

“A proper farewell”, the lizard man thought to himself while admiring the two lady elves still laying by the sides of his bed. He had woken up dazed from all the booze he drank the night before, which made it too tiresome for his face to give a smile long enough for the occasion – but there was also a chance he was already feeling the downsides of his decision. Either way, his mind was set, even though his spirit was definitely still a bit shaky.

The lizard man woke up feeling dazed from all the booze he drank the night before – not to mention the two gorgeous lady elves (his favorite type of women) still laying by the sides of his bed. “A proper farewell”, he thought with a subtle, yet lively smile.

He carefully removed the reddish silk blanket in a way to not uncover the others and jumped out of the bed, taking a last glimpse of the beauty of his two long time friends. Although he had trusted Elia and Zaria many times with the keys of his home, he never did it without any sort of previous notice or the date of his return.

The lizard man knew that the letter he left on his room would be sufficient to appease their frustration. The duo would know that he had done that to escape their attempts of convincing him to give up on his journey, which most likely would have been successful, as they were tremendously effective at persuading men; especially their scaled lover, as he knew their charms better than all. The hefty amount of gold and silver coins that accompanied the paper would also help, even if the pair was not in need of them.

“They should be almost here!”, the lizard gasped as he watched the clock prototype gifted by one of his many highborn acquaintances.

The jar of purple-strawberry juice on his bedside was his best friend when it came to hangovers, as not only did it energized the mind due to all the sugar, it replaced the foul breath with a smell akin to the fruit, although much weaker. Two minutes later, his “best friend” was gone and the lizard was already fitting through the clothing that he arranged the day before, stumbling his way out of the room. He had time left to close the door carefully, go down from the second to the first floor of his house and grab his provisions before departing, but not enough to contemplate his dear home.

But that did not stop him from reliving his fond memories through his hands: as he descended the spiral shaped stairs and felt the wooden ornaments of the rails, as he leaned on the walls with his fingers, as he ran through the small hallway and went to the dining room and touched the dining table and as he finally reached the living room, where a large crystal-glass window stood silently and the door to the outside glared, taunting him, his memories became alive.

Veiner felt his knees hurt when he was five and fell of the stairs; he felt his body trembling in front of the hallway, that seemed much longer when he was eight, in fear of the darkness when nature called him to do his business during the night, forcing him to use the bathroom on the first floor; he smelled the royal wine and tasted all the exquisite grains, juicy fruits and hot soups from the feast of his twentieth shedding of scales, seeing the room filled with his friends, some sat and others standing up, but all drunk to the bones, nonetheless.

Veiner walked to the window and focused his view on the golden palace in the distance, shining over its enormous stone walls and reflecting the sun's light to the colossal plantations outside the capital. With its carefully positioned glass panels, what once was an unnamed and shy farming town eventually rose to be one of the most renowned kingdoms in history, not only due to the technology mentioned but also to the coordinated efforts from its community and a leader with a mindset far ahead from his time.

But that wasn't at all what Veiner was thinking while looking to Aurelia's palace; instead, a plentiful mix of familiar faces started showing up in his head.

What would all his friends think of his choice? A fool's errand, to be sure, but it was even that foolish? Despite having so many that loved him dearly, loneliness haunted him for quite a while, as they certainly would not have the same affection for Veiner's "thesis" as the lizard himself had. He wanted to speak about it to everyone, but knew that not a soul would take it seriously, and in turn he preemptively kept it hidden where no one could mock it.

Getting lost in his thoughts, his focus returned when four figures on horseback appeared on the horizon, the figures he desperately yearned to meet. Realizing that they were faster than he pictured them to be and were almost by the road ahead of his doorstep, Veiner quickly snapped out of his useless reflections, got outside, locked the door and slipped the key beneath it, which was standard procedure when he trusted close friends with it.

The lizard man rushed through the plains on large and nervous steps, struggling not to stumble on the edges of the refined tunic he wore. As soon as that only a few meters kept him away from the group, which was already on the road and with their backs turned to Veiner, he coughed timidly in hopes of them noticing his presence. Once he failed, he sharply whistled twice; when failing again, he raised his shoulders, stuffed his chest and exclaimed in a loud and clear tone:

"Excuse me, gentlemen!"

The man that led the others pulled the reins of his black steed and turned him in the direction of the pompous lizard: the red embroideries that decorated his clothing and the material of which was made of (the coveted and gleaming silk of spider-of-the-moon) exhibited his riches – a factor that could be of interest of many, especially the men that he wanted so much to talk with. But as soon as the band finally noticed him, he seemed to forget all of which he had in mind, like his words were escaping his mouth as a rat escapes from a cat.

"Hiss right away, lizard. Or then you will learn what costs to those who waste my time," demanded the leader, an elf of pale hair and rigid, rude countenance.

