever sleep?" said Verse.

Cecelia sounded hesitant, or perhaps confused. "Sometimes."

Verse wasn't sure how to take that, but he knew if he didn't speak quickly, she'd steer the conversation towards matters that didn't concern him.

"Last question—the le'er. You sent tha' to your grandfather?"

"I wrote a new one explaining that we wouldn't be returning for some time, as your old one was no longer pertinent," said the bat. Verse could hear her wings flap with annoyance. "...I need to talk to you about something."



Verse glanced over his shoulder at her. “If it's about me and Xan being in your book again—”

♪♪ [Those Who Once Ruled the Earth](#) ♪♪

She cut him off. “This is about the Sea Death.”

That got his attention.

“Verse, you do understand what the Sea Death is, don't you?”

Verse shook his head. He'd have said something snarky if he'd not (for once) been interested in what she'd had to say.

“It's the most obvious of the scars from the God Wars. The wars that robbed us of everything. The dragons, the unicorns, the faeries... They're the reason half-beasts like us exist. You know that much, don't you?”

Verse shook his head again, looking over his shoulder at her. “I don't believe in any of that crap.”

“‘That crap’ is why you and Mr. Xan are stuck here. It's why you may never get to go back to sea. I just wanted to warn you, it's going to get a whole lot worse in the next few years. It's why I don't want to go home...”

“I don't see wot any of those things 'ave to do with one another.”

“Elancia is dying right beneath our feet, Verse. Right now, it's the oceans. I don't know what's going to come next. Wind, Flora, and Fire are safe for now, but I don't know how long. The very ground we live on could swallow itself whole after the oceans disappear... or maybe during...”

The bat girl trailed off. For once, she wasn't speaking as loudly, or as forcefully.

“Wot d'you mean 'safe'?”

“If you go into any Aegiys Temple here in Dascillia, you'll see what I mean. The Gods of Wind, Flora, and Fire are all part of the Aegiys' pantheon, and presumably, still alive. The Goddess of the moons, too, but Verse, the God of the Ocean they worship is an impostor. The real Goddess of the Ocean is named Lamenth, and the Aegiys don't worship her.”

“I know of Lamenth. Wot's your point?”

“I don't know,” said Cecelia, “...but I think that has everything to do with why the oceans are dying. Lamenth is very likely dead. Most Gods were only sealed, to keep their elements alive. We had to seal them, because if we didn't, they would have destroyed Elancia just by fighting one another, and using us to do it.”

Verse spent a few moments trying to wrap his head around what she meant by all of this. “I don't really think I understand. Basically, you're saying the Sea Goddess is dead, and tha's whoy the oceans're... wotever they are now, and the Aegiys are worshipin' someone el—”

That was when that strange feeling came over Verse, washing down over his eartips, lingering in his chest, and finally settling in the pit of his stomach. He felt cold.

Cecelia hadn't noticed his abrupt stop, “Whoever killed her mustn't have cared about our world. If they'd sealed her instead of killing her, you'd still be sailing. There are many Gods we can only assume are sealed or alive—the God of Earth being one. That's really all that's keeping us alive on this world. A series of sealed Gods, the children of a few dead ones, and the last few that survived the wars... and then there's those who won't do their job—like Elia.”

Verse should have been surprised that Cecelia thought Elia was real, but the thought never fully materialized. Verse could smell the air—the pine forest's scent being carried on the breeze towards the scent of the ocean, where he had stood on a very cold day a very long time ago.

He could remember what the drying blood felt like all over his hands and his chest. He could see it dried on the grass at the cliff's edge, where someone had been sitting. Someone who had tumbled over the edge. Someone Verse had pushed.

He remembered his eyes stinging, and the way he'd felt like his own heart would rip itself out of his chest, either with or without his help. He remembered staring at his hands as the blood dried, and the way the light of the moons looked on the surface of the water that night.

He just couldn't remember how old he'd been. In trying to, the memory slipped away. Just a strange thought that had slipped into his mind and back out again—not a memory. Not his, anyway. Something from a book he'd once read, perhaps. Some story he'd spun. Some lie. Someone else's lie.

“Verse...?” Cecelia asked. “Did you fall asleep? Are you falling ill?”

Verse realized he'd curled up on the windowsill when the nausea had washed over him. He felt light-headed, to say the least, and his hands and feet were numb.

It took several moments for Verse to make his mouth work. Anything to make her keep talking and stop his reeling mind. “W-wot d'you... you... believe in Elia? I didn't think you did.”

“Elia is the Goddess of Death,” said Cecelia, her worry for Verse having mostly faded, “and she won't let anyone truly die anymore. She was supposed to guide the souls of the dead into the beyond, but she stopped a very, very long time ago. The souls of the dead just... stay.”

“Why.” Verse managed.

“I wish I knew,” said Cecelia. “I wish anyone knew. The Gods don't exactly um... talk to normal people—at least those that are still around. Elia lives up on the Sky Ring though, so I guess doubly so in her case. We're very small and very unimportant, Verse. The God Wars ending... that was supposed to be Elancia passing into the hands of us—the mortal people. I don't think that ever truly happened, though. I can... I can tell you all of it now, if you're willing to finally listen. It's important you know. It's important everyone knows.”

“I'll pass,” said Verse. “I need sleep. Tell me another day. Goodnight, Cecelia.”

None of this nonsensical talk of Gods mattered right now. Cecelia acting this strangely, also, did not matter. Not after whatever that feeling had been.

The fox felt around for his pocket watch, drawing it free of his vest, and opening it. Inside, as always, was the old, faded image of Clifford and Cadence McDowell together, before they had made the mistake they'd named Verse. Before Clifford had ridden off into the sunset, and Cadence had drank herself off a cliff.

Off a cliff at the side of the ocean, in a spot where on many nights, the wind would carry the scent of the pine forest up until it met the scent of the ocean.

A spot that had been so very cold that night.

The spot where Verse had left a pile of stones from the ruins atop dried blood on the grass out of guilt for things he couldn't quantify nor take back.

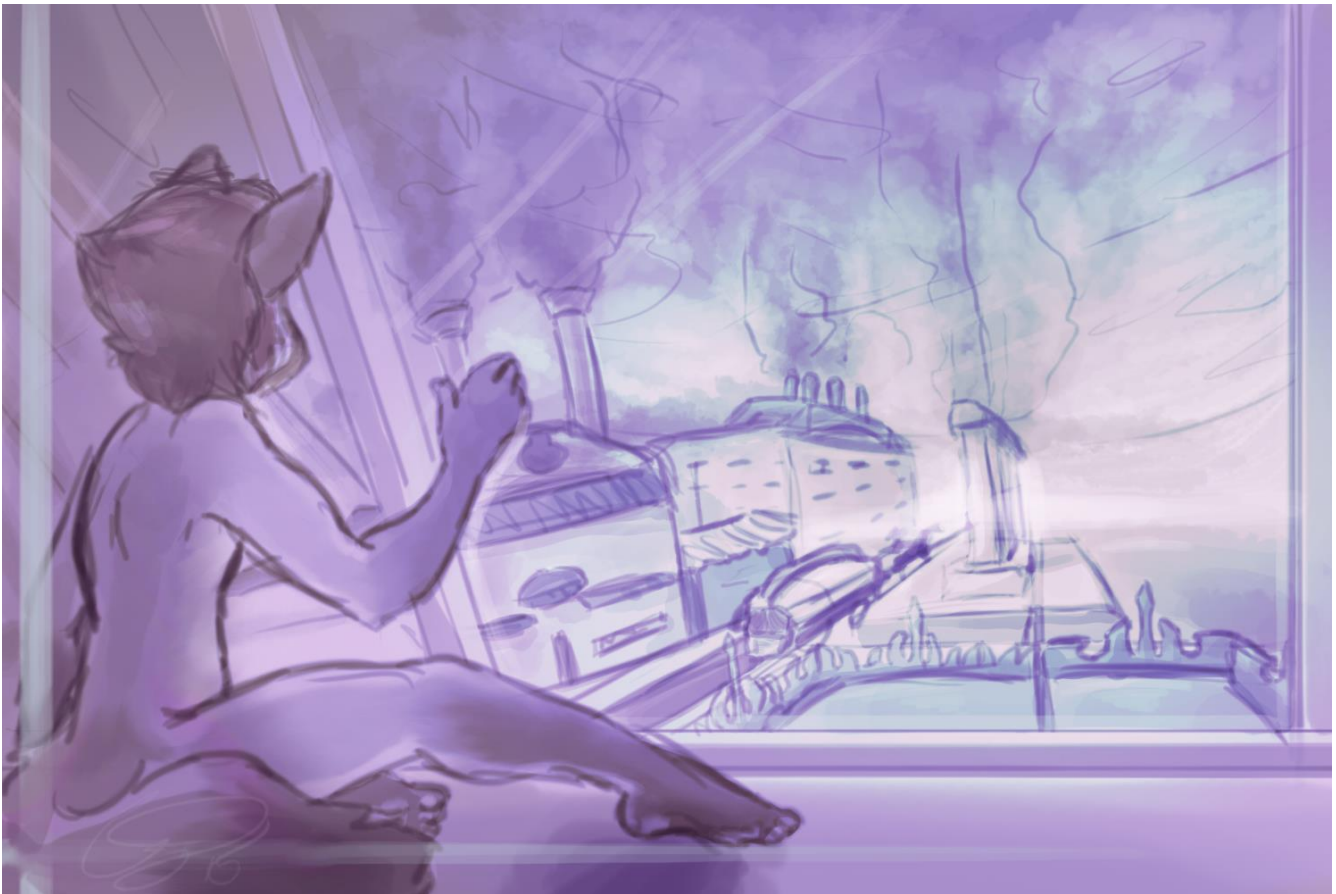
The stones were likely still there. Stones from the ruins of the Sea Goddess' temple—just like everything else on Qaimusu. Left behind by Lamenth, just like Verse had been left behind by Cadence.

"We didn't seal them all," said Cecelia from the doorway. "The ones still alive are fighting on with even less opposition. The Gods of the Aegiys are fighting Elia. This whole war is just that. It's got nothing to do with Celestion or Dascillia, or anything. I just thought you should know."

The door closed, and then, Cecelia had left, too.

♪♪ [Stormclouds Over Pulf \[Day\]](#) ♪♪

Verse didn't bother sleeping after that. He may have drifted off at some point, because he saw hazy light filtering in through the window eventually. Slowly, that light grew brighter than that of the lantern in his room, and he set aside *The Al'ressian Princess*, the latest of Grandfang's books. (Sadly, it was not racier than the last one, but it wasn't as sloppily told, either.)



Outside, a carriage slowly made its way down the road that lead across the river from the castle. Smoke billowed from the stacks of factories, and the sounds of the city waking up filtered quietly through the glass. He could see an Aegiys Patrol making its way through an intersection much further down the road. This early in the morning, they were typically thing. For a moment, he wondered where Rellin might have ended up after Patchmore took him, but realized he didn't really care.

Pulf had become somewhat familiar since he and the others had returned. The buildings were mostly very drab around the castle and the factories, but the outer parts of town were rather nice, at least. Multi-story brick buildings that housed shops and boutiques—the likes of which Verse had thought he'd never see on Basker. There were even a few pubs that weren't completely overrun with Aegiys that were pleasant enough to visit.

Verse often found himself drawn to the factory district though. It was near enough to the castle that he could escape back inside if he was recognized (something he doubted would happen with Rellin gone, although Regando had felt otherwise upon hearing their story.) It also housed the saloon with the best selection of drinks in town, and the shopkeepers in the area hadn't caught him shoplifting yet. He'd found he didn't much like the taste of cigarettes other people rolled, but since they were free, he endured it.

The fox leaned back against the wall of one of the factories on the riverfront, and lit one of these cigarettes, taking a long pull from it. It was nice here—it reminded him of the few years he'd spent on the streets as a child. He'd holed up in a factory district then, too, living in a hole like a non-sent. He missed that at times. He could be alone then, and he could be simple, like any non-sent would.

