

PROLOGUE

High in the hills in a lonely wood in the middle of the night, a female fox sits warming herself by a fire in a small one-person camp erected in the center of a clearing.

But this is no ordinary fox. This vixen, anthropomorphic, stands on two legs rather than four. With gentle breasts, flared hips, and paws that rest on the ground distinctly plantigrade, she is most certainly a humanoid. Her furry pelt is mostly a distinct jet black with fox orange patches across her shoulders and thighs and cheeks, but... most of that is obscured up by the dark brown light leather armor covering her lean and athletic body. Going off her light musculature, the beaten state of said leathers, and the large knife that was fixed to her hip, she was quite the scrappy creature. One who wasn't afraid of a good brawl.

For now, though, with her ass upon the ground and her body facing the fire, the vixen was completely silent. Her sharp yellow eyes were fixed on the fire. Her posture was hunched, shoulders forward, legs dragged against her belly, and arms draped over her knees. The end of her handsome muzzle was all wrinkled up and her gaze was a little hazy. It was clear that she was deep in her memories, somewhere far away from the place that she was actually sat in.

A rustling noise comes from the dense overgrowth surrounding the campsite clearing. Dragged from her thoughts, the vixen's triangular ears prick all the way up and her whiskers bounce forward, alert. On instinct, her hand falls to her hip. Her fingers intertwine around the handle of a knife there, preparing to unsheathe it...

... but the fox had no need to draw her weapon, for the presence that stumbled into her campsite was clearly non-hostile. It was a wolf. A wolf that, like the fox, was anthropomorphic. His bright blue eyes were sharp, his long muzzle was handsome and his shaggy fur was a dusty brown. Over his slender body he wore a simple set of dirty traveling clothes, and over his lean shoulders was a backpack - a full and well-stuffed one. He was an adult - though young, in his early twenties, perhaps. Bright-eyed and bushy tailed. "Hello there," he said gently as he raised his hands into the air in an open-palmed gesture of peace. "I mean no trouble. I was just wondering if I could share your fire."

The vixen lowered her hand from her blade and set it into her lap. Her bright yellow eyes lidded as she considered her fellow canine's request... and then, seeing no real problem with it, she nodded her head. "Sure," she said. "I don't see why not."

The wolf nodded his head. He lowered his hands and ambled toward the fire happily, setting his pack down on the ground a couple of feet away from the flames before sitting down beside all of his things. He loosed a sigh of relief as his rear hit the ground, glad to be done with the road for the day. "Very kind of you, stranger," the wolf murmured.

“Not really,” the fox murmured. “Not like you’re going to make it any less warm by being here or anything.”

The wolf chuckled gently. “Suppose not,” he said wryly. He relaxed and made himself comfortable, spreading his legs out across the ground and leaning the side of his hip against his pack. “But thank you all the same.”

The vixen recognized the wolf’s accent. He sounded like he was from one of the small towns not so far from the eastern outskirts of the forest that she’d found herself in. Given his heavy pack she imagined that he was a merchant or perhaps an overprepared traveler or, well, something like that. Regardless of his profession or intention, he was clearly making his way through the vast woods to get to the other towns over on the western side. “You’re from around here, right?” the vixen said, figuring that she could just ask the guy questions rather than puzzling it out in her head. It had a chance of being more interesting than staring at the fire. “What’s your name?”

“I’m from around here, yes ma’am. Little town on the east side of the woods called Lefhem. And the name is Lynal, ma’am,” the wolf replied politely and without hesitation. “Yours?”

“Kyobi,” the vixen replied. “I ain’t from around here. Obviously.”

Lynal nodded his head. “Figured as much. Never heard an accent quite like yours before.”

Kyobi smirked and leaned against the little log behind her back, pushing her leather-booted paws a little closer to the fire. “Oh, my accent is all messed up,” she replied lazily as she tilted her head up toward the canopy above her head. “Been around all over the place at this point. Picked up a little of the dialect from just about everywhere.”

“Well, where are you from originally?” Lynal asked curiously. “That is, as long as you don’t mind giving me an answer. Don’t want to barge into your camp and make you talk about yourself unless you want to.”

Kyobi curled her toes, making brown boot leather flex. She felt the fire’s warmth begin to radiate into her aching feet. “It’s fine, I don’t mind. Not doing anything important, and conversation is a good way to pass the time,” she said. “Though I can’t really answer that question,” she admitted as she scratched at her chin. “Not for the sake of privacy or anything, but because I honestly don’t remember.”

Lynal raised his fluffy white brow in surprise. “You... don’t remember where you come from?” he murmured all confused.

Kyobi smirked. "Do you remember being born, Lynam?"

The wolf bit his lip and lowered his eyebrow. "Ah, well. I suppose not, no. But I remember growing up in Lefham."

"Place I grew up in wasn't the same place I was born in," Kyobi explained. "Wasn't a stable little farming town like Lefham, either. I grew up in a - well, I guess the best way to describe it is a traveling circus. A troupe - or, something like that - sort of. A bunch of entertainers."

Lynam nodded his head in an unsure sort of understanding. "Oh, right. Like one of those, uh... caravans that comes around every once in a while and puts on a show? Music and acting and animals and all of that stuff?"

"Right, yeah," Kyobi said. The wolf's description was far from exact, but she didn't really want to delve too deep into all of that. "Something like that, sure."

"That why you've been around so much? 'Cause of your troupe?" Lynam asked.

Kyobi lowered her yellow eyes from the canopy and looked toward Lynam. The wolf looked attentive. His head was lifted, his ears were tall and pricked, and his bright blue eyes were all keen and focused. "You don't get to talk to travelers much, do you, Lynam?" the vixen asked with a hint of amusement.

Lynam shook his head bashfully. "No, ma'am," he replied, sounding a little embarrassed. "Mostly just talk to the folks back home. Tried sparking a conversation with the traders a couple of times, but... they aren't much for talking."

Kyobi nodded her head gently. "Traders are like that for the most part. Time is money to them. The time they spend talking to you could be spent hawking their wares to someone else."

"True enough, true enough," Lynam said with a nod of his head. "I don't blame 'em, of course. I just think it'd be nice to hear what the world is like outside of Lefham, that's all."

Kyobi lifted a hand and gestured toward the wolf's hefty pack. "That why you traveling, Lynam? You want to see the world?"

Lynam shook his head regrettably. "No, ma'am. Just off to see a girl, that's all."

"Oh, yeah? Romance?"

Lynam looked toward the fire and shrugged his shoulders a little numbly. His posture

noticeably changed - going from a perked excited to a limp... defeated. "I suppose you could call it that, ma'am."

Kyobi squinted. With a grunt, she sat up and pulled her feet away from the fire. "You sound miserable," she asked as she looked down toward her boots and began to unlace them. "Are you on your way to break up with her or something?"

"Hardly, ma'am. I'm on my way to get married to her."

Kyobi tugged her boots off of her feet and set them just behind her. Then, with her black paws bared, she laid down on the ground fully, propping her head up on the log behind her and using it as an uncomfortable wooden pillow. After placing her hands behind her head for a little extra padding, she kicked her feet up and pushed her bare toe beans and pads toward the fire. "You sound miserable," she noted. "Guessing the marriage is arranged?"

Lynal nodded his head. "Mhm. Parents arranged it to improve relations with some of the farms over west. Should give my family access to better livestock."

Kyobi flexed her claws and frowned. Well, now *she* felt miserable. To tell the truth, she didn't much care about Lynal or his fate, but... hearing about someone's family turning them into a pawn for plumper cows was an unpleasant reminder of how cruel your so-called loved ones could be sometimes. "Sorry to hear that," Kyobi said gruffly.

Lynal smiled and did his best to pick himself up a little bit - though whether it was for his own sake or for Kyobi's was unclear. "Don't be, ma'am, it's no big deal. She's a nice enough girl and her family have been very kind to me. Just never figured that I'd spend the rest of my life running a farm is all."

Kyobi nodded her head gently. Then, clearing her throat, she sat back up, planting cheeks on the ground and her lower back against the log behind her. "Well, Lynal," she said as she dragged her legs underneath her and crossed them, "since you seem to have an interest in the world, how about I tell you a story? About me - and about one of my experiences in a land far across the oceans."

Lynal's ears pricked all the way up. His shoulders straightened as his body completely unsagged - and, behind him, his tail began to wag gently in excitement. "A story about you and your troupe, ma'am?"

"Oh, no," Kyobi grunted. That was the *last* thing that she wanted to talk about. "No, this is from a good few years later. When it was just me and my old horse, rest his soul."

Lynal - shivering gently in excitement - sat up properly. He dragged his pack behind him and leaned his back against it properly, turning it into a makeshift seat. Then, with

his hands on his knees, he nodded his head firmly. "I'd love to hear just about anything you want to tell me, ma'am."

Kyobi straightened her shoulders and turned her head toward the fire. "Alright, then. This is one that I like to call... *The Rat King*."

* * *

PART ONE *The Rat King*

I

The Rat King screamed. His loud and shrill vocalization bounced fiercely off the fleshy walls of the tight and hot stomach that he was trapped within... but it still wasn't enough to drown out the horrible gurgling of a gut that was starting to digest.

"Be quiet," murmured a black and orange vixen upon horseback. "I haven't even started melting you yet."

The Rat King released another scream of utter anguish. Despite his captor's command, he could *not* be quiet right now. His environment was too hot. Too claustrophobic. Too *disgusting*. The intolerable heat of fox innards, her stomach walls rumbling ominously all around him, the foul stench of all the pulpy chyme that clung to the inside of her stomach from her last meal... it was all too much for him. For anyone, in fact. The Rat King was far from the most stalwart of creatures, but even the bravest person in the land would have struggled not to be terrified in the caustic swamp that was Kyobi's belly.

Kyobi rolled her eyes and focused on the road that her horse was galloping down. Her hands tightened around her reins. Over yonder - less than a hundred or so yards away - was the town of Littleburg. "Which is a good thing," the vixen murmured down to her leather-covered belly. "Haven't even gotten you back to town yet. Don't worry, though, we ain't that far away now."

In the dark, The Rat King awkwardly scrambled on his palms and his heels inside of the vixen's slimy gut and shoved himself up against her quivering stomach wall. He did his best to clutch onto it in order to keep himself away from the acids and enzymes that were beginning to pool in the center, but... his grip was completely unsure. Why? Because the tips of his fingers - and by extension, his claws - had been sliced from his body before the swallow. Bloody stumps were all he had now, and... they would've been no good at grabbing onto anything *solid*, so they were completely fucked when it came to trying to take a hold of slippery squishy stomach folds. "Then... then you're going to let me out, r-right?!"

The vixen eyed the flagon of water that was tied to the side of her saddle. She considered uncorking it and taking a drink just to throw the rat off even more than he already was, but... there was something pleasant about the vague sensation of his struggling. "I might," she murmured. "Depends on if there's a half-decent bounty on your head."

"There is!" the sweltering Rat King insisted as he did his very best to stop himself from slipping face-down into the hot swamp collecting in the bottom of the gut that he unfortunately inhabited. "There's... there's a bounty on my head, I promise! A h-huge one!"

"Really?" the orange and black vixen replied with a smirk. "Because not so long ago you were saying that there wasn't."

"I... I lied!"

"Well, why would you go and do something like that?"

"You were dangling me over your mouth and threatening to eat me!" the Rat King yelled as he struggled to retain his extremely precarious grip. "I was trying to save my fucking skin!"

"Well," the vixen sighed, "If you wouldn't have lied, then you wouldn't be where you are right now. Having a bounty on your head would've made you *significantly* more valuable than just a snack."

"Then let me out! Please, let me out!" the rodent whined at the top of his tiny lungs. His voice had become good and hoarse over this little period - not just because he was wearing it out with all of his yelling, but because of the intense humidity of his awful environment. Because of the foul vomit stink that was assaulting his overwhelmed sinuses. Because of the bitter acidic fumes that he was perpetually gulping in. Much like the rest of him, his poor vocal chords didn't really have a chance.

The fox didn't care for her prey's worsening state, though - so, in response to his plea, she shook her head firmly. "Nope. Can't hock you up when I'm on horseback. That would be awful undignified. Best we wait until I get back to the tavern."

"No! No, you can't leave me in here for another minute," the rat sobbed. "Please, it's so hot and it smells and..."

Littleburg's front gates were only a stone's throw away now - gates that were closed rather than open, despite it being the middle of the day. Odd. The vixen *yanked* on her horse's reins, slowing its gallop down to a trot. In the process, her ass *bounced* in the

saddle, and...

... vixen insides shuddered like disturbed jelly. A gentle quiver, but more than enough to make the Rat King's bloodied fingers lose their grip on the slimy stomach wall. "No!" he wailed as he fell backward. Screaming and howling in disgust and anguish, he landed belly up in the deep puddle of foul gastric juice that had pooled up in the center of the vixen's intolerably hot stomach. Disgusting yogurt-like slime splashed up around him as he made his awkward landing. Concentrated gut sludge saturating into his pelt felt foul, but having it in his eyes and nostrils felt far, far worse, given the intense and all-consuming burn that it provided to both.

