Local Celebrities by Jessica Iris Nichols-Vernon

“Well Malisa, I hope that ended your boredom.” Thomas smiled, sitting back on his throne chuckling. “Not everyday you meet Nasoj now is it? I’d love for all my griefers to be so amusing. Though I do really wonder what’s for dinner. Something other than salad, I’ve grown sick of lettuce as of late. Perhaps some grape leaves?”

“You’d think he’d choose his lies more carefully, especially around you.” Malisa said, getting back to her book, now twice as enthusiastic in her resolve to finish it. “You don’t think there was a chance he only didn’t cure Dame Seranima so that we wouldn’t think he was Nasoj? You never know how that man thinks. Remember how much of a scramble you were in to get all the mages to prepare a defense? I don’t think I need to mention how ill-prepared they were for what his actual plan was. How any of us were.” Malisa burying her face in her book as she said that last line, she never fully accepted the fact that she was female, even after nine years. Nine. Long. Painstaking. years, and the only woman who made it easier was kept from her by two of the very subjects she had busted her metaphorical tail to keep safe.

Duke Hassan rubbed his thick fingernailed hoof-like hand down his long equine face. “Malisa I know what you’re thinking.” he said, concern and deep empathy filling his voice.

“That the safety of Metamor Keep depends on us knowing for sure that the one who made us infamous isn’t resting in our dungeon trying to find another way to use our rich magical nexus against us? Naturally father.” Malisa said, keeping a straight face, but she could not deny that she was getting emotional towards the very end. This is what the Duke was afraid of. Malisa was usually someone who operated on facts and facts alone, letting the safety of the keep be her first priority over even herself. She would give up eating for fifteen days straight if it would somehow allow a starving Keeper child to eat for one. As a result she was never usually the kind to get snippy with him.

“Even if he’s really Nasoj he won’t turn you back into a man you know.” The black stallion ruler of Metamor said, everyone in the Keep had long accepted that the curse just wasn’t going to be cured. At least not in their lifetimes. Any remaining dash of that was shattered when Prince Phil Tenomides of Whales, an ex-resident of the Keep, turned back into a human for about ten seconds before he burst into flames and returned to a lapine state. “The only two reasons I didn’t have him outright executed was because he acted foolish, not maliciously, if it weren’t for the Nasoj business I’d have given him a slap on the wrist. Especially since he wasn’t cursed yet. Now it is inevitable. The second reason is because we don’t have any idea where Hawl came from, we don’t know if he’s the worst ambassador we’ve ever had, someone of importance, a man with a mission, or someone who just wandered in.”

“He didn’t appear to be cursed at all, he was imitating a Keeper like Virmir did, but unlike Virmir he didn’t get stuck that way..” Malisa noted “What gets me though is how easily he did it. The ability to go through bodies like common garb is a skill that many only dream of. Only one man has power like that and that’s Nasoj. Under ordinary circumstances it requires a long drawn out ritual to change forms.”

Thomas rested his rather large head onto his arm. “If it suits you perhaps try inquiring from Hawl. He’s in the dungeon, likely wondering if I’m really going to let him rot in there for as long as I said.”

“Are you? His powers need to be studied, especially if they can be replicated.” Malisa questioned.

“Easing the fears of the people take priority over curiosity and personal gain, you know this far better than I do.” Thomas warned.

“Giving them cause to celebrate is the mark of a great leader worth remembering.” Malisa countered, starting to sound openly hostile towards her adopted father.

“I’m not fighting you Malisa, do what you will. I am properly convinced that Hawl and Nasoj are two different people. If you wish to press the matter forward, take it up with him.” The Duke stated before standing up, pushing on his back as it cracked. “Maybe you’re right, I’m getting old. What do I know about running a kingdom anymore? Less than the people think I do.”

“I am surprised Byronoth has not yet began to carry your offspring.” Malisa said coldly. “You’ve been running the Keep for a very long time and have had far too many close calls. Need I remind you that I cannot become the Duchess should you or Alberta become unable to lead the Keep unless I am acting as a placeholder for a True Hassan?”

“I’m working on that.” The horse king smiled and then chuckled. “Trust me, I’m working on that.”

“I appreciate that.” Malisa said. “I’ll go talk to Hawl now.” she said, as she made her exit, walking in an orderly fashion towards the dungeon, doing her best to keep her hips from swaying, not an easy task when you’ve been rebuilt with the body of a fertility goddess incarnated as a human.

Thomas nodded before turning to his alligator aide. “Come Thallburg, it is nearing dinner and I know you are hungrier than I am. We need to begin preparations for the Spring Solstice, and more importantly, our problems to the North.... They need to be taken down a notch.”

“Yes your highness, famished even.” Thallburg agreed. ordinarily he was as every bit as ornery as the gator he appeared to be, but he was wise to butt out when father and daughter were talking. “I hear Jessica’s onto something.”

“Interesting.” Thomas said as he and Thallburg were off. “Perhaps she should join us.”

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Roscoe was a cave scorpion who could not leave the dungeon. The sun was far too bright for his buggy little eyes, as a result of this condition the dark damp dungeon of Metamor was the only place he could survive, and thus every since becoming a scorpion nine years ago the dungeon was the most familiar location to him. Metamor did not often see prisoners, and so, for much of his time, except when he was feeling very adventurous in the night time he was alone in the dungeon. Yet despite this and his nightmarish appearance, Roscoe still managed to stay friendly and courteous. “Good evening milady.” Roscoe said to what to others would appear to be a woman shaped silhouette or maybe a guy on the skinny side, but to Roscoe was clear as day the masculinely dressed Princess Malisa, bowing and playing a little song for his ruler’s adopted daughter on a pincer raised to the side.

“Greetings Roscoe.” Malisa said coldly, with eyes that could pierce the heavens. “I heard you got a new prisoner today, may I see him?”

This was a formality, of course royalty could see anyone they liked, but the Hassan family was often very informal, with the minor exception of Malisa when she was busy you couldn’t even tell they were nobles. “But of course, he’s near the back, we had him near the front, but he’s very bothersome. Not dangerous though, the spells on the walls and floor negate his magic like they do with anyone else, just very annoying.” Roscoe said, pointing a crab-like claw towards the unseeable darkness where a white, blue, and black blur was banging on the cell bars.

Malisa patted Roscoe on the head, who blushed. “Keep up the good work.” she said as she walked towards the back, again trying her damndest to prevent her wide womanly hips from swaying in any manner, a task that would be easier if they weren’t absolutely and completely perfect for childbearing. Even though no one could see her, it had become second nature to try and emulate a man’s walk as best she could.

As she reached the end of the hallway she saw a young man looking no older than 16 with brown hair, green eyes, a blue linen shirt, and matching black pants. “Nasoj? Could I really be staring into the true eyes of so cruel a tyrant, the oppressor of flesh, he who dances with daedra....”

Hawl was about to open his mouth to talk, but Malisa shook her head.

“No, you barely have enough magical power within you to put out a candle. There’s no way you did....” Malisa put her hands on her breasts. “This.... I can tell you have a lot of raw latent talent, but it appears to be untouched for the most part.”

“I resent that, greatly!” Hawl said, Malisa hit a nerve, and a nail on the head. Outside of his natural shape shifting ability he knew about as much about magick as he did about building a house from scratch. Which is to say, nothing at all. Just that magick required mana and that houses required wood, but a child could tell you that, and not just the ones in Metamor. “I’m plenty magical, perhaps it is your gaze that is mistaken. I am also insulted that you would only list a quarter of my impressive titles. If it weren’t whatever it is holding my powers back I’d be off to find the Sondecki and of course to punish your insolence, accursed maiden.”

Malisa raised an eyebrow ignoring the theatrics, very unimpressed by the cliches in ‘Nasoj’s’ words. “Sondecki?.... Who exactly do you mean by this?” the princess was fully aware the person before her was likely referring to Charles Matthias of Glen Avery or, unlikely, but still probable his apprentice Garigan the Ferret or late son Laredo Matthias, but did not want to accidentally reveal anything ‘Nasoj’ did not yet know. If it was the real Nasoj then even the smallest millimeter given to him could be used to run a marathon of the macabre.

“I am most uncertain, the only one I know of used to be in the Writer’s Guild. This is the only detail I know, but still there is a matter of great importance that is beyond you or I that I need to discuss with him. I mean unless you have any Weathermongers or Kankorans lying around. The important thing is knowledge that they are a Southland Mage.” Hawl said. “I know you at least have a Sondecki, a little ferret told me. Cute girl. The fur really brings out her mismatched eyes.”

“Claire Flameheart....” Malisa mouthed to herself “If you tell me the matter I can discuss it with the Sondecki next I see him, if it’s really important I’ll send a summons out to him.”