“Sir Verse,” said Basil, rousing the fox from his daydreaming. Verse almost didn't recognize the bat at first, upon opening his eyes. Basil was dressed in a rumpled brown suit with a tie, his hair neatly organized into a ponytail and tied with a bow. Verse had rarely seen Basil outside of his armor at all, and really, the armor sort of seemed like it was part of the bat.

“I didn't do it,” said the fox, exhaling smoke out of the side of his lips.

Basil seemed to miss the joke, simply looking perplexed. “Do... what?”

“It's uh... it's a joke, Baz. Y'know, loike, someone wolks up to you, and they look a touch suspicious, and you're loike, 'Whoa, I didn't do anything bad,’” said Verse.

Basil blinked once, then twice. “I don't see how that is funny, but nevermind. I wish to discuss something with you.”

“Shoo’,” said Verse, glancing at the bat for a moment, and then closing his eyes again.

“Why would I shoot you?” asked the bat.

“Speak,” said Verse.

There was hesitation while Basil seemed to be trying to figure something out in his mind, or...

“Sir Verse... I wished to ask your opinion on...” Basil lowered his voice, leaning in close enough that Verse could feel his breath on his whiskers, “...ghosts.”

That hadn't been exactly what Verse had been expecting, but he wasn't quite sure what he expected anyway.

“Rubbish and poppycock,” said the fox.

Basil continued on, unabated, though. “Often, at night, I am paid visit by the spectre of my father. Are there any tales of such things from your mystical homeland?”

“I li'erally said I don't believe in no ghosts,” said the fox. “bu' even if I did, I uh...”

It took a few moments for Verse to find a way to frame this all politely.

“Baz, you drink an awful lo'. You're completely smashed and shi'faced every single evening. Are you shore you aren't just—”

“What are you insinuating?” Basil demanded. “You came back to help us, did you not? I would think that meant you would... er... that is to say that you would... care. About me. Your friend. Your old friend, Basil. Now, can't you at least take my inquiry seriously? Lady Karina wouldn't... listen to such things, and Sir Xan would likely think it some sort of jest...”

The bat seemed embarrassed now.

"Talk to Cecelia about ghosts," said Verse. "All I'll tell you is tha' you're too drunk to tell wot's wot—and I'm right. If you're lookin' for any answer other than tha', she's the one to ask."

Basil shook his head vehemently. "I'd rather not. I do not fully understand her er... motivations, nor do I trust her."

"You probably should," Verse said. "She and Xan were the ones tha' wan'ed to come back, not me. And another thing—I ain't your friend."

Basil folded his arms, and scoffed lightly. "I see," he said simply.

Verse leaned his head back up, exhaling some smoke towards the sky. He expected, by the time he looked back down, Basil would be gone.

He wasn't.

No, he was leaned against the wall with an arm a foot or so from Verse.

"May I procure one of your cigarettes?" asked the bat.

"Nope," said Verse, sighing.

There was silence for a little while longer, before Verse spoke once more.

"Why are you 'ere?" he finally asked. "Besoides the ghost thing."

"I wished to become better acquainted with you. Our lives will depend on our abilities on the battlefield, and indeed, they already have. I felt it necessary that we should ride into battle as friends, not just... whatever you consider us."

Verse swallowed, lip curling slightly. There were many different things he wanted to say here, but he settled on, "Well, we can be friends when you don't lie to me about payin' me lots and lots of money."

Basil looked slightly wounded. "Had I not created such an elaborate tale, I would not have gotten your help. I would have never made it to Pulf."

"Yeah, because you're the only person tha' ma'ers," said the fox out the corner of his lips.

"This is not about me—it's about the people of these two countries!" said Basil.

Verse had enough.

"Look, I know in old woives tales n' wotnot, the gallant knoigh' 'as a party of adventurers tha' follow 'im around and foigh' stuff with 'im, before they ascend and foigh' a dark lord, or wotever, but if you're lookin' for tha', you're going to be sorely disappoint'ed. Loife doesn't work tha' way. I don't know you, and you don't know me."

Basil squinted slightly, as if he were truly seeing Verse for the first time.

"So, what you're saying is that we have to develop our comradeship over a long period of time, in order to become legends on the battlefield."



Someone please kill me.

"ow drunk are you at this very moment?" asked the fox.

"Perfectly sober," said the bat.

"If I give you a cigarette, will you go away?" said the fox.

Basil held out his hand.

A while later, Verse sat by the river's side near the castle. He'd had particular luck today procuring items to amuse himself. Currently, those items were a harmonica, a fishing pole, some line, and a pillow on which to rest his head.

No fish had bitten yet, but Verse was also rather sure that the runoff from the factories made up more of the river than the water might. It didn't matter, anyway. He could sleep out here. He'd played the harmonica for a time, grown bored, and taken to counting clouds in an attempt to fall back asleep.

He closed his eyes for a while, but when he opened them again, Xan was standing over him.

"Sup, bro? Got any fish yet?"

Verse shook his head, and patted the spot beside him. The rabbit promptly sat.

"You look like shit. Did you sleep?" asked the rabbit.

Verse shook his head again.

"Weird, you normally sleep way more than anyone else I've ever met," said the rabbit. "Oh well, whatever. You seen Basil today? He ain't even in his armor!"

"I know, roigh?" said the fox, closing his eyes again. "Looks weird..."

"Yeah," said Xan. "You know, he'd still be in the castle, but he and Karina got into a pretty nasty fight over where we're supposed to head today."

"Where is tha' again?" asked the fox.

"We're shippin' off to Gizdich ranch. JIZZ-DICK, bro."

Verse's tired brain did not like the idea of being shipped off to anywhere, much less someplace called Jizz-dick, but he knew he couldn't stay behind unless he faked being sick... and he'd rather not send Xan or Cecelia off alone.

"Anyway, Karina liked Regando's plan, Basil didn't. So they start smack-talkin', and pretty soon, she just straight up walks out on him, then, he's all fumin' and he leaves too. Me and Regando was like, *damn*. Anyway, Regando ain't gonna delay nothin', so... I don't know what's goin' on with that. Guess we'll be headin' out soon. ANYWAY, Baz goes and gets him some regular-ass clothes, and straight up bounces. I haven't seen him all day."

Verse slowly began to realize why Basil had so desperately tried to stay near him, then. "I sawr 'im," said the fox.

"Where?" said Xan.

"Factory district, but I told 'im to fuck off," said the fox.

Xan sighed. "Well, whatever. I'mma go back to looking for him. Ya'll wanna help?"

"No," said Verse.

"What if I bring you a shit ton of coffee?" said Xan.

"Still no, but I'll take the coffee."



About an hour later, Verse and Cecelia were making their way through the factory district yet again. Still no sign of Basil.

Worse yet, Cecelia hadn't said a word about the previous night. Verse had asked at least three times by this point, but she'd ignored him, and kept talking about *The Al'Ressian Princess* instead. As usual, she was somehow ahead of him in the book, despite writing her own, and reading any other text she could get her grubby hands on.

"Look, can you stop with the bloody spoilers at least, if you're gonna ignore me?" asked said the fox, as he and Cecelia passed the place he'd spoken with Basil earlier. "Talk about somethin' else, or I'm gonna look for 'im by meself."

Cecelia adjusted her glasses a bit, sighing through her nostrils and looking towards him. "I don't want to talk about last night," she said.

"You made tha' very clear," said the fox. "So uh... wot about your novel?"

"I got Xan to read it..." the bat girl said, trailing off.

"And? Did 'e loike it?"

Cecelia grumbled.

"It doesn't matter, because you won't read it," she said simply.

"I don't 'ave toime," said the fox.

Cecelia gave him a strange look. "You have time to fish, and to go to pubs and all that stuff. You have time for Grandfang, even!"

Verse came to a halt then, wincing. She had him there. He found that he didn't want to seem like too much of an ass to her for some reason. The fact of the matter was, though, that he didn't want to. There was no way it would be any good. From the little bits she'd told him about it, it sounded like a complete clusterfuck. That, and her cockamamie scheme to print copies herself and sell them was... well, cockamamie.

"Tell you wot," said the fox, "I'll wait until it's done. Then, once it's done, I'll read it."

"But Verse... um... it's part of a series. There's going to be like... um, I think eight books, maybe nine," she pointed out. "So um... y-you'll read each one I finish, right?"

Verse made a face. "If I promise to read the bloody thing, will you tell me wot on earth got into you las' noigh'? Tha' was really weird."

"FINE! But you have to read it! Even the parts Xan didn't like!" she said, hands on her hips.

Verse considered this for a few moments. He'd have to find a way to wiggle out of reading it when the time came to do so, but he'd figure that out when he got there. Best to appear busy and to shine her on. It was the 'polite' thing to do. He wasn't sure why it was so important he waste time trying to not be that rude to her, though.

"Ms. Karina said it's really really good," she said, "but she kept laughing at some serious parts."

"Wot parts?" asked the fox, although he wasn't really paying attention. His ears were perked, trying to listen for any sign of Basil, and he'd begun to walk again. Cecelia was right behind him.

"Well, the main hero is this girl, right?" said Cecelia.

Verse came upon an intersection. To the left, a road led towards the river and past a few abandoned factories. To the right were several working factories and a pub, and dead ahead was an undeveloped part of town that was mostly overgrown with old dark trees, and housed a few smaller workshops.



*Basil is probably looking for solitude, so maybe he went that way?
We already checked everywhere else...*

Verse continued forward.

"Anyway, she's really really good at magic, right? And she's the smartest girl in the whole magical academy she's in! And she reads a lot. But her parents died when she was really little..."

The bat girl trailed off again, as if in thought, rubbing her chin, and squinting one eye, before continuing, "anyway, she befriends these mercenaries when she's on her quest outside of the school, and they're really strong and really really..." she lowered her voice, "...attractive."

"Okay," said Verse.

"So, they're going to journey together to defeat Elia, right? So, they're going, but she realizes she's in love with BOTH OF THEM!"

This had probably been meant to be some big revelation, but it didn't really surprise Verse.

"Interesting," he said. It wasn't, and he was sniffing for hints of Basil's scent, but—

"The one who can play music, when she kisses him, Ms. Karina started laughing, and kept saying, 'Perfect.' for some reason. I don't get it."

Verse winced for a few moments, as the puzzle pieces fell into place. He decided to confirm his suspicions.

“Wot's the main girl's name?”

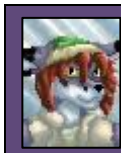
“K'selia,” said Cecelia. “K-apostrophe-S-E-L-I-A. T-That's my real name, you know... Grandpa Elianised it. S-So since I can't use it anymore, I thought it would be a good name for her, 'cause she's a bat like me.”

Verse sighed through his nostrils. “And wot's this musician mercenary loike that she kisses?”

“Oh, he's wonderful!” said Cecelia, skipping a few steps to fall in beside Verse. “He sings like an angel! But only when no one's looking! And he's dark and mysterious! And he's a foreigner! And he smells really nice! And he's really really nice to K'selia. And he's got muscles! He's not super bulky, but like... y'know... really tough. He's sleek looking! Yeah! He's a fox! Um...” she trailed off for a moment, as if suddenly realizing something very awkward. “Y-you realize I'm talking about your character, right, Verse?”

Verse heard himself make a sound. It sounded as if he'd just broken a tooth or stepped on a nail. He tried to mask it, though.

“Aha...hhah... t-that's um... w-well that sounds very interesting, Cecelia...”



Time to change the subject.

“Whoy don't you use your real name anymore, though?” he asked.

Cecelia, who seemed very, very confused, finally realized she'd been asked something. “Oh, uh... 'cause that was part of the agreement we had to make so that Grampa and I wouldn't be executed.”

Verse winced. “Oh... Well, y'know, you're not in Celestion anymore. If you want to be K'selia, be K'selia.”

Cecelia shook her head lightly. “How come both you and Ms. Karina laughed at that part of the book?” she asked.

“ow come you barged into my room at 'alf past three and gave me an 'istory lesson?” said the fox in return.