Meanwhile, the vixen settled back into her saddle. Outside of the digestive hell - though very much responsible for it - her only complaint was that her ass was starting to chafe from being in the saddle for so damn long. Hopefully she'd be out of it soon, though, because... here she was in front of the gates. Two guards in light armor and bright blue tabards flanked closed wooden doors that were about twelve feet high and eight feet in width - or, just about big enough for a large cart to roll through.

Steel plates clinked as one of the guards raised a gauntlet-covered hand toward the vixen and her horse in what was a very lazy greeting. "Afternoon," the man grunted. He was some kind of dog - old and weathered but still brawny. His pelt was a vague faded light brown sort of color, making it look like he'd been standing in the sun outside the gates of Littleburg for... well, years. Which he probably had. "Got any identification?"

The vixen pursed her lips and patted at the pockets of her black linen pants. They were completely empty - and she knew that - but she hoped that fumbling at them might make something materialize in one of them. Unfortunately, that was not the case. "Must have left my papers in my other jacket," she mumbled. "Is that going to be a problem?"

The weathered guard eyed his comrade - a fresh-faced otter who was significantly younger than him while somehow managing to look just as exhausted. The young anthro's fur was as white as fallen snow - which made sense of why he looked so tired. Even though he was standing in the shade, the heat would've definitely been getting to him. "Might be," the brownish dog murmured. "Aldbert, you got the list?"

The pale otter blinked, yawned, and looked over toward his companion and the vixen that he was addressing with bright blue eyes that were watery and hazy. "Sorry, Will, what did you say?" he asked in a weak voice as he tugged at the sweaty collar of his tabard.

"The list, Ardbert," Will huffed impatiently. "The one with the names on it."

"Names?" the vixen asked curiously as Ardbert fumbled around in a leather bag attached to his hips. "What names? Any cool ones? Like... *Xavier*? Or *Jett*?"

Ardbert pulled a piece of parchment out of his bag and handed it over to Will. "Never you mind," the old canine snorted as the white otter leaned against the wall with a theatrical groan behind him. "You let me worry about that. What's your name?"

"Kyobi," the vixen replied.

"No second name? No affiliation with any houses or other such entities?"

"Not that I know of."

"Occupation?"

Kyobi shrugged. "Don't really have one," she said. "I just kinda do stuff."

"What sorta stuff?"

"Whatever's paying the most at the time. Doesn't matter if it's shoveling shit or killing."

Bill sighed. "So," he grunted coarsely, "mercenary, then?"

"Sure," Kyobi said, noting the sudden change in attitude. A lack of conviction for anything but money tended to make people dislike mercenaries, and the old dog was seemingly no different. Or maybe he was just annoyed at how evasive she was being - or maybe it was a little of both. Either way, Kyobi had no intention of fixing her attitude or her claim to an abrasive occupation. "Let's go with that."

Bill furrowed his brow in clear irritation. "Alright. And what's your business here?" he asked.

Kyobi glanced down at the leather plate that covered her stomach and thought of the rodent that was curled up inside of it. Ears bounced as she attempted to make noise of the din coming from inside, but... the rat's screams were *mostly* incomprehensible. Not because he was melting into calories or anything. Her stomach was taking its sweet time in gathering all the juices that it'd need to break down a rat. The heat and the stink and the general state of his disgusting environment had turned him into a miserable and overwhelmed little thing that could only sob in a way that sounded utterly broken.

The vixen was confident that he'd start making sense again before too long, though. Acids biting into flesh tended to make one desperate enough to form complete sentences - if only so that they could properly beg for release from the hell that she'd gulped them into. "Prisoner," Kyobi said as she lifted her eyes and ceased gazing at her occupied belly. "One who has a bounty on his head here, apparently."

“Apparently?” asked Bill suspiciously.

Kyobi shrugged. “So he tells me. Personally, I’m not so sure. He kept calling himself the Rat King, though... and that’s a pretty prestigious title, isn’t it? Especially for someone who was trying to rob me.”

“Familiar name,” Bill murmured gruffly. “Get a lot of complaints about the so-called Rat King, but unless he’s done anything more than pester people at the crossroads as of late, it’s doubtful that anyone stuck a bounty on his head.”

Kyobi smiled as she felt the rat’s position shift in her stomach. He yelled something about how he definitely *did* have a bounty on his head, but... the vixen had trouble making out his exact words. They were muffled by her guts and she was having a conversation with someone larger and more significant. “Doubtful,” she murmured agreeably, “but, not impossible, right?”

“I suppose not. Where are you keeping him?”

Kyobi extended an index finger and delicately tapped the leather plate over her abdomen.

Bill raised his eyebrows. “Underneath your armor?” he asked.

“Sort of, but also, no,” Kyobi said with a smirk. “He’s in my stomach.”

“Like... you swallowed him?”

“I don’t think there’s really any other way of putting someone into your stomach,” Kyobi murmured flatly. “So, yes. I swallowed him.”

Bill gave a worried glance toward the vixen’s middle. “But doesn’t that mean that he’s...”

“Digesting?” Kyobi said, finishing off Bill’s sentence lightning fast. “Nah. I have a pretty slow stomach. He’s got a good half an hour or so before his skin starts melting off the bone.”

Bill blinked and looked down at the sheet of parchment in his hands. His lips moved as if he wanted to form a sentence, but... he had been shocked into silence. Not even in all of his years had he heard of a mercenary bringing a prisoner into town in her guts.

“I was planning on, uh, puking him up before things go to that point,” Kyobi went on, “but given how long the proceedings seem to be dragging on here, it’s probably not going to be worth it. Well, unless your bounty office accepts *bones*, anyway. So maybe

we ought to get on with this and you can, I dunno, tell me what this is all about instead of asking me a ton of questions?"

Bill cleared his throat and lifted his eyes from the parchment sheepishly, still a touch disturbed by all the vixen had told him. "Right," he said. "Gates are closed right now. We're letting people in - or at least, some people - but we aren't letting anyone out. There's a wanted criminal in the city right now."

Kyobi's eyebrows perked up. "Oh yeah?" she asked curiously. "What are the charges?"

"Grand larceny," Bill explained, still sounding a little off. "Multiple thousands - if not tens of thousands. The exact scale of the theft is difficult to determine at this point - especially because they've been thieving even while the city's closed. That's how we know we have them trapped."

"Well, shit," Kyobi replied. "Guess you let the wrong person into town then, huh?"

Bill grunted. "We didn't let 'em in," he explained, "see, the thing about this guy... or... or girl, we don't really know - well, we reckon that they're a resident. Someone who's lived in Littleburg for most or all of their life."

"And what makes you think that?" Kyobi asked.

"I can't really go into the details of an ongoing investigation, but... let's just say that they're too familiar with the town to be an outsider," Bill explained.

"Well, if you don't know who they are, then it's pretty obvious that they're some kinda sneak thief," Kyobi murmured as she twirled her horse's reins around her fingers, thinking. "Not a bandit or an outlaw or a mugger or anyone who's willing to show their face off."

Bill nodded his tired old head. "Yeah. Silent, doesn't leave a trace behind. Even after we closed the city and bumped up the night guard, we haven't seen a trace of him. Definitely a professional." The dog snorted. "Or a fucking cheater."

Kyobi grunted, rubbed her lower back, and then, sighing, she slipped out of her saddle and put her paws down on the ground with great relief. As she made impact with the cobblestone path that led toward the gate, she felt the rat jostle and splash around inside of the thickening gastric goop that was beginning to swirl around the bottom of her gut. He yelled something - something comprehensible this time - but Kyobi didn't pay it much mind. Her ass *really* hurt. "What kinda cheater?" she asked lazily as she rubbed at her sore butt and paid no intention to the rat's internal plea. "Wizard or something?"

"Yeah, wizard or some other kind of mage," Bill replied with an angry and dismissive wave of his hand. "Probably teleports into places and then teleports out with a bunch of loot. Or something like that."

Kyobi reached into her saddlebag and withdrew a flagon of water, uncorking it and lifting it to her muzzle to take a long drink. She didn't think of the rat inside of her until she heard his screams get drowned out by the water she was gulping down - but by that point, she'd already swallowed half a guts worth. On top of that, she didn't give a single shit. If anything, providing he survived the flood at least, she figured she was doing him a favor. Fresh water would calm the heat and water down the stench. Not by much - or for long - but it was *something*, right?

Bill nervously lifted a finger toward Kyobi's middle as she lowered her flagon from her lips and sighed. "Er, isn't that going to..."

"Don't worry about him, he'll be fine," Kyobi murmured nonchalantly. "Answer a more pressing question for me. Supposing the guy can teleport, then... what's stopping him from just teleporting out of the city?"

Bill cleared his throat and cocked his thumb behind his shoulder toward the city's walls. "Anti-magic barrier in the walls. Fries anything that tries to get in or out."

"I see, I see," Kyobi said with a nod toward the gates. "Well, I think I've asked enough questions for now. So, are you going to open those up for me or what?" Her fingers trailed over her stomach and gave it a gentle pat. "Kinda got pressing business to be on with, as you know."

Bill reluctantly glanced toward the stomach that the vixen was gesturing at before snapping his eyes back up toward her face. "I do know that. It's just... I'm not supposed to let you in without identification."

"Look," Kyobi sighed. With her horse's reins wrapped around her wrist, she took a couple of steps toward the guard, getting close, but not close enough that it was uncomfortable. A friendly distance - or a sort of friendly distance, anyway. "Bill, right? Or William. Yeah, let's go with William. You don't have a problem with being called William, right?"

Bill blinked, more than just a little baffled. Indeed, he eyed the few inches of friendly distance between them warily, as if he was tempted to take a step back into the more comfortable *colleague* territory. Then, deciding against it, he looked back up toward the vixen in front of him. "No?" he replied with a complete lack of confidence. "At least I... I don't think so? Most people just call me Bill because it's easier to say, I think."

"Okay, William, that's great," Kyobi blathered. "If identification were *really* a

requirement, then you wouldn't have bothered playing twenty questions with me, right? Clearly there was some other kind of process for letting people in who *don't* have the luxury of owning an expensive piece of paper with their name on it."

Bill's leathery old pad of a nose wrinkled up. "Well, yes. We could make an exception," he admitted reluctantly. "Given the thief, though, that's mostly for urgent business... which I suppose you do have, in a way, but... well, I'm sure you'll agree when I call it... *highly unconventional*." The dog cringed in a state of disgust as the words awkwardly came out of his mouth.

Kyobi, on the other hand, smiled. She enjoyed having this effect on the man. Over his many years as a guardsman he had probably seen some shit, but - he had clearly never dealt with anything like her, and the vixen couldn't help but take pride in that. "Unconventional, but not illegal. It's not like I did it anywhere near your jurisdiction, William."

"True enough," Bill murmured reluctantly as he lifted his shoulders. Finding it difficult to look at the vixen, he turned his head away from her and looked toward the distant green plains over her shoulder. "The wildlands are the land of no man."

"Exactly. So are you going to let me in or what?" the vixen sighed. "If you're that perturbed about it William then just think of it this way. If you don't open the gates, then there's no way that I'm letting this rat out of my guts. And you don't want to spend the rest of the night thinking about him melting, do you?"

"Enough, enough," Bill spat as he turned on his heel and looked toward his fellow guardsman. "Ardbert!"

The white otter jolted. Throughout the entire conversation he'd been slouched against the wall, uncaring and unhearing. "Yeah?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"Open the damn gate," Bill growled. "This vixen has urgent business."

II

Despite its name, Littleburg was not all that little. When the town had first been founded several years ago it was quite small - nothing more than a handful of houses, a local farm and a tavern, basically - but as the centuries had gone on it had developed itself into a sprawl of narrow streets and narrower alleyways that criss-crossed and connected and occasionally looped back around on each other. In other words, it was an absolute maze, and Kyobi quickly became very lost within it.

Asking a local might have helped - after all, the town would have made complete sense to anyone who had been living in it for a decent amount of time - but,

unfortunately, there were barely any locals around. Certainly not any friendly ones who were willing to give proper directions. Despite it being a lovely late afternoon, the streets were almost completely devoid of life. There were a few stragglers here and there, but it was evident that the thief was so at large that they had forced most people into their homes and businesses so that they could guard their precious belongings.

So, more than a little annoyed, Kyobi led her horse through the streets in search of a stable. Along the way, she attempted to make a note of any landmarks that she could see and build a mental map of the town in her mind. This was a task that required all of her attention, and, as a result, The Rat King and his struggles were far, far from her mind.

Of course, that didn't mean that the vixen's stomach forgot about its prey. Around The Rat King her foul insides squirmed, gurgled, and clenched, stirring both him and the disgusting contents of her belly around like a cement mixer filled with hot rotting yogurt.

