

TELLTALES

“That shouldn’t matter... *but*... I’ve been surprised before.”

As they got deeper and deeper into the humid, hot, black-leaf forests of Mu’siir, the telltales became decreasingly forthcoming.

“One thing’s for certain,” said Faern, the rainbow-furred raccoon. “Whoever fashioned this was tasked by the fates to waste our daylight and our holy water, or, he or she or it or zee was an imbecile.”

Kosk, the black-furred fennec fox, said, “Patience; Wisely, and Slow. It is Here. It will Serve as all the others have.”

The raccoon and the fox stood together at a fork in the old road. Presently, the raccoon with the rainbow fur stood on its hind legs, and tapped one clawed hand rapidly, rhythmically, against its grey leather jacket; It drew a dagger, twirled it about its digits once, twice, thrice, and a fourth time, as the other hand tapped, and then it dropped the dagger back into that dagger’s sheath, on the hip; Its other daggers (all three in sheaths sewn along the back) called out to their puppetmaster, their maestro, singing, “Dance with us, Dance with us; Let us dance, Let us dance;” The raccoon ignored the other daggers for the time being, and in fact stopped tapping its clawed rainbow hand against its grey jacket. The fennec fox, plumed in black fur, clad in a black cloak, helmeted with a black, wide-brimmed, and pointy-topped hat, ornamented with a necklace of black bones strung together on black cord, seeing with black eyes, smelling with a black nose, hearing with black ears, and standing against a forest of black leaves and black dirt, was invisible; She stood

on all fours, black pawpads standing on black dirt; The infinitesimal liminal space between her feet and the ground was as though four soft moons orbited a fertile planet in a universe without suns; She sniffed, and, by the smell of lilac flowers in the air, she was reassured that their work on the telltale was accomplishing *something*; Their work on the telltale was not, yet, sadly, accomplishing what they *hoped* for, but, even still, it was clear to the fennec fox that the stones laid out before them were not dead and unpetitionable things.

All around Faern and Kosk, the woods were not silent. The chirping of insects was a thick blanket over the rolling hills. The birds (singing, shouting, shouting, waiting,) came across as eager for all with ears to know them well.

Kosk, as much as possible, preferred to observe, and not to be observed; Earlier in their journey, when they had trekked across a desert and Eric had still been in their good company, Kosk had made her hair, cloak, hat, and so forth, to be the colors of the sands. Playing with the pigments of her personage was an easy form of magic, and truly quite fun.

Faern refused to consent to camouflage; It wanted to be seen by all with eyes.

There at the fork in the road that the raccoon and the fox had come to, there was of course the path behind them, and a path ahead veering left around trees and hills, and a different path ahead veering right around different trees and different hills; And, in the center of the available ways, there was this fork's telltale.

Telltales were things often found at forks in roads, in the many parts of the many worlds that had ever been populated by magically adept craftspeople; engineers; hobbyists; contractors; passionates; the bored. A telltale was like a guestbook, signed by all who passed by it; A telltale was, in effect, a collection of ghosts, each ghost sliced apart and its pieces categorized into different metaphorical drawers; To the magic user in the possession of even some intelligence and wits, it was nearly always a casual matter to arrive at a telltale, ask it a question, ("Who has passed through here in the last twelve days?" "Has a hatchling dragon called Eric spoken any messages in any language for a raccoon named Faern and a fox named Kosk?")

“Where did the hatchling dragon go next?”) and then draw out the appropriate ghost piece from the appropriate metaphorical drawer, and observe the ghost’s answer.

Ghosts spatially, not mortally; Echoes from those no longer here at this location, not Echoes from those no longer alive. (Well, with the telltales existing for decades to centuries to millennia to longer, it is true that a ghost could often be both.)

The telltales of the worlds could take any and all shapes: an idol on a plinth, a spinning wheel, a cone with a smooth and undecorated face, a cone with a face interrupted by recesses and colorful patterns, a mosaic, a model of a fortress, a fortress at a full scale or greater, a book, a sundial, a sword set into a stone, and so on.

