

Like a Sandcastle

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 16

@dressupgeekout

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The rhythmic, limping clanks of nearby cranes, trucks and shipping containers woke Bisky at the preordained hour. She made several discoveries upon waking: she had fallen asleep on the couch (typical), she had drooled overnight (somewhat typical) and that her paw was tucked inside her pajama pants (...not uncommon). The saliva was cold on the edge of her lip, but her paw was warm and cozy. She blinked hard on purpose and wiped her face with her arm. “Helluva trip,” she whispered to herself.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the edge of the ocean as she prepared an easy, expedient breakfast of buttered cranberry muffin. She quickly heated up leftover coffee already in the pot and poured it into a small insulated canteen, which accompanied her lunch and the rest of her belongings. Within minutes, the bag Gardenia had made for her contained everything she’d need to survive for the rest of the day. She donned a cotton sweater to combat the seizing cold of dawn-time portside breezes, and the coffee she sipped along the way would also help to warm her up.

Bisky did not ordinarily drink coffee on the way to work — far better coffee could be brewed at Carmen’s — but today was different. Today was Marlsay Day. No time to slowly wake up in the early morning hours at Carmen’s. Granted, most of the Port Avenue festivities wouldn’t actually begin until midday, but all of the merchants and theater technicians and security guards surely needed their fix immediately. Gotta be on top of the game, all the time. Quite stressful for everybeast involved.

Even the bus on Port and Lomacquirage was more crowded than normal for a Saturday. Only two dollars and fifty shells remained on Bisky’s TranspoCard. She tried to remember to fill it up at some point. She managed to find a seat just fine, having boarded at the beginning of the 47 Northbound route, but still, what

the hell? Are all of these longshorebeasts seriously going downtown *right now*? Why?

No matter. The skunk retrieved the canteen from the bag and took a careful, exaggerated sip. To make room for her tail, Bisky always had to sit at the edge of the seat, which invariably made things more difficult. The zebra sitting next to her watched intently, conspicuously disapproving of Bisky's decision but nevertheless remaining vigilant in the event the bumpy ride would cause a scalding coffee rainstorm. Bisky didn't appreciate the zebra's expression, but she tried to redirect all her energy to the task at paw instead. The coffee was very black, very bitter and still very hot. This cup did not need to taste good. It just needed to taste like *attention*. Whatever it took to keep her alert and alive and cheerful through a day she knew she was going to dread.

The bus crawled its way up Port Avenue and *finally* made it to Laysan Street. No canteen mishaps on the bus, got that zebra to calm down a bit. That was a good sign, right?

But what was *not* a good sign was the line of animals already sprawling out of the door. Actually, not a line. A mob. Truly yikes. Did they really need *Carmen's* coffee, specifically? Why not the donut shop across the street? At any rate, the situation looked... dangerous. Clearly, it would be better to take the side entrance through The Garden. So she turned the corner instead of progressing up Port Avenue — where her muzzle immediately slammed into a wall of metal.

"The fuck?!" Bisky exclaimed as she rubbed her nose.

She took a step back and looked up. She had walked straight into a large semi-trailer — presumably hitched to a tractor, but she couldn't tell right away — which was too big to traverse through The Garden. She heard a light tinkling, a sort of sprinkling of metal and ceramic, above her head. Her eyes opened wide in horror once she realized that the adobe tiles had been ripped from the roof of *Carmen's*, and that of the barber on the other side of the alley, due to a prolonged, traumatic impact with the truck. It became clear to Bisky that the tractor cab was short enough to fit through the alley, but there certainly was not enough clearance for the wheeled shipping container in tow. There barely was sufficient clearance lengthwise, too — only a fraction of an inch of room left over. The side entrance to *Carmen's* was completely blocked, and the overhang had crumbled on the 18-

wheeler which managed to wedge itself into The Garden. At least the walls of the café and the barber were still intact.

The carnage had a poignant look in the young dawn light. She wanted to concentrate on the wreckage for a little bit longer, but no, Joyce could definitely use more help than ever before right about now.

She heard a bat accent and a pawful of other beasts approaching from up the street.

“...Aye-aye, but it’s not *me* alleyway...!”

“...Look, I don’t think this street meets municipal regulations...”

“...Well, then, that’s a good reason to *not* drive through it, am I right?! I’m right...” Joyce’s voice, but... barely. Raspier than normal. She sounded emotional. Distracted. Bisky furrowed her brow and bit her lip.

“...Cactus matey be sleepin’ at the wheel, lazin’ ’bout in the head, aye, on the day I find grey hair on me shoulder...!”