“You would not believe me, no one ever believes me.” Hawl stated. “And who are you that can just summon a Sondecki, you’re probably just a cleaning lady who stole a purple shirt from the Prince. He’s not gonna be happy, purple isn’t a color they just give out. Of course I can give it out all day because I’m just so Great and Powerful.”

“Well I did get this shirt from the Prince, your powers of observation do not fail you, and he is not happy, though admittedly somewhat amused.” Malisa stated, holding back a smile. “This isn’t about me though. I want to know why you’re here and what you want with The Sondecki.” she demanded, starting to get rather pissed off.

“Naw get that prince down here, I demand to talk with someone who has the authority to let me o.. I mean someone in the royal court worthy of speaking to the great and powerful Dark Overlord Nasoj. Yeah that’s it.” Hawl boasted “Unless you can let me out before I curse you harder than anyone has ever been cursed in the entire history of curses!”

“Both of those things are equally undoable.” Malisa argued, though a small part of her wondered what could be worse than getting turned into a tree. “I assure you I am the best you’re going to get. Why are you here, Are you really Nasoj, and why do you want...The Sondecki?”

“What do I get if I tell you?” Hawl asked, while patting himself on the back for staying in character so well. “I mean, unless I’m going to get let out why should I answer your questions? There’s not really anything in it for me. What have I to gain?”

Malisa looked at the ground, clearly getting nowhere. She couldn’t let him out unless he had agreed not to escape. The second he was let out of the cell which had runes on the walls and floor blocking his magic he could turn into a bird, fly away, and never be seen again. Any chance of him serving his sentence or more importantly any curse cure that could extracted from his strange abilities would be gone. The tomboy princess would have to step up her game. She could do this! She was after all the finest Prime Minister that the Keep had ever seen. “Let us begin simply. I’ll let you ask one question, and I will answer it, but in return you must answer one of mine. We will continue under that rule until we get somewhere.”

“Cool beans, I suppose the first thing I want to know is why can’t I use my unholy powers of darkest darkness?” Hawl asked, hoping for she he mistook for a cleaning lady to give him some sort of edge by mistake.

“Cool beans? I have never heard that term before. Well if you look on the floor and the wall you’ll see runes, as long as they physically touching you it will be impossible to conjure even a simple fireball. These cells are very carefully crafted by ancient magick and made for those who exhibit a strong magic that Metamor has no knowledge of. This particular cell once held the very Sondecki you are looking for.”

“A troublemaker eh? Sounds like my kind of bloke.” Hawl smiled, looking at the floor, and then the wall thinking he had just figured out something. “Hmm, well a deal’s a deal. Ask away.”

“What do you want with the Sondecki?” Malisa asked. “And if this has anything to do with the Chateau Marzac then you must trust me when I say it’s been taken care of.”

“I don’t know what that is.” Hawl stated before continuing his speech. “What I require is information. There’s a southland mage cult that has been after me for quite some time, about as far back as I can remember. They always stayed in the shadows, showing only enough of themselves to keep me in fear of them. If there is a Sondeckis living in Metamor Keep, then he may be my only shot at learning who the Flesinoir are and why they haunt me so.” Hawl said with a haunting voice. “Imagine being owed a favor by the Great and Powerful Dark Lord Nasoj. Is there not something your little heart desires, cleaning lady?”

Malisa looked up at the ceiling, it wasn’t a good thing for being of great evil to know what you want, nay, to the very object of your heart’s most fondest desire, to know that which would allow to sing in infinite and never ending bliss and praise, but Malisa had a desire that only Nasoj could grant. Weighing her options, the princess of Metamor Keep decided that this was probably a good way to check to see if Hawl really was Nasoj. “I want to be Prince Matthew again.” she said, biting her lip wondering if that was a good idea or a foolish one, deals with the devil seldom work out well Malisa and Hawl were both very hard pressed to think of any that ever had.

“I’m not sure I follow.” Hawl said scratching the hair of his goatee. “Since when were you a pr..... your name is Princess Melissa isn’t it?” Damn! Hawl couldn’t actually reverse the curse and once Malisa knew that he would become far less valuable to her and he’d be left to lose his powers and become forever female, young, or an animal. Though admittedly, two of those didn’t sound too bad to him, losing his powers however sounded awful.

“Not the traditional spelling of Melissa, but indeed it is, I thought that was obvious when I said my outfit belonged to the prince once.” Malisa said bluntly and with no hint of sarcasm “Was I somehow unclear?”

“Yes, I thought he was a horse like his daddy and you had just stolen his outfit.” Hawl said, stalling for time while he thought of way to tell Malisa he couldn’t make her a man, but without outing that he wasn’t a very powerful ally for her to have. “That wasn’t obvious at all.”

“Me as a horse? Well I’d blend in with both of my parents..” Malisa said thinking for a second, regretting that she wasn’t more insistent upon staying at her father’s side during the attack of Three Gates, if only she hadn’t had been defending the royal wives at the second gates. Why, she’d even have been able to take Jenn for a bride and made a mother of her. The first of those things almost seemed doable with how things did turn out, at least for a small period of time.

“Not to mention instead of a woman, you’d be twice the man you used to be. If you know what I’m saying your highness.” Hawl said with all the tact of a rotted deer carcass. “You know because stallions have large...”

“I got the implication, I just didn’t think it needed to be uttered aloud.” Malisa exclaimed flustered, her face had turned a ripened red as she in truth had already been thinking about that. “Your negotiation skills could use work Nasoj.”

“Perhaps, now then, if you want to be a man again you just need to devote yourself to me princess and together we can take over Metamor Keep and possibly the world. Though without the curse this place would make for some nice real estate on its own. A guy like me, a manly man like yourself. We’ll lead as two kings!” Hawl cheered, manipulating Malisa Hassan was going to be easier than those idiots at the Mugal Tavern and far more rewarding.

“How dare you insult me with such a disgusting offer!” Malisa yelled as she clenched her fist at her side which began glowing blue with an extremely visible build up of power. “To think that I would betray my Kingdom, my Family, at ANY price! The very idea is as sickening as the filth you crawled out of you son of a bitch!”

Or not! Hawl was in for it now, his eyes grew wide looking at the sheer force of power building up in Malisa’s hand. He had never seen a mage use this much energy for one attack before. “Your highness let’s not do anything rash..... Your grace, your divinity, YOUR OMNIPOTENCE! Have mercy!”

“Perish!” Malisa screeched as she let loose a massive blue torrent of energy that pinned Hawl to the wall.

“I’m..... sor... I....” Hawl couldn’t talk or breathe very well, he felt an intense pressure placed on him as though he was under the foot of a giant who was slowly bearing down upon him. “I’m no...n..”, he still couldn’t quite say anything, he couldn’t even hear his own words over the sounds of his bones cracking and disjointing. He wished to howl out with thae pain of a man who has just known true agony for the first time in his life, but he felt the air being pushed out of his lungs with a little blood and vomit. Malisa began to look worried and slowed her torrent of body destroying energy which gave Hawl back his ability to breathe, but not much else as he fell face first on the floor with every bone in his body shattered, nearly every bone, fortunately his jaw worked well enough to speak. “I’m... not... Nasoj....” Hawl managed to say, unable to move much of anything else.

“I know this now... By the gods I have taken a life. I thought Nasoj could resist half of that. I have let my ambitions cloud my judgment, I should have trusted father when he said you weren’t he that hath cursed my homeland so. By the Gods... If there’s anything I can do for you...” Malisa was saying, but was interrupted.

“That’s... fascinating... pull me... out... please..” Hawl struggled to say, he had no way of moving and if he didn’t get help soon he’d likely die.

“How can I touch you without harming you?” Malisa asked, taking her gaze half off Hawl “There is nearly no bone in your body that is not broken. Gods, I am so sorry. I... it’s the Winter Assault all over again.” The very sight of Hawl’s mangled body made her want to vomit profusely.

“PULL!” Hawl wanted to say more, but raising his voice alone was too large of an effort.

“As you wish.” Malisa sounded very unsure as she ran back to Roscoe to obtain the keys and ran back in the same amount of hurry she would use if the Keep was on fire. Upon her return she opened the door and pulled Hawl out who winced and would be screaming had it not been for his inability too. Malisa had to keep from losing her lunch, any seasoned warrior would if he saw a man this broken and mangled.

The second Hawl was free his powers went to work, bones repaired themselves and snapped back into place, but it didn’t stop there, his muscle mass greatly increased as he grew orange and black striped fur all over his body. He rose with powerful black claws, sharp fangs and a very feline looking disposition. He even morphed his shirt ripped open to reveal an abundance of muscle. “Thank you my dear. You know, being a woman isn’t that bad, it does make you quite cute.” Hawl said as he grabbed the chin of the rather annoyed Malisa and began looking over her face. “Anyway, if you don’t mind I think I’ll be leaving.”