The telltale before Faern and Kosk was a black boulder, at the top of which was a tiny black cup; The stone of the cup was of one piece with the rest of the boulder; The cup could hold very little liquid, about a thimble’s worth, before it would overflow down the sides of the boulder on which the cup stemmed. Nearby the boulder were three additional black stones, one positioned at each direction a road continued in; Each satellite was significantly smaller than the parent boulder, and each had a small recess on top of its otherwise domed figure.

The fox’s intuition, upon arriving, had been that she should pour a dram of her holy water into the cup atop the center boulder, ask which way Eric had gone from here, and then, she marked, she would witness the holy water drain from the cup’s bottom, witness the holy water fill in the recess of whichever of the satellite stones was closest to Eric’s road, and also, she marked, she would witness a ghost of the hatchling dragon passing through.

She was meticulous, though, and as best as possible, acted with foresight so as to rarely find regrets in her hindsights.

So, upon arriving at the telltale at the fork in the road, she had halted before getting too near to it, and had bid Faern to halt likewise. Standing at a distance, Kosk duplicated her eyes; spectral black orbs floated forth from her, one after another, and began circling around the telltale, swooping closer to squint for any details, sweeping outwards to examine the woods surrounding. The fennec fox then swept the place with

duplications of her black nose, taking in the scents of the dirt, the surface of each stone, the air generally, the foliage. At the end of her preliminary observations, she did a pass around the place with duplications of her ears as well, though the telltale proved to not be speaking anything at that present moment.

With all of this done, she arrived with a sound knowledge of the prior state of things; How all had been before any of her and Faern's efforts. And so, when, with a spectral hand, she had poured from a vial a dram of her holy water into the cup atop the black boulder, she knew very precisely what effects the action had not had, and had had. The holy water had *not* drained from the cup and appeared in the recess atop a satellite rock; The satellite rocks *had* each gained a perfume of lilac; Kosk was certain of it; No such smell had been near here in her preliminary observation, and only upon adding the holy water to the cup had the scent of lilac flowers arrived.

The fennec fox went on to try various other acts, one of which entailed pouring the holy water into the recesses of the stones and asking her questions, another of which entailed dashing the holy water against the boulder's side and commanding the boulder to reveal any who had passed through here of late. Faern pitched in an effort occasionally, the most bawdy of which, and, sadly, also the most likely to have worked, was standing atop the boulder and pissing into the cup, after it had first slurped out the holy water that had been in the cup prior, and had rubbed the inside surface of the cup dry with a finger as best as it could.

Pissing into the cup had *not* revealed which of the ways Eric had gone from here, though it *had*, like the first use of the holy water, re-intensified the scent of lilac in the area.

The fennec fox's most reliable connection to magic was in the use of symbols. She could do much with her thoughts or with small utterances, but she had first learned by way of symbols literally drawn, and found them to be very dependable. She pawed symbols into the dirt before the telltale, used dirt to draw marks upon the boulder itself, but even exploring it this way for some time, the telltale remained shut off from her inquiries.

As the sky overhead was dimming noticeably, the rainbow-furred raccoon was becoming quite noticeably irritated with their lack of progress.

FAERN

Maybe this one was built in a fitful tantrum of romance, and will only open to those seeking true love or already possessed by it.

KOSK

That shouldn't matter... *but*... I've been surprised before.

FAERN

One thing's for certain: Whoever fashioned this was tasked by the fates to waste our daylight and our holy water, or, he or she or it or zee was an imbecile.

KOSK

Patience; Wisely, and Slow. It is Here. It will Serve as all the others have.

FAERN

Is it like the others, for a fact? Do we know for a fact that this isn't just the beginnings of a telltale?

KOSK

The beginnings?

