

Quest: A Fair Exchange

Word Count: 1,089

Characters:

- [Desembra Gray](#)
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As Desembra explored Greendoze and its various communities, they had discovered an odd custom. It started when they overheard in the tavern some tabby making an indignant comment about the guild. At first Desembra had thought that perhaps some magic went awry, so they made sure to stay hidden from the conversation's view as they eavesdropped.

But, as it turned out, the tabby was complaining about an empty seat of all things, and pinning the blame on the guild. Who else would do such a thing if not someone who came from outside of Greendoze? It was downright rude. Those in the conversation mumbled their agreement, and Desembra was utterly perplexed at what was wrong.

From then on, Desembra had heard it peppered in conversations that they've passed by: the occasional catfolk remarking on the "exchange" they had come upon that day, the mentioning of what offering that they left behind. The artificer was starting to get a vague idea of what was going on, but one morning they casually asked a barista at the Bluebird Café about it as he was serving them coffee.

As it turned out, Greendoze had a funny little tradition of leaving goods behind at rest stops for others to make use of on their own journeys. The catch was, though, was that the taker would need to leave behind something else in exchange for the next catfolk to find. Come to think of it, they had seen objects littered about and just assumed it was forgetful catfolk accidentally forgetting their things.

Desembra thought it was novel and charming. If someone had tried something like that in New Star City, they'd find that generosity was in extremely short supply. They were sure that if it could have been afforded, many catfolk would enjoy the idea of sharing their things with each other and rely on the honor method. But more often than not, it was those who were greedy that simply took what was free and defenseless without a care for who it affected. And sometimes kind cats were desperate and had to do what they needed to for themselves and their loved ones.

Desembra, somber, nursed their mug of hot coffee as they stared out into the street from the window, watching the locals walk by. No, a city filled with so much strife couldn't be a place for a fair exchange.

Paying it forward without any moderation definitely relied on the idea of hospitality and kindness that was venerated in a cozy place like Greendoze... In such a (comparatively) small village where everyone knew each other, someone would be inclined to give back to the community and to those that wandered through, and be equally as ashamed to "steal" from them.

It made them curious, though. Desembra picked through the logistics rather pragmatically, from the eyes of a shrewd intellect. If they left something behind, how long would it take for them to get their part of the exchange? Would it really be *fair*? What if they left behind something of high value, like a tool, only to find that a single sock was left in its place? How would that be fair for them or whatever other traveler stopped by to rest?

Funnily, it reminded Desembra of tiny libraries. They stared down at their bag beside them. Inside of it were books they had brought along with them to read as they lounged in the café, but they were too lost in their thoughts to pick them up. When they had been a child and followed after their brother into the city, they would often find a small glass case, unlocked and lined with books. Tiny libraries were what the name suggested; a small bastion of literature, one that relied on the public to fill its shelves.

And, in all of their precociousness, Desembra had taken whatever titles that held their interest and never intended to return them. The books were theirs now, as far as they had been concerned. It wasn't only they were older (embarrassingly too old to finally relinquish their claim, in their opinion, at the age of sixteen) that they had returned the books back into circulation and even added some of their own. Even after all the years, of all the times they had taken from the tiny library, of all the other thieves that must have raided it, the shelves had been never empty.

Ultimately, Desembra concluded, the appeal and the real reward of the exchange was for the sake of it.

Just like the tiny libraries, it was a gesture of kindness without the expectation of anything in return. The worth was knowing that a small comfort was put out into the world in hopes

of brightening someone's day. Desembra supposed that, in a way, generosity would always find a way to survive even in the most unsuitable of environments.

With a thoughtful hum, Desembra finished their coffee and ventured from the café towards a particular bench that was close by in Greendoze Central. It was one they enjoyed resting at; the branches it sat under were particularly sparse and it allowed sunlight to dapple through the leaves and warm the pelt.

Sure enough, there was something there already waiting for them, laid out neatly on the grass: a belt, of all things. Desembra blinked as they scooped it up from the ground, inspecting it. Well... It was certainly better than a single sock. They were always in need of carrying space, and while they didn't fancy pants, they could probably tie a couple of pouches onto the belt, or perhaps hang a weapon off of it.

With a little nod, they slung the belt over their shoulder as they set their satchel down on the bench to rifle through it. They procured the bag of trail mix Maisy gifted them (and nibbled one pretzel, just to make sure it wasn't stale) and a book about a valiant, roguish hero. It was worn and obviously well-loved, its leather cover fraying on the corners. While they enjoyed a fictional read, Desembra needed to make more room for academic research that would be relevant for their guild work.

And besides, it would offer a little taste of adventure for someone in this sleepy, peaceful village.

Desembra set down the treats on top of the book where the belt had once been. It was admittedly a little hard to let the book go, but they steeled their resolve and turned around to head back to the tavern.