The water that Kyobi had drunk by the gate hadn't helped at all. True to her thoughts it had reduced the caustic heat and the fox vomit stench some - at least, for a brief moment - but it had also introduced an entirely new element to the rat's plight. Which was struggling not to drown in a neck-high mixture of water and stomach slop. If the disgusting and swampish mixture were still it would be one thing, but given that it was being swilled and churned around by the process of digestion it was very, very hard for him to keep his little head above the swirling tide. For now, his legs were managing to pedal just enough to keep him afloat, but... he was getting tired very quickly.

On top of that, the vile pukeish gut concentrate that he was trying to keep his head above was, of course, constantly eating away at his body. By now his once-full coat of brown fur had entirely stripped from his body, leaving him an utterly naked mess of rubbery pale flesh. His claws had been pulled from his hands and feet, leaving little more than stubby digits behind that were wearing away more and more by the second. On top of that, gaping and very painful sores had opened up around his armpits and between his thighs thanks to his limbs constantly thrashing and rubbing up against his body.

The Rat King knew that he was done for. That thirty minutes or so in the vixen's stomach had reduced him to a pale and disgusting shell of what he once was. He knew, deep down, that there was no point fighting any more because what was left of him wasn't *worth* fighting for, but... at the same time, his survival instincts were firing on all cylinders. He thrashed in the slop and kept his head above it all as best he could because his body wasn't ready to lay down and digest even if his mind was.

Proving that he was, at least, as stubborn as a monarch, The Rat King managed to stay alive in the twenty minutes or so that it took for the vixen's belly to drain itself of the water that she'd drunk. At that point, he was a quivering mess and gasping mess

sprawled out across the bottom of her still-gurgling stomach. His limbs and body burned with horrible indescribable agony, and not just because of the bout of stressful exercise that had been forced upon him... but because even more of him had been eaten away. His little body was more exposed meat than flesh. Great sores across his ribs that were peeling open to reveal steadily softening bones and slowly disintegrating organs. Patches of untangling bright red muscle across his arms and legs and back. Eye sockets hollow and a flapping tongue in a mouth devoid of teeth.

Coincidentally, right around the moment that The Rat King's royal prison was void of water, Kyobi *finally* managed to find a stable. The owner was rude and standoffish and she was *pretty* confident that he charged her more than his regular rate, but the vixen was so done with the whole ordeal that she didn't care one single bit. She paid up for a month - hoping that she wouldn't be trapped in this maze of a town for as long as that - and trotted out of the stable to try and find a tavern *somewhere* in this mess of a town.

Inside of the vixen's belly, the broken down Rat King raised his crownless and hairless little head. Laid in a pile of his own disintegrating viscera, "Please," he croaked with the last of his vocal chords, "let me out."

But The Rat King's plea was too hoarse and worn for the vixen to hear... and even if it wasn't, her mind was currently devoted to something far, far more important. Specifically, a question - which was *why the hell had she come to Littleburg anyway?* She had no objective at all here. She'd just been on the road looking for a place to get a warm meal, lay her head, and maybe find a little work to top up her coin purse. And while she could find all three of those things here...

... she'd gone ahead and trapped herself in a locked-down Littleburg in the process. Why had she done that? Why had she felt the need to challenge the guard and prise her way into a closed-off town? Why hadn't she just walked away and rode to the next town over? These were all questions that the vixen was thinking about, and she didn't really have any answers for them.

The Rat King had questions spinning around his own dimming mind too.... like why have you done this to me? Or why would you do this to anyone? Or even why didn't you just break my neck and make this painless? If he had the energy to vocalize them loud enough for the vixen to hear, then he would have received the same answer for every single one... which was, roughly, *because I wanted to and I could so why not?*

The vixen eventually decided that the answers to *her* questions didn't really matter, though. At the end of the day, after all, she considered herself a free-spirited creature. She went wherever the wind took her, and, well... the wind had happened to guide her into a town on lockdown. A town where a wanted criminal was on a wild and seemingly unstoppable thieving spree. That was kind of interesting, she supposed.

Maybe even very interesting. It was, after all, a puzzle, and the vixen mercenary quite enjoyed a puzzle every once in a while. Perhaps fate had called her here for exactly that. To solve the crime, put the villain in his place, and score a huge bounty in the process? Well, whatever the reason, it sounded far, far more interesting than just laying around in town and waiting for the whole mess to blow over. She was here now... so, might as well do something productive, right?

A solid thirty minutes later - for the distracted vixen had mostly been walking around in a circle in the maze that was Littleburg - the vixen *finally* found herself in front of a tavern that was uncomfortably wedged between two residential buildings. It was a dirty-looking place with an even dirtier-sounding name. *The Rusty Nail*. Exactly the kind of drinking hole that Kyobi was looking for. Suddenly feeling *highly* motivated about everything that Littleburg held for her, the black and orange vixen sauntered inside with a smile on her face.

Inside of her stomach, the Rat King wore no expression at all... for he was nothing more than a pile of mulched up bone and gooey bright red viscera that was soon to be deposited into the vixen's tract.

III

Ah, to arrive at a tavern after several days on the road. For Kyobi, it was one of the best feelings in the world. The vixen thrust herself into The Rusty Nail with so much eagerness for a drink that she had completely forgotten about the rat that she'd digested on the way over here.

Befitting of its name, The Rusty Nail was hardly a fine and fancy establishment. The pokey and enclosed bar area of the two-story building was poorly lit and had a pervading odor of what could only be described as *sweaty bloody piss*... which made sense after you had taken a glance around the place. The stone walls, wooden floor, and even the ceiling overhead were marked with an uncountable amount of dirty brownish stains. Most were from drinks that had either been spilled or thrown around, but some were evidently the result of spilled blood from drunken brawls that had gotten out of hand.

Kyobi wasn't put off by the grunge, though. If anything, she was in her element right now. If it were clean then she would've turned around and walked out of the door and looked for another place. Dirty taverns like this were the best places in the world as far as she was concerned. The only thing that could have made it better was a little more activity... despite the scent and the stains and all of the rest of it, the bar was, to put it lightly, kind of *dead* tonight in terms of customers. The vixen couldn't complain about that too much, though, really. At the end of the day it just meant that she'd get served quicker.

Grinning to herself, Kyobi pulled out a stool and raised her hand in a lazy greeting toward a pudgy badger that was standing behind the bar. He looked... grumpy. Pissed, even. His brow furrowed and his muscular arms folded over his round belly. Once again, though, this didn't put Kyobi off. What was a shitty tavern without a grumpy ass owner, after all? "Hey, barkeep," the vixen said to him as she sat down, "Gimme your crappiest whiskey."

The barkeep sighed, rolled his burly shoulders, and lumbered over toward Kyobi. He extended a broad hand in her direction, silently but clearly expecting payment from the vixen.

Kyobi pulled a few coins out of a small leather purse and placed them in the badger's hand. "Not very talkative, huh?"

The badger's nose twitched irritably as he pulled a bottle full of dark brown liquid from beneath the bar. "What is there to talk about?" he asked as he poured a couple of fingers of whiskey into a mostly clean glass. "Town's on lockdown. People are afraid and no new people are coming in. Business is shit."

"Mmm," Kyobi said as she glanced around the mostly empty tavern. There were a few drunks scattered around - every bar needed its regulars, after all - but the place was hardly bustling with activity. "Yeah, I can see that."

"Right. And if I'm being honest with you, it wasn't all that great before the lockdown either," the badger grumped as he slid the glass of whiskey in Kyobi's general direction. "So, no. Not particularly talkative."

Kyobi picked up the glass and hovered its mouth in front of her nose, sniffing the whiskey within. It smelled bitter and nasty and cheap - which was excellent. The last thing that she wanted to do was drink something fancy. She drained the glass in a couple of seconds, sending an acrid taste down her throat that lit a blazing fire in her belly. "Well," the vixen sighed as she set the empty glass down. "I have a fair bit of money. If you're nice to me and scintillate me with a little conversation, then... I might just spend it here tonight."

"Oh, please," the badger snorted. "You're not much thicker than a rake and you're drinking whiskey. You'll be on the fucking floor after another glass or two."

"Quite the contrary," Kyobi replied as she pushed her glass toward the badger. "I have a cast-iron liver. And even if I don't, then I'm pretty likely to spend a decent chunk on snacks. Speaking of, what you got?"

The barkeep rolled his beady eyes and sighed through his snout. "Peanuts," he murmured. "Or pork rinds."

“Fuck yeah, I love pork rinds,” Kyobi said as she yanked her coin purse from her hip and threw it on the bar. It produced a decently weighty jingly noise. “Here. Give me like three bags of those. And a bottle of whiskey. Not the one you just poured out of - I want a full one.”

The badger lazily plucked the coin purse from the bar and opened it. His eyebrows raised ever so slightly. There certainly wasn’t enough money in there to fix his problems, but there was enough to make him at least consider his customers’ proposal. “How much conversation are we talking about?” he asked with a sigh.

“I dunno, enough for a bit of back and forth, I guess. I don’t want your life story or anything, you know?” Kyobi said with a shrug. “In fact, I’d prefer we kept personal details to a minimum. I have other things that I’d rather talk to you about.”

The badger raised his white brows. “Oh yeah?” he murmured as he emptied the coins into the palm of his hand and threw the empty purse on the bar. “Like what?”

Kyobi scooped the empty bag up. “Like how I *really* want those pork rinds and that whiskey.”

With a sigh, the barkeep set to work. He dumped his pay into a pouch on the front of his apron. Then, as one hand reached beneath the bar to take a hold of three brown paper bags, he reached behind him with his other, taking a bottle of whiskey from the shelf behind him. Both were placed upon the bar in short order. “There,” he said as he folded his muscular arms across his portly belly. “Now what?”

The vixen took the bottle and poured herself another glass of her favorite beverage. “Well, what I’m most interested in is the wanted criminal that’s causing Littleburg so much trouble.”

“The sneak thief?”

“The very same.”

The badger raised a hand toward his muzzle and rubbed at his chin a little uncomfortably. “I assume the guards at the gate gave you a brief overview, yeah?”

Kyobi snorted and tore open one of the brown paper bags. “How do you know I don’t live here?” she asked as she plucked a crispy pork rind from the bag and slid it into her mouth. It was salty - deliciously salty - and she bit down into it with such a starved eagerness that one wouldn’t think that she wasn’t in the process of digesting a whole rat.

"Because if you lived here then you'd know everything about the thief already," the barkeep grunted back. "It's not like they haven't been prolific. Stolen something from just about every Tom, Dick, and Harry in town at this point."

"Really?" Kyobi asked as she hungrily reached into the bag for another savory treat. "Doesn't have a particular pattern, then?"

"Nope. That's one of the reasons why the guards have had so much trouble pinning them down. They're as likely to steal from a bank as they are to rob an armory as they are to burgle a house. On top of that, they'll do it at any time. Could be the middle of the day, could be the middle of the night."

Kyobi slid a couple of pork rinds into her mouth. She chewed, crunched, swallowed, and then chased it down with a mouthful of whiskey. "Hmm," she murmured thoughtfully as she lapped some salt from the tips of her fingers. "You ever thought that it might be a group of people doing it?"

"Some people think that, but it wouldn't make much sense to me."

"Why?"

The barkeep made a low-effort shrug of his shoulders. "You know how many places this guy has robbed, right?"

"The guards told me they'd lost count," Kyobi murmured wryly as she raised her glass to her lips. "Or something along those lines. But most town guards can't count above five, you know?"

The badger's nose wrinkled as he let out a little huff of amusement. "True enough. But they're not wrong. We're talking about hundreds of cases - and, sometimes, the robberies don't even get reported for a few days because people don't even know the thief has *stolen* something - so the guards reckon that there's a whole bunch of unreported thefts. That's how fucking sneaky they are."

Kyobi took a long drink from her glass. As fire roiled down her throat and fell into her belly, she ran her finger around the rim of her now-empty glass in thought. "So you think a group would make more noise, then?"

"That, and they'd be taking more loot," the badger said with a nod of his head. "Another reason these robberies go unnoticed is because the thief doesn't take a lot of loot. They'll go into a jeweler and take a single diamond necklace, for example - or they'll burgle someone's house for the sake of a wedding ring."

"So they're taking peanuts, then," Kyobi murmured as she picked up the whiskey.

She tilted the neck toward the glass as if she were going to fill it again, but... instead, she diverted it up to her muzzle, taking a sip from the bottle. "Just repeatedly."

"Aye. If it were just one or two cases, then it'd wouldn't be a problem - small fry shit - but the fact that there's hundreds of them... well, yeah."

Kyobi set down the bottle and grabbed the brown paper bag. Clearly mulling everything over, she reached into the bag and began to pull pork rinds from it, stuffing them into her maw efficiently but thoughtfully.

"Sometimes they'll even go back to the same place," the badger went on as Kyobi crunched away loudly. "Someone on the other end of town claims they've been robbed eight times by them, but... people reckon that she's just neurotic. Or that she's constantly losing shit. Or something like that."

"Guess that's another reason why a lot of these cases have gone unconfirmed," Kyobi murmured as she lifted a paw and wiped her greasy fingers off on the side of her leather boot. "Guards are probably struggling to keep track of which cases are real and which cases are bullshit."

"Mhm. It's why they're trying to get the thief caught as quickly as possible. That way they can recover the loot and figure out what he's stolen."