“Get back in your cage beast.” Malisa snapped.

“Oh, but my dear.” Hawl smirked as he began stroke his paw through Malisa’s raven colored hair. “I’m a lot bigger and scarier than you. Why the hell would I stay when I have a Sondecki to look for? Any hints you wanna give me darling?”

“Paw off or I’ll cut it off.” Malisa said as she drew a shortsword that Hawl had not noticed Malisa had on you, pushing the blade against the tiger morph’s throat. “Are you so thick as to believe I’d actually meet with Nasoj unarmed?”

Hawl stepped backwards quickly taking his paw off of Malisa, truthfully he was expecting for that paw to get a little lower and for him to run off scot free. In hindsight it would have been wiser to take off like a bat out of Hell, but no he had to taunt his captor. “Well I thought it was a hypothesis worth exploring.....” Hawl’s frightened startled face changed back into a smug smile. “So what’s to stop me from becoming a mosquito and hightailing it out of here?”

Malisa’s facial expression did not change, but her sword caught fire. “Because I can produce a wall of flame hotter than the rising sun that will burn you so badly there shan't even be ashes of you remaining. Back in the cage kitty!”

“I’m willing to bet that you’re bluffing, where is the Sondecki and what is his moniker?” Hawl demanded, growling.

Malisa twirled the blade, cutting a pattern lightly into his torso and pushed the blade back up to his throat. “Bet your life?”

Hawl winced, looking at the singed fur and cut flesh with blood pouring down from the letters “M” and “H”. “So, I’ve heard good things about the bread and water you do around here, I’m getting hungry and have traveled a great distance to be with you.” he said as he re-entered the cell. “Given my feline state may I have some jerky or perhaps some rotted meat in place of bread?”

“I’ll send someone down.” Malisa said coldly as she left re-locking the cage. “One final question before my departure. How are you able to move between bodies with such ease?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Earliest thing I remember I found myself in the town of Mugal about eight years ago, truthfully I don’t even know how old I am, I don’t remember anything before that and I’ve kept myself from aging to keep my good looks. I’m guessing I might be 28. I was recently exiled from Mugal and I just want to find someone who can explain why the flesinoir want me.” Hawl said, finally being truthful. “Can you please tell me anything about the sondecki?”

“It is written in the Canticles that Yahshua once said ‘The truth shall set you free.’, I am no Follower nor Rebuilder, but that is one piece of wisdom you should keep much closer to your heart in the future.” Malisa nodded as she thought about things. “I shall send a note to the sondeckis, he’ll be here in a few days to speak with you. Until then I’m going to send for Jessica to study you, presently she is having dinner with my father, but afterward she’ll come to collect you.”

“I don’t have a few days, if I get cursed I might get stuck in that form and lose my powers. Can’t you bring him or her here faster?”

“He resides in Glen Avery so no, it will take some time. Besides, the curse is something that will require you to make peace regardless as you have committed a crime and pretended to be our worst enemy. Letting you out of the dungeon, let alone the curse’s range, won’t be easily done.”

“Aww, but come on your awesomeness, you know you can’t do that. I mean... I could be the key to the cure, I gave Sera a beard for Eli’s Sake!” Hawl whined.

“Even so, you aren’t exactly on my best side and I’m the closest thing you have to a friend right now.” Malisa gave Hawl a stern look. “Jessica will be here after dinner, you will be given your rations until then. End of discussion.” and with that she was out.

Malisa walked out of the dungeon and into the world outside. “So learn anything interesting about him?” Roscoe said, closing his eyes and facing away from the setting sun.

“He isn’t Nasoj, that’s about all I know.” Malisa looked back at Roscoe. “Jessica The Hawk and Charles Matthias will be coming around. Jessica is permitted to take Hawl out, Charles is not. Please give her the keys when you see her.” she gave back the keys, remembering she had them as she said that.

“Of course milady, any further instruction?” Roscoe asked with his eyes meeting Malisa in a display of overwhelming obedience.

“Hawl is a shapeshifter, do not let anyone out unless you’re certain you let them in. If he finds out how to change in his cell, do not listen to my voice or my father’s voice unless you are convinced it’s really us.” Malisa stated this, as Roscoe bowed and agreed to these terms, and with that she was off.

The princess wondered about back to the main part of the Keep, people bowing and curtseying, whichever they felt more comfortable with, as she passed them. Eventually she was halted by an armored human woman and a little raccoon child. “Your highness, there was a bit of a misshap in the market today. One of the merchants is no longer with us.”

“That’s quite tragic Dame Gary, I’ll have arrange a funeral service conducted by either Father Hough or Lightbringer Raven depending on the religious standing of the family. I trust the child with you is a survivor or a kin of the deceased?” Malisa asked, looking down at the raccoon girl.

“Yes ma’am, I mean, yes your highness. Vercetti was my auntie, she was gonna take me to watch her and Mr. Copernicus play pool.” The raccoon said, sniffling, some tears trailing from her eyes. “Dame Gary said I could eat in the castle and I was wondering if I could eat with you.”

Malisa’s eyes perked up with confusion and intrigue. “Me? Child why would you desire to dine with me?” Malisa was a very bitter person fully dedicated to her career and the safety of Metamor, she was no child’s icon nor was she the brightest and most cheery of Duke Thomas’ staff. As such she was found rather confuzzled by the child’s request.

“Well.... Dame Gary said I could have anything I wanted and I wanna have a tea party with you Princess Malisy!” The raccoon child smiled, and began to laugh, like all children do when they get their way.

“You want to have a tea party, with me?” Malisa’s face grew strange with a sensation that had not been familiar to her in quite some time, the raccoon child’s laughter had been contagious to Malisa who almost wanted to fight back the chuckling as her usual frown shifted into a smile. “Alright child, I was just about to have a meal. Please, tell me your name.” Dame Gary was actually very visibly shocked to see her this way.

“Sargosa of Keeptown, Granddaughter of Amare.” The raccoon child curtsied. “And yes I do! What little girl doesn’t wanna play with a princess?”

“I don’t know much about little girls, but, alright. I shall grant this request. Dame Gary have tea prepared and sent up to my chambers.” Malisa ordered as she took Sargosa’s paw, there was a humming in the raccoon’s heart and somehow the princess could feel it.

Sargosa cheered and the two went into the Keep and up to Malisa’s room as Dame Gary ran off to obtain a new fresh piping hot kettle of tea. On Sargosa’s insistence Malisa redressed herself into a long flowing pink dress and the two sat down at a table. “Alright, tea’s on its way, you are the guest so name what you would like for dinner.”

Sargosa looked at her common and plain red dress, it looked rather drab and out of place in comparison to Malisa’s outfit which had been expertly crafted from the finest materials, enchanted silk made purely for the sake of bedazzling all who looked upon it and at the chest a large blue sapphire contrasting with the pink and made to symbolize the remaining the masculinity within the princess. This had been a gift from her father’s allies in Whales given in good faith for taking good care of their Crown Prince during his reign as Metamor’s head of intelligence and continuing to defend the border between the Giants Downs and the rest of Galendor. Malisa rarely wore it, this being the third time she had ever done so. The garb was far too girly for her tastes as she preferred to dress as male as she possibly could in defiance of Nasoj’s will for who he wanted her to be, who she could never truly be asked to be, but Sargosa could see the coldest truth that Malisa wished to deny, she looked dashing in it. “Do I get a pretty outfit too? Yours looks so cute!”

Under ordinary circumstances words as simple as these would be enough to pierce Malisa’s soul with sharpness more powerful than any blade that any soldier or deranged killer has ever wielded. However when they were spoken softly by an innocent child it didn’t hurt. Instead Malisa found herself grateful for what had happened to her even if it would be merely as brief as this meeting. It is a dream of every young girl that they would one day be a princess of a magical land, several fairy tales were told to little girls pertaining to this subject, written on the fuel of this dream and in turn igniting it within various youths of the world. Such is the symbiotic relationship of stories and to those they are told. As such princesses capture the hearts and spirits of young girls, it is simply quite their nature and right now being a princess, Malisa had captivated Sargosa’s heart merely by existing. It is a magic that worthy of note, one that people of true greatness wield easily. Malisa had not known this since she lead armies as Prince Matthew. Sargosa was oblivious to all this and just happy to be with a princess, while Malisa felt strangely moved. So much so that she almost forgot what Sargosa had said to her and took a second to snap back into reality. “Sorry, I don’t have any pretty clothes that would fit you. I was a boy for my childhood.”