FAERN

Ay me, it's a thousand and ten years ago, I'm an enterprising little apprentice I am, let me spread paste onto the foot of this cup and stick it to this boulder, oh that's very pretty, now to design the enchantment, oh bugger oh bugger oh bugger this enchantment business is puzzling, let me go ask daddy how it is that I make a telltale again, oh what's this tickle in my chest? Cardiac arrest, at my tender age? And even after I ate all of my peas and cabbage? Oh, what a woeful fate it is to journey to the grave so early due to a hereditary condition, OH I fall to the ground now and perish, rather than finishing my very first telltale, OHHH, AGGGGKKKK, GAHHHHKKKKK, AAAAAGGGGGHHHHHHKKKKKKKKK.

KOSK

I see.

FAERN

He then writhes in agony for twenty minutes but no one is near enough to hear his screams for help, and then he dies.

KOSK

I see.

FAERN

His telltale was begun, he had put the farting cup on the shitting rock, but he never actually made them more than a cup on top of a rock.

KOSK

I see what you mean by the beginnings.

FAERN

You sound unmoved by the theory.

KOSK

There is an enchantment here for a surety. We know that when liquid is placed into the cup, the surrounding rocks begin to smell of lilac.

FAERN

Oh well I am so very sorry to have left that fact out of my theory, let me begin again. This time I will take it into account. Ay me, it's a thousand and ten years ago, I'm an enterprising little apprentice I am, here I am setting this cup on this boulder, that looks very nice, this will be a very good telltale I'm sure of it, and now to design the enchantment, oh bugger I've bollocksed it to pieces and done the enchantment that makes the surrounding rocks smell of lilac when a raccoon pisses into the cup or when a fox pours in holy water, let me go ask daddy how it is that I make a telltale again, oh what's this tickle in my chest, cardiac arrest at my tender age, oh, oh, ack, gahk, agghk, I now writhe on the ground in agony for twenty minutes, and die having intended to make a telltale, but in fact I only got as far as making a set of rocks that smell of lilac when liquid is placed into a cup.

KOSK

The theory has merit.

FAERN

Shall we pick a way, and with luck find out at the next telltale proper that we are indeed still in pursuit of our truant hatchling, or, failing luck, find out that we are in fact in flight from our truant hatchling dragon, and double back so that we may arrive here again and take the only path remaining, which, by necessity, will bring us closer back to the hatchling's company?

KOSK

A proper telltale or not, many things speak; I suspect I can find an answer at this fork, by this same time tomorrow.

FAERN

Tomorrow! Make it a week and I would set up my tent! A year and I would build a hut! A decade and I would erect here a cozy home of bricks! Tomorrow is only enough time to cause me pain, knowing the trail cools by the minute.

KOSK

Someone approaches.

FAERN

Yea, verily.

As the silver rabbit approached, Kosk walked off to stand along the edge of the woods. Faern paced about, making obscene remarks to itself.

FAERN

Go in the direction of the fucking cup? What sense in the name of all of the gods and their whores up and down and left and right does that make? Do you want me to sprout wings and fly, you stupid map? Enough. I won't be the hapless little plaything of some little piece of paper. Map o mine, I give you death.

With that, Faern clapped its claws together, and caused a very large ball of fire to appear in the air before itself. The bulk of the fire went away almost instantly, and left a ring of grass burning red at foot. Faern began stomping at the ring. As the silver rabbit arrived, the last of the glowing blades were going out.

RUESUFF

If you'd kept the map a moment longer, I could've lent another pair of eyes to figuring it out.

FAERN

Oh!

The rainbow-furred raccoon brushed some bits of ash off of its grey jacket, and turned to face the new company.

FAERN

No, good swift one, I warrant that map had been seen quite enough. Less of a map and more of a list of riddles.

RUESUFF

Oh, a list of riddles could have been great fun. Do you know of the orange valley tavern? I was on my way there.

FAERN

A tavern is hereabouts? Ale? Beds? Strangers?

RUESUFF

Yeah.

FAERN

Oh swift one, how I love thee! Though the day waxes dark, your presence brightens all that I see! Truly I have never known love until now, and I only wonder, whither did Eric go from here, this I ask, only so that I can go tell him of my newfound love!

With a gaping grin and sparkling eyes, Faern looked to the boulder with the cup of piss, and paused, awaiting a response.