Kyobi reached toward another one of the brown paper bags - but then, fingers inches away, she hesitated and turned her head toward the barkeep. "The woman who's been robbed eight times," she murmured, "you know her address?"

"Of course," the barkeep said with a nod of his head. "Why?"

"Thinking I might pay her a visit."

The barkeep produced a genuine but brief bark of a belly laugh at the thought of that. "Trust me, you don't want to do that," he chuckled as he leaned into the bar and shook his head. "That old crone is insane. All she'll do is fill your head up with a bunch of nonsense."

"Personally, I'm a big fan of nonsense," Kyobi said as she grabbed the bags of pork rinds and shoved them into her satchel. The whiskey was plucked up too, but, rather than stow it in her bag, she pulled the flagon from her hip and began to fill that with the liquor instead. Glass bottles were very breakable, after all. Didn't want to lose the whiskey. "So I'm sure we'll get along just fine."

IV

The barkeep had been more than happy to dispense the address. Hell, he had even given out full and complete directions. For one, it got Kyobi off his back - and, for another, he wasn't a particularly huge fan of the woman that he was sending the vixen to, so he didn't much mind throwing solicitation in her direction.

The journey was about a half an hour long if you went quickly. Kyobi didn't, though - she was a little drunk, a lot lazy, and Littleburg was as much of a goddamn maze as ever - so, all in all, it took her a little over an hour to reach her destination. By the time she was done walking through winding streets and crossing alleyways, the sun had begun to set upon Littleburg, filling its narrow and abandoned streets with a cool orange glow.

Soon, she arrived at Sylvia's home... which was a small but cozy bungalow on a street of cozy little bungalows. It was far from the fanciest place in the world but in comparison to the dirty tavern that she'd been in a couple of hours ago it was utterly opulent. A well-kept little building made of wood and stone with a tiny but pleasant-looking front yard that was bordered with a variety of brightly-colored flowers. Some of them were a little wilted and looked as if they were in need of a good watering but... well, that made sense. Going off the barkeep's word the owner was quite old and likely didn't get outside very much at all.

After ambling through the yard and making her way to the front door, Kyobi raised her fist and knocked hard, making sure that whoever was within was well aware of the presence. After her knock, she soon heard a dull banging coming from within the house. The sound of someone slowly dragging themselves out of their comfortable seat and then clearly slapping a cane around as they trudged toward the front door. That roughly matched the image that Kyobi had in her head of this woman from the limited information that the barkeep had given her - which was that he'd described her as an *old crone*.

As the front door was thrown open, said image was completely confirmed. What Kyobi saw was a withered little white bunny with a walking stick who was about four feet tall and as thin as a twig. Her faded blue eyes were wide and her weathered hands were trembling around a wooden cane that she clutched onto for dear life. "What?!" the tiny old bunny yelled hoarsely at Kyobi as she *smacked* her cane on the ground in a poor attempt at intimidating the vixen. "Who the hell are you?! What do you want?!"

Kyobi briefly considered her options. On one hand, she could be sarcastic and give the crone a nonsense reply - and, on the other, she could be polite and attempt to appeal to this old bat's judgmental glare. While the first option *was* incredibly tempting, it'd likely lead to getting the door slammed in her face, so... she supposed that it was time to play a part. "Hello there," she said, keeping her voice light and kind and low in volume. "My name is Kyobi. I'm sorry to be disturbing you this late in the afternoon, but I understand that your house has been, uh, burgled several times recently?"

The old woman *banged* her cane against the side of her door. "Shut up!" she yelled up at Kyobi as she tapped the side of her nose. At one point the pad had probably been a bright pink, but... the years had faded it into a spotty sort of flesh color. "I might be old, but my senses are still sharp - and I can smell booze on you! You're drunk!"

Kyobi cringed ever so slightly and glanced down to the flagon on her hip. Probably *shouldn't* have been drinking that so much on the way down here. Sighing, she pulled the flagon free and held it out, wagging it in the old bunny's general direction. A sloshing noise from within made it sound half full. "Sure am," she said without shame. "You want some?"

The wizened bunny grunted and *thwapped* the flagon out of Kyobi's hand with the tip of her cane, sending it crashing down to the floor. "No! I don't drink!" the woman yelled.

With her flagon now on the ground, Kyobi considered her options again. They were the same as before. Sarcasm, or, polite? She knew that she should have gone for the second one again, but... this time, the temptation to be a jerk was just too damn strong. It wasn't because she'd just gotten whacked in the hand, it was just in her nature to be an ass. "You don't drink at all? Not even water?" she murmured wryly. "That must be rough."

"Of course I drink *water*," the old crone belted out. "But I drink *just* water! Nothing else!"

Kyobi scratched a couple of fingers behind her ringing ears and smirked. "What about soup? You don't like soup?" she suggested. "Or... gravy?"

The old woman rolled her glassy and barely blue eyes. "You don't drink soup or gravy, you idiot," she only *half* yelled, bringing her voice down just a couple of decibels. "They're food. You eat them!"

Kyobi nodded her head in firm agreement. "I've been saying that for years too," the vixen said. "Soup? Gravy? Both foods. But you ask the average person at the tavern and they'll tell you that they're a drink."

"That's why I don't drink booze, stupid," the old woman grunted as she tapped her cane against the ground a couple of times. "Places like that are full of idiots. And I'd know. My husband was the biggest tavern-goer in town - *and* the biggest idiot! And going off this conversation, you're not much different."

"Hey now, I'm smarter than the average tavern-goer," Kyobi insisted. "I already told you, I don't think soup is a drink. That has to count for something."

"Whatever," the withered woman sighed. It was unclear whether Kyobi had worn her down or if her old lungs had just run out of wind, but her voice had eked out into a hoarse and high-pitched croak - one that was still abrasive, but much quieter than all of her previous tones. "What do you want?"

"I already told you," Kyobi sighed. "I want to talk to you about the burglaries."

The old bunny shook her head firmly. "No, what do you *really* want?" she asked.

"Was going to see if I could poke around," Kyobi admitted. "See if I could find any clues. Something that'd help me track down the burglar, maybe."

"And why would you want to do such a thing?"

Kyobi blinked. Why was she doing this? That was something that she hadn't really thought about much herself. "If I told you that I was doing it for the bounty on the guy's head, then would that convince you?" she asked with a half-hearted shrug.

The bunny shrugged back, though hers came with a visible wince due to her stiff back. "Would it be the truth? Do you want the money?"

"No, not really."

The old woman frowned and wrapped both of her hands around the top of her cane. "Why, then? Some sense of justice? You one of those do-gooders? Do you feel bad for an old lady or something like that?"

Kyobi snorted. "No, not that either. I never do anything for a good reason," she admitted very honestly. "To tell you the truth, I don't know why I'm doing this. I think it's because I'd be bored otherwise. That's why I do most things, really."

With a little grunt, the old woman nodded her head, seemingly satisfied that the strange vixen was telling the truth. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm not ridiculous, I just don't think about stuff all that much," Kyobi sighed with an annoyed flick of her tail. "Don't really wanna waste my time thinking about the reason *why* I'm doing this. Sort of takes the fun out of it, you know?"

The old bunny rolled her milky eyes and awkwardly turned on her heel with her cane, walking back into her home while beckoning for the vixen to follow. "Why not just punch me out?" she grunted as she hobbled. "Can do whatever you want then without having to think about anything at all."

Kyobi followed the bunny into her home and gently closed the door behind her. Her

nostrils wrinkled as she caught the smell of dust. "Punch an old lady? Please, I have some rules," she murmured wryly as she wiped her boots on the doormat to avoid a lecture. "I mean, if you were coming at me with a sword or something then I wouldn't hesitate, but - well, you get my point."

"Yeah, whatever," the woman sighed as she gently lowered herself down into what was clearly her favorite armchair - a plush deep pink thing that had clearly seen some use or the last decade or two. "Go wherever you want. That bastard took everything worth thieving at this point anyways."

Kyobi looked around. The old woman's living room was sizable enough and provided enough breathing room for both vixen and bunny, but it was hardly luxurious or lavish. About enough room for six people standing shoulder to shoulder. Hardwood floors. Stone walls. Low ceiling. A lit weathered fireplace roaring away, providing the dull room much needed light. The furniture wasn't much to speak of, either - that dull pink armchair, a matching sofa that was piled with a bunch of laundry, a bookcase and a coffee table that were good and dusty. It didn't look like a place that anyone would want to rob once - much less *eight* times.

There were two doors on the left and back wall. Kyobi headed toward the one on the left. "What's your name?" the vixen asked.

"Sylvia," the bunny replied with disinterest.

"You don't want to know mine?" Kyobi asked as she opened the door.

"Not really. If I need to go to the guards after this, then that black and orange pelt of yours is distinct enough for a report."

"Fair enough," Kyobi said as she stepped into what was a very tiny kitchen. There wasn't much to note here at all. Counters that were low to the ground due to the bunny's smaller height, a weathered old oven that was much the same, and *just* about enough space to prepare a meal. The only burglary related thing was a pair of wooden shutters for what was clearly a window. "You keep the shutters locked?" Kyobi yelled back into the living room.

"Yup," Sylvia yelled back hoarsely. "Haven't opened them in years."

Just to be sure, Kyobi walked up to the shutters and grabbed them, finding out that they were, indeed, secured by lock. The shutter's vertical dark wooden slats could be pushed with a finger regardless, opening them ever so slightly to the outside world... but the gaps between were very small. Too small for anything but a large insect. Plus, they were incredibly dusty - to her word, Sylvia likely hadn't looked at them in years, much less touched them. "They didn't steal anything out of the kitchen?"

The sound of Sylvia's cane *smacking* against the floor resounded through the kitchen sharply. "What the hell would they steal in the kitchen?!" Sylvia yelled. "My pots and pans?"

"Hey, some spices are pretty expensive," Kyobi said as she stepped back into the living room and closed the kitchen door behind her. "Might be common enough around here, but you wouldn't believe the shit that people would do for a pound of salt in some parts of the world."

"Wouldn't know," the bunny grunted. She'd made herself quite comfortable in her armchair - other than her cane which was still held defensively in her left hand, she was slouched back with a blanket laid over her lap. "Only place I've ever known is this shithole of a town. Never been across the Wildlands."

Kyobi couldn't help but feel depressed at the idea of that. Littleburg wasn't one of the worst towns in the world, sure, but to be trapped inside of its walls for almost a century would have been utterly miserable. At least, for her. "So he probably stole stuff out of your bedroom, then, right?" she said, swiftly moving on as she opened the bedroom door. "Jewelry, I imagine?"

"Yup. Bastard took all eight of my necklaces one at a time. Damn things were the only valuables that I ever really had. Spent the first few years of my life collecting them in the hopes that I'd have some kids to hand 'em down to, but..." Sylvia snorted. "Married a man with a limp dick and weaker sperm."

Kyobi poked her head into the bedroom and glanced around. Again, there was nothing lavish in here, though the space was, at least, a little larger than the kitchen. After accounting for a wardrobe, dresser, and double bed, there was enough floor space for a large green rug. The room also smelled a little dustier than the rest of the house - probably *because* of said rug. It looked like it had been a decade or so since it had last been beaten. "What about the window in here?" Kyobi asked as she eyed another set of shutters over by the bed. "You keep this one locked?"

"I might open it on the odd evening in the summer to try and let a little of the heat out," Sylvia called, "but ever since the first burglary started, I've obviously kept it locked."

"Was it locked before the first one?"

"No," Sylvia responded. "I imagine that's how he got in the first time."

Kyobi navigated her way through the bedroom, making her way toward the window. There, just like in the kitchen, she gave the shutters a firm tug. They seemed secure

enough. The slats moved easily once again, providing *just* enough room for something very small to crawl through. Unlike the kitchen, though, there wasn't a trace of dust upon them. They had been cleaned, and... recently at that. In fact, they were practically beaming - glinting in what was left of the sunlight as Kyobi rocked them back and forth with the tip of her finger. "Did you clean the slats recently?"

"Why would I do something like that? I barely have the energy to talk to you, much less clean the place."

"Well, if *you* haven't, then someone has. These things have been polished to hell and back."

Sylvia snorted in disbelief. "Well, it wasn't me who did it!"

"Concerned neighbor, maybe?" Kyobi suggested over her shoulder. "Or a boy scout?"

"Doubt it," Sylvia called back. "Neighbors hate me and the kids around here hate me even more."

Kyobi reached for the flagon of whiskey on her hip - and then she remembered that it was still on the floor by the front door. An annoyed grumble rolled up her throat. "What if the thief did it?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Sylvia laughed. "Why would a thief clean my blinds?"

"That's a good question," Kyobi said as she looked down at her satchel. "One that I'd like the answer to." With her right hand, she began to fumble through her bag. Looking for... something. She wasn't sure what, but there was bound to be something in her stupid satchel that'd shine a light on things...