“Because you need to understand what Mr. Xan pulled us into. This isn't about right and wrong like he thinks it is. It's ... it's just... not about that!”

“I don't think tha' we're in the roigh'. I jus' think I'm followin' Xan,” said the fox. “I koind've regret comin' back, though, really. Look, if you really want to talk to me about—”

But Cecelia was already gone.

Verse decided to just plain let her go, and continued deeper into this quieter part of town. There was a short, sharp canyon here, near a quarry. The road was narrower here, but still rutted by the wheels of wagons, and up ahead a small bridge jumped the canyon.

Basil's scent, which was getting thicker, lead that way, but once Verse reached the bridge, it stopped abruptly. Verse scratched his head, and sniffed all around the area, but the scent was just *gone*.

The railing of the bridge was not very high, and the fox turned to sit on it, trying to figure out what that could mean. Basil could have perhaps headed back the other direction. Karina would have found him, were that the case. She'd been searching the other side of town, but Verse was pretty sure she didn't really want to find the bat just yet. As such, he'd been quick to volunteer to check the factory district so she didn't have to, even though she likely didn't appreciate the effort, much less anything else.

The fox looked down for a few moments, patting himself down for his cigarettes, before a shadow passed by him, then lingered. When he looked up again, Karina was there. Finding a cigarette, he stuffed it in his mouth.

She looked less 'hard' today than she normally did. That was a good adjective to describe her, Verse felt. Her ears were drooping a bit, and her tail wasn't as curly as normal. She regarded him for a few moments, before sitting on the opposite side of the bridge from him, and folding her arms.

For a few moments, all Verse could think about is hearing Karina in a dream, talking to Lyrikos. He shook those thoughts from his mind.

"No luck?" asked Verse.

Karina shook her head.

"How long do we 'ave before we need to leave?"

"Check your watch, idiot," said the dog.

Verse didn't bother. "SORRY, TOO IDIOTIC TO READ TIME," he said. "So, are we leavin' without Baz, 'en?"

"If we must," said Karina. "It is more important that we deal with the Aegiys Cannon than deal with Basil's ego. One could kill a lot of people. The other bruises easily."

Verse shifted his lips off to the side. He was surprised to hear that, as Karina and Basil seemed rather close to say the least. The fox honestly resented the connection the two of them shared for reasons he knew, and reasons he did not understand yet.

"I can't say I expe'ed tha'," he admitted.

"People are dying," said Karina, flinching slightly. "The more I think about that, the less appealing searching for a petulant child matters. The quicker we execute Regando's plan, the quicker the Aegiys lose the ability to level cities."

"Wait, level *cities*? Tha's wot the cannon was meant for? I mean, I've seen magic, bu'—"

"The cannon channels magic," said Karina. "...if the intelligence we received is accurate, anyway, it would magnify the energy of a lot of people on the Aegiys side. It isn't ready yet, but it will be in a few weeks.

Do you understand what I'm saying? There's a proverb about this, which you should recall from training. When the rivers run red with the colour of blood, don't go swimming."

Verse was pretty sure she mistook the meaning of that proverb—and also that it wasn't real. This was the fourth or fifth time she'd spat one of these out.

"Um, kay, so... I guess we'll just go without Baz. Wot's our method of transport?"

"Weren't you paying attention in the meeting this morning?!" Karina demanded, standing up.

"Skipped it," said Verse, rolling his eyes.

Karina growled for a moment, probably out of sheer frustration, and then sat once more. "You're worthless. I'm not going to tell you. You'll just have to figure it out for yourself."

"Kay," said Verse. "Still though, aren't you and Basil loike—*together*? Loike, you're awfully callous about this if—"

Karina had begun to laugh. "You're so amusing sometimes, McDowell! What gave you that impression?"

Verse took a moment to think about it, and realized there hadn't been much evidence one way or the other. "e's the only person you speak plainly to other than Cecelia," he finally said.

"Because, for all his idiocy, I trust him," said the dog woman. "He is a dependable warrior."

"e's a drunk," said the fox.

Karina looked angry for a moment, but the moment passed.

Verse looked her over. The way the afternoon sun illuminated her fur was absolutely stunning. So was the sheer strength her frame radiated. Sure, he didn't know shit about her personality (mostly due to the fact that she often avoided him or outright refused to speak to him,) and sure, she didn't like him, but that couldn't really stop him from looking at her.

"Is there something on my face?" the dog-woman asked, patting lightly at the top of her snout.

"Huh? Uh, yeah," said Verse. "Wan' me to get it?"

Karina shook her head, feeling around on her face a bit more. "It's funny. You think with how honor-driven Basil is, he wouldn't do something like this..." she said.

"You'd also think 'e wouldn't lie about thirty thousand silver sillens," said the fox.

Karina rolled her eyes. "You'd think that," she agreed. "You'd also think he wouldn't put himself in a situation such as he has here in Dascillia."

"Tha' part shouldn't surprise you. I've only known the guy for a short whoile, but 'e's gonna thrust 'imself in to wotever 'e can. 'e's got somethin' to prove, that one."

Karina perked her ears, although she was still trying to locate whatever it was on her face with one of her big hands. "He has something to prove?" she asked. "What, praytell, is that, yokel?"

"Tha' 'e's a Basil. Loike oll them statues back in Kalandla and wot. You notice the inscriptions on 'em? They all list some great deed. The fuck's *this* Basil done in 'is loife ye?"

Karina seemed to take a moment to consider this. "Hm. A fair assessment, I suppose. Perhaps you aren't a complete waste. Tell me, did I get whatever was on my face?"

Verse looked her over for a moment longer, before looking down at himself.

Slowly, he stood, and moved closer to her, before very gently reaching out, and awkwardly brushing her cheek with a hand. He held it there for what felt like a year. It was only a half second though, probably.

"Got it," he said, quickly pocketing the hand, his face feeling hot.



She didn't kill me!

Karina gave the fox a very strange look, before her expression softened, and she looked away. Verse did the same.

"I meant to ask earlier. I think we 'ave a friend in common... Karina, do you perchance know anyone named Lyrikos?" said the fox.

"Lyrikos?" asked Karina, sounding perplexed. "No. Why would you assume one such as yourself would know anyone I would?"

Verse felt all the euphoria he'd felt from touching Karina's cheek fade away very, very quickly. It was replaced by embarrassment, pain, and uncertainty.

"Oh well, strange... hah. Guess tha' was a different Karina," said the fox. "It's a very popular name." He avoided using the word 'common' so as not to raise Karina's ire. It was easy to tell that no matter how tough she'd grown, she held her social standing in high regard. Strange for someone who obviously lived very far away from anywhere her social status would have mattered. Celestion had an upper crust (presumably. Maybe it was just Basil,) but she... Well, Verse didn't know enough about Celestionese culture to ascertain—

"Why are you staring at me?" she asked. "Who is Lyrikos?"



This is awkward. I'm out.

“Gotta go!” said the fox, before turning and running to his side of the bridge. It wasn’t that tall, and there was water below. As such, it was easy to hop right over the edge and into the water to disappear.

The water was cold and kind of gross, but he stayed in it long enough for Karina to (probably) leave. He surfaced under the bridge, dragging himself to the shore, and waiting for the water to flow out of his clothes.



Why did I go and say that to her? Things were going well! She was insulting me... I touched her face... She doesn't know Lyrikos... I'm crazy... Yeah. Things were going great.

“Sir Verse?”

Basil's voice. Verse realized the bat-kin was sitting in front of him, an unlit cigarette between his lips. The fox realized it was the one he'd given the bat.

“Uh.. did you 'ear oll tha'?” asked the fox.

Basil nodded his head.

Verse felt rather awkward to say the least. He swallowed. “Look, abou' wot I said...”

“You're absolutely right,” said Basil. “I would rather die here in Dascillia dismantling the Aegiys cannon than live a worthless life back in Celestion. I don't think Karina can understand that. She is here because I am here... She feels the need to protect me—as if I need protecting.”

“You do,” said Verse, squatting in front of the spot where Basil was sat.

“Perhaps,” the bat agreed. “I fought well in tourneys, and I thought I would perform admirably well on the battlefield. I... have not, thus far.”

Verse shrugged. “I don't know. You do foine. I don't even *loike* foigh'in', but you take to it loike a fish to wa'er.”

“I suppose there is something to be said for the fact that I wish to face battle head on,” the bat said. “but...”

“But?” said Verse, before realizing he was doing that stupid thing where he cared too much. That was something the Old Verse would have done. The one with the long hair, and without the scars. The one who wasn't a pirate.

The one thought he was a girl.

“Look, wotever, I don't care,” said the fox. “I don't give a damn about you, or Celestion, or Dascillia, or Elia—which I'll 'ave you know, is the Goddess of Death. We should just go deal with this Aegiys Cannon or wotever. Tha's our mission today, ainnit?”

Basil looked confused for a few moments, latching onto the part that seemed to have upset him the most. “What is this nonsense you babble about God? She is the God of all things, not simply death.”

“Keep tellin' yourself tha',” said Verse. “I'm gonna go leave town with the others. You can stay 'ere under your bridge.”

The fox turned, and took one big step along the riverbank, before pausing, and looking back towards Basil. “Um... where... exactly are we oll s'posed to meet up?”

“It's almost as if you need my help or something,” said the bat, standing, and dusting himself off. He'd dropped the cigarette. Verse had seen that coming though—Basil had never smoked.

“We are to meet the Patchmore Players at Gate 4A. That one leads out onto the highway that leads towards Gizdich Ranch. They'll be ferrying us. I'll.. pretend you said nothing blasphemous earlier.”

Verse's annoyance faded away. He liked the Patchmores.

“Wonder wot they've got Rellin doin'?” said the fox. “Woshin' dishes maybe?”

“Didn't you hear?” said Basil. “Rellin escaped.”

♪♪ [Eye of Fate](#) ♪♪

The communication spell fizzled to life, wavering in the flames that had taken hours for Rellin to kindle.

“Sarboza, how goes it in Pulf?” Lionel sounded particularly chipper this morning, and Rellin wasn't sure why. The Paldo Facility had been sabotaged and blown to bits a week previous, and the month was already looking bleak for the Aegiys forces with losses on the eastern front, no matter how badly they were trouncing the opposition on the western front.

He wasn't sure if he should address the fact that he'd let himself be captured, but decided to do it.

“Sir, the Blades of Light managed to capture me, and I was handed off to some band of gypsies. I am on my way back to Pulf, but—”

Lionel was laughing on the other side of the spell. “Are you pulling a fast one on me, kid?”

“No, sir. I do not pull 'fast ones',” said Rellin. “I have escaped, and—”

“Good, then you know which ones are Blades of Light, right? Should be pretty easy for you to weed them out and kill them, so Regando stops doing troublesome things.”

“They were masked, sir. They came in the night and killed three of my compatriots when they resisted. Pulf practically belongs to them now.”

What came from the other side of the spell was perhaps the longest, most disgusted sigh Rellin had ever heard. It lasted for a good minute and a half.

“Y'know, kid, I leave Pulf to you, and I expect that—hey, y'know, this Sarboza kid's pretty good. You know what Lord Commander Aces said about you? He said you were the best thing since sliced bread! You were the best of the best!”

Lionel laughed again, but it sounded almost pained. “Well, you know what? Fine. Fuck Pulf. Filn and Ryadel are going to ride my ass about this, but it doesn't really matter. It's one city. We can just take it off the map. Thing is though, Sarboza, Filn's getting real ornery. I just said it doesn't matter that he's riding my ass, but he's the prince. Do you know what's at risk here if we piss down his throat?

Everything. If we fail—”

“We die,” said Rellin. “I know. I signed the papers same as you, sir.”

“Did you actually *read* what you signed? We'll be stricken from history, kiddo. Gone.”

“Yes, I read it, sir,” said Rellin.