The fixture continued to smell faintly of lilac, and birds nearby continued in their conversations, but no ghostly image of a hatchling dragon appeared to show which way he had walked.

Faern shrugged, and said, "Worth a shot. Maybe it can tell if someone is faking."

Ruesuff asked, "Trying to use this old thing? The ah..." Ruesuff stood on his hind feet, and swiped a front foot in the boulder's direction.

Faern conjured a flame in its claws, and threw it at the boulder. The fire snuffed itself against the boulder's side. "Telltale," Faern said. "Do you know how it works?" Then it also

turned and called out into the black woods, “KOSK! I SAY, KOSK, COME MEET THE LOCALS! THIS ONE IS A BIT BLAND, I THINK, BUT IT PROMISES ALE IF WE FOLLOW IT!”

Kosk cringed from head to toe at Faern openly bullying the rabbit—even if she did not disagree, from hearing the conversation thus far, that the rabbit did not seem to be all too much for conversation. In their travels so far, the locals of any given place were often very strongly hit or miss for conversation, it seemed; Some had all of the skills of listening and chiming in and twisting ideas around with cunning and good humor and novel insights and there seemed to be a fire burning within them, knowledges and passions that wished to spread, wished to increase to greater intensities by sharing the company of others with great knowledges and passions; Other locals, when Faern and Kosk talked with them, seemed in no way vile, but also in no way interesting. The rabbit seemed very much the kindly disinteresting sort, already at the outer limits of his skill to make small talk; To Kosk, this left the rabbit as someone to share agreeable politenesses with; To Faern, this left the rabbit as a blank canvas on which to paint absurdities, until such a time as Kosk was able to come in and help the poor thing.

Kosk quietly padded along the edge of the woods, and then hid herself behind a tree, and waited, with the intent of emerging, in a moment, as though just arriving when Faern had called.

Ruesuff, in reply to being asked if he knew how to work the telltale, explained, “I only come through here to get to and from the tavern, and sometimes to visit Lilin.”

Faern bounded up to Ruesuff on all fours and then stood upright beside him, threw an arm around the standing rabbit’s shoulders, and said, “Well, that makes three of us that don’t know how to use it, which is really no better and no worse than when it was just two of us—me and Kosk—who didn’t have a clue.” Projecting its voice to the boulder, the raccoon berated the stones, “Do you work in threes, is that it? Three guests before you, three rocks around you, three liquids all from my body I’ll fill your cup with, three miners’ instruments I’ll use to make you into powder, three breaths after you’re gone is the time that it

will take before all in the world will have forgotten you were ever here—do THREES satisfy you, oh telltale?”

Kosk emerged from behind the tree, her fur brown, darker on the back and lighter on the chest, as unremarkable a presentation of countershading as she could get it, without the benefit of spending an hour in front of a mirror fussing over the details. Her hat she had changed to a greenish drab, her necklace of bones off-white, her nose and the insides of her ears pink, her eyes—she had forgotten her eyes! As she walked towards the rabbit and the raccoon, she blinked rapidly; her eyes, just seconds ago uninterrupted black, filled in with big brown irises.

She stooped her head and arranged the placement of her paws in a curtsy, and said, “Charmed, and well met.”

The silver rabbit got down on all fours again, and said, “Hello, you’re Kosk?”

“Yes, and this raccoon, if it hasn’t introduced itself, is Faern.”

Faern remarked, “We were getting to introductions.”

“My name is Ruesuff.”

“A pleasure, Ruesuff.”

Faern asked, “That way to the tavern?”

“Yeah, that way about a quarter of a mile, and then on the right side of the path, there’s a trail that leads down a hill, and that hill is the orange valley, that the tavern is in.”

“Then let us go, we brave three! Noble Ruesuff the bravest of all! With one whisker, Brave Ruesuff lifts kits out of wells; With swift hops, Brave Ruesuff rescues cubs from burning burrows; When there is a brawl, Brave Ruesuff defends the peace—AH!”