... and, bingo! Tucked between a roll of parchment and a brown paper bag of pork rinds was a shiny hexagonal gem that was all a-glow with pale blue light. Just about big enough to snugly fit in the palm of the hand, it was a detection geode - a rare crystal mined and processed far, far to the south of Littleburg in an entirely different and very frozen continent. How had the vixen gotten ahold of it? Well, she couldn't quite remember... part of a deal she'd made, perhaps? Or had she pulled it off a corpse? Had she killed any wizards lately? Maybe...

... well, it didn't matter now. Kyobi pulled the detection geode and a small wooden serving bowl from her satchel. "Did the guards visit you at all?" Kyobi yelled into the living room as she set the bowl down on the windowsill.

"Barely," Sylvia yawned back. The old bunny had clearly become quite comfortable

in front of the fire over the course of Kyobi's investigation. "Came by and asked some questions and looked around the place for a bit. Weren't obsessed with the windows like you were."

Kyobi closed her palm around the crystal. Detection geodes were extremely brittle - which meant that she could easily grind it up between her palm and fingers into a fine and bright blue powder that fell from her fist and down into the serving bowl. Not much was produced - about a thimbleful, all in all - but it was more than what she'd need to *hopefully* figure out what the hell was going on here. "Did they run any tests?" the vixen asked as she flicked the last of the dust off her fingers and into the bowl.

"A test? Like a math test?" Sylvia grunted back.

Kyobi sighed. "No, like a magic test," the vixen murmured. "You know. Like, did they try to detect if anyone had cast any magic around your house? That kinda test."

Sylvia's reply was a barely coherent but clearly irritated grumble - something about how there's no magic around here. Which was true enough. The continent that Littleburg was upon - or, the largest continent in the known world - was a place that prided itself on being tamed of any form of the arcane. Magic had been outlawed over a hundred years ago. Anyone who taught it or otherwise practiced it was either exiled or executed, and anyone caught casting a spell these days was pretty much dead on the spot. As a result, most forms of spell detection were frowned upon - because it was either magic or magic-adjacent. Even the detection geode was technically contraband. Kyobi had almost forgotten about all this coming into Littleburg, so... she took a moment to count her lucky stars and be grateful that the guards hadn't decided to search her bag.

With a sigh, Kyobi reached into the bowl and gathered a little of the detection geode's dust on the tip of her finger, bringing it up to her eye where she briefly admired just how bright and shiny the ground up crystal was. It quite literally hummed with the arcane - producing both a bright glow and a low ethereal sort of ringing noise that she could now hear clearly due to it being right in front of her face.

Then, Kyobi lowered her finger and smeared the dust into the windowsill, wiping a bright blue line across it. There was an immediate reaction. The dust began to glow much brighter - which could only mean one thing. A spell *had* been cast here. Several spells, even. Maybe even eight of them.

Kyobi wiped the glowing blue line from the windowsill, making sure not to leave any evidence behind. Then, curious, she plucked a little dust from the bowl between her fingertips and scattered it across the floor behind her. The reaction was the inverse - the dust *ceased* its glow and turned completely inert. "Spell was cast by the window, then," Kyobi murmured to herself quietly. "Interesting."

The vixen picked up the bowl and carried over toward the dresser and the jewelry box that laid atop of it. There, she took another fingerful of dust and wiped it around the jewelry box in a rough circle. Once again, it flared into life, producing a beautiful blue glow that Kyobi almost immediately wiped away with the palm of her hand. "A spell cast by the window," she thought aloud again, "and a spell cast over here."

"What are you talking about?" Sylvia barked from the living room. "Speak up!"

"Oh, don't mind me, I'm just talking to myself," Kyobi murmured as she pulled out her empty coin purse and tipped the rest of the detection geode's dust into it. "You carry on taking a nap or whatever."

Sylvia grumbled something, but Kyobi wasn't listening. She was too busy thinking about what little she knew of the thief. According to the guards, they were most likely a resident of this town. They were also insanely prolific - and perhaps a little clever, too - robbing random places at random hours in order to prevent anyone from recognizing a proper pattern. They were also a magic user, and, given that they lived in a place where magic was outlawed, probably not a very good one. There was nobody around to teach them, so... the tricks that they knew must have been self taught. Which meant that the tricks that they had up their sleeve were probably amateur-hour level shit.

That ruled out teleportation. Even expert wizards tended to fuck that one up, and the vixen very much doubted that a low-level mage was capable of doing such a thing consistently. So... a simple pick lock spell, perhaps? No, that didn't make sense either. The windowsill was aglow with magic, not the lock. Besides - if he had really been in here eight times, the lock would have broken by now. They didn't tend to like being mangled by the arcane too much.

The vixen approached the window again, looking over it while pulling the slats apart. The final possibility, she supposed, was some kind of transfiguration. The thief had turned themselves into a rat or some other small creature and *squeezed* through the blinds. That also made sense of why they were able to steal from so many places - they'd be able to case the place out easily without being noticed at all. They'd be able to get into the perfect position and strike when everyone's backs were turned, moving quickly and only taking a single item at a time, making sure that they remained unnoticed until they were far gone.

It made perfect sense. Until Kyobi remembered that transfiguration was even trickier than teleportation - and far, far more advanced than a pick lock spell. Still, though, that didn't rule it out completely. Artifacts of transfiguration weren't common at all, especially around Littleburg, but... they were much harder to use than teleportation gems and much rarer than skeleton keys. Plus, transfiguration just made *sense* to her.

Kyobi drummed her fingers against the windowsill and carried on thinking. She had a

method in mind now, then, but... what of the motive? Why were they doing this? Mad with power, perhaps? Incredibly greedy? Grudge against the townsfolk? Perhaps all three? Hard to say, really. At least right now. She'd need a little more info. The one thing that she knew was the thief was a germaphobe - the fact that they'd so thoroughly cleaned their point of entry told her that much.

Kyobi turned around and walked back into the living room. Old lady Sylvia was asleep in her chair. That was good - the vixen had spent an awful lot of time thinking and barely any time drinking, and she'd rather get back to her flagon than waste any more of her precious minutes on making goodbyes.

Kyobi headed to the front door quickly. There was a set of keys hung up on the wall beside it. She took them off the hook, opened the door and closed it behind her, and then locked it, slipping the keys back through the letterbox when she was done.

The vixen scooped her flagon from the ground and took a very long drink to make up for lost time. With her insides once again burning, she plucked the coin purse full of powder from her hip and walked over toward the outside of the bedroom window, deciding to conduct one last test. There wasn't much powder left, so she only took a small pinch of it. Then, getting down onto her knees, she rubbed said pinch into the ground a few feet away from the bedroom window.

The smidge of smeared powder flared to life, producing a dull but noticeable glow. That confirmed her theory about the thief using some kind of artifact. Enchanted objects had a tendency of leaking mana all over the place. Tracing the thief would be as simple as smearing a bunch of dust into the ground and following all the trails to their source, though... she'd need a great deal more dust than she already had to pull that one off.

Kyobi fumbled through her satchel, wondering if there were a few more detector geodes stashed away in there. Sadly, there were not - but, happily, there were pork rinds. The vixen tore a bag open and shoved a few into her mouth, crunching thoughtfully. Brow furrowed, she stared up at a dark sky that had now fully entered the realm of the night.

After half a bag of salty snacks and a whole lot of thinking, though, Kyobi still had no idea how to find the thief. It was clear that she'd need a little more information. And a lot more whiskey than she had right now. So... back to the pub, then. That would have at least one of those things.

With a belly full of pork rinds - and a well-decomposed rat somewhere deep, deep in the tail-end of her guts - the cross vixen pulled herself up out of her kneel and took off into the dark streets of Littleburg, hoping dearly that she'd somehow find the tavern again in the dark night before her flagon ran dry.

* * *

“Can I ask a question, ma’am?”

Kyobi blinked a couple of times and looked away from the fire. “Huh?” she murmured, having been so into her story that she’d almost forgotten that a dusty brown wolf male was beside her campfire. A question, though - she didn’t mind that - she needed to take a little breather, anyways. “Sure, Lynal. Go ahead.”

Lynal adjusted his position on his back ever so slightly, shifting his weight around. “You said this story was called *The Rat King*,” the wolf said. “But... he’s barely been in the story. Except at the beginning, before, you, y’know...”

“Before I digested him. Right.”

“Right. Uh, speaking of, did you really digest him, or...”

Kyobi raised a hand and waved it dismissively in Lynal’s direction. “One question at a time. You want me to explain the title of the story, or tell you whether I really ate a rat?”

Lynal considered heavily, leaning forward and gazing into the crackling flames. They were getting rather low - the fire hadn’t been attended during the vixen’s recounting. “Can I only ask one question?” he eventually asked.

Kyobi shook her head and reached over to her side to grab a couple of logs for the fire. “No, you can ask as many as you like,” she chuckled gently. “Just one at a time, that’s all.”

Lynal nodded in understanding. “Okay,” he said. “Did you really... um... digest the Rat King?”

“Sure did,” Kyobi said as she chucked one of the logs onto the fire. The embers dimmed briefly as they were suffocated by its weight - then, with a burst of light, the log ignited and brought the fire back to life. “I mean, there’s a reason that I stopped mentioning him after a certain point in the story.”

Lynal swallowed. The wolf wasn’t sure how he felt about learning that, and... it showed from the unsure expression on his face. “I see,” he murmured. “So... you’ve killed people before, then?”

Kyobi threw another log onto the fire. “Mhm,” she sighed. “Don’t know if you were paying attention to the story, but I was and still am a mercenary. And mercenaries are best known for killing people.”

Fear flashed over Lynal's face. A little intimidated by the vixen, he glanced over his shoulder cautiously without lifting himself from his seat, as if checking his escape route out of the campsite if need be.

Kyobi immediately noticed the wolf's edginess. Her senses were sharp, and, even if they weren't, the male wasn't doing a particularly great job of hiding his fear. "I'm not going to kill you, though," she pointed out gruffly. "No need to have a panic attack, Lynal."

Lynal twitched sharply as if he was going to have a panic attack anyway... but, with a deep breath, he turned himself back to Kyobi and nervously set his eyes on the vixen. "Sorry, ma'am. It's just... I've never met anyone who's killed before, that's all."

Kyobi smirked softly. "Sure you have," she said. "Those traders you said you've spoken to? Or... tried to speak to, anyways - they've most certainly killed a dozen or so bandits in their time. It's part of the job."

Lynal frowned and rubbed at his chin all gently and unsure. His eyes fell toward the now roaring fire in thought. "You... are you sure about that?" he asked.

"Well, shit, Lynal. They have weapons, don't they?"

"Mhm," Lynal confirmed with a nod of his head. "Big crossbows, usually. Couple of 'em even have them new-fangled guns."

"And you don't think they use those to kill people?"

Lynal rested his hands on his knees and squeezed them gently. "I... I figured they just used 'em to scare the uh, more violent kind of people away."

"True enough, you're not wrong - they wear 'em loud and proud as the hazard that they are," Kyobi said. She gently tilted her muzzle. "But what if the bandits don't get scared away by the big crossbows, Lynal? Or the *new-fangled* guns? What if they really want their wares and are willing to risk it? What do you suppose happens then?"

Lynal cringed. "I, uh, I suppose they shoot the bandits, ma'am," he whimpered.

"Right. They shoot the bandit and then the bandit dies, Lynal."

"But... but that's bandits. Bandits are scary and they'll kill you without a thought," Lynal murmured as he squeezed his knees a little tighter. "An innocent little rat, though?"

"*Innocent*," Kyobi snorted as she shook her head firmly. "That *innocent little rat* tried

to stick me up at the side of the road while calling himself monarchy, Lynal. Hardly a pure soul."

Lynal shook his head back at Kyobi. "Right, but it's not like he was a threat or anything. I mean, what did he threaten you with? A tiny little crossbow?"

"Doesn't matter what he threatened me with. The point is that he threatened me in the first place and that he was going around bothering a bunch of other people apparently. Just because he was small and stupid doesn't make him any less of a bandit."

"But..."

Kyobi rolled her eyes. "But nothing. Come on, Lynal. You're acting like I've just told a story about a murdering spree that I went on or something," the vixen sighed as she patted her bare paws against the ground. "The rat was annoying and a local nuisance... so I ate him. But I didn't kill the guards - or the barkeep - or the old lady, even though they were all annoying. It's clear that, you know, I don't kill anyone unless they cross a line. Or... someone pays me to."

"I... I suppose," the wolf murmured reluctantly. "Just... I couldn't imagine doing something like that, is all. Killing someone, I mean. It just feels... wrong."

"A lot of people couldn't - and a lot of people feel that way. That's why mercenaries have a bad reputation in the first place." Kyobi shrugged. "But, you know what? The Rat King was harmless around the time that I ate him, sure. But the little guy was clearly a deranged weirdo who was going to do something harmful sooner rather than later. Maybe he would've gotten a bunch of explosives and done some real damage. Or, shit, maybe he might have just sneaked into that old ladies house and turned himself into a tripping hazard and sent her down the stairs to break her frail little neck so that he could steal all of her *loot*. Who knows?"