“Then you *know*, that if we fail, we also doom Elancia. That wasn't on the paper, but I'm sure you know that, right? You paid attention in church? If we die—”

“Elancia dies,” said Rellin, voice raising. “Sir, with all due respect, do you think I don't care for this world? Do you think for an instant that I am complacent and do not mind Elia's willful ignorance? Sir, I understand what is at stake here. I understand very, VERY well. If I did not, do you think for an instant I would be contacting you after escaping? I need to know what I can do to save Elancia. I don't have time to be lectured by someone who sits behind the front lines and spends most of his day cursing at privates and rubbing elbows with royalty!”

There was silence from the fire. It was then that Rellin realized he might have overstepped his bounds in his anger.

“You've got balls, kid,” said Lionel. “...but if you start one more statement like that with 'With all due respect,' I'll cut them off. Now get your ass back to Massjay as quick as you can. We don't have time to screw around with Pulf. There's supposed to be some big hullabaloo at the Aegiys cannon tomorrow... Fate's very adamant about—You know what? Just... Just get back to Massjay, Sarboza.”

Lionel closed the communication link spell before Rellin could get another word in.

♪♪ [A Memory Misplaced](#) ♪♪

Verse found herself amid the seawood trees near she and Lyrikos' beach. She was just beyond the spot where the waves turned around and retreated between the trees, sat atop a small rock. It seemed natural she would be here, just as much as it did any time she found herself anywhere. In fact, thoughts like that rarely crossed her mind when she dreamed. Mostly because she often didn't realize she was at first.

Lyrikos was sat on the sand in front of her, filing the younger vixen's claws carefully.

"THERE YOU ARE, PUDDING," said the older fox, looking up through her bangs. Her floppy ear, as always, flopped a bit when she blew some of those bangs out of her face.

"OH UH... HI," said Verse, letting the strange feelings that had clouded her mind drift away.

"LYRI. UM, CAN I ASK YOU SOMETHING?"

Lyrikos looked back down at her work. "Mhm."

"YOU KNOW KARINA, RIGHT? KARINA FRJRAU?" asked the fox.

"I DO!" said Lyrikos. "VERY WELL, IN FACT."

There was a fondness to Lyrikos' tone that Verse didn't take too kindly to.

"SHE JUST TOLD ME TODAY THAT SHE DOESN'T KNOW YOU," said Verse flatly. "SO YOU'RE LYING."

Lyrikos stopped her work, and then snorted, before giggling, and coming to sit beside Verse on the rock.



Verse scowled. "Wot the 'ell is so funny?!"

She didn't even realize she'd slipped into Elan, but Lyrikos slipped right along with her.

"Wot's so funny is tha' you don' even think I'm real-loike, n' wot, but you mentioned me to someone."

Verse growled a bit, but blushed, too. She realized this was the first time she'd ever mentioned Lyrikos to anyone at all.

"Does 'is mean 'at you foinally know I'm real 'en?" asked the older vixen, before continuing in Kerlynzian, "BECAUSE THAT WOULD REALLY, REALLY MAKE ME HAPPY."

"FOOD MAKES YOU REALLY REALLY HAPPY," grumbled Verse.

"IT DOES," said Lyrikos, undaunted, "SO DO YOU. SO WOULD YOU TREATING ME LIKE..."

The older girl sighed, and draped an arm around Verse's shoulder. "...LIKE I EXIST."

Verse looked down at her own lap, and past it at her nicely filed toeclaws, feeling her ears sag.

"KARINA SEEMS TO THINK YOU DON'T," said the fox.

Lyrikos shook her head. "SHE DOESN'T KNOW ME BY THIS NAME IS ALL, SWEETIE. SHE KNOWS ME BY THE NAME I GAVE HER."

Verse felt her face contort, and turned to look at Lyrikos. The older fox was smiling at her, but the smile faded.

"WHY WOULD YOU CALL YOURSELF SOMETHING OTHER THAN YOUR NAME? YOUR NAME IS TRULY LYRIKOS, CORRECT?"

"YES, OUR MOTHER NAMED ME, JUST AS SHE NAMED YOU," said Lyrikos. "I DON'T LIE TO YOU."

"SO WHY WOULD YOU LIE TO HER THEN, IF YOU DON'T LIE TO ME?" demanded Verse.

"YOU'RE MY SISTER," said Lyrikos, "KARINA IS A DIFFERENT STORY."

"WHAT EXACTLY IS KARINA TO YOU?"

♪♪ Dream Sea ♪♪

Lyrikos' ears perked. "WHAT?" she asked, although she wasn't looking at Verse.

"HUH?" said Verse.

Lyrikos placed a finger to the younger fox's lips. "SHH A SEC, PUPPING. WHAT? YES, I'M AWARE. WE'LL DEPART IN FIVE MINUTES. HAVE WE LEFT ANYTHING BEHIND? ...YES, I KNOW. DO ANOTHER SWEEP. I HAVE SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT TO ATTEND TO NOW, IF YOU'LL LEAVE ME BE."

Verse followed Lyrikos' gaze.

Out there, among the seawood trees, was someone... Just their head was poking out of the water, although Verse couldn't quite see them. They were large, but formless. Just a dark shadow. They had tiny ears that wiggled when they spoke—and indeed, they *were* speaking, although Verse couldn't hear it. She strained as hard as she could to hear.

"YES, MY LADY," said the person from the water.

"YES, HOLY ONE," said a second, who Verse hadn't even spotted in the water. As quickly as they had arrived, they were gone.

Lyrikos sighed slightly. Her arm hadn't moved from around Verse all the while, and in fact, she'd held her tighter during the conversation.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT...?" Verse asked after a very long moment. "WHO... WHY DID—"

"JUST FIGMENTS OF YOUR IMAGINATION," said Lyrikos. "PLAY THEM NO MIND."

"YOU'RE LYING," said Verse. He knew her well enough to know when she was lying.

The older vixen leaned in, and sniffed Verse's hair and one of her ears. "YOU SMELL VERY NICE TODAY," she said, "AND YES. I'M LYING."

Verse sighed, but she knew better than to ask. Lyrikos had lied about these people before. Years ago. Verse remembered the wiggly ears on the bigger one. The last time, she hadn't admitted she was lying.

Verse sniffed Lyrikos' neck and cheek. She smelled sweet—like love, like secrets, and lies.

"YOU LIED WHEN YOU SAID YOU DON'T LIE TO ME."

"...I SUPPOSE I DID. I'D ONLY EVER DO IT TO KEEP YOU SAFE."

Gently, Lyrikos licked the bridge of Verse's nose, before giving her another gentle squeeze.

"SWEETHEART," she said softly, "WHEN THIS WAR BUSINESS IS OVER, YOU AND I HAVE A LOT TO DISCUSS."

"YEAH, WE DO," said Verse, licking Lyrikos' chin gently. "A LOT. YOU COULD TELL ME NOW."

"WE DON'T HAVE TIME TODAY—NOT YOU NOR ME. CAN I HOLD YOU FOR A WHILE?" asked Lyrikos.

Verse didn't say anything, she just put her arms around Lyrikos, too.

"YOU LIE TO ME TOO, YOU KNOW," Lyrikos whispered in Verse's ear, her warm breath making Verse feel almost cold. "VERY OFTEN."

"I DO," said Verse quietly. "I LIE TO EVERYONE I MEET."

"PERHAPS YOU COULD DO THAT A LITTLE LESS AROUND YOUR DEAR OLD SISTER?" asked Lyrikos.

"I'LL START WHEN YOU START," said Verse, hugging Lyrikos tighter. "CAN YOU JUST... STAY? I DON'T WANT TO WAKE UP TODAY."

"I CAN'T," said Lyrikos. "NOT TODAY, BUT SOON."

"STAY," said Verse, holding her tighter. "TELL ME THE THINGS YOU HAVEN'T. HOLD ME."

Lyrikos sighed softly, brushing fingers through Verse's hair. "VERSE... THE THINGS I DON'T TELL YOU WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY RUIN YOUR LIFE. EVERY TIME I WANT TO, I JUST... I LOOK AT YOU NOW. YOU'RE ALMOST HAPPY. YOU'RE ALMOST COMFORTABLE. YOU ALREADY HAVE TO DEAL WITH EVERYONE TREATING YOU LIKE A MAN. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU COULD BEAR THIS BURDEN."

"I KNOW," said Verse quietly. "I KNOW THAT'S WHY YOU DON'T TELL ME THINGS, BUT IF YOU WANT ME TO ACCEPT THAT YOU ARE REAL, THEN YOU MUST LIFT THIS VEIL OF SECRECY."

Lyrikos sighed again. "YOU ONLY SPEAK SO FORMALLY WHEN YOU'RE UPSET..."

"HOLY ONE?" asked one of the people from the trees. "WITH ALL THE RESPECT AND HUMBLE APOLOGIES I CAN OFFER... PLEASE, WE MUST GO NOW, BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE."

It was the one with the wiggly ears.

"WHAT NAME DOES KARINA KNOW YOU BY?" asked Verse.

"KIRYL," said Lyrikos. "KIRYL HEMANA."

♪♪ Light in the Murk ♪♪

Verse sucked down a breath of air, and opened his eyes, pulling his bandana up from where it was blocking his vision. His lips and nose felt dry, but a quick swipe of the tongue fixed that. He nearly bit it when the wagon bumped over some rough terrain, though.

Patchmore's wagon was rather comfortable and rode rather well, typically, but the road they were on must have been very rough. The cheetah's bed was small, but it smelled nice, and was comfortable. Aside from it, the wagon was sparse, but homely. There was a small desk, two chairs, a bookshelf containing several tomes in many different languages, all held in place by wooden bars. Everything in the wagon was nailed down—even the bed, or perhaps especially, although from what Verse had learned of the cheetah-kin, there were more reasons than one for that.

When he'd fallen asleep, Sir Patchmore hadn't been far away, and the sun could be seen through the small window in the door at the rear of it.

Now though, fireflies danced around in the darkness, among the limbs of trees that hung low enough to brush the wagon.

The sounds of horses' hooves and talking were still present outside, and Verse could hear a couple of the Players' musicians further up in the procession practicing together.

He wasn't exactly sure what to make of his dream. He could take Lyrikos at face value, but that would require him accepting the fact that she might be a real person. If that were the case, it raised a lot of alarming questions he didn't even want to contemplate just yet. Better not to think. Things that rhymed with that were easier just now.

Uncurling from the ball he always slept in, he felt around blindly for the bottle of wine he and Patchmore had shared before he'd fallen asleep. It was somewhere on the bed, he was sure of it.



I wonder why he's so nice to me?

Joaquin seemed nice in general—in some ways, anyway. He had agreed to ferry their group deep into Dascillia ... for a nominal fee of course. Verse recalled it being enough to vex Regando, but it wouldn't be easy sneaking to Gizdich Ranch as it had been getting to Paldo. There was no fog here, and a lot of open landscape once they passed through the swamps. ...Which was where Verse assumed they were now.

As Verse was looking out the window of the door, it rather suddenly swung open, and Joaquin entered with a yawn and a stretch. He eased the door shut with his tail, before glancing down to Verse.

"Ah, good morning Sir Feesh," he said, arching a brow. "I was afraid I would not see you awake again until we had to part."

Verse sat up, finally finding the bottle, only to whine when he realized it was empty. "Oh, uh... mornin'. 'ow far'd we ge'?"

Slipping down into the seat behind his small desk, Joaquin rested an elbow on it, fidgeting with one of the patches on his coat, tsking slightly when he realized one of the patches was working its way loose. He turned his chair a bit, kicking off his boots, and resting his feet on the bed near to Verse.

"We are steell in the northern swamps," the cheetah-kin said with a sigh, "probably will be for another few hours. Your mercenary friends grow restless."

"Firs've oll," said Verse, "they're no' merc'naries, n' second of oll, they're no' me friends. Well, two are, I guess."