Finally, Bisky could see the owners of the voices through the line of Carmen’s customers. The bat restaurant got hit, too? Joyce noticed Bisky.

“Oh, thank the Maker, you’re here.” Wisps of pineapple-scented smoke trailed behind her profound expression of relief. “I thought you might have been splatted.”

“Skunk coffee lady! You are safe,” Kess from the bat restaurant announced.

“Good morning, Bisky!” Suey the wolf beamed. Ever the optimist.

The black panther, a uniformed Port Sokuit Public Works representative, was less grateful. He carried a clipboard in his paw and a white hard hat on his head, with holes cut open for his ears. “You also work at the café here?”

“Yeah...” Bisky started.

“Yes, officer, this is the associate I was telling you about,” Joyce interrupted.

“I’m not an officer. I’m an official.”

“Whatever!” Kess blurted, throwing her little wings up in the air.

The panther deliberately flicked his tail, unenthused. “You must be Hibiscus Damiat?”

“Her name is Hibiscus?” Suey thought out loud.

Bisky shivered. “I go by Bisky,” she retorted.

“The driver of this vehicle is in the custody of the authorities. My colleagues

from the Municipal Engineering Department are currently inside the facility, performing a routine inspection. In situations such as these, regulations require that we validate the structural integrity of the premises before we allow anybeast back inside.”

“Isn’t this great, Bisky?” Joyce asked. Her voice shook, her body quavered noticeably. She addressed Bisky but she wasn’t talking to her. “The nice gentlebeasts with the hard hats are making sure we’re safe!!” She put on an affected motherly tone. She inhaled deeply.

“All in a day’s work, ma’am...”

“Joyce...?” Bisky began.

Pineapple dumped out of Joyce’s mouth. “*Otherwise* the roof would cave in on us. Just like that! While preparing a pour-over, or busing a table, or taking a shit, ya never *fucking* know now, do ya? It—it could happen when you least expect! You depend so much on a *roof* over your *head*, and it’s supposed to *protect* you, but, no, *crunch*, the café decides to *eat* you. Or not even the café! Your own house! Your safe haven. Can you *imagine?! You* go home and then the ceiling just splats ya flat. Or the whole tower block is knocked over while you’re in it, j-just totally leveled, like a sandcastle.”

“Joyce.”

“Ya never have a *fucking* clue. You just *can’t* know! Oh, *watch out*, a drunk truck driver could just plow right into ya if they felt like it! Did ya know that?? You’re walking down the street and then they kill ya. You’re *dead!* For no other reason than the Maker’s *finished* with ya. Have fun living in *eternal fear* for the rest of your forsaken life! What’s the *actual point?* Ya don’t have even a *glimmer* of a chance!”

“Joyce!”

“Fuck me, *I hate pineapple!!*”

Joyce spat the Alondra from her mouth onto the sidewalk and curbstomped it with her boot, furiously swatting away the clouds.

The mob of customers and onlookers stared.

Kess had cowered under her own wings.

Suey had turned away.

The panther’s stoicism was faltering.

Bisky, though. Bisky bit her lip harder, furrowed her brow deeper. She focused on the squirrel. Joyce had her paws on her knees and looked straight down on the pulverized cigarette, like a god personally overlooking a blasphemer's execution. A pathetic wisp of smoke still arose. Her right boot's laces had come undone.

Bisky took a gentle step towards her and squatted slowly. To the onlookers, she seemed afraid to set off a bomb. But Bisky knew there wouldn't be another explosion. No, she did not fear that. She feared what she would see when her eyes finally met with Joyce's. She braced herself for the very real possibility of witnessing a sight impossible to unsee: her boss, her colleague, her friend who always had her shit under control, scowling in seething, resentful rage.

From her crouch, Bisky finally amassed the courage to tilt her head up. The sight was worse than expected. Much worse. She was crying. Someone—something—had smeared its brutish paw across Joyce's face and contorted it into an ugly, misshapen mass. Tears had carried black eyeliner across her light brown fur. One was desperately clinging to the edge of her nose, but in vain. It finally dripped onto the dying Alondra and put out the last embers with a soft sizzle.

Bisky gingerly brushed a lock of Joyce's hair and tucked it behind her ear. Joyce didn't budge. She sniffled. Bisky opened her survival bag, produced a tissue, and delicately patted the tear-streams dry, and whispered: "Captain."

This elicited a reaction from the squirrel. She hadn't been called "Captain" since the day before Bisky's father died, several weeks ago. She turned to face Bisky. "Heh. Babe," Joyce replied weakly.

Bisky stood up and offered a paw. "Let's go, Captain."