Lynal quivered and tightened his fingers over his knees. "Or, maybe, he might have gone and learned the error of his ways and changed his tune. Become a model citizen, or... at least, a half decent one."

Kyobi chuckled briefly, scratched the side of her nose, and loosed a long and tired sigh. "No offense, but I've had this debate a lot. You're not going to change my mind on it and I'm not going to change yours," she murmured firmly, clearly done with the topic of conversation. "The truth is this - and I hate to break it to you - but the world outside of your little farming town is rough as hell. People die a *lot*, and there's always a bunch of *maybes* involved in the equation. Maybe if they brought an extra skin of water - or a weapon of some kind - or didn't threaten people on the road, well, maybe they wouldn't have died."

"I... I suppose," Lynal murmured, though it didn't sound like the wolf particularly understood at all - more that he just wanted to move on from this particular topic.

"You're free to walk away from the fire if you want. I won't stop you or anything."

Lynal shook his head almost immediately. "No, ma'am. I figure as long as you don't want to kill me then this is probably the safest campfire in the forest right now."

"Clever thinking there Lynal," Kyobi said, sounding almost impressed. "You know people have paid me quite a lot of money in the past to guard their camps while they travel, right? Sleep here tonight and you'll get that service for free." The vixen nodded her head firmly. "Which is a real damn bargain if you ask me."

The wolf nodded his head, though his excitement to be around the vixen had noticeably dimmed. The edginess had faded completely, though - he had at least heard enough to know that the fox wasn't some kind of demented ax murderer at the very least, even if she was dangerous and a little scary.

"You want me to carry on my story?" Kyobi asked gruffly. "Or do you want me to stop?"

Lynal considered. "I think I'd like you to continue, ma'am. Even if it's grisly," he said. "Aside from the whole... um, Rat King thing, I was kind of wrapped up in it all. Curious to hear the solution to the mystery, and... well, I gotta say, it's all a whole lot more interesting than the stories that I hear from my folks and the people around town."

"Wonderful. Let me continue, then. Though you were right about one thing - the title of the story was a little off. Let's call it... *The Tiny Bandit* instead."

Lynal nodded his head and leaned forward, bringing his blue eyes up and his ears forward to focus them both on Kyobi and her tale.

The vixen cleared her throat and took a breath. Then, steepling her fingers, she leaned a little closer to the fire. "I found my way back to the inn - eventually - but after a long sleep and another day spent hunting for clues, I didn't find out much more than I already knew. For a few days I did that - investigating, looking for clues while the thief continued to steal from the town - but I wasn't coming up with anything, especially since I didn't have any kind of magical aid. But, about a week into my investigations - and, fuck, a week trapped in Littleburg - I had a breakthrough."

Lynal frowned. He expected the vixen to go on, but... she had turned her head away from the fire and toward him, her pale yellow eyes gently blinking and her posture leaned toward him, waiting for the wolf to ask the obvious question. "And... and what

was the breakthrough, ma'am?" he asked.

Kyobi smiled. "The thief stole something from me."

* * *

PART TWO

The Tiny Bandit

I

"You know, you're taking this surprisingly well."

Kyobi took a gentle sip of whiskey and raised her brow toward her badger of a barkeep. She'd changed neither her drinking hole nor the place she was sleeping at in the weeks she'd been in Littleburg - because why bother? The booze was alright, the bed was comfortable enough, and the barkeep could easily be bribed into talking with her. "Taking *what* well, Bartholomew?" the vixen asked, all playfully confused.

Bartholomew sighed. The barkeep crossed his burly arms over his round gut and rolled his beady eyes. "You know what I'm talking about."

"Maybe," Kyobi said with a gentle shrug, "but it's fun to make you elaborate."

"Fine. I'm expressing surprise that you're not upset about the thief stealing something from you, then. Happy?"

Kyobi drained her glass dry of liquor. "Very," she said as she slammed her glass down on the bar and grabbed her bottle to fill it back up. "Anyways. I don't really see the point in being upset about it. He didn't steal anything sentimental. Just some jewelry that I'd been hanging onto and was planning to sell at some point."

"That's still something of yours," the badger grumbled as he uncrossed his arms and leaned against the bar.

Kyobi filled her glass and set the whiskey back down. The bottle had been full this morning. Now, just into the beginning of the afternoon, it was just a little over half empty. The vixen wasn't even close to wasted, though - indeed, aside from being a little extra playful and, well, the pungent liquor on her breath, one wouldn't be able to tell that she was drunk at all. "Actually," she pointed out, "I took the jewelry off a corpse. So, if anything..."

Bartholomew turned his gaze away from Kyobi and firmly shook his head. "Let's not talk about that."

“Squeamish, Bartholomew?”

“You know full well I am.”

Kyobi smirked. She did, indeed, know full well that Bartholomew was a squeamish sort who wasn't a fan of the more *macabre* topics that she occasionally brought up. Of course, that didn't mean that she wouldn't bring them up to make them uncomfortable - but she'd best not linger on the topic unless she wanted the badger to *tend to other customers* and ignore her for a few hours. “Anyway,” she said, “dead person's jewelry or no, it's no big deal. I'm onto this guy. Only be a matter of time before I catch him.”

The vixen waved her hand dismissively and grabbed her drink. Meanwhile, Bartholomew turned his head back toward her and frowned at her in disbelief. “You still reckon you're the one who's gonna get him, huh?” he said as he watched the fox glug down a mouthful of whiskey. “Figured you'd have given up on that after he stole something from right underneath your nose.”

“I told you,” Kyobi sighed as she set her glass down. “It's easy to steal things when you can shrink yourself down to the size of... I dunno, a beetle or whatever.”

“I still don't buy your shrinking theory,” Bartholomew grunted. “Seems way too outlandish. I'm more of a fan of simpler explanations - like, he's just incredibly sneaky.”

Kyobi shook her head. “Not a chance. After last night, I know that *has* to be his method,” she said as she rapped her knuckles against the top of the bar confidently. “There's absolutely no way that he could've gotten past me otherwise.”

Bartholomew narrowed his eyes and pulled himself out of his lean against the bar, standing straight and setting his hands on his hips. Then he lifted his eyes toward the tavern's ceiling and scratched at his chin. “Actually, there are lots of ways,” he said, lowering his gaze after a thoughtful moment. “Even if we go with the theory that he's magical, he could have... I dunno, gone invisible?”

Kyobi shook her head. “Nope. He'd have still made enough noise to alert me. My pack was right by my bed.”

“*Alert you*,” the badger chuckled sarcastically. “Please. You were black out drunk last night. Almost two bottles deep before you went staggering up the stairs.”

“Doesn't matter how drunk I am, Bartholomew. I sleep with one eye open,” the vixen said, tilting her head and closing one of her eyes as if that somehow proved her point.

“Sure you do.”

"You don't have to believe me, Bartholomew," Kyobi murmured warningly. "But, you know, if you want to find out, just try sneaking into my room one night. You'll see what ends up happening to you."

Bartholomew grunted. A little annoyed, he reached out and grabbed one of the dirty mugs laid on the side of the bar and grabbed a wet rag to shove within it. He began to swab the inside of it firmly, attempting to ease his frustration by being productive.

Sensing the barkeep's blatant irritation, the vixen took a moment to relax and let him settle down - lest she lose him to the back room of his bar. He had no reason to stay out here, after all - she had paid for her drinks today and there were no other customers in here. And the last thing Kyobi wanted to do was end up drinking in an empty bar - that was one of the most depressing things in the world. "Anyway," she said after setting her glass down. "Him stealing from me gives me another lead. I reckon that he was here last night. Eying me up as a mark."

Bartholomew's nose and whiskers twitched. "What makes you think that?"

"Just a gut feeling, mostly. If I was two bottles deep last night then I must've been throwing some cash around," Kyobi hypothesized. "Maybe that got his attention, I dunno."

"Could've just broken into a random room," the badger suggested off-handedly. "Got a few travelers staying here on account of the lock down and all that."

"Maybe," Kyobi murmured. It's not like they're particularly choosy who they steal from. That's well established." She lifted her shoulders. "But it's not like I have any other leads to go on right now."

Bartholomew sighed and gave a wary glance to the vixen as he set down the now well-washed tankard onto the bar. "You're going to start asking me for names and addresses now, aren't you?"

Kyobi nodded her head. "Obviously. There's less and less people coming here. I know you remember everyone who comes in here on the daily because we've spoken about that, and, I know that you also know everyone in town, because, you know, also spoken about that," she rambled. "Wouldn't make sense to do anything but ask you."

The badger squinted and leaned against the bar, studying the vixen carefully. "You're not going to go and hassle them, are you?"

"That would depend on your definition of *hassle*," Kyobi sighed. "I'll go visit them. Ask them some questions if they're home. Maybe take a look around their place if I get the opportunity to, you know?"

Bartholomew's ears gave a gentle bounce as he paid careful heed to Kyobi's words. After thinking for a moment, he sighed. On one hand, he didn't really want to be giving out customer's information... but, on the other, it'd get the vixen out of his fur for a while. "Not going to... accuse them of anything? Or rough them up?"

Kyobi rolled her eyes and groaned in irritation. "Please. Did I go and rough that old lady up? Or anyone at any of the other places you've told me about?"

"Had a couple of complaints," Bartholomew murmured. "But they were nothing to do with violence, no."

Kyobi frowned. "What *were* they about?" she asked curiously.

"Your odor. And the fact that you were walking around drinking."

"My *odor*?" Kyobi gasped as she raised the cuff of her shirt to her nose and gave it a deep sniff. Sure, it smelled a little musky - she was short on clothes and places to wash them - but the smell wasn't *complaint* worthy. "A little sweaty, a little boozy, but, you know, mostly fine."

Bartholomew briefly considered tossing a barb in the vixen's direction, but... in the end, he just shrugged. "You've been talking to some pretty high class folks, Kyobi," he murmured. "On top of that, most people around here don't really like outsiders. The fact that your... *light odor* is the only thing they can find to complain about is probably a compliment."

"Sure, whatever, right," Kyobi sighed as she lowered her arm from her snout and set it back on the bar. "So, you going to give me some names and addresses, then?"

Bartholomew grunted. "Tell you what," he said as he leaned backward and raised a broad finger in the vixen's direction. "Supposing you do catch the thief. You have to give me... ten percent of whatever you get in return for the information."

Kyobi smirked. She wasn't really in this for the money at this point, more... that she was bored and that it was something to do other than sit around. Well, that and the fact that she couldn't leave until the matter had been dealt with, anyway. Also - even if she wasn't acting annoyed about the bastard stealing from her - she *was* annoyed about it under the surface, if only because the bastard had violated her personal space. "I'll give you twenty, Bart. How about that? You'll have to tell me how bounties around here work, though."

Bartholomew smiled back at the vixen and relaxed a little bit, shoving his hands into his pockets. He didn't think that the vixen would catch the thief, really - at this point, he

honestly doubted anyone would - but, hey, at least he had a running in the whole investigation now. "I've already told you how the bounties around here work. Twice, actually."

Kyobi scratched her head and finished her whiskey. "I don't remember that," she said.

"You were very drunk."

"Okay, well, tell me again while I'm slightly less drunk."

Bartholomew pulled one of his hands out of his pocket and scratched at his brow, his smile twitching ever so slightly as he resisted the urge to grumble. "Like I've explained twice now, it all depends on the reason the bounty has been posted. In this case, though, it's simple. Find the loot, find the person it's attached to, and bring them in for a confession. After that, they'll be dealt with swiftly - and you'll be given your cash."

"Dealt with how?" Kyobi asked off-handedly. "Like, executed?"

Bartholomew pursed his lips uncomfortably and nodded his head. "Execution or banishment - their choice. But... let's not drift back into... corpse territory."

Kyobi grabbed her bottle of whiskey and reached for the glass - but then, figuring that she'd be leaving soon, she raised the bottle to her lips and took a drink from it. "Fair," she murmured as she licked her lips clean. "Seems like a hasty process, though. Figured you'd have a court or something like that."

Bartholomew shook his head. "Nah, the town has no interest in that. This is the first time we've had any proper crime around here in a while. People that break the law are made an example of."

"What if I break someone's window or something?" Kyobi asked. "Am I gonna get an axe to the neck?"

"Of course not. But you might get put in the stocks and made an example of."

Kyobi scratched her furry chin as she considered delving a little more into Littleburg's legal system, but... in the end, she decided that it didn't matter to her at all. They could deal with their criminals however they wanted to. "Well, can't complain about a simple process, I suppose. Makes it easier for me."

The badger nodded his head in agreement.

The vixen grabbed her bottle of whiskey and started to empty it into her flagon for

the busy day ahead of her. "So," she said with a gentle tilt of her head as she carefully poured, not wanting to spill a drop. "Names and addresses, please?"

II

Four names and four addresses later, and the day was almost done. The sky had been blue and bright when Kyobi had left *The Rusty Nail*, and now, hours later, wispy gray clouds had begun to roll in over a horizon that was a dull evening orange. The moon was rising while the sun was steadily tucking itself into bed after a hard day's work, and...