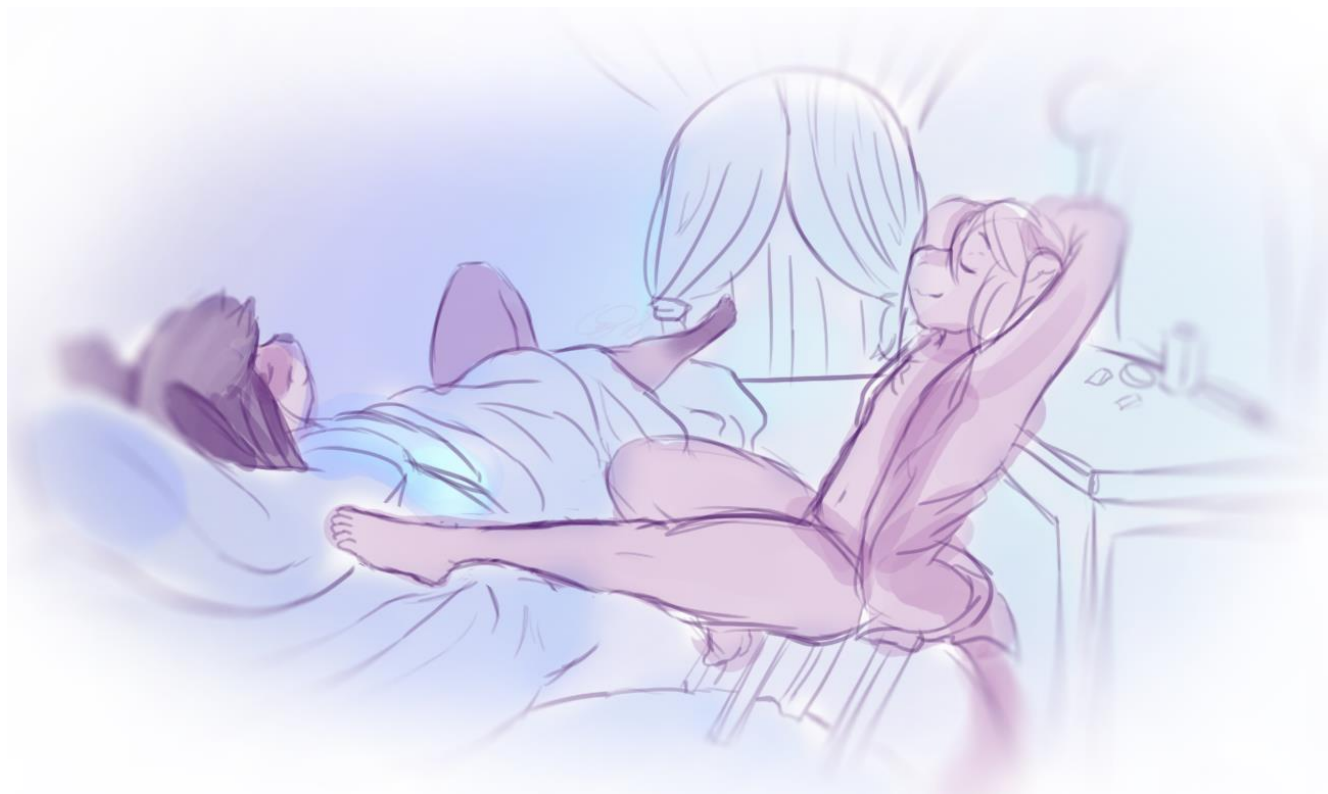
Shifting around on the bed, Verse folded his arms behind his head, and looked up at the ceiling for a few moments, stretching his legs out, and scratching one shin with the claws from his opposite foot.

"My apologies," said Joaquin, "I don't profess to know much about your group, or you, een fact. I'd assumed you and your two friends had turned to mercenary work after the pirate... eessue."

"Ah, actually you're roigh', I guess," Verse muttered, reaching over to the side where his vest had been crumpled up. It took a few moments for him to find his cigarette box and his matches, but once he did, he put one of the former in his mouth, and used a footpad to light the latter. "It's a lo' stupider than you think. I 'aven't 'ad anyone sane to talk to in a whoile. D'you wanna 'ear exactly wot we're doin'?"

"Remind me of your name, first? I wish to try once again to pronounce eet," Joaquin said, tapping his fingers on his desk, and looking past the fox, out at the swamps outside.

"Verse," said Verse.



“Oh, right. It is easier when you shorten it! Such a strange name... did you geeve it to yourself?” the feline asked, leaning forward a bit, his gaze trailing back towards the fox. Joaquin seemed to be the curious type, and the talkative type. Despite being a bit prissy, and a little more concerned with money than Verse had realized (and a lot less grandiose when not in-character) he actually wasn't annoying, which was a plus. Still, Verse hadn't encountered anyone this interested in him, and wasn't entirely sure how to deal with it. He had no idea why on earth someone would care so much. Even Cecelia didn't. Well, actually...

“No,” Verse said, taking a pull from his cigarette, before offering one to Joaquin, who took it with his toes, and placed it on his desk.

“After this many rendezvous, you're steell playing it cool?” Joaquin asked. “You aren't the type to let his guard down, I see. I don't think you're the type to throw your hat een with ruffians such as you have, though. You are sensitive, and quiet ... thoughtful. That group ees... not so much.”

“I ain't sensitive, and I'm only quiet when I go' nothin' to say,” Verse countered. *Which is often.*

“You are, too, sensitive,” Joaquin said with a laugh, before placing his hands on his own thighs, so he could lean closer to the fox. “The way you've spoken when we are alone says that you are not like them. I am curious as to why you travel with them. That is all.”

“Xan's me bes' friend. 'e's a lo' smar'er than 'e looks, and 'e doesn't piss me off much,” Verse explained, finally looking from the ceiling over towards the cheetah-kin, past his feet and legs. “Whoy are you askin'? You wanna 'ave me join your group or somethin'?”

Patchmore smirked slightly, “Well, you are certainly talented with a guitar, and your voice... I think perhaps you would be happier not soiling yourself with things such as combat and hardsheep. We do not have much, but we do alright for ourselves. I think a happier you would be better, no?”

“I'd rather no' leave me friends be'oind, sorry,” Verse said flatly. It hurt for him to say that. Joaquin frowned too, and Verse hated to see that. He beat down that sensitive part inside of him—the part that felt things like that. It wasn't a very useful part, and had done him no good.

“I see... There is no way to make you reconsider?” the feline asked after a few moments.



Verse sighed, gathering his thoughts, before putting them to words, “Well, imagine this. I sawr you tolkin’ with this canine fellow since the momen’ we se’ ou’ from Pulf. I’m safe to assume tha’ you two are... close?”

“...Yes, he and I are quite close,” replied Joaquin, sounding distant for a few moments, and looking towards the door. “This troupe is my family.”

“Would you leave them to come kill people with us?” the fox asked, sticking out his tongue. “Of course you wouldn’t.”

Verse didn’t even believe himself. He’d heard his own voice—he’d spoken with the conviction of a wet piece of paper.

“There are a lot of things I understand,” Joaquin remarked, producing a small ball of yarn from one of his sleeves, and holding it in his palm. He observed it for a few moments, perhaps so as to not spend them observing Verse. “I understand love. I understand beauty. I understand money and how eet works, where eet comes from, and how to charm it out of the pockets of others. I understand the art of a good show, of a scam, and the art of illusion—of keeping those close to me safe, as well. I do not understand ugliness, nor war, nor violence. I don’t understand why you’ve let yourself become mixed up in this sort of lifestyle.”

“Things make a lo’ more sense when you ge’ some blood on your ‘ands, mate,” Verse said with a shrug. “You don’t really go back from tha’ sor’ve thing. You just keep doin’ it until you or everyone else is dead.”

It had felt like lifting a million pounds to shrug like that, and Verse wasn’t fully sure why. Something similar to the guilt he sometimes felt. He ignored it for now.

“What makes you say that?” Patchmore asked, finally looking back at the fox.

Verse shook his head. “Blood don't wash off. You should never forge' wot you are, if you're loike me, or Xan, or Basil, or Karina. We know wot we are. I've go' a job to do... Xan and I go'a buy our freedom. Ge' off this bloody continent.”

Perhaps sensing Verse's discomfort, the cheetah-kin changed tack. “This continent is in a bad state, yes. All this talk of Gods and war... I think we will be headed to B'yada soon. However, we do plan to perform a few more times here...”

“Pre'y odd place for a pack of pacifists,” Verse said. “You're aware tha's dangerous. Any town you se' up in could ge' sacked, and anywhere you camp could ge' attacked overnoigh'.”

“People in tough seetuations are the ones who need escapism the most,” said Joaquin calmly, putting the ball of yarn away. “We have something for everyone. Musicians, dancers, acrobats, wrestlers, tricksters, and freaks. What better way to banish the thoughts of war, than traveling to a mystical land that comes straight to you?”

“...and because of their need to escape their daily troubles, they may give you more of their 'ard earned cash?” Verse said. “I'd coll you slimey, bu' tha's pre'y brill, I guess.”

Patchmore smirked once more, until his eyes closed a little, “...and now you see why I wish I could keep you around. I suppose I also enjoyed the game where you spoke Kerlynzian, and I, Tykondrian, and neither of us understood what was being said. I like games.”

Verse felt heat in his cheeks, but banished any thoughts of why that was from his mind as quickly as he could manage. “Would've been noice if I could stay,” he finally admitted, his voice coming out quieter, and more timid than he intended.



I don't belong here.

Like with being part of the She-Wolf's crew, Verse could tell there was definitely a sense of comradarie here. A sense of belonging and rugged, determined togetherness. That didn't really gel too well with his state of being anymore. He'd tried it and hated it. How long had he tried it? When he cast his mind back, he couldn't honestly remember how long he'd been part of the She-Wolf's crew. Everything was foggy, except that lingering feeling. It had been a while, certainly.

Joaquin was still speaking, Verse realized. He'd missed most of it.

“...I suppose keeping you for the duration of this short journey will have to do,” Joaquin said with a sigh, his voice again distant.

For a while, they were both quiet. Joaquin sat beside Verse for a time, and for that brief Verse was less lonely. Sometimes, Xan could fill that hole in his heart, but Xan was someone Verse was attached to. Someone he'd have to lose eventually. At least with Joaquin, he knew they'd both be going their separate ways in a few hours. It would exist as a fond, hazy memory sometime in the future. One that, like an old photograph, could be dusted off and admired. One that could raise questions such as 'what if I'd stayed?' before being followed by a sharp tinge of regret, and awkward laughter.

“When I was a kit,” said Verse, much later, “I 'ad dreams. Vos gonna be a musician—a travelin' one. I wan'ed to wroite symphonies... Figured I'd be famous. You know 'ow kids are. Then, well, one thing lead to another...” *and I shot someone in the head.* “Your dreams though... you've accomplished them, 'aven't you?”

“Who said being Sir Patchmore was my dream?” the cheetah asked, curling his lip for a moment, as if he'd bitten down on something that tasted bad. “Perhaps you are not the only one suffering from a comedy of errors.”

Verse looked at the cheetah for a few moments more, up those slender legs of his, and to his face. "...Oh," said Verse. "I mean... I saw the Patchmores when I was li'ul. The old Patchmore was this elf-chick, I know the mantle passes on. I know they wouldn't give the job to someone tha' joined recently. I figure you 'ad to be in the Players a while."

"That was a while ago," Joaquin said with a laugh. "That was Raff—she was great. She passed on about... maybe ten years ago now. That said though, no, this was not my dream. I actually had aspirations in a far, far different field. I'd planned to follow in my father's footsteps. I was going to be an economist. From there... I had much higher aspirations in politics."

Verse took a moment to process that. "You're fucking with me," he said.

Joaquin shook his head. "No, Verse, I am not. I feel that perhaps things do not work out in the ways we expect, though. My dreams were crushed very, very early. I was a child, and I was told to leave home.

And now, here I am, playing many roles. Sir Patchmore, La Feroz the wrestler, Starlight the acrobat... We all have our roles among the players. I suppose eet ees safe to say, I like these roles more than I like theenking about who I was before I joined the Players."

Verse winced, and then looked back out the door towards trees and fireflies. "Your family threw you out?"