“Oh yeah.... Didn’t realize that...” Sargosa’s eyes trailed downward, being somewhat disappointed she didn’t get to look fancy like the princess.

Malisa’s warmth chilled a bit, she began to ponder what she was even doing. Thoughts were going a mile a minute as time stood to standstill, Malisa’s mind was racing some of her thoughts were dedicated to the promising young soldier-scholar that Matthew shaped up to be, he surely wouldn’t have been getting admired at a little girl’s tea party or would he? Perhaps it was Sargosa’s spell, the whimsy and energy of a child’s imagination was far stronger than any gender roles Could it have been likely that she would still be having this tea party if she was a prince? The other part of Malisa’s mind and perhaps the strongest right now was her strong desire not to dissapoint Sargosa and see to it she have a swell time living a dream of little girls.

“It’s just you look so cute and adorable and I just have this ugly old dress grandma gave me. I wish I was a princess with a little white dress and a shiny tiara! I’d have a huge castle with servants paw and hindpaw telling me how pretty I look and anyone who said I wasn’t pretty would have to buy me some cookies or I’d throw them the dungeon! And they’d have to because my daddy was the King!” Sargosa boasted waving her hands in the air spastically.

Malisa felt her spark of joy ignite and catch flame. “Well I think that dress looks marvelous on you, it really brings out your fur. I don’t have fur, I just have this plain old boring white skin.” she rubbed her arm for emphasis. “Smooth, cold, and if you ask me I think this skin might be the only tacky thing worn in this room.”

“You like my dress!?!” Sargosa sparked up as a red cardinal dressed in a common tunic came in with the tea. Sargosa nearly didn’t notice him as she was filled to the brim with an extreme excitement. A Princess! Just said that she LIKED Sargosa’s garb, this was almost too much for the raccoon child.

“Thank you Itamar.” Malisa curtsied after the tray was set down, Itamar was relieved he had not dropped the tray as it took him awhile to find a good way to hold it. A show for Sargosa, a proper lady is polite and curtseys to show respect, though it confused the avian for a second.

“You’re welcome your highness, Dame Gary went back on patrol and asked that I bring you this tea.” Itamar returning the curtsey with a bow. “Will you or your guest be needing anything else?”

“Yes, whatever Sargosa wants to eat is what we’re having. Also can you tell me if you’ve seen anyone strange in the Keep lately. I’ve come to learn that your wife encountered the false Nasoj earlier today.” Malisa returned to her serious face, the illusion had to be broken for business.

“That she did, Claire didn’t have much to say about him, just that he was a rapscallion and rather impolite. She’s currently with her father, it seems her brother came to town with Hawl and the Transblade and she’s introducing him to the family. They live in Lorland so it’s going to be a bit before she returns. Anything you want me to ask her though?” Itamar stood at attention, he was a former soldier until the curse took his thumbs, nowadays he just did tasks for the royal family and general service work around the Keep, but some habits never died down.

“I’m aware, I’ve spoken with Sir Yariv several times, he used to be Loriod’s bodyguard before he fired him.” Malisa’s voice stopped being cheerful and once again returned to its more serious and grave tone. “Itamar, I need you to do a task for me.”

“Of course your highness, the daughter of Thomas Hassan needs only to ask and I shall move the world for her.” Itamar got on one knee, he was nothing if not professional. Plus Sargosa seemed to like it, her pouty face began to turn to intrigue as her imagination ran wild and she imagined this being some kind of secret mission.

The princess got up and obtained stationary and a quill with ink and quickly wrote out a note, but still taking the time to be punctual and to the point. The recipient needed to fully understand the situation, but Sargosa was growing impatient and flustered. Malisa finished and stamped the note with the Hassan Royal Symbol, the head of a stallion. Her father really embraced the whole horse thing well, most of the animal keepers well. It was enough to give a girl curse envy, she thought back briefly to the false offer of Hawl’s, she never found out if he really couldn’t or if even if he plain doesn’t have the potential, but she felt that it would have been too good to be true. Malisa believed she might actually enjoy having her transgender curse be replaced with an animal one far more than being a human man again. “See that this gets to Charles Matthias in Glen Avery, let no one else read it, not even his wife or kids. It is potentially a matter of great importance or a trivial distraction, no telling. It revolves around a southland cult called the Flesinoir, tell no one else. I have only told you because I highly suspect your wife may already know.”

“Most certainly milady. I shall see that no one other than the Rat Of Might and any he deem appropriate to read this get the chance to. Might I inquire why you would not ask me to involve Yonson or Rickkter?” Itamar asked, standing up and placing the note in his foot talons as he prepared to change into his feral form.

“I don’t want to stir up too much noise, this could easily be nothing, so I’d like to excite as few people as possible. Plus Hawl requested that I send this to the Sondeckis. I don’t know if he specified that for a reason or not.” Malisa turned to Sargosa who had her head in her paws listening with excitement and intrigue, her face easily made Malisa’s point..

Itamar nodded after flying upward off the ground in his feral bird form to meet Malisa’s eyes and was off, currently unable to speak as he was now fully an animal save only in mind and with that he was off to the Glen.

“OOOOOOOH! Mage Cults sound so exciting. I wonder if Malakai and Zyhx are secretly mages here on a super secret mission.” Sargosa’s eyes were alight with wonderment. “Maybe they’ll turn that bad man who killed my auntie into a toad! Unless he’s already a toad.... Ooooh maybe a tree! Or a flower!”

“Xhyz is from Fan Shoar, not the Southlands and we’ve checked his powers extensively. He really is a Shaman like he says. I think he’s only interested in learning potions and calling all the gender morphs ‘Two-Spirits’, I swear his head was spinning at the concept. I’m surprised becoming a Red Panda was not a disappointment for him” Malisa said as she poured tea in two cups that came with the kettle, realizing too late she forgot to have Itamar take their orders or inform Jessica who had to be out of the meeting with her father by now to see Hawl. “I have no idea who this Malakai is.”

“No no no, another guy name Zyhx and this new guy called Malakai showed up at my house today. They say they’re former ladies, but, well. Don’t tell anyone, but I’m a little magical myself and I didn’t see a lick of the curse in them. I didn’t tell my grandma, but. I’m not sure why they’re really here.” Sargosa got suspicious. “The guards say Auntie killed herself, but that’s not true. The note she left behind had poetry, she hates that artsy stuff! Someone planted that!”

Malisa hummed to herself as she sipped her tea. “You may be onto something, tell me everything you know.” Xhyz was a very unusual name, one Malisa had never heard before the Red Panda came to the Keep, there could be a connection. “Keep your knowledge that they might be Flesinoir to yourself, if it’s a secret they might try to hurt you, I would however try to keep your grandmother on her toes. Have your father or any other able combatant living with you ready to defend the household from them.”

“My father’s dead!” Sargosa exclaimed with a very serious look on her face.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Malisa closed her eyes in silent prayer for the losses in Sargosa’s life. “My real father is as well, though I have always considered the Duke to be my true father.”

“Don’t be” Sargosa said angrily, looking to the side. “I’m hungry! Have your servants send up some cookies.... and a suckling pig...” she buried her claws into the table and scratched bitterly as she said “suckling pig”

Malisa nodded, her stomach was rumbling as well. “I might what I said about the dress” she smiled as she walked outside her room and turned towards Devon, the coyote jester within the Keep who happened to be passing by. “Have cookies and any suckling pig we have sent up, no pranks involved please.”

Devon nodded meekly, more shy than intimidated. “Y-yes your highness.” as he ran downstairs to fufill his majesty’s request.

“I take it you had issues with your father.” Malisa said, taking a more calming and nurturing tone.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Sargosa pouted, folding her arms before becoming sad. “I miss my Auntie, there aren’t many good people out there Malisy. That’s why I like Princesses, they’re always so kind and pure hearted! They always look out for their subjects and are super nice and super pretty. You’re a good Princess Malisy.”

Malisa felt odd, not only was happiness not something she was used too, but with Sargosa’s words she felt the weight of the Keep’s problems once more, but not as Matthew-turned-Malisa, but as a charming, sweet, effeminate Malisa-born-Malisa. They seem to be less dire on her small shoulders, especially since she was less cold and more intune with her subjects. The wider range of emotions women have compared to men was more of a power, a talent, a force at her command as opposed to a weakness given to her by Nasoj. Truthfully, this was not something she normally dared to think about for fear that it would let the feminine side take over and the curse would win. As amazing as it felt to give herself to princess hood for a bit and not be ashamed, for the good of her people, Nasoj could never win.