... Kyobi honestly felt like doing the same. Four names and four addresses had led to precisely zero leads. The thief had apparently stolen something from all four of them, but... that was nothing new. A couple of them had even been nice enough to let her take a look around their places, but, again, nothing had been revealed to her that she didn't already know. Just more suspiciously clean blinds and window sills and a bunch of sob stories. Nobody had commented on her apparent odor, though, so... that was something, at least. But no matter how much she might have wanted to retire, the vixen had been given her five names and addresses total - which meant that there was one more to check out.

The vixen had saved this one for last since Bartholomew had told her that this guy was in the running for being one of the most difficult and unsociable people in town. Apparently it wasn't that he was violent, it was just that he was a complete and total asshole. According to what the bartender had told her he'd been a decent sort at one point in his life. But a couple of years ago after going through a rough divorce, he'd turned into a real bastard of a recluse. The sort of person who most likely wouldn't answer his door to Kyobi, much less a question, and even if *did* then she'd only get her ear yelled off. The only reason he'd been at the tavern yesterday was to grab some booze to take home with him.

The asshole's name was Aezher, and Aezher's house was not so far from where her investigation had begun... which was about two doors away from old lady Sylvia's place. Just like the bunny's house the place was a cozy little bungalow... though it was far more worn. No flowers in the yard, the wood unpolished and worn, and the stone walls had clearly never seen a mop in their life. Whoever Aezher was... he was either lazy or simply didn't care for maintaining his home. Perhaps both.

The run-down state of the bungalow was of little concern to Kyobi, though. With a noticeably drunk swagger, she ambled up to the door and pounded on it all rude and hard in a way that would make *any* homeowner pissed off.

But there was no reply.

A touch annoyed that nobody had yelled at her, the very persistent Kyobi knocked on the door again. A little harder this time, a little more like she *owned* that block of beat-up wood.

But still. Nothing. Not so much as the sound of a chair creaking or a floorboard squeaking.

Kyobi turned her head away from the door and looked toward the blind-covered window beside it. The thick wooden slats were closed as far as they could go, though... that wasn't *completely* closed. Peering between their inch-wide gap revealed that there were no lanterns or candles lit inside of the property... at least, not in the front room. Combined with the lack of reply... could that mean that Aezher wasn't home? Kyobi considered that a distinct possibility, though... there was all the chance that he could just be holed up in a back room somewhere. That would be a very recluse-like thing to do, after all.

The vixen soon noticed something more interesting than the absence of light, though... and that was that there was a thin layer of dust upon them. Under normal circumstances this wouldn't be strange at all, but... given that every other set of blinds that she'd examined this week had been cleaned from top to bottom...

Suddenly *far* more interested in this Aezher asshole than she ever had been, Kyobi turned away from the window and back to the door - and then, with her fist, she *pounded* on it as hard as she could, producing a knock that *nobody* could ignore.

But still, nothing. Aezher was either comatose, not at home, or *really* good at being a recluse.

Kyobi looked at the window and considered her options. As far as she was concerned, leaving wasn't one of them. As bizarre as it was to say it, after finding dust on Aezher's blinds, she couldn't just leave without finding an answer for that. So, with that determined, she could either keep knocking on his door, sit on his stoop, wait for him to come home, or... break into his house. With the town on heightened alert right now for break-ins, that last one probably wouldn't be the greatest idea in the world - but it would lead to the quickest answer and the least sore fists.

Kyobi looked over both of her shoulders, making sure the street around her was clear. It was. The entire town was clear right now. Most people were in their homes safeguarding their things as best they could at... pretty much any hour, given the thief's flexible working hours. Cautious, the vixen gave a brief glance to the windows and blinds of the neighboring houses too, doing her best to make sure that nobody was peeking through them.

Mostly satisfied that there were no eyes on her, the vixen sighed and reached for her

hip, unsheathing a very thin little dagger that she kept on her hip. She swallowed as she considered the consequences of her actions - of being thrown in a cell, or maybe even getting an axe to the head - and then, pushing those consequences to the back of her mind, she nodded her head and tightened her grip on her dagger. "Fuck it," she muttered. "Let's do this."

The dagger's slender blade was slid between the blinds. Then, with a careful twist of her fingers, its sharp tip was pointing at the window's latch. This was far from the first window that Kyobi had jimmied. Even if she was more than a little drunk, she'd done this so many times that she had it down to muscle memory. With a flick of her wrist and a flex of her fingers, the window had been unlatched. From there, it was a simple case of opening it and squeezing within. This was a series of motions that was also intimately familiar to the vixen. With a hop upward, a grunt as she landed on sill on her belly, and a wriggle of her rear to guide her all the way within, she was inside Aezher's home.

Kyobi landed on her feet - just about. From what she could tell in the low light, the recluse's front room was a mostly tidy little area. An empty and mucky old fireplace that was clearly seldom lit, a single and fairly comfortable looking chair, a bookcase stuffed with tomes. The most disorderly looking thing was the table between the chair and the fireplace. Some strewn papers, an overturned bottle, a dirty bowl that had been eaten from a couple of evenings ago. But there was no trash on the scuffed stone floor - at least, as far as her keen eyes could see - so at least she wouldn't break her neck creeping around the place.

But before Kyobi crept anywhere, she took a moment to lift her ears all the way up. With them, she listened carefully, tilting them every which way to see if she could hear anyone moving, breathing, or existing. But... nothing. The house was empty. At least, as far as she could tell.

The vixen inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of the place through her sensitive sniffers. What she smelled was... dust. Beer. A light hint of something male and sweaty and doggy. And, ever so lightly, vague and hardly there but oh so distinct to the vixen...

... the gentle scent of her stuff. It was here. No doubt about it.

Kyobi turned around and closed the window behind her and sealed the blinds tight. Closing off her one escape route made her feel edgy, but it was either that or risk someone peeking through an open window. Then, once again pushing back the thoughts of consequence, the vixen proceeded into Aezher's front room properly.

The first thing that Kyobi checked was the fireplace. Seldom used meant that there might be a secret compartment in there somewhere, but... after rapping her knuckles across the chimney's interior, she found nothing but the sound of thick stone. No hollow

compartments here.

The fireplace was a little obvious, though. Kyobi wiped soot off her fingers on the hip of her pants - adding the scent of ash to her already fine 'odor' - and then, huffing, she approached the bookcase. She bent down and studied them for a moment. Aezher was clearly quite the reader, because every book on his shelf had been well-read, proved by creased spines and well-worn pages that had clearly been thumbed through more than once. Going off their titles, their subject matter was of quite the range too - politics, science, magic, history, far-flung fantasy tales... it was all here.

Aside from surface level curiosity, though, Kyobi wasn't particularly interested in what Aezher was reading. Once again looking for hollow compartments, she rapped her knuckles across the spine of every book, counting them underneath her breath as she went. "154," she whispered as she tapped the weathered spine of the final book. "No fakes."

Kyobi positioned herself by the side of the bookcase and pressed her shoulder into it. Given all the books in it, it was very heavy - almost too much for one athletic vixen to move - but, after wedging her fingers behind it and shoving *very* hard with all of her strength, she managed to shove it a few inches. Enough to reveal that there was no hidden compartment and that her efforts were in vain. With her palms sweating a little, the vixen sighed and moved over to the other side of the bookcase and pushed it back into its place.

The vixen glanced around the living room. Unless she was desperate enough to start looking through the junk on the table or prying up floorboards, there was little else to check in the front room. Aezher's bungalow offered more than this one room, though - a bedroom in the back, a kitchen at the side, a bathroom if she was getting especially desperate. But which one first?

Kyobi lifted her nose to the air and gave the room another sniff. Moving the bookcase had disturbed some dust, so there was plenty of its musty smell in the air... along with a hint of her stuff. Wafting from... the bedroom? Yes, most certainly.

Trusting her nose far more than anything her other organs might have to say, the vixen proceeded to the bedroom door at the back of the bungalow. She grabbed the handle and gave it a twist, expecting a lock or something annoying to get in her way... but, to her relief, the door popped open. "Why bother with security if you're the thief, after all?" she murmured to herself.

Into the bedroom Kyobi went... and in the bedroom she smelled her things. It was difficult to tell exactly *where* the scent was coming from, though, because... unlike his front room, Aezher's bedroom was, to put it lightly, *cluttered*. A bed covered in white sheets and an oak wardrobe were pushed far into the back corner of the room.

Surrounding them were about a dozen knee-high wooden boxes. Some sat by themselves while others were stacked so high that they almost reached the bedroom's ceiling. There was enough room between them that Kyobi could've squeezed through them and made her way through the clutter of boxes to the bed if she so desired.

But given all the boxes surrounding her, Kyobi had absolutely zero interest in the bed. With *this has to be the loot* running through her mind, the vixen grabbed the lid of one of the boxes, revealing...

... not loot, but *shoes*. A pair of leather ankle boots, a well-worn set of sandals, some leather brogues, heels, dress shoes... the list went on. About ten pairs of them in total, enough to fill about two-inches worth of the waist-high crate. Going off their shape and size, they all belonged to the same person, designed and hand-crafted for a particularly dainty set of paws.

Kyobi frowned and wondered if these were Aezher's shoes. Given the extremely narrow crate-lined path to his bed, the guy *must* have been skinny. But at the same time, the vixen doubted it. These shoes had a certain scent to them. Floral. Perfumey. Feminine. Something that she hadn't smelled in the house at all until she'd opened the box and unleashed the preserved scent within. So perhaps he had stolen these from someone? Though... that didn't make sense. These all clearly belonged to the same person, and the thief usually went for shiny things - not clogs.

The shoes were curious to Kyobi - *very* curious, actually - but she didn't really have the time to try and work out whatever this weird puzzle was. She sealed the box and moved onto another one, popping the lid off to reveal... dresses. Made of soft fabrics, tailored for a slender figure, and scented with the same perfume as the shoes were. Like with the shoe crate, this box was also half-full... which really begged the question of why Aezher needed so many boxes in the first place. Categorization, perhaps? Or maybe he'd just never thought to consolidate?

Either way, Kyobi had a good feeling that she could stay in this bedroom all night opening up boxes and turn up with nothing other than some random woman's personal objects when she very much wanted to find her own things, so... she diverted her attention away from the crates and began to shuffle in between the boxes to make her way toward Aezher's bed instead, hoping that she might catch a whiff of her own scent when she was there.

Cramped in the corner of the room - *right* up against the wardrobe - was an unmade bed covered in creased white sheets that were in need of a decent launder, though... honestly, they looked a little cleaner than the sheets at *The Rusty Nail*. Figuring that checking underneath the mattress wouldn't hurt, the vixen dropped to her knees and made to reach underneath it...

... but, as she did so, her nose caught a whiff of the scent of her stuff. Strong. Coming from underneath the bed. Though... how the hell would that work out? How did you cram weeks upon weeks worth of loot underneath your cot?

Kyobi didn't have much time to think about all that, though, because her ears also caught the sound of something - that of a key turning in a lock.

III

A room away, the front door opened. Aezher was home. Which meant that Kyobi didn't have much time. Hopefully he wouldn't notice she was here immediately, because that would buy her a minute or two to at least figure out some kind of escape strategy...

"Who's in here?!" came the angry bark of a very alerted Aezher. "I can hear you! I can *fucking* smell you!"

... nope, the fucker had good senses. Knowing that she had *very* little time, Kyobi reached underneath the bed. Her fingers slid over the creases between the floorboards, hurriedly looking for one that was loose as the thunderous sound of angry footsteps approached her rapidly.

Luckily, it didn't take those fingers long to find what they were looking for. With the edge of a loose floorboard against her fingers, Kyobi dug her claws into its bottom edge as best she could and wrenched it upward, revealing a cubby hole that she hurriedly stuck her entire hand into.

Inside there was a cloth sack. A rather large and well-stuffed cloth sack at that, but... certainly not large enough to even hide a quarter of everything that had supposedly been stolen. On top of that, what she could feel within was very small and... extremely valueless. It felt like scrap. Like pieces of misshapen metal. If it weren't for the fact that it was stashed underneath the bed, then she wouldn't have had any interest in it at all. Given that it *was* hidden, though, she was curious enough about the sack to pull it out of its place and shove it into her satchel.

A mere moment later the bedroom door *slammed* against the wall as it was rammed open by the scrawny form of a short male anthro covered in dusty brown fur. In the dark room, in the intensity of the moment, Kyobi couldn't really tell exactly what species he was. Skinny, bushy tailed, big triangular ears and bright green eyes. Some kind of canine, probably, but the vixen didn't have time to play guessing games - because beyond his physical traits, he was holding a crossbow in his hands.

Aezher narrowed his bright green eyes at Kyobi. He didn't spare her a word before squeezing the trigger. A bolt flew through the air. In a dodge that could most certainly be

described as *extremely narrow*, the vixen rolled to the side and threw herself behind one of the many boxes that almost filled the bedroom. “Ha!” she yelled cockily. “Nice shot, dickhead!”

“Keep yelling, you dumb bitch,” Aezher growled as he began to reload his crossbow in a hurry, snagging another bolt from the pocket of a pair of dirty jeans. “Doesn’t matter how shit of a shot I am when you’re making a big enough ruckus to alert the guards!”