Joaquin made a tossing gesture with his hands and whistled.

"Why?" asked Verse, before immediately regretting the question. Joaquin averted his gaze, hiding behind his own eyes.

"Why not?" said the cheetah-kin.

Verse had seen that kind of pain before—on Xan's face the day he'd decided to come back to Dascillia, and on Cecelia's when she'd talked about her parents.

There it was again, that nagging guilt.

"Well, then they didn't deserve you," he said without thinking. His face felt hot again. He wasn't really sure how to talk to people like this. It felt kind of good but kind of scary. He knew though, deep down, that he'd done it before, though.

Joaquin smiled absently and sighed. For a while longer, they were quiet together.

♪♪ Just Walk ♪♪



Verse watched Xan set his glass down on the bartop, while the fox-kin fanned himself with his own tail. Gizdich Ranch was hot. The desert was unforgiving and brutal on Basker. This surprised Verse. Surely, he'd thought, nothing could be as brutal as the towns in northern Kerlynzia.

He was on his fourth or fifth cup of water now, and he felt like he'd sweated all of them out one by one. His clothes were sticking to his fur.

"Fuck, man, where *is* he?" Xan grumbled, after he'd swallowed. "We were supposed to meet this guy an hour ago."

"No' so loud," Verse hissed, "This is secre' stuff, remember?"

"Meetin' someone ain't no secret, people meet people er'ry day," Xan whispered back, "it's hot, and I ain't comfortable."

Verse rolled his eyes. It wasn't like he felt any different. Still, he'd lived in the desert for a few years. It's where he'd learned a lot of his shooting, where he'd killed his first man, gotten blackout drunk for the first time, and gotten one of his first kisses. Not exactly in that order.

Actually, now that he thought about it, it was.



"You ge' used to the 'ea', ma'e. Jus' drink some wa'er instead of tha' stuff, and give yourself some toime. When the bartender comes back, jus' order some wa'er. Aren't you supposed to be the sensible one?"

Xan snorted softly, "Too hot to think straight..." he admitted. "Why do people live here?"

"Why do we keep ge'in' sent out to blow up steadily bigger structures?" said Verse.

Xan shrugged. "Wot'd you expect? The five of us goin' through a bunch'a different wack-ass adventures in really really exotic-ass locations to ultimately fight Fate atop a tower or whatever? I told you to quit readin' that Grandfang shit, bro. Rots your brain."

"Grandfang wroi'es romance, for one, and for two, that was oddly specific, for three, no, I expected to sit on me arse until the war wos over, babysittin' Basil."

"Well, you're doing one of those things," said Xan, "Plus, explosions. Things happening. This is way more exciting. I mean, I've read my fair share of adventure novels, bro. Shit don't work out that way. It's way more boring and stupid in real life. Trust me."

"You're more boring and stupid in real life," Verse said.

The saloon they were in was completely deserted, adorned with all sorts of junker knick-knacks fallen from the sky ring, worse yet, was in direct sun this late in the afternoon. The light came in through the windows and drenched the bartop and the tables in its yellow-gold.

The heat was annoying—especially this deep into autumn. The best Verse could attempt to do at this point was distract himself and Xan while they waited for the group's contact. Everyone else had stayed upstairs in the hotel.

"Cooooooooooooooooooooooooonfession toime," said the fox, looping an arm around his partner in crime. The fox loved this game. The rules were basic. First, the person who had not initiated the game had to admit something embarrassing. It was then the initiator's turn, and he would have to admit something even more embarrassing. The turns would keep going until one or both players gave up. Loser got punched in the dick. It was a great way to kill time. Of course, if you cheated and lied, it was an automatic lose, and you had to be punched in the dick.

Rules were rules.

Xan shot Verse a look, and then peered back towards the door behind the bar, to see if the bartender was going to re-emerge from the back room, where it was cooler. He did not.

"I ar'dy tell you about how I got cursed?" the rabbit asked finally.

"Yeah, yeah, you 'it on some mystical shaman, and she didn't want none, BAMF! Cursed as," the fox scoffed, "You troy tha' every toime. My dick-punching fist is ready."

"Hold up, hold up, I got dis," Xan said, folding his arms on the bartop, and leaning forward. He glanced towards the door for a moment, then lowered his voice. "I left a big-ass bag of money on our boat 'cause I forgot it."

Verse laughed, then cracked his knuckles. "You dick'ead!"

Xan shrugged. "Well, I mean, if we'd stuck around, we might'a got eaten, so whatever."

It was the fox's turn. "Remember 'ow I said tha' my birthday wos tha' noigh' in Granport?"

"You lied?! You're shittin' me! *Dude!* If we hadn't gone out drinkin', we wouldn't even be here right now!" Xan said, lifting his hand, and getting ready to shove the fox.

"Ah-ah, no you don'. No punchin' dicks 'til someone loses! 'soides, we would've drank anyway."

Xan lowered his hand, and sighed.

"So, when's your real birthday?" Xan asked glumly, "you douche."

"Second month, twenty second day," Verse said with a shrug. "Gonna be twenty two in a couple months."

"Why would you make up a lie like that? That put us in a helluva lot of danger!" Xan pointed out, glaring.

"To be fair, I 'ad no idea tha' we'd end up in this situation as a resul', and as I said? We'd've drank anyway," Verse pointed out huffily, his arms folded now, and his ears back. *Besides, it is a birthday of sorts. It's the first day Lyrikos visited me. Xan doesn't need to know I'm crazy, though.*

"Fair enough, I guess," Xan grumbled. "Fine. My turn. I once kissed a chick, and she turned out to have a dick bigger than mine."

Verse sort of stared at Xan for a few moments. "Wot the...? Where? When?" asked Verse, without realizing what he'd asked aloud.

Xan laughed, making a face, "Yeah, that is a thing that happened. So, your turn."

Verse, stupified, shook his head. "I got nothin' to top tha'," he admitted.

"*Great!*" said Xan, leaping out of his seat, and, before Verse could even react, bringing his fist right down on Verse's crotch with the full weight of his body.

Pain shot through Verse's body so violently that he had stumbled off of his stool, and was holding himself before he even knew what happened. His eyes watered, and one of his ears twitched.

"Aah! W-wot the 'ell ma'e?! I know tha's the rules, bu'..."

"That's for getting' us into this mess. Sort of. Kind'a. I guess," Xan said matter of factly, hands on his hips.

It was then that their contact arrived. He was met with the sight of Verse falling on his rear, and whining like a tiny feral, while cupping his delicates, and Xan laughing. Verse had to admit, this was a less of a distinguished first impression than he'd hoped for, but it probably could have been worse.

Probably.

Verse ended up falling down to his knees, but could see their contact (some sort of fox-kin) glancing around the bar to make sure they were alone.

“Uh... so you're the mercenaries, I guess?” the contact asked. He was wearing a dusty leather coat that looked like it had been beaten savagely for several years, a pair of dirty goggles around his neck, those strange pants Verse was pretty sure were called 'jeans' and had a number of belts with tools on them, as well as a couple of guns. He looked like a ruin-runner, or a junker. This made sense, as he'd been told their contact would be a junker, just like everyone else in Gizdich Ranch. He had fur a bit browner than his coat, and probably smelled of oil and metal.

“Actually, we're pirates!” said Xan, “I'm Xan Gryphon, and dis here my boy, Verse.”

The rabbit put a hand on Verse's back, even as Verse was still bent over.

“Yes 'ello...” rasped Verse, managing to look up.

“Wow, okay, not what I expected...” the contact muttered, tucking his hands into the pockets of his coat. “Soooo, you two need some stuff, and I've got to take you to meet a friend.”

The walk across town was a hot one. Light reflected off tall piles of star-junk that surrounded most of the city for miles, magnifying the heat. The streets were dusty and the wind quietly tried to move them about, one swirl at a time.

Stalwart wooden buildings stood in this inhospitable landscape, lining the boulevards, some painted, some not. It wasn't very different from many of the frontier towns back on B'yada that Verse had seen. Quickly built and settled in the same ways, even. The difference between most of them and Gizdich Ranch was the number of shops that Junkers used to practice their craft. Every third building was such a shop.

Here and there, the odd scraggly tree had sprung up between a building or two. The bars looked relatively tame here, and although there were several, Verse didn't see very many customers. There were more people toiling away in the junker shops.

“They're working on the finishing touches for the Aegiys Cannon,” Arrow explained as the three of them walked. “Tonight, a lot of that's going to get shipped to the military depot just outside'a town, and then taken to the Cannon by train. That's where you guys come in.”

“We were briefed,” Xan said confidently.

Verse lowered his ears. He hadn't exactly paid attention, but knew that they'd be getting disguises, riding the train, and then (hopefully) destroying the Cannon.

Arrow smiled a little bit, “Ah, good, then all I have to do is take you to Ryza so you can get your disguises, and you're good to go. We're lucky the army stays out of town for the most part, or this would've been a lot harder to set up. They're pretty lazy this far from the front, but... Well, you know.”

“So, where do you junkers fit in, in all of this? You guys just pick the side of whatever country you're in?” Xan asked, slowing his pace a moment, to peer into one of the shops.

Arrow shook his head slightly, hands still in his pockets. He didn't slow his pace, “Nah, not really. Our guild's neutral for the most part—you know the Monster Hunters? We're like them. Our own whole... deal. Not really part of any country.

Thing is, some of us get slipped money, or some of us get blackmailed. Either way, we end up picking a side, even if we don't mean to. We're people, just like everyone else, and our guild's pretty sparse on this continent, anyway... We can't pick up our toys and leave like the Monster Hunters either.”

“You're one of the Blades of Loigh' though, aren'cha?” asked Verse, looking up ahead. The boulevard that ran down the center of the city widened out as the buildings dropped away in that direction. At the very end of it was what was left of a large structure that had been burnt to the ground. Verse guessed it was a Church of Elia at one point.

“...Not really,” Arrow said simply. “Like I said, we're people. Some of us get slipped money or blackmailed by one side or the other. A lot of people like to have someone in their pocket who can fix their machines, or do manual labor... Some of us like having extra money. Some of us like not bein' in jail... The guild doesn't really have any sway on Basker, so we take what we can get if we want to dig up parts over here... The girl you're gonna meet, that one's one of the Blades of Light, though.”

Verse began to get the impression that Arrow wasn't too keen on sharing much about his situation. It could be rather easy to guess from there that he either wasn't too proud of taking a bribe from the Church of Elia, or that they had some dirt on him that could have done some real harm. It was best to leave things be.

In the middle of the walk, though, something occurred to Verse. “Whoy a train, though?”

“Weren't ya' listenin'!?” fumed Xan. “Only other way's up the cliff across the Rukruos, but they be *packin'* up there. The Aegiys got too many dudes there. We take the train so they ain't gonna see us.”

Verse eyed Xan. “How're we gettin' *back*?”

“We go over a waterfall into the Rukruos so they ain't gonna see us.” Xan furrowed his brows. “You gotta start payin' attention, bro. At least listen when they tell ya' what name ya' got!”

Arrow led them to the burnt out building. It must have been two stories tall at one point, although only of its wooden walls still stood, blackened and charred. In the bright sunlight that bathed the desert all around them, the charred wall and empty windows looked strangely dark.

Around the side of that one wall sat a lone figure, dressed in Dascillian Military attire, sitting atop a small crate, smoking and staring off into the desert. She was lizard-kin like a large amount of Dascillians were, long dark hair, and fierce eyes.

“Hey Ryza,” said Arrow. “Got the uniforms?”

The lizard woman glanced towards he, Verse and Xan, “Those are the guys?” she asked.

“We're the guys,” Xan said, folding his arms. Verse managed an awkward smile and a bit of a wave. He was still honestly in a bit of pain.

“Well, looks like we're fucked,” she remarked, with a roll of her eyes.

Arrow, who had already turned around to depart, from the sound of his voice behind Verse, snorted, “We still have a deal? I cook up these bombs, and I you get me my part?”