To shut up the raccoon’s barrage, Kosk had used a spectral hand, two fingers extended, to squarely give the raccoon’s tailhole a jab.

Faern immediately turned its head and spit a glob of fire at the fennec fox; The fennec fox bowed her head, and the fire hit her hat, and was snuffed. While the rabbit was looking at her and not Faern, she took a moment to have a spectral hand stick a finger in the raccoon’s ear, and then to have another slap the raccoon’s behind.

“Kosk, I am going to hatefuck your carcass tonight, okay?”

“It jokes,” Kosk said to Ruesuff.

Faern, to Ruesuff, said, “It can joke and bite simultaneously.”

“Well, um, the tavern is this way, if you two want to go to it.”

Indeed, the three proceeded onward, taking the left fork in the road. They walked for about a quarter of a mile, passing over a couple of bridges along the way, and then took a footpath which connected to road’s righthand side. Down the footpath the three walked, and soon, a tavern could be seen in the valley ahead, warm lanterns lighting wood walls and stone chimneys.

Duluth, Minnesota

JANE

And THAT... is where we will close for tonight.

TEAGAN

Bravo! We accomplished pretty much nothing.

JANE

You asked me to run it by the book, I am running it by the book.

In-Universe, Earlier

FAERN

Ah!

KOSK

Stay, Stay; Calmly, Calmly.

ERIC

No, wait, do that to it again.

KOSK

Hush, Eric; Calmness, Calmness; Big breaths.

On their way out of the port town that morning, Faern had purchased a pair of grey leather boots.

Now, after a day of hiking in them—forced to walk upright the entire way, and feet fitting oddly atop the soles—the raccoon had collapsed suddenly on the trail, and been unable to stand again; Its legs, back, and most of all its feet, were stuck curled inwards; Carefully, Kosk had used her spectral hands to lift the raccoon to a nearby pond; So, now, the raccoon laid floating on its back at the edge of a pond, vile boots up on the shore,

accompanied in the water by a green-coated fennec fox, and a blue-scaled hatchling dragon. By the fox's magic, no insects pestered them, and by the dragon's magic, the water around the raccoon was warmed to a very pleasant, relaxing degree of heat.

As the raccoon floated on its back, the fox's spectral hands did gentle work; Massaging, and carefully doing what she could to help the raccoon through recovering. When the raccoon tensed or gasped, she minded the pain, and did not provoke it.

"Stay, Stay; Calmly, Calmly..."

In time, Eric and Faern both fell asleep.

Gently with her many hands, Kosk lifted Faern out of the water and laid the raccoon on the shore.

In the morning when she stretched and lifted her head, she saw that Eric was most of the way done with turning the tall boots into a jacket.

Duluth, Minnesota

Teagan felt like someday she was going to look back on it and miss hanging out on Lidia's roof. It was nighttime, and hot. Lidia was sitting cross-legged, while Teagan was lying face down, head towards the edge of the roof, like she was going headfirst down a slide; Teagan was covered in sweat, and the grit of the shingles pressed into her arms, and in her mind she kept replaying feelings—tactile, physical feelings—sensations—from about two minutes ago, when she and Lidia had just made out for the second time ever. That had been on the other side of the roof, on the slope that faced the back yard.

Lidia said, "I'm not gonna lie, I tried picturing you as a dog for some of that."

Teagan felt her cheeks fill with embarrassed blood. "Wow. Of course you did. And?"

Lidia used a finger to toy with the edge of Teagan's Blue's Clues t-shirt's sleeve, and said, "I was enjoying you as a dog a lot, but then I was like, why stop at that, you could be a cute furry who just got disowned because she told her parents she thinks she might be gay, and I found you on the street and gave you a couch to crash on for a while, and now you're stuck in this random hot bitch's house—I'm also a furry for this—"

“Of course.”