One of his companions, from the bluish race, had vivid purple eyes (strangely enough, this one had only three instead of four) that stared at the reptilian with extreme

curiosity. Another one, a gnome with grey fur, delighted himself with the knight's threat, revealing amongst his stuffy beard a row of aligned and surprisingly white teeth, considering the habits of his kind. The last member of the band hid his face with a grayish hood (despite the hot weather) and entertained with the map he held in his hands, seemed to judge that encounter a foolish distraction unworthy of his attention, as if he only had followed the others out of pure inertia.

The lizard joined his hand intertwining his fingers and claws, properly cut and polished, and soon answered, "My name is Veiner, and it's my pleasure to meet you." He did a discreet bow, curving slightly his back, in a way that showed respect for them, but also for himself:

"I am right to believe that you are a squadron of mercenaries in service of the Crown, am I not?" Veiner pointed to the elf's chest, where a brooch was stuck next to the button on the front of his cape, the same brooch that his companions possessed:

"The King is a good friend of mine; we exchange letters frequently. I come from a family of distinguished bards that has ties to the Crown ever since they left their homeland, the hills of Old Iron, two generations ago."

"Do you have proof of this... 'friendship'... beyond convenient words?" inquired the elf.

Veiner put his hands between the two layers of his tunic, searching for something, until he found a letter stamped with the royal seal. When he tried to give it to the elf, he protested:

"A man with your possessions would have no trouble to afford the services of a forger capable of making one of those. Even a scaly like you," he affirmed sharply, moving him away with the extended palm of his hand, like he was a noble dismissing one of his subjects.

"I don't want you to believe in me by the appearance of the letter, Lurandir, but by it's content. Otherwise I would say that my friend doesn't know how to choose mercenaries like he used to be, and that subject certainly would be pivotal in my next visit to the palace."

The elf could not avoid his composure being broken by the rather acid, unexpected comment; even though his curiosity was awakened when hearing his first name, the scare made him slow, and for that reason it was the bluish that got off his mount and took the piece of paper from Veiner's hand. He proved to be used to reading, because in less than half a minute he already returned it.

"There are no doubts that this is the writing of the King," the bluish affirmed, brushing through the royal signature made by thick, black ink: "Judging by what is written here (and by the way it is written), it seems that the lizard speaks only truths. The King would never mention your name and our passage through Lusta's Road if they weren't intimate friends; he even mentioned the hour in which we would part and suggested to the lizard that he

looked through his window to 'admire my most fearsome mercenaries', as if we were some sort of attraction" he said to the elf, mumbling the end of his sentence.

"And why does that matter?" asked the gnome while dismounting, knocking his feet to the ground: "All that this twat wants is to keep showing off? Until now he didn't say what he wants, only kept wasting our time, time that was bought for an excellent price, for us to do something much more relevant than to spend our breath with a smug bard – Then, Lurandir, will you keep your word and show him what happens with whoever wastes your time?"

The elf got off his mount: he was much taller than he looked like, almost as tall as two whole gnomes. His white strand of hair danced and gleamed in the sun just as his fancy silver armor did, full of the most majestically complex ornaments, certainly designed by an elite blacksmith; they both highlighted his dark brown skin as much as they were highlighted by it. His green and bright eyes were also beautiful, but had a certain cruelty to them.

Veiner, that for quite some time had no issues with recognizing male beauty when he saw it, could not help but think if the elf had one, two or maybe even three sisters, because if that were the case, he would be interested in meeting up close the loveliness of them all.

It wasn't necessary that Lurandir uttered any noise for the lizard to feel threatened, and with that in mind he soon exclaimed, "Well, my dear gentlemen, it is my conviction that you wouldn't have listened to me if I began this pleasant talk of ours by speaking my end, and now you will know why: I wish to pay a good amount of gold coins for you to let me accompany you in your mission and write during the journey, until our return to the King."

The gnome began laughing hysterically, raising his hands to his forehead and even spitting unwillingly, as if he had just watched a piece of one of Vesuvio's comedy plays, the infamous bard that brought an entire kingdom to madness during one of his performances (at least according to one of the legends of the Old World).

"I only do not say that you are the dumbest spy that ever was because of the admirable efforts you made to sabotage this mission. Becoming the King's friend, since who knows when, until you gained his trust to the point he would give you crumbles of information that only concerns the Crown... very clever on your part," commented the bluish.

"We must take him to the King immediately."

Veiner didn't know in which way, but somehow the hooded one had appeared behind him and poked him with a stone mace: "He can be interrogated in the dungeons and even provide useful information about our enemies, since he clearly works for them."

"I see that you men are truly professionals, considering all the precautions that you took so far." The reptilian turned to the hooded one, swallowing his fear and sinking it down the throat, fear so great that by luck he didn't stumble on his own tail: "It is with a heavy heart that I assure you that the conclusion in which you arrived proves that you let paranoia consume your minds, for I am not anything but a humble writer."