Ryza nodded. “As long as you're sure you want that. That's a one way ticket you're asking for.”

Verse looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Yeah, freedom sounds pretty cool,” said Arrow. “I'm gonna go cook up some bombs now.”

He turned and left.

Verse scratched behind an ear, looking back to Ryza. “Can I ask wot tha' was oll about?”

“I guess I can tell you guys, since you're working for Regando. We're helping him fake his own death,” said the lizard-kin, “You'd be surprised what people are willing to do to to get out of... service, here in Dascillia. Plus, he's—actually, yeah, that part doesn't concern you. I've said enough. Are you two ready?”

Xan, who looked as confused as Verse shrugged slightly.

♪♪ [Miss Chief](#) ♪♪



Gizdich Ranch was much cooler at night. The dirt still held heat from the day, but the light of the moons glinting off the star-junk piles was a lot easier on the eyes. The bars were fuller, and the shops emptier, but that was about it, as far as differences went. Their group was traveling the same way that Verse and Xan had with Arrow earlier, but this time, they'd be going a lot further. Past the church they went, all while Verse tugged on his coat, in a lame attempt to make it fit better. He already missed his vest.

“Waayyyy too big,” said Cecelia as the three of them followed Karina out of town.

“Too small...” said Xan. “This is midget clothes.”

“Moine feels okay...” said Verse looking off to the side. He'd taken the set Cecelia was going to wear and not told her. He honestly felt guilty about it, and now that he was thinking about it, surely,

someone would notice this was a women's uniform if there was much light on the train, but honestly, the uniforms were not terribly different. One just had a skirt, and it felt nicer. No one had said anything yet, but no one had really looked at him. He'd elected to stay at the rear of the group as soon as they left the darkness of the hotel room they'd changed in.

Silently, Basil fell into step with them, along with one other—their liaison, a lizard-kin woman named Ryza who didn't speak often. She did now, to give them a briefing.

"The five you are replacing on tonight's shift have already been dealt with, but and *since* they were transferring to Gizdich from the front lines, no one knows what they looked like. *However*, this isn't an excuse to waltz around and be seen a ton. Try to blend into the scenery and act like you belong. The names of the five you're replacing are important, too. So don't forget them."

Ryza looked toward the group for a moment. "Short stack, you're Booksworth tonight," she said to Cecelia ("Books what?" said the bat) before pointing to Karina, "You're Askern," (Karina said nothing), then to Verse, "You're Puddingstone."

"Coincidence, innit?" said Verse.

"Puddingstone's not supposed to be a woman. Why did two of you switch uniforms?"

"Huh?" said Cecelia.

"Dunno wot you're tolkin' abou'," said Verse haughtily.

"We don't have time for you two to switch..." the lizard woman said a moment later, making a face. "I had no idea we were being sent a bunch of idiots."

"Do not fuck this up," said Karina as Ryza sighed, saying much the same thing.

"You're Queens," the lizard woman said to Xan.

"Hold up, no. *He's* Queens," said Xan thumbing toward Basil.

"What?" said the bat.

"Fine, he's Queens," said Ryza. "That makes you Richter. You five are supposed to be working for me, so act like it. I don't exactly need to be ratted out."

"Bad ass..." said Xan gleefully.

The five "soldiers" and their commanding officer arrived in a large warehouse which housed the train. Fully loaded down with Star Junk, it chugged and hissed quietly. On the wall opposite the large doorway they'd come through (and across a veritable sea of boxes) was a massive Dascillian flag, with the Eye of Fate drawn over it.

"A once proud national symbol of what was once a wonderful country..." said Basil quietly.

"For a place you're at war with," said Xan, "y'all speak fondly of it. I swear you're gay for it."

"G... Gay for?" said Basil eyeing the rabbit. "Sir Xan—Sir Richter, I do not understand. I find no joy in this situation." The two of them had lined up behind Verse and Karina who walked side by side. Cecelia walked just behind Ryza up ahead.

Xan sighed. "Naw, dawg. *Gay*. Like... hella gay. Like, you know, if you have a little bit of..."

"Verse!" said Cecelia.

"Arse..." said Karina.

The fox had stumbled over his boots, and bounced off of them both before regaining his footing.

"Sorry..." said Verse.

"I fail to understand, Sir Richter..." said Basil, the group now making its way between boxes and towards the train.

"Do not fuck this up," said Ryza. "Shut your mouths and let me do the talking from here."

"You don't have to tell me what to do," said Karina.

"*Especially* you." Ryza looked over her shoulder at her. "You're mouthy."

Verse laughed, but earned a piercing glare from both Ryza and Karina.

A few minutes passed by. Somewhere along the way, Verse could have sworn he saw red cloth moving alongside the Star Junk. But he dismissed the thought; he was probably seeing things, which

wouldn't have surprised him at that point. Besides, *she* wouldn't be sneaking around; she'd be blundering in with a stick of dynamite. She didn't have the smarts or the patience for anything else.

Eventually, Ryza met a bored-looking quarter-beast bull man, who seemed to have fallen mostly asleep looking at his paperwork.

"Ryza Malkus," she said, "reporting in. These are my new recruits, Booksworth, Askern, Puddingstone, Queens and Richter. We're here to keep watch on tonight's freight."

"Oh uh... what? Malkus!" said the bull sitting bolt upright. "There you are!" Quickly, he picked his pocket watch up off of the table. "We're on a bit of a delay," he said through a yawn.

"Sorry we're late, Captain," said Ryza dryly.

"Wasn't your fault," the captain said, rubbing one of his eyes. "There's some holdup loading the cargo. We're going to be running about fifteen minutes late, I think."

Ryza glanced over her shoulder at Verse and the others for a few moments, and then looked back to the captain, "Fifteen minutes? Alright."

Soon, Ryza, Verse, Karina, Xan, Cecelia, and Basil were aboard the train. They were all stationed in the rearmost car, watching over several boxes marked with the Eye of Fate. Or rather, they were supposed to be. Instead, Ryza was briefing them.

"First of all, we'll need to keep an eye on the explosives," said the lizard-kin, brushing her black hair away from her face.

"And where're those?" said Verse.

"In that crate." Ryza poked the one the fox was sitting on with her foot.

Verse felt his eyes widen, almost dropping his cigarette, but managed to sit still. "...Cu'e."



"There's a trick to them," the lizard-kin explained, "They're on a timer. Arrow set it for one hour. As you know, the train was delayed by fifteen minutes. The back of the train, where we are, is unloaded last. Originally, that gave us time to plant the explosives, trigger the alarm, and get as far away as we could. Given the fucking delay, though, we're going to need to move the crate to the front of the train as high-priority cargo, and get it unloaded first."

Verse swallowed. He had no idea he was sitting on a time bomb, let alone any sort of bomb whatsoever.

"Well, this just got... kind'a gay..." Xan muttered, tugging at the collar to his coat nervously.

"That word again..." Basil started to say, but was cut off.

"So, 'Askern,' since you're the strongest, I'll want you to be transporting that crate. You'll need help from someone else, of course. If you notice, it's labeled differently. You'll follow us on our patrol as we head toward the front of the train. Let's try not to stop anywhere for long. This should be really easy, provided you all *behave*."

"Y^oU'RE ANNOYING," said Karina to Verse in Kerlynzian.

Verse snorted, shaking his head. "W^oW, LISTEN TO Y^oU, PRINCESS!"

Off to the side, Basil and Xan were continuing their conversation.

"Okay, so say you and Lord Regando..." said Xan, stopping for a moment.

"Lord Regando? Er... very well. Explain further, sir X—Richter! Lord Regando and I what?" Basil still sounded completely lost.

"Basically, Baz, like, if you two was gonna..."

"Fuck!" cried Verse. Karina had punched him in the cheek, knocking him off the crate.

"Quit fucking around!" snapped Ryza. "You're going to get us killed."

Verse grinned evilly at Karina from under his red mane. Sure, his head hurt, but he'd gotten her in trouble. He felt like a God.

Karina gave him a look, but hefted the crate up anyway.

"Let's go," said Karina.

"Remember," said Ryza, "we don't want to blow it up early. Once the train is stopped under the Aegiys Cannon, we'll make our move. Each car has an alarm lever. Do not do anything suspicious."

♪♪ The Desert Shuffle (or Prelude to a Shootout) ♪♪

The walk through the first few cars went relatively well. Most of the soldiers riding on the train didn't give them a second look. Some were sleeping at doorways, or smoking and playing cards; others were drunk. It seemed like many of them longed to be on the front, instead of guarding the train.

In one car, two drunken soldiers were telling jokes amidst a pile of discarded star junk that Verse couldn't even identify.

"So I tells my commander," one was saying, "that's not a spearhead, that's my di—oh hey Ryza!"

Ryza gave the two of them a look, but continued on. As they passed through the space between cards, the lizard-kin laughed. "You can see what I have to put up with..."

Verse walked alongside Ryza as they made their way into the fourth car, which was empty. "So, wot's the deal with this 'Aegiys Cannon?'" he said.

"You don't know?" she said, giving him a glare. "Were you even listening?"

"I jus' wan'ed to 'ear again," said Verse.

"It's a giant gun made from Star Junk. It all used to be one piece before it fell down and shattered. They say that the God of Fate says it's strong enough to destroy even the Sky Ring if we channel magic into it. As you can imagine, aiming it to face Celestion, or Lurafelle, or anything else... well, we'd be unstoppable. Or rather, the Aegiys would. They see Dascillia as means to an end."

"So... it's a goiant... space... gun?" said Verse blankly. "I don't understand, 'ow could anyone 'old a gun tha' was so big?"

"It wasn't meant to be held by people. It's a cannon. Just how hard did 'Askern' punch you?"

"'ard enough," said Verse sheepishly. "Were there a lo've weapons loike this one tha've follen down 'ere?"

Ryza shrugged. "I'm no Junker, but a lot of things have fallen down from up there. This is one of the few of them I've ever seen being reassembled though. This bizarre group of Junkers was sent here by the Aegiys. They were excavating something *huge* before they got here, some kind of... what'd they say it was? A star... ship? Like a boat that can sail the Sky Ring, and maybe beyond. Apparently, guns like this one were meant for that thing. I don't really know all the details, I just work here. I *do* know that if we let them finish working on this thing, the Aegiys are going to be formidable, if not unstoppable."

Verse was dumbfounded for several moments. A ship that could sail through the stars? Those were the things of fairy tales and myths! Still... who knew *what* Star Junk really was. All of this was a lot to chew on.

He did that, deciding not to bother Ryza further. She seemed tense to say the least, and he could easily understand why.

The going was slow with Karina and Xan carrying the crate together, but things went rather well for quite a while. A little before Verse expected dawn's first light to tickle the horizon, the group of six entered an empty car near the middle of the train.

Two Aegiys Guard stood at the opposite end of the car, on either side of the door leading forward. When Ryza approached, they crossed their spears in front of the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" she said. "My men and I are transporting a mislabelled crate to the front of the train."

"Two problems," said the Aegiys Guard member on the left, a pig-kin. "One, there's an intruder on the train, and she's believed to be up ahead. For the other, we have reason to believe she didn't come alone. I'll need all of you to state your names, and we'll go over the list of everyone who is supposed to be on the train tonight. Can't be too careful."

"Fair enough. I'm Ryza Malkus, as you know," said the lizard-kin, before looking over her shoulder to the others.

"Pudding," said Verse happily, voice a little higher than normal, and perhaps a touch strained.

The second guard, a bird-kin with dark feathers, began flipping through his papers, shaking his head. "Victoria Pudding... stone?" he said.

"Oh, yeah, tha'!" said the fox, tail wagging slightly.

"Richter," said Xan, putting a hand on his hip.

"Bell Richter?" said the bird. "Alright, that's two of you..."

"Booksworth!" said Cecelia, trying to make her voice sound deep as possible. It sounded too silly to be real.

"Stanley Booksworth, okay, got it..." The bird flipped through a few more pages on the clipboard he held.

"Askern," said Karina.