Meanwhile as the night was brightly lit by the moon and the stars and his darling sons and daughter were put to bed, Charles Matthias stood outside, wanting to use the starlit as a perfect time for night training. Charles was a Sondeckis, a mage-warrior of justice who was lead by the song in his heart to uphold the law of the land and be a beacon of light wherever there was darkness. The warrior’s night vision was excellent, being a rat and all he was meant to scurry through dark areas, but still the light was of some value. Charles was out in a big field just outside his house which was shaped like a tree, far more elegant and befitting his natural cheerfulness than the now-famous Hole In The Wall when he lived at the the Keep proper. It also made a much better place to raise a family as there was far less tension at Glen Avery than at the Keep. It was a quiet place mostly within the range of the Curse of the Third Gate and thus populated by animals such as himself, though there was a human woman or two who had moved to get away from painful memories of Three Gates. Charles was not alone as he was being watched by his ferret apprentice Garigan and his wife Kimberly who was also a rat. Kimberly watched for her own enjoyment, like any warrior’s wife always eager to see her man in action, Garigan watched as part of his training, Charles was the only man at Metamor capable of teaching the secrets of the Sondeckis. Though for tonight warm ups and basic maneuvers were the course for Charles to teach his pupil.

Charles raised his Sondeshike, a rare and powerful pole-arm like weapon wielded once by ancient Sondeckis and passed down only to those who were worthy, and began to twirl it in a series of attacks. He did this slowly, putting muscle behind it to practice his stamina. Were this a real battle his attacks would be swift and merciless. Charles was very worthy indeed of his weapon indeed with how many times he had saved not only Metamor, but the entire world with it. Before that he had also shown himself exceptional by ascending to Black at a rather young age, Black being the second highest ranking among the Sondeckis. Neither of these being how he got his Sondeshike which he had to obtain from an old friend, an old friend who turned towards a darker path and had to be extinguished. Charles started with an upward swing, a forward jab, a pull back with a kick, a downward thrust as though wielding a sledgehammer, and finally a side twirl to complete ruin the sides of this imaginary opponent. Charles repeated this motion for a few times before finally stopping and tapping the invulnerable and incredibly powerful bo staff to the ground like a walking stick. He was not panting, the night was young and he could not afford to be the slightest bit winded this early. “Alright Garigan, repeat what I just did thrice to prove you were paying as close attention as you should have been.”

Garigan the ferret bowed to his master, wearing green training robes to show his rank in the Sondeckis as an apprentice. “Yes Master!” and repeated the motions, much to Charles’ delight.

“Wonderful, wonderful. Good to see you taking this seriously, as always.” Charles smiled readying his Sondeshike. No matter how good Garigan was it would be most likely that he would never wield this weapon nor possess one of his own. Sondeshikes were incredibly powerful and rare, taking an entire lifetime just to craft and Charles received his through a string a luck. Securing another would be quite an arduous task.

“I’d never slouch off Master Matthias!” Garigan sounded delighted and excited as he flawlessly repeated his master’s motions with a less magical bo staff.

“It is my job as your teacher to continue to see to it that you keep that promise.” Charles warned. “A Sondeckis must always be ready to act when he is needed, rest is simply not a luxury to be afforded until we are with Eli.” He was being overly dramatic as they two of them lived in a generally peaceful place, but it was all for Garigan’s best interests to keep him motivated. The bravado also served to be a wonderful show for his wife Kimberly, she loved it when her man got tough and took charge.

“Of course! If Calephas ever shows his face here again we’ll make him eat dirt.” Garigan said excitedly, he knew better than to point out when his mentor was exaggerating. The training regiment got near brutal at times and he didn’t need to give Matthias a reason to make it worse.

“Perfect, that’s the right attitude to have, but don’t get too cocky with me now. Pride is the making of a dead man.” Charles resumed his performance of the movements he showed Garigan, matching his apprentice’s speed and beginning to speed up. “Try to keep up with me, I’m not going to make this easy.”

Garigan nodded and sped to match Charles, but he was a little off to Charles and Kimberly’s disappointment, just the other day they had performed in unison. The black robed rodent shot a look at Garigan that got him disappointed in himself enough to speed up to Charles’ level.

Kimberly oohed and aahed as the two were as one, master and student blending together perfectly as to ensure that one one knew where one began and the other ended. The two were really getting into it, if it were possible for a rat and a ferret to sweat they’d be working up a doozy of one. “That’s my Rat of Might!” she called out.

Charles began to slow down as he heard the flapping of avian wings, definitely a bird of some kind. Garigan did two more rounds before he realized his master stopped. “What’s wrong? is something the matter...” he asked as he looked towards Charles panting, having gotten really into his practice before stopping his actions.

Charles looked for the sound, his short-sightedness making this rather a difficult task, but he knew that a bird wouldn’t fly at night, unless it was one that had been born not hatched.

The bird flew down to Charles revealing himself to be a red cardinal with a scroll in his talons. The messenger morphed into his anthro form after dropping a parchment in Charles’ paws who read it very intently, a shiver fell down as spine as the first thing he noticed was the Hassan Royal Insignia, this was either invitation to a grand event or once again something had gone wrong at the Keep. “Oh my.....” he said to himself, speed-reading the note and noting that it wasn’t from Duke Thomas, but his daughter Malisa. “Thank you for bringing me this note.” Charles bowed before the royal messenger. “Did she tell you anything to tell me? Even the slightest detail could be helpful if you can recall it.”

“Only that no one is supposed to know about this unless you say otherwise.” Itamar the Red Cardinal stated.

“Smart move on her part.” Charles stated, shaking in place, terror gripping his spine. “I hoped that I would never see this name again, to think I am being sought out by this ‘Hawl’ specifically is very worrisome..”

“Do you think we should be worried about Hawl?” Itamar asked. “My wife and my brother-in-law encountered him sometime late this afternoon, all I know is that he’s a little crazy and lacking in manners, but ultimately harmless.”

“I see, I’ll think this over. It’s a bit much to take in at once. I will be praying with all my heart that this is a hoax.” Charles was very serious and very punctual, his strong presence really came through to Itamar.

“That it?” Itamar wasn’t scared, just reasonably cautious. The bird did not see point in panicking just yet.

“For now, I’ll need to know more about the situation.” Charles reached into his tunic pocket and tipped Itamar a few coins of silver.

Itamar nodded and pocketed the coins, as a reward for his services to the royal family even after losing his thumbs he had been giving an outfit that he wore regularly that re-fitted to whatever body he possesed. “I’ll be taking my leave now unless you have a message you want me to deliver in Keeptown.”

Charles shook his head no. “I cannot ask you to fly back in this darkness. Please, I insist that you stay with us for the night.”

“Thank you for your offer Sir Matthias.” Itamar cracked his beak into a smile. “I shan’t take up much room in your home.”

“Please, make yourself at home.” Charles called out as the bird began making a nest in his host’s treehome.

Kimberly and Garigan looked at each other and then back towards Charles and Itamar with concerned looks. “Charles darling what’s wrong? Who is Hawl?” Kimberly called these questions out, full of worry for her mate.

“Are you going somewhere? Am I coming with?” Garigan asked, just as worried as Kimberly, but pretended not to be to look strong for her sake.

Charles closed his eyes thinking of what to tell his beloved wife and studious apprentice. “It’s nothing, probably just yet another adventure.”

“What’s this about Master?” Garigan asked

“All I am at liberty to discuss is that Princess Malisa wishes for me to speak with someone about an old Sondeckis legend. One I always hoped was nothing more than a legend.” Charles did not move his gaze from the sky as his mind drifted to an ancient battle that took place in the Southlands over five hundred years ago. “The rest I am not sure if I should tell yet.”

“Legends have a nasty habit of turning out true....” Garigan said to himself, starting to have his worry turn to fear.

“I know.” Charles stayed looking up at the sky for a second longer before looking to Garigan

“Damn it Garigan get my wife inside!” Charles was very visibly upset and worried for the future, he remembered exercises for controlling his rage and was normally very good about it. He tried to keep calm, he didn’t even know if this shapeshifter business was for real.

Garigan gulped and did so, he didn’t live with Charles, but he figured it was best to do as he said. Charles began training much harder, he would resume his training with Garigan once he found his calm, as for now Charles was beside himself with worry.

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Back in the cold dark dungeon Hawl was thinking to himself, looking at his arms. “Surely I won’t be doomed to just one body, I bet the curse won’t even work on me.” he had been pacing in his cell ever since Malisa left. “Ha, they might even reward me when it doesn’t......” Hawl knew this was a lie as he groaned and began looking over the room. He thought maybe if he climbed onto the bars he might be able to use his powers and squeeze through them.

Hawl’s ears perked up as he heard footsteps. “Jessica? Is that you? About time someone showed up.”