Kyobi bit her bottom lip. Oh, right, that. “Maybe I want to alert the guards,” Kyobi bluffed. She hadn’t found what she was looking for in here, but... that didn’t mean that she couldn’t *pretend* that she had. “That way I can show ‘em all of that shit that you stole!”

Wanting to see Aezher’s reaction to her statement, Kyobi carefully peeked around the corner of the crate. There, she saw that the male was noticeably shaken. His green eyes were wide open and his jaw was as tense as a trap. The crossbow quivering in his hands, his fingers stalled and shaky on its loading mechanism. His hesitation lasted for a second or two but it was there, clear, apparent, and obvious, even in the low light of the dim bedroom. “I recognize your obnoxious voice. You’re that drunk who’s been hanging around *The Rusty Nail*,” he murmured as he finished loading the bow. “You’re nothing and you know nothing too.”

Kyobi licked her lips and placed her hand on the pommel of the short sword on her hip. It was tempting to draw it and charge the guy. She was almost one hundred percent sure that she could take him, and that wasn’t just the drunken bravado speaking. The male was a fair bit shorter than her - about one hundred and sixty centimeters to her one hundred and eighty - and he was *much* leaner in the old muscle department, too. Practically fur and bone. On top of all that, she was wearing leathers and he was wearing some musty old shirt and blue jeans. In other words, she could stand a couple of his crossbow bolts, but... he wouldn’t be able to stand the tip of her blade.

Still, though. Killing the guy wouldn’t be the best course of action. Kyobi would much rather get to the truth of the matter than let it bleed out all over the guy’s bedroom floor. Besides. Getting *murder* added to her list of growing crimes tonight would be a little too much for even her charismatic self to smooth over. This, though? Well, if she had some evidence that this guy was as guilty as he looked, then she just might be able to talk it through with the guards... maybe. “I might be nothing, but that’s better than being a weirdo with a bunch of weird shit in their bedroom,” she singsonged as she twiddled her thumbs behind the crate. “Like your collection of used women’s shoes. Tell me, are you hoarding those because you’re a slob, a pervert, or because they have sentimental value?”

Aezher scoffed angrily and pushed his crossbow a little harder into his lean shoulder. Almost unmoving he stood in the corner of the bedroom by the door, his weapon firmly aimed toward the crate that Kyobi was crouched behind. “None of those things,” he

growled in clear frustration. “But I don’t have to explain it to you.”

Kyobi reached into her satchel and pulled out the sack that she’d found underneath the bed. Hoping that it’d give her something to work with, she dropped it into her lap and thumbed open the drawstring. She gasped as she saw what was inside. It wasn’t scrap metal. It *was* the loot. It had just shrunk. Reduced to the size of something that a rat or a roach could wear instead of an aristocrat.

It was all the loot, or at least, all the loot as far as Kyobi could tell. There was a *lot* that had been stolen and she didn’t exactly have a comprehensive list nor the time to look through it all. But what was in the sack was most certainly weeks and week’s worth of valuables that had been stolen multiple times on the daily. Hundreds of things, all of them gold or glittering or otherwise obviously valuable.

“No,” Kyobi murmured as she sealed the sack and carefully tucked it back into her satchel. “But what you do have to explain to me is what I found underneath your bed, Aezher.”

Knowing that she may very well get a bolt through the eye if she took another peek toward Aezher now, Kyobi simply remained crouched behind the crate and drank in the grim silence that followed her statement. Smiling, she took a breath and simply waited for the male to make a move. Would he try to kill her? Or would he try to strike a deal with her? Either way, she knew full well that she had him on the ropes right now.

“Come out from behind the crate,” Aezher eventually grunted. “I want to talk to you face to face.”

Kyobi chuckled quietly. “Fuck off. That’s the oldest trick in the book.”

“I’m being serious.”

“Then put your crossbow down,” Kyobi requested politely.

Total silence followed. Not a word, not the sound of the crossbow being dropped, not even a breath.

“Yeah,” Kyobi murmured dryly. “That’s what I thought.”

Aezher breathed out in a long and stressed exhale. “Fine. Hide like a coward for all I care. All I want to know is what you want from me.”

Kyobi smirked a little at the *coward* taunt. Such blatant bait. It wouldn’t make her move an inch. “I want you to answer some questions of mine.”

“Look, if this is leading to some bullshit where you try to cut a deal with me, then... I’m not interested,” Aezher grunted. His tone utterly was defeated and deflated. Energyless. Like the only thing keeping him on his feet was the prospect of being able to potentially shoot the annoying vixen at some point.

“No, no, we’re not heading in that direction, I promise you,” Kyobi assured. Just like Aezher, she found the idea of working with him rather uncomfortable. “I’m legitimately curious about you.”

“Curious about what?”

“Well, for a start, why aren’t you even trying to deny it?” Kyobi asked. “The first reaction to being caught like this is usually trying to play dumb or something like that, you know?”

Aezher released a resigned huff out of his leathery black nose. “I’m ready to be caught. It was bound to happen sooner or later,” he murmured with a gentle shake of his head. “Just... didn’t want to get caught by you, that’s all.”

“Interesting. Most thieves don’t want to be caught at all, you know,” Kyobi pointed out sagely from behind her crate like she was dispensing a particularly insightful piece of trivia. “But, in your case, you wanted to be caught by... someone specific, it sounds like?”

Aezher offered no reply at all - not a whimper, not a grunt, not even a sigh.

“Oof,” Kyobi said to the uncomfortable silence. “Don’t want to answer that one, huh?”

“Don’t have to answer any of your questions if I don’t want to,” Aezher said back gruffly. “At this point, I’m just waiting for the guards to come so that they can arrest me.”

Kyobi frowned. “Are the guards even coming at this point?” she asked. “It’s been a while now.”

Aezher shrugged his scrawny shoulders. “Probably not, but you’re going to start yelling for them at some point, aren’t you?”

Kyobi considered. “Am I, though?” she asked. “What if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll shoot you in the face the second you come out from behind that crate.”

Kyobi made a brief and quiet chuckle as she patted herself on the back for not standing up earlier. “Well, why don’t you just move around?” she asked. “You know, get a better angle?”

"Listen. I know you're a merc, and I know you're cleverer than you look," Aezher muttered bitterly. "I move, you move, and then all of a sudden you have your hands around my neck and you're carting me off to the guardhouse unconscious. Which wouldn't do at all." The skinny male shook his head. "I want to be awake when I'm finally caught."

Kyobi was baffled. What was it with this guy and wanting to be caught? "Why, though?" she asked, clearly confused. "You want everyone to know you did it? You want to see the look on the guards faces when they realize it's you? Or are you just one of those weird criminals that gets off to the idea of being caught after a crime spree?"

Aezher said nothing.

"Whatever," Kyobi sighed. "You shrunk yourself down to get the loot, right? Went in through cracks in the windows and underneath the door and wherever else you could wriggle your tiny body into? Snuck in unnoticed and grabbed whatever valuables you could? Which would be easy, since you were shrinking the loot down too," the vixen said with a sage nod of her head. "That's how you went about it, right?"

Again, Aezher said nothing... but he didn't need to. Kyobi knew that her words had affected him because she could hear his hands trembling around the stock of his crossbow. The gentle and anxious sound of his claws *tap tap tapping* on wood. "Not going to answer that one either, huh?" Kyobi teased. "Is that because you're secretive? Or is it because you're humiliated about the fact that you had to make yourself into a cockroach-person to accomplish anything in your weird miserable life?"

"Are you going to do something?" Aezher growled, clearly doing his very best to not be made frustrated by the vixen's words. "Or are you just going to ask stupid questions and be a fucking coward all-

Kyobi threw herself out from behind the crate and made an open-handed charge toward the shorter male.

Aezher immediately pulled the trigger of his crossbow, sending a bolt flying toward Kyobi. It landed in her left shoulder, penetrating the leather plates there and sinking all the way through her flesh.

Kyobi winced as sharp white hot agony shot down her left arm. But with adrenaline pumping through her body, she was more than capable of fighting through the pain. Before Aezher could reload his crossbow or even turn to flee, the vixen had grabbed him by the muzzle. With a hard shove, she sent both of them toppling to the floor.

The crossbow clattered of Aezher's hands as Kyobi landed on top of him. Her knees

landed on his thighs and her body weight came toppling down onto his legs, preventing the male from becoming too winded. Grunting, he raised his arms and *shoved* as hard as he could into the vixen's stomach.

The male was weak, but Kyobi was drunk, bleeding, and off balance. She was knocked to the ground rather easily. Whimpering, Aezher began to scramble onto his feet, pulling himself from the ground as best as possible...

... but before he could, Kyobi reached out and snagged him by the back of the ankle. With how scrawny it was, she was able to curl her fingers around it completely, capturing it like her hand was a leg bracelet.

Aezher kicked backward. His shoeless hindpaw struck Kyobi in the face, but given how weak he was, the impact was more like a slap than a proper strike. It didn't make her budge an inch, much less dislodge her. "Fuck off!" he yelled as he uselessly tried to wrench her leg out of his grasp. "Let go of me!"

Kyobi smirked and lunged forward to grab Aezher's other leg. The male kicked out again, though - and in a surprisingly well placed blow - he planted his foot down on the bolt in the vixen's shoulder, driving it deeper into her flesh.

The vixen howled in agony as the bolt's barbs tore up the inside of her shoulder. Her fingers shook around Aezher's ankle as she felt the urge to release him and simply scream. But, fueled by liquor and by years of experience, she was able to push back the pain. With a grunt and pull, she yanked the almost weightless male back down to the floor.

This time, Aezher landed belly down. He was winded as his ribs harshly struck the hardwood floor of his bedroom - and then, whatever air remained inside of them was thoroughly *squeezed* out as Kyobi mounted him and pressed her knees into his shoulders. "Got you, you piece of fucking shit," Kyobi hissed through her teeth as pain burned through her left side. The male was struggling, but the full brunt of her weight was more than enough to keep him on the ground. To be sure that he didn't go anywhere, she grabbed him by the scruff with her right hand...

... and as she did so, she felt the cool and slender chain of a necklace.

"Don't touch that," Aezher hissed like a deflated and desperate balloon.

Kyobi curled her fingers and slipped them underneath the necklace's chain. The scrawny canine went completely and utterly still beneath her. "Why not, Aezher?" she asked oh-so-curiously.

"I can't explain," he half-wheezed half-whined as his big ears pinned back against

his skull. "Just... I'll give you whatever you want. I'll... please, just let it go."

Kyobi reached around to the front of the necklace and carefully brushed her fingers against the triangular pendant that hung from it. It felt like a simple metal plate at first. Nothing more than a three-edged shard of steel. But she soon felt with the edge of her claw that there were arcane runes etched into the back and front of it. She wasn't sure which ones exactly, but... it was rather obvious that the runes on one side must have added up to a spell of reduction while the runes on the other reversed the effect. Or something like that, anyway. "Oh, I think I get it," Kyobi teased quietly. "This is the magical trinket that helped you shrink, yeah?"

"Don't mess with it," Aezher pleaded hoarsely. "Please, just let it go. Please. Please!"

Kyobi pressed her fingers against the face of the pendant and pushed it down against Aezher's throat. Hot and powerful energy flowed through her palm as the runes on its backside made firm contact with his flesh...

... then, in a blink of an eye - and a dull *thunk* as Kyobi's knees hit the floor - Aezher had been shrunk. Reduced to the size of about three inches tall - or a little smaller than your average rat - he laid on a good couple of feet away from the vixen, belly-down with all the appearance of a well-swatted and particularly fluffy roach. Given that there was no deflated pile of clothes upon the floor, it was clear that the male's attire had shrunk with him, though... the necklace hadn't. It dangled from the vixen's slender black fingers, utterly absent from its owner and entirely within her grasp.

Kyobi blinked a couple of times. She had sort of expected this, but it was surprising anyway - doubly so because she still had a hold of the necklace somehow.

In Kyobi's moment of shock, little Aezher hurriedly picked himself up from the floor. The process of being shrunk was disorientating to say the least... but it was also a process that he had suffered through many, many times by now. Dizzy, sick, and hopeless for he now had no way of growing himself back, he got up onto his tiny feet and fled.

Before the vixen could lift her yellow eyes from the necklace and look for Aezher, he was already halfway toward his bedroom door. "Ah, shit," she grunted as she shoved the trinket into her satchel, feeling a sharp pang of pain in her wounded shoulder from the bolt worrying around inside of her. Shivering ever so slightly, she lunged forward, fingers outstretched to try and catch herself an insect... but as her body hit the ground awkwardly, her fingers caught nothing but air.

Shaken by the huge fingers that had just glanced over his small back, the canine began to run even quicker. Before long, he was entirely out of the vixen's reach. In an attempt to correct that, Kyobi went to pick herself up from the floor. But, before she

could, the front door of Aezher's front home burst open again. Through it clanked the forms of two heavily armored guards.

Things had suddenly become quite awkward.