Lidia went on, “and you have all of these conflicting feelings about wanting to show your gratitude to this random hot bitch—who is me, I think you’re a yellow lab and I’m a cheetah—but anyways, you want to show your gratitude to this random hot bitch, but you don’t want to make it weird, and you also don’t want to risk getting kicked out and being homeless again, even though you kind of are homeless cuz it’s not like you actually live here, but you do highkey want to fuck this hot cheetah, and you kind of feel sometimes like she’s flirting with you but you can’t tell?”

“And then we make out,” Teagan finished.

“Yeah. But then I was like, why stop at furies either, I could imagine you as a dragoness.”

“Uh huh.”

“But then dragoness wasn’t as hot, and then I was like ‘I should stop thinking about all of this’ and then you were Teagan again. And I was like, I like Teagan, this is new to me still, humans, and I should freaking pay attention and enjoy it for what it is. And I did enjoy it. Five stars. Ten out of ten.”

A while ago when Teagan and Lidia were driving to a thrift store, Lidia had been like, “What’s one thing I don’t know about you. Like, give me a BOMBSHELL, right now.”

Teagan thought of it instantly, and the two of them then drove in silence for a little while, before Lidia was like,

“Cmon, say it.”

And Teagan admitted, “I used to write erotic Blue’s Clues fanfiction.”

And Lidia was like, “GIRL.” And then banging on the steering wheel to punctuate her words she was like “WHAT. THE. FUCK. I. D-M. YOU. E-VERY. DAY. ABOUT HOW MUCH I’M DAYDREAMING. OF. DOGS. FUCKING. ME. SILL-Y. I. D-M. YOU. ABOUT HOW FUCKED UP I AM ABOUT MARCUS. I. D-M. YOU. ABOUT ZOOPHILE HOCUS POCUS. HIJINKS. THOUGHTS. AND VARIOUS ZOOPHILE MUSINGS. AND I AM ONLY JUST NOW HEARING. YOU. YOOOOUUUU. USED. TO. WRITE. BLUE’S. CLUES. FAN. FIC-TION. THIS—wait, featuring Blue?”

“Yeah usually.”

“THIS. IS. ACTUALLY. INSANE. WHAT. THEEEEE” (for theeeee she drummed repeatedly on the steering wheel with both hands) “FUCK. GIRL. DO. DOGS. MAKE. YOUR. PUSSAY. AS. WET. AS. THEY. MAKE. MINE. E-VER-Y. NIGHT. WHEN. I. TOUCH. MYSELF. WITH. ZOOPHILIC. INTENT.”

“I mean, I’ve been there with Blue.”

“GIRL. THAT IS A-MA-ZING. AND I. APPRECIATE. HEARING. THAT.”

Marcus had been Lidia’s soulmate. A dobermann.

And anyways Lidia ordered Teagan a Blue’s Clues shirt online and gave it to her, and Teagan wore it a lot.

There on the roof, after their second time making out, Teagan was like, “Do you think Kosk and Faern would ever start dating?”

And Lidia said, “I think the way it is with them is that everyone thinks they’re secretly fucking, and they encourage the allegations, but actually they have never fucked and never will and they are not even that good of friends.”

And Teagan said, “As Faern: I agree completely. I wasn’t sure if Kosk saw it the same way.”

Lidia slapped Teagan’s arm, and then said, “Mosquito,” and then wiped Teagan’s slapped arm with her hand, and then said, “Kosk is not stupid. She very much sees Faern as... something between an obligation, and a really useful killer robot.”

“Yesssssss. That’s great.”

“She would actually be relieved if it finally died,” Lidia said. “She would not avenge you.”

Teagan said, “Faern would avenge Kosk in a blaze of glory like the multiverse has never seen before and it would never get her out of its mind for as long as it lived.”

In-Universe, at some point

ERIC

I miss him.

KOSK

Tell me about him again.

Eric and Kosk laid in the midst of a wide open field, late into an Autumn night.

Eric, like most dragons, was not originally from this world, but incarnated here whilst midway through living a different life.

ERIC

He had eyes like angels' haloes, and the cutest flopsy ears...