Instead it was a man in black robes, smiling, very relieved to have found Hawl. “Oh good, you’re here. I can take you back to Malakai and I won’t have to suffer the curse. I think you’d prefer our company to being locked up in a cell.” he said to himself.

“Regorez!” Hawl growled. “You tied me up to a tree and left me abandoned, why are you here? What do you want? How do you know Malakai?”

“I’m a Flesinoir, wasn’t it obvious you twit?” Regorez had Roscoe’s keys and began to open the lock on the door. “Come with me stripes, we have a long trip ahead of us and time’s not on our side. It’s a good that monster at the front didn’t notice me sneak by, I’m not sure how I’m going to get out with you in tow.”

Hawl walked out and tried to change forms, but it just wouldn’t happen, this set off an alarm. “No... I...” he was about to say he couldn’t be cursed already. He had only been here a day. Hawl would have to think of that later, Regorez was already reaching for a bag of some kind and Hawl didn’t want to find out what. Thinking quickly he picked Regorez up and snatched his keys.

“Wha... put me down you foolish pawn! Do you know the power I possess?” Regorez was peeved and struggling a lot.

“Not really and I don’t care.” Hawl stated “Why have the Flesinoir been following me?”

“I can’t tell you...” Regorez laughed. “He’d kill me, he can see me even now. Hehehe, you know that snipping noise you heard outside of your bedroom door, the one you could never trace? That was me with a pair of shears.”

“What?” Hawl tilted his head, putting Regorez down as he was getting heavy.

“He wants you to be afraid of us so you’ll comply, that’s why we showed ourselves so little. I am the Snipping Man and I’ve finally come to take you away Hawl.” Regorez chuckled hoping this would work.

“No....” Hawl’s eyes lit up in fear as he stepped backwards.

“Come with me and learn your true purpose, the meaning behind your powers.” Regorez offered, this was beginning to look like Deja Vu to Hawl

Hawl pushed Regorez into the cell. “Never! Just leave me alone!” he cried as he locked the cell and began to formulate a plan.

“What are you doing Enroygall?” Regorez pondered as he charged up a spell to cast on the cell door, but had it fizzle instantly.

“Something I should have done at the Mugal Tavern, be a better actor.” Hawl grinned. “It’ll take them sometime before they figure out you’re not me. That princess really is the closest thing I had to a friend.”

Regorez looked panicked “Hawl let me out or I swear the consequences will be dire.”

“Tried that, it didn’t work!” Hawl turned to Roscoe’s direction and screamed “NASOJ IS TRYING TO ESCAPE!”

Roscoe skittered to the back as fast as he could. “What’s this?” he said confused and concerned.

“I was doing some patrols, came in while you were napping, didn’t wanna wake you. Somehow the shapeshifter got your keys.” Hawl pawed them over to Roscoe who bowed appreciatively. “My short was damaged in the first, but I got him back in. He’s dangerous and an amazing fighter, I’d keep my eyes on him. Well, glad I came in here while I did, you can handle it from here” With that Hawl left before a confused Roscoe could even say anything to him.

“You idiot! That was your prisoner, he is playing you for a fool!” Regorez pleaded.

Roscoe rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall watching Regorez like a hawk until an actual one came in. “A likely story, you’re not getting out again on my watch!”

Hawl was free, all he had to do now was find a Sondecki and get the hell out of dodge. It was nightfall now leaving him to wonder long he’d been in the dungeon. Looking for someone who could tell him more about the Sondecki, Hawl traversed the field outside the dungeon and eventually came to a red panda with blue hair and a porcupine seemingly made of latex with various colours in over her body in a zebra stripe formation. Both were looking over a cauldron and back up the moon. The red panda was dancing around waving two very primitive looking axes around. The porcupine looked onward approvingly. These two looked important and were in the throne room when he was arrested, so naturally Hawl thought they’d be a good candidate. “Greetings porcupine and raccoon-dog-thing, how are you two?”

The porcupine smiled at the tiger “Pretty good, just watching my apprentice dance. Name’s Pascal, he’s Xhyz, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before and I try to get to know everybody. Especially if they’re as handsome as you.” Pascal giggled to herself.

“I’m a member of the Writer’s Guild and I have a story based on one written by the former guildmaster.” Hawl recalled what Claire had said about the Sondecki and was using it to his advantage, Pascal may have suspected something if he said Sondecki. “I need his approval on a few scenes before I can get my latest story rolling. Do you know where I might find him?”

“Sounds like you want Charles.” Pascal thought to herself. “I think he moved to Glen Avery two years back, I think so anyway. Me and him didn’t really jive all that well. I only saw him on the rare occasion I went to the Gnawer’s Meetings. Alright guy, he’s a rat and very old fashioned, I couldn’t be seen with a guy without him assuming he was my date.”

“Thanks miss, by the way, what exactly are you two doing out here?” Hawl was a tad curious, holding his paw under his muzzle.

“Some potions need proper moonlight to properly prepare, this fluid won’t even come to a boil unless it’s under moonlight. I was running low on this particular formula so I thought what better way to teach my new apprentice outside of making some more.” Pascal watched Xhyz dance and wave his strange axes about. “Keep it up I think it’s almost ready.”

“What’s the potion?” Hawl watched with Pascal “or those axes, I’ve never seen any like those before.”

“Tomahawks, a weapon of Fan Shoar.” Xhyz waved them over the potion and looked toward the moon. “The potion is used as an amplifier for other formulas, magical energy waxes and wanes with the moon, so this potion captures moonlight to strengthen the effects of other formulas. It’s very expensive and you need to channel the energy of the moon just right or you’ll have serious problems.”

“Like what?” Pascal quizzed smiling at her student.

“The potion could burst with moonlight and send every in a four mile radius into an incredibly bad mood up up to twenty four hours.” Xhyz smiled back at his teacher. “There are also the less serious ones where it becomes a randomizer for potion effects or it will weaken the potion instead”

“Bravo! Bravo!” Pascal clapped. “I’m very pleased with you my young apprentice. I am surprised by your progress, if I doubted you I’d never let you attempt this. If this went wrong enough you’d break every bone in our bodies.”

“Mistress I am older than you.” Xhyz protested, albeit half-joking. “And yes, I studied extra hard in the Lunar Spells and Elixers book you gave me just to prevent that.”

“Only physically darling.” Pascal reminded “Glad you did, for your sake. I have a morph ring and could just not have bones if I wanted.... Well I guess Hawl would still have problems.”

“I’m just teasing, but what is your chronological age?” Xhyz asked purely out of curiosity, his mistress having the very rare condition of being under the effect of all three curses at once.

“A gentleman never asks and a lady never tells.” Pascal giggled, she had taken to womanhood when the curse was first laid down and taken to it well. The porcupine did not see too much of a difference from the gender swap as her old body was often mistaken for a female one anyway, or at least that’s what she claimed, there really was no telling what went on in her head. With all three upon he she had gone from an old man to an attractive permanently young half-porcupine woman. “But, I will say that I am older than you believe.”

Hawl nodded, though was a little uncomfortable at the prospect of having his bones broken a again, and stretched. “Well I wish you two the best of luck, I better be heading for Glen Avery.... It’s that way right?” he asked pointing in a random direction.

“Yes actually” Pascal didn’t turn to face Hawl to even check where he was pointing, she was too focused on Xhyz. “Go away please you’re distracting us.” Normally Pascal was quite careless due to her playful nature, her lab known for exploding and the scent of burning latex, she had magic that made her body made out of that substance when she wanted or needed it, a good sign to call for the infirmary. However if the potion was of the proper strength she was more careful.

Hawl headed on down his way towards the path to Glen Avery, the journey lasted only so long when he fell asleep, and woke up in some bushes the next morning. Hawl looked back and panicked, they might have found out he wasn’t Regorez by now and if they were looking for him he was not that far away from the Keep. He kept walking for a bit and nervously passed two female knights. “I hear Duchess once broke every single bone in a lutin’s body.” one said to the other, Hawl winced over his hearing of a woman talk of breaking bones.

“Please! That woman is a show off.” The other said, Hawl noticed that she was Dame Seranima out on patrol, and instead of leggings she was wearing an iron skirt. Hawl didn’t see the point of this, but figured that women will try to look good if they were born men. “You, me, and her are all scheduled for patrol slash drill near Giants Down soon. You’ll see what I mean, she’s all talk and no substance.”

As they passed Hawl, Dame Seranima stopped to look at him. “Good morning citizen, have you been in a scruff recently? Your clothing appears to be ripped.”

Hawl was terrified she’d caught him, especially after Sera had beaten him senseless the other day. “Not really Sera, I was just climbing a tree and I fell off ripping my shirt in the process.”

“Be more careful you could have broken every bone in your body that way.” Dame Seranima chastised and continued on her way, and as did Hawl who stopped in his tracks as she called back to him.