The guards gave her an odd look, before looking over the paperwork the bird held.

"Brand Askern, okay, got it..." said the bird, "and you, in the back, with the big wings?"

"Queens," said Basil, before gasping. "N-No, wait, I'm... Richter? Richter?" He eyed Ryza, ears falling back. "Lady Ryza, what is my name?"

Ryza's mouth opened and hung that way. The guards were both staring at Basil now.

"Basil, you idio'!" said Verse, before realizing what he'd said.

"Hey, she sounds like a he," said the pig-kin, eyes widened.

"Verse! Shush!" said Cecelia.

"And he sounds like a she!" said the bird-kin. "What's going on here? Sound the alar—" Bang.

Verse had already drawn and fired, hitting the pig-kin in the shoulder, and causing him to fall down the wall clutching his wound.

The bird-kin pulled the alarm before the fox could turn his gun on him, but Ryza shot him in the hand even as he pulled the lever to sound it.

"Oops..." said the lizard-kin, and sighed. "I thought I told you to remember those names."

"How am I supposed to!?" demanded Basil. "It is not my true name!"

"Baz!" Xan shouted over the sound of the bells that were now ringing in this car and undoubtedly in the others. "If you fuck up any harder, I'm takin' your spear and jamming it up your—"

Karina glared at Verse and Ryza. "You two didn't have to shoot them! Tame your bloodlust!"

"I've had about enough of you!" said Ryza. "You two fuckwits pick up that crate, and we'll make a mad dash for the front of the train before someone stops the damn thing. Now let's *go*!"

Ryza ran to the door, between the two fallen guards, and wrenched it open.

This is worse than Paldo, thought Verse. We're so dead.

♪♪ Infil-TRAIN-tion ♪♪

The entire train was in a frenzy as Ryza and company worked their way forward. No longer were guards relaxing. Most of them were grasping their weapons, and many were running between cars trying to find whoever this mysterious intruder was and why the alarm had been pulled. The first car Verse and the others entered was filled with guards who had heard the gunfire and had to be convinced it was something else.

Unfortunately, Ryza's smooth talking didn't get them far. Two cars up, as soon as Ryza opened the door to the vestibule at the end, they found two members of the Aegiys Guard drawing their revolvers. Both of them guarded the door to the next car. One was a pointy-eared humanoid man, clearly an elf. The other was a badger-kin with cold blue eyes and mussed fur.

"Hold it right there!" he said. "You can't go between cars right now. The train's going on lockdown!"

Ryza rolled her eyes. "Don't you know who I am? I'm Ryza Malkus, and I'm the—"

"Ma'am, I know who you are. But that's an order from high up. *None* of us can. Get back in your car. We'll have to stop the train and find the intruder!"

She growled under her breath. "We don't have time for this!" She was about to say more when Basil and Verse squeezed their way past her. Basil's wings obscured most of the view.

"We are on important business, Sir," said Basil narrowing his eyes. "Let us through!"

"You're disobeying a direct order!" said the badger raising his gun. "Get back in your car or you'll get us in trouble. Your important business can wait!"

Basil drew his spear as he stepped forward and slapped the gun out of the badger's hand.

"What are you—doing?" said the soldier, pausing as the speartip threatened to pierce his throat. Just then, the door swung open.

"Hey, guys, what's going on in—"

It was a Disciple of Fate who'd just stuck in his hooded head.

"Oh shit!" The door slammed shut.

"Great," said Ryza. "Elia in heaven, please help us..."

Basil's wings twitched. "You will both live if you put down your weapon," he said to the elf. The elf carefully lowered his revolver to the floor and stood with his hands up.

"Everyone through," said Basil. "I shall take up the rear."

Xan began to laugh as he and Karina made their way through the door with the crate. "You'll take it up the rear? Hah! *Gaaaaaaaaaaaaay!*"

Basil turned his head toward Xan. "I do not understand what you are speaking of!" he bellowed in frustration. "Now move!"

When he looked back, the elf had fled through the door. Verse couldn't get a clear shot because of Basil's wings. And now everyone further down was going to know that a group of mutineers were coming. Verse was now certain the train would stop before its payload could be delivered. He was starting to hate Basil more than usual, for being a pampered aristocrat who knew nothing except how to be a fairy-tale knight.

The party passed through the door into the next vestibule and the party stood aside except for Ryza, who flung the next door open. She was met with gunshots from Dascillian soldiers, and ducked behind one of the nearby walls, the bullets flying by as she did so. She reached around and fired warning shots to make the soldiers duck rather than advance on the group. Amidst the confusion, Xan continued to try and explain himself.

"Okay, so, say Cecelia and Karina were to start grabbin' on each other's—"

"Tits!" said Ryza just after narrowly dodging a bullet that struck the doorway right where her head had been. She promptly slammed the door. "That room is crawling with innocent soldiers. We've got to think this through."

"I don't follow, sir Xan," said Basil shaking his head after closing the door they'd come through.

"Dude, okay, all I'm saying is if you and Verse, like—"

"Oi!" said Verse.

"Y'know, if you were maybe a little drunk, I doubt Fish'd have to be—"

"I'm roigh 'ere! I can 'ear you!" shouted the fox. "Ge' off!"

"If you were gonna *dip your pen in Verse's ink...*"

"You wot, ma'e!?"

Basil just looked confused.

"Y'know, the four legged frolic?" said Xan.

"Washin' the windows? Churning the butter?
Going to meet the Queen? Give her a pat? Flop
the hay? Anythin'?"

Basil narrowed his eyes. "Sir Xan, I'm getting the impression you speak of sexual intercourse between two members of the same sex." His eyes widened and his ears flung back. "That is a *sin*! And has nothing to do with how I feel about Dascillia as a country! What... Whatever could you even *mean* by such a thing?"

"Everyone *shut the fuck up!*" screamed Ryza. "I'm thinking!" That quieted things down.

That was when Verse heard gunfire from the next room, its report different from the Dascillians' revolvers. Several shots were fired, and then there was silence.

Ryza looked horrified. "That... wasn't good. Maybe it's the other intruder? What the hell is going on?"

The group waited in the silence, but no other sound came from ahead, other than an agonized, "She went up to the roof!" Two more gunshots, and then nothing.

Verse could hear footsteps going across the top of the car they were in, although only barely over the sound of the train's motion.

"The train's slowing down..." said Cecelia fixing her glasses on her snout.

"Damnit, we've got to move!" said Ryza before prying the door open once more.

On the other side, Verse could see that several Dascillian soldiers lay slain or wounded on the floor of what had been a dining car. Only one of them had a gunshot wound. The rest looked to have been bludgeoned by something.



Ryza crouched near one soldier, who she could see groaning in pain where he lay. "What happened here?" she said.

"Ryza..." he said, "someone told us you went traitor..." He coughed.

"Who attacked you?" she said, changing the subject.

"Some woman... she used stone magic... beat us senseless... never seen her before...wore all red... You didn't really go traitor, did you?"

"Of course not," said the lizard-kin. "Long live Fate! We'll go see if we can get this traitor. Can you walk?"

"No... but... you should go find her. Worry about us later..." He closed his eyes and coughing one more.

"C'mon," said Ryza standing again. "We can't let them stop the train. Let's go."

The group fought their way all the way up to some flat, open cars not too far from the coal cars before coming to a stop. Out the door of the last car, Verse could see that they were on a tall bridge over a river gorge several stories down. The fox squeaked, his fear of heights kicking in, even as the train slowed further.

"Lady Ryza!" shouted Basil to be heard over the wind. "You, Lady Cecelia and Sir Verse should head to the front of the machine and prevent it from stopping! I shall defend these two while we carry the explosives!"

"Hold on," yelled Ryza, "who's in charge here, you or me!? Settle yourself down, 'Queens!' I need 'Askern' to go back with me and detach the rest of the cars before things get worse!"

As she spoke, though, Verse was already on the move. The wind hit him hard enough to nearly knock him over, but he held his footing. He could see the coal car from here. He just had to get to it.

He struggled toward the coal car, the black mountain atop it blocking the wind enough to make movement easier. The train slowed further, its brakes squealing in the night. This tall bridge was the last place Verse wanted to stop. In a panic, he forced himself across the platform with all of his strength, and began climbing the ladder at the corner of the coal car.

"Wait, stop!" yelled Ryza.

"Wot!?" screamed Verse looking over his shoulder, his hand clutching a rung.

"Not now!" Ryza motioned toward herself and Cecelia. "Get back here and help!"

"Wot's goin' on!?" Verse instinctively reached for the Man-Ender.

Ryza looked over her shoulder. "Looks like the rest of us are in deep shit!"

She ducked and Verse saw a rock flying right at his head. He let go of the ladder and fell into a crouch just in time to hear stone smashing on the car behind him. Fragments bounced off his head before he ran back towards Ryza.

Beyond them was a sight that angered Verse more than anything else on the train. Basil, Karina, and Xan were poised to fight on his side, but the crate sat between them and a woman wearing red, who held a revolver in one hand and was making hand signs like Cecelia's with the other. Her fur was mussed, her body bruised, and her clothing ragged at the edges, but Verse knew who he was looking at.

It was Stella.

"Well lookie here!" she said looking over her shoulder at him. "What's with the getup, Versie? I always knew you was a bitch!"

Verse growled. He took a step closer, but she gestured in the crate's direction.

"You move one inch," she said, "and I'll spear whatever's in this crate. I reckon it's mighty important to y'all..."

"Motherfucker!" shouted Xan. "I thought yo' ass got crushed in that cave!"

"When the 'ell'd you learn magic, anyway?" said Verse.

Stella glared at Verse. "Around the time I's born, shithead! You had *your* secret, I have *mine*! Just had to hide it 'cause of the damn Church! Didn't you hear? The Church's time is over! We're at the dawn of a new age, baby!"

Basil recoiled.

“Maybe it *is* the start of a new age,” said Cecelia, “but I’m going to beat up your face *really badly* if you don’t... go... and...” She began mumbling.

“You’re on the side of the Aegiys?” said Basil, glaring at Stella. “Is that why you tried to kill us in the tunnel?”

“Fuck no!” she shot back confidently. “I’m on my own side. I’m just here to kill Versie and Xan ‘cause they—”

“Wai’ wai’, whoa whoa...” said Verse holding up both hands from where he stood. The train begun to shake and rattle, and soon, it was in motion again. It took a while to accelerate, but did so continuously as the fox tried to puzzle out what was happening.

“You came oll this way, found ou’ where Xan and I were, and presumably mangled a bunch of people with magic, jus’ to ge’ Xan and I over the ticket thing?” The fox scratched behind one of his ears.

Stella grinned. “You bet!”

Verse stared at her for what felt like a full minute. “...Tha’s the mos’ fucked up thing I’ve ever ‘eard!”

“Well, what’ll it be?” she said gleefully. “You gonna die, or am I gonna kill ya?”

“This is ridiculous!” said Ryza. “How about I knock that smirk off your face?”

“Y’all don’t want to lose that crate do ya?” said the she-wolf, her tone dripping with mirth. “I already got the spell ready and waitin’!”

“This is stupid,” said Verse. “Ge’ off this train and kill us la’er if you ‘ave to, bu’ this is dangerous!”

♪♪ Cooldown ♪♪

“Aww, are you worried about me, Versie?” said the she-wolf before she let out her annoying laugh. Verse knew her long enough to know that whenever she did it, she rested a hand on her head and leaned back. But it seemed Xan did, too, for the rabbit lunged at her the moment she leaned back and tackled her.

The train rocked slightly, going around a hard curve on the bridge, causing Verse to lose his balance as well. As he fell forward, he heard Stella shriek.

He looked up in time to see her fall over the edge of the car, and into the abyss below. Xan, himself, was half over the edge as well, and slipping further. Verse knew he couldn’t make it in time, but he tried nonetheless.

Suddenly, the sky above and the abyss below vanished, and darkness came.

They’d entered the tunnel to the Aegiys Cannon.

ON THE NEXT EPISODE...



THE AEGIYS CANNON AWAITS.

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