The one that was threatening him issued a simple laughter and joined his colleagues. The bluish took his hand to the chin, scratching it fiercely, the gnome wrinkled his forehead, gaped with a crooked face, and the elf bent down until he had his emerald eyes stuck – like a pair of daggers – on the orangish globes of the lizard:

“And why would a writer pay to follow a band of mercenaries? Can’t you write in other company or are you in a hurry to die?” he questioned humorously. “We aren’t exactly going sightseeing. Your desire makes me think you do not know what mercenaries actually do”.

“That may actually be the case, and it is precisely from where my quest is born”, he answered without a shred of hesitation.

Veiner took the left hand to the chest and began gesturing with the other one while he explained his motive. He knew he was closer to get what he wanted than the four thought, that he only had to choose the right words, and he also knew this would not be a problem, since not only it regarded one of his specialties but also one of his innate passions:

“I’ve been writing for a long time - ever since I was a child, when I noticed that my voice wasn’t suited for a bard’s career. But it is only now, after twenty-three shedding of scales, that I’m aware that I need to see with my own eyes what I write about: how can I tell stories about duels I never witnessed, describe creatures from which I’ve never escaped, to sing the glory of wars that I never survived...” now it was him that stuck his gaze upon Lurandir: “And write mercenaries that I’ve never met?”

The four stood noticeably confused and intrigued. They never met someone so naive, and probably would never meet again. Taking advantage of the fact that they were entertained, he continued:

“Do not get me wrong: the imagination is one of the most essential tools of a writer, as is the feather, the ink and paper, but it needs to be nourished with experience! With life!” Veiner screamed while raising his open hands to the air, as if he tried to catch the sun: “And of that, I still have little....”

Before the silence set in, the gnome intervened:

“Well said, well said... You only forgot one thing—” he contained himself and looked to his companions, outlining a smile that anticipated the joke that was to follow: “How will I write about women, since I never ate a nice pussy?”

The gnome began to laugh thunderously for the whole four, since no one else did (even if the elf grinned), poking them with the elbows for them to join him. “This cretin chat is chat of whoever don’t know stuff, of whoever don’t fuck women. Now excuse us, you are good at making me laugh, but aren’t good in anything that can be of our use now.”

“Of women, for my luck, I know more than many,” said the lizard while counting the fingers of his hands.

As soon as he was over counting them, he looked at his feet and raised his fingers one by one, until there was none left to count, and then repeated the process one or two more times while saying, “I also know plenty of parties, of wines and beers, of politics, geography, history, art and women. Oh! How foolish of me! I had already spoken about the ladies. Anyway, none of that really matters; for I want to write about other things from now on. Things that I believe you lot know really well, better than I and all the writers I’ve met.”

The four stared at him vigorously. Lurandir, particularly, haven’t appreciated not even in the slightest his last line, but Veiner couldn’t care less, because in spite of the discomfort that engulfed them – and that he wasn’t yet capable of understanding –, he knew that he was about to convince them:

“I must also say that I am glad that you, gnome—” he paused, waiting for a name.

“Rodion,” growled the little one.

“That you, Rodion, appreciate my company even before we part together. At the same time, I must keep it clear that it barely matters to me, as well as it barely matters if you people approve or not of my personal search for the refinement of my craft.” Veiner thrown to the mercenaries a generous sack of cloth stuffed with gold coins, that was grabbed by the gnome: “It only interests me if you accept my company and payment. Well, what do you say to that?”

“Even if all that you have said until now is truth, even the minimum details, the King would not allow that we took one of his esteemed friends on this mission – or any other, for that matter. You do not have the necessary experience to even survive, much less to contribute. We don’t need dead weight, even if it amounts to a good sum, because the one that is already being paid to us is far larger,” explained the bluish.

“You understand me poorly, sir—” Veiner made a slight bow to the mercenary, extending his arm and the palm of his right hand. After a few shameful seconds dragged, in which he did not received any names, he rescued his composure, stuffing his chest, coughed up twice, and finally proceeded:

“I am an excellent coward when it comes to fights, duels or any conflicts of corporal nature; when my tongue – as sharp as any blade that you may carry – isn’t enough in order to avoid them, my agility and speed definitely are. Beyond that, I don’t pretend to help you in whatever you are going to do, but only stand as a mere observer. Were that not the case, I would now be going to the King to charge him my share of the pay.”

He said that as if his cowardice were a reason to be proud of, a crown that he had gifted to himself, and one that he boasted with great joy. If he tried to use that argument with different men from those he would be mocked until the day the dragons returned and soared

the sky once again, but Veiner knew whom he was trying to convince; he always knew, no matter the circumstances. He knew that mercenaries valued, beyond it all, three things: honesty, a good pay and the capacity to survive, not mattering if the means employed were brave or not; for survival and courage are not and never will be good friends. And if they were to believe his words, which they had little to no reason to doubt now, he had just presented all of those infamous virtues.