“Wait a minute” Seranima turned about scratching her non-existing beard, a habit from when she was a man that never died down. “Have we met before? How do you know my name? I’m almost positive I’ve never met you before in my life, yet there’s something familiar about you I can’t put my finger on.”

“No I don’t think we have Miss.” Hawl tried to keep his cool as Seranima examined him closely. “I just thought you looked like a Sera... Really cute.. You carry yourself well, I thought you were a real woman for a second.”

“Hey thanks, I’ve always felt that this gender suited me better anyway, like it’s weird, my true calling in life is to be a knight. Yet somehow, being a woman knight clicks better than the previous way around. Only in Metamor I guess.” Sera smiled as she turned around and continued heading back to the Keep.

“Cats are all over the place Sera, I must have seen every kind of feline there is during breakfast this morning. So of course he was familiar.” Sera’s friend said. “If I had been at the Third Gate instead of the Second I’d wanna be almost anything else, they’re just so common. I mean it’s not like he was a... what are those big lizards, the scarier ones? Dinosaurs? Had I been an animal instead of a woman, I think I’d want to be that thing that Jon’s amulet turns him into.”

“Almost forgot about Jon and his amulet, I haven’t seen that guy in two or three years. I wonder what he’s up to nowadays.” Sera thought aloud, she met the deer only of a few times. Alright guy, or so she gathered, he seemed a bit reclusive.

“I hear he’s become a doe now from some mishap involving some magic armor.” Martha gossiped “Just a rumor I heard, it’s probably hogwash.”

“I don’t see how or why you would create magic armor that changes your gender, unless it changes people like us back, I don’t see the use, but I guess I’ve heard of stranger things. Like, most people in this province for example.” Sera suggested.

“Yeah I will say one thing about Metamor, if you’re here long enough then nothing seems weird to you.” Martha said.

“Hmm you know Martha I was originally stationed at the third gate.” Sera mused. “Abandoned my post, just didn’t think it was safe for my sister there..... May he rest in peace.”

“I guess it’s true what they say Real Men don’t go AWOL.” Martha laughed. “I had myself stationed at the second, Prince Matthew as she was at the time was protecting the royal wives and I figured that was the kind of thing you get commended for. I didn’t, but I still stand by it I’d rather have the honor that I defended the royal wives and prince during a vital battle than my manhood anyday. I mean, I’m not like you or Pascal, I do dream of the day I have it back, but I take comfort in that I lost it for a good cause. Thus it is a sacrifice I can take pride in.”

“Like defending Loriod’s life is something to be proud of.” Sera teased. “But I hear you, some burdens are worth bearing. It all depends on whether or not you did the right thing.”

“Okay there are at least twenty things beyond my control with that incident.” Marsha objected, immediately getting defensive.

“I’m only joking.” This was the last thing Sera said while Hawl was in earshot, his human ears would have stopped hearing them awhile ago, but there was something to this tiger thing.

Hawl continued for several hours down the path wondering what those two were even doing down this road, probably searching for either him or lutins. It took a long time but finally Hawl made it to a small town with houses shaped like trees. Having nothing to go on really he began yelling. “CHARLES! CHARLES! I’M LOOKING FOR A MAN NAMED CHARLES! HE’S A SONDECKI RAT! CHARLES THE SONDECKI RAT! IT’S VERY IMPORTANT!”

Various critter-people stared at Hawl wondering what the comotion was, none of them felt like answering him though.

A nearby rat-man with a mark on his face and a green and blue tunic winced upon hearing Hawl’s continous screaming and ceased tying his pony to a cart that contained his Sondeshike and a few pairs of clothes. “I’m he.” Charles said looking towards the tiger’s direction running up to him. “I presume that you must be Hawl. Please come into my house, we have much to discuss. Seranima and Martha were just here looking for you.”

Hawl looked down the rat, not sure what to think. “You know, I expected someone much taller for a big bad sondecki.”

Charles smiled as he held his door open with his Sondeshike in the other. “I used to get that alot, please, come inside, we would not want to make a sense any worse than you already have.”

The house was small for Hawl, but a perfect size for Charles and Garigan, the latter of whom was sitting and doing some stretches. “What’s with the Tiger? Is he coming with us to the Keep?”

“Actually this is Hawl, turns out Sera and Martha had the right idea, but their timing was off. So we won’t be leaving after all. Works for me, we were just there.” Charles said calmly, his just there comment referring to when he was knighted not too long. “Garigan, fetch some Blackberry Wine for our guest, we have much to talk about.”

“Yes master” Garigan bowed getting the wine out of a liquor cabinet and pouring glasses for Hawl, Charles, and himself.

“I do enjoy having company I just wish it could be under better circumstances Mr......” Charles sat on a couch whilst Hawl sat down on the floor as the chairs were too small for him.

“My surname is Enroygall, my name is all I know of my family.” Hawl looked around noticing a shelf with various books and some lively furniture that went with the tree theme. “Please call me Hawl.”

“I am sorry to that, but alright Hawl, I was just on my way to see you when Seranima and Martha told me you escaped. Malisa’s note said you needed to talk to me about something important, well here you are. I was giving you five more minutes to see if you were coming here, before I departed to help the guard look for you.” Charles sipped from his wine glass, keeping a firm paw on his Sondeshike. “I prefer anything we talk about to stay between us three, which is why I’ve sent my manservant, wife, and kids to Lord Avery’s so we can be alone. I will try to answer your questions as best you can, but you must promise me that you are not a Flesinoir. If you are, I must ask you to leave Metamor Keep and never return, we have seen enough turmoil over the years without them on our doorstep.”

Hawl shook his head no. “I know nothing about them just that for all my life they’ve followed me and watched me. They only ever show enough of themselves to make me aware of their presence. I don’t really know why. I’ve heard they’re a Southland Mage Cult so I was hoping you could tell me about them.”

Charles closed his eyes and focused on his Calm to allow his heart to speak to him, after looking Hawl in the eyes and seeing his honesty he made his decision. “I believe you Hawl. I suspect they might be why you have shapeshifting abilities. The Flesinoir are known for their horrifying experiments, it is why they are called the Cult Of The Flesh. They mutate people in fashions that are too gruesome to think about, even for one such as I. The Curses of the Three Gates is a cakewalk compared to what they can do. I’m quite amazed they haven’t set their sights on Metamor sooner as they are obsessed with changing people. I had thought the reason for this was that they were long dead.”

“Why would you think that?” Hawl listened in, finally getting somewhere with his questions, Garigan was also on the edge of his seat listening very attentively.

“Because hundreds of years ago they had a war with us Sondeckis that saw their base of operations wiped out by one of the earliest whites. You see the Flesinoir are very secretive and like to hide themselves by using magic garb that shifts to whatever the wearer desires, for a while they were imitating us and giving us a bad reputation by committing unspeakable acts of evil in our name. The Kankoran and Weathermongers aided us in this effort, one of the few times that has ever happened. Their defeat was nigh impossible and resulted in the deaths of various people all on our side. If the old tales of this battle are true The Flesinoir proved nearly incapable of death.”

Hawl and Garigan nodded as they drank their wine, captivated by this tale. “I am wearing clothing like that right now... I just woke up with it and a small parchment that said that my name was Hawl Enroygall... eight years ago” Hawl said as he morphed his outfit to something more regal and appropriate, blue and black colorized robes with a red ruby on the chest part.

Charles winced and tapped his hind-paw repetitiously in extreme discomfort. “I was desperately hoping for this to be a hoax. After the incident in Marzac I was hoping things could stay peaceful for a little while. If they have followed you to our doors I fear what would happen, they say that they cannot die. I just don’t know how Metamor would face something like that, even after our close calls with Nasoj’s two attacks.” The black sondecki rubbed between his eyes. “It would calm me a little if you shifted to a form that didn’t spark my instincts. I can control them well, but, I’d be more comfortable if you did this.”

Hawl tried to shift into the form of a rat himself, but it just didn’t seem to happening. “I think I’m cursed like this... Ever since I turned into a tiger in front of Malisa it just hasn’t seemed to be working.”

“It’s possible your shapeshifting has made you more susceptible to the curse, but not likely, I don’t sense it in you. If you are though, can you atleast try to turn into a kitten? You should have the power to change your age and gender still.” Charles looked over Hawl carefully. “Just a guess, I’m not a curse expert.”

“I am NOT turning into a child!” Hawl roared and folded his arms. “I have a hard time getting people to listen to me as it is. If I was a kid I’d be even more of a laughing stock!”

“They couldn’t die? How did they ever get defeated?” Garigan shivered, spooked by this tale.

“Very well.” Charles began focusing more on his calm. “According to the legend the flesinoir stored their blood and souls inside something called a Flesh Pool, which was an incredible source of power that allowed them magicks the likes of which have not been seen since. It allowed them to alter their bodies at will and raise the dead. Not much else is known about these only that they brought victims to it to serve their cause as horrible abominations. They were eventually bested when one of the earliest whites plunged his sondeshike into the Flesh Pool. This released a force so powerful it disrupted the Flesh Pool and put massive cracks in the mountain they used as a base. The Flesinoir were never heard from again and that location is called the Shattered Mountain to this day.”

“Cool, so you think they have a new one? Give me that sondeshike you’re holding and I’ll take care of this.” Hawl clapsed his fingers and laughed. “They won’t know what hit them.”

Garigan’s eyes grew very wide, he could not believe someone just said that to his master. Some common tiger marches into Charles’ home and demands his sondeshike? The legendary weapon held sacred to their people, Garigan could not think of a worse insult that Hawl could have given to this household.

Charles seemed incredibly annoyed at this request, trying his best to keep it at annoyed out of the benefit of the doubt that Hawl spoke merely out of ignorance. “I would never trust this sacred weapon to anyone who is not a sondecki, and a damn fine one at that, I would not even let Garigan here practice with it. You would not even begin to be able to wield its power.” He glared into Hawl with the most evil of eyes before returning to a much calmer complexion. “I doubt they’re still at the Shattered Mountain. In all likelihood there is a new Flesh Pool somewhere else and we have no way have of locating it unless they make themselves known. I fear for if they do horrible things will happen, the Reaper Robes themselves send chills up my tail and through my spine, and with a tail this long that is not something to be said lightly.”

“So what should I do?” Hawl pondered, feeling hopelessness in this situation.

“Reaper Robes?” Garigan’s curiosity was peaked.

“Well Hawl if they haven’t come to Metamor Keep in the past decade I assume there is a reason that they haven’t.” Charles began thinking hard. “If you just stay here they may never arrive, or they may begin attacking. Tough call, but I have found that Metamor is an excellent place for hiding from people. As for why they want you. I don’t know, do you think it has something to do with your transforming outfit? or more likely, perhaps your ability”

“I’ve had this thing as far back as I can remember, eight years ago I just found myself in a town called Mugal with the Flesinoir watching my every move and like I said, with just my name and these clothes.” Hawl shrugged “We’re getting nowhere fast.”

“Not quite, we have two leads, one is your abilities. Shapeshifting as easily as Malisa described you doing is almost unheard of. You may be an experiment of theirs they wish to keep an eye on. The other lead perplexes me more.” Charles was very deep in thought as was Garigan who pondered what a Reaper Robe is. “This being the Transblade Malisa wrote about, it’s too big of a coincidence that a shapeshifter and a shapeshifting weapon appear at the Keep at the same time. Is there a reason you took it from the ambassador Cedric?

“I don’t know, I could sort of feel it calling it to me. Like a person I’ve known all my life who seems to really care for me.” Hawl recounted the feeling of the Transblade to his touch, the vibes it gave us when he was near it. “It felt wonderful just to be around, I had to have it. No one else seems to have this happen to them. Just me, right now I actually feel a deep regret that the blade is nowhere near me.”

Charles began scratching his headfur perplexed by the whole thing. “I’m not sure what this means, has anyone else shown this connection with the weapon?”

“Like I said not that I know of, but when the sword was given to ol’ Tommy, Cedric didn’t seem to mind having the sword leave his possession. So I don’t think so.” Hawl recounted

“Ol’ Tommy” Charles chuckled at this nickname for the ruler of this cursed land. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone call the Duke that before.”

“So I take it we’re cool now?” Hawl scratched his chinfur. “I don’t have to go back to jail?”

“I don’t recall that I ever implied that, you’ll have to take it up with the royal family. I am not any kind of authority figure at the Keep. It’s not really up to me.” Charles informed, swallowing as he predicted that Hawl wouldn’t like what he had to say. “I would reccomend go back to your cell, for your own safety.”

“Hmmm.... I’ve got a better idea” Hawl thought that there was no way in hell that he was going to put up with that crossdressing princess. He was afraid that she could shoot him with another bone breaker beam and he was not that fond of pain or people who cause it to him. “I run like crazy away from ol’ Metamor Keep, forget I ever came here, and uhh, just stay out of your..” Hawl looked his host over once more. “...fur.”

Charles grabbed the Sondeshike and pinned Hawl to the ground. The tiger did not expect this maneuver as he was forced the ground by the power of the Sondeck. “Good arms you have there sir... Can you let me go now?” Hawl asked, swallowing, starting to get the feeling that he’d be seeing the infamously thrice cursed stone keep a lot unless he had something really clever to do.

“I’m afraid it’s for the safety of everyone, not just you.” Charles said. “You have latent magical abilities and very little self-control, that’s a very bad combination!”

“Hehehe... Hahahahahahahaha...” Hawl laughed hard and sincerely, shaking his head no with an all too smug grin like he had seen a jest that had not stopped being funny even though this was the umpteenth time he heard it. “That’s a Cross you wear around your neck isn’t it? Symbol of the Followers, those of the Way, Eli-Worshippers?”

“Yes....” The amount of force Charles was using intensified with his discomfort, the brown rat was not sure he liked where this way going

“Isn’t it JUST LIKE A Follower, to force their will on someone else, say it’s Eli’s.... and expect the suckered one to just lay down and accept it like some cheap prostitute, because you have labeled him a heathen.” Hawl bore his fangs at the rat with a growl. “I do not work in a brothel Charles, and if I did my act would cost a king’s ransom.”

Garigan looked at Hawl bitterly. “How dare you bring such sharp words to Matthias’ househol...”

Charles sighed and silenced Garigan with a simple gesture of the pink paw that served as his hand. “Contrary to popular belief Garigan, fighting fire with fire is a fool’s around.” In truth Charles was devastated on the inside to have his religion insulted in this manner. To have such words paint it in so foul a color. The rodent knew there was only one way to plant the kind of seed in Hawl that would change his mind and it was not in arguing. “Hawl, I will call the guard to collect you, but perhaps I can train you in some techniques that will help calm your mind and focus your abilities. I once had to stay in those dungeons, then can grate on you.”

“Oh that makes me feel better....” Hawl sarcastically snided. “What were you in the dungeon for?”

“I could call them now and teach you nothing.” Charles warned. “Your choice. And if you must know, I tried to attack the Duke, it was not my finest hour and I’m not proud of it.”

“Because he’s Lothanasi? Pfft, Followers. I’ll... take what I can get...” Hawl growled once more, but ultimately decided it would be best to give in, if only to get the rat off of him. “Fine I’d rather have a Follower’s Help then no help at all.”

“Then let that be lesson one, pride will hurt you in the end, don’t rely on it.” Charles advised, taking his foot off of Hawl and helping him up. “I’ll train you until the curse takes hold of you, and for a little longer if necessary. For a grand total of a fortnight, but no longer. Understood”

Hawl cracked his neck. “Alright, I’ll try to be a courteous house guest while I’m here, but. Before we begin, I haven’t had a decent meal since I was in Mugal. Can we start with lunch?”

“Absolutely. Garigan and I were going to stop by and see our friend Gregor, he’s a baker, once we got to Keeptown.” Charles smiled. “I’ll have Kimberly make a stew, that should agree with your carnivore pallet just fine. I am most certain you’ll enjoy it, my wife did use to work in the Keep’s kitchen after all. Now if you excuse me, I need to write back and tell Malisa of our arrangement.”

“Fantastic, I’m starved. I’ll have had to eat are a few turnips and some moldy bread.” Hawl purred.

The training would begin after the meal, and Hawl was already formulating an escape plan. This foolish rat’s generosity left him open to some exploitation. Though the tiger had to admit something this was wearing on his mind, being fed, training? This was unlike any Follower behavior he had ever seen. Hawl was more accustomed to “Don’t like Eli? I’ll beat you with a mace!”, or being called a heathen, heck it was even rumored in some circles in Mugal that he worshipped Lilith! Lilith of all people! Even one as thick as Hawl knew better than that. But, “Let me feed and teach you magic?” unheard of! What game was this Charles Matthias of Glen Avery playing at? It had to be a trick, maybe the soup was poisoned, maybe the training was an elaborate ruse to get him back in his cell without any such tricks. Hawl’s heart was racing, and his body tensing up as he was trying to figure this out.

“Something the matter Hawl?” Garigan asked.

“No, everything’s fine and dandy.” Hawl lied, on his toes and very hungry. The tiger was saying a prayer himself. He prayed that the food wasn’t going to be a poison, he was hungry enough to start chasing rats, man-sized ones.