In-Universe, at some point

Faern had never felt better in its entire life; Throat sore from intense panting and muscles screaming from physical exhaustion; The raccoon laid floating on its back in a hot pool of dragon blood; So far down in the depths of these caves, Faern could see its own breath as it laid there, floating, panting, its body overheating in the blood, the fur on its face freezing, literally stiffening with ice crystals, in the cold.

Kosk, from some unseen vantage elsewhere in the cave, summoned eleven spectral spears, and thrustured them at various calculated locations in the chamber's ceiling.

An enormous portion of the ceiling fell, and crushed the dragon's head, making sure that she was truly done with.

As the portion of the ceiling collided with the dragon and ground, Kosk created temporary barriers around her own fennec ears and around the raccoon's ears, to prevent the two of them from being deafened by the sound.

Kosk and Faern were still catching their breath again when they saw that an egg was beginning to emerge from the dragon's cloaca.

In Another Universe, Much Longer Ago

Blue voiced, "Bow, bowwww," as Mr Salt grinded his glass body up and down the outside of her pussy, his metal top poking at the pit of her tummy with every upwards movement, getting salt in her soft little strands of blue hair. Blue wrapped her mouth over Mrs Pepper again, the shaker's glass body a nice

cool feeling against her slobbery jowls, the taste of pepper getting onto her tongue.

Mr Salt released an intensely pleased moan as he grinded, and said, “Blue... you feel wonderful.” He began pressing on her vulva with his hands.

Mrs Pepper slid out of Blue’s mouth, and, stroking through the hair on the outside of Blue’s jowls with her hands, said, “I cannot believe how arousing this is, the two of us having sex with this dog together. I am glad we broke our promise to Mailbox, that someday we could help him lose his virginity by allowing *him* to be our first ever third. Imagine that we almost said no to *this*, and for what, just to make him happy?”

Blue held Mr Salt tight against her canine body.

In Another Other Universe, A While Later Than The Blue’s Clues One

Lidia added another 9x9 set of diamond blocks to the wall of the passageway that she was working on. Her whole subterranean base was a display of wealth and waste.

She had said to Jane in text chat at one point, “It’s all in tribute to him.”

Jane had said, “I can see it. That makes sense.”

Duluth, Minnesota, Presently

Jane looked up from the notes that were hidden behind her GM screen, and said, “When we left off, Faern and Kosk, along with a silver rabbit named Ruesuff, were in the orange valley, bound for the orange valley tavern. The tavern had just come into sight, with its cozy exterior decor, a few circular glass windows, some chimneys with thin lines of smoke billowing out, birds chirping and flitting around on the branches of the trees outside. The sunlight is not yet gone for the day, but it will be definitively nighttime before too much longer.”

In-Universe

Kosk said to Faern, when they were nearly at the orange valley tavern's front door, "None of your side quests."

Faern answered, "Above all, I am in need of a good night's sleep."

Kosk, Faern, and Ruesuff entered the orange valley tavern through the front door.

SOMEONE AT A TABLE MID CONVERSATION

A hard day thanks to—

With a series of cartwheels and tumbles, Faern landed itself in the one remaining empty chair with the other patrons at the table.

FAERN

When I'm having a rough day at work, I always imagine an abusive mate is waiting for me at home, and that it's my one and only hope to spend as long as possible at work before having to get back to being put through it, emotionally, physically, I really get imaginative. Name's Faern. If you've got a problem, I will fight it, fuck it, or find it out, or some combinations of the above, for eligible customers.

SOMEONE AT THE TABLE

A problemsolver, you say you are—

The innkeeper, a dire wasp named Locke, interrupted from behind the bar.

INNKEEPER LOCKE

Miller Argus, does this one truly look to you like it's the type to want to help you clear out your grandmother's knickknacks? The O'Maisa girls are asking a fair price, and you won't find that you'll get this one to help you for any less.

Kosk, immediately noticing that Locke had used Faern's correct pronouns, it/its, without such a thing having come up

yet, began covertly sensing at the dire wasp, for any signs of magic.

Kosk got her answer very promptly, when the innkeeper's voice appeared directly in her head, saying, "We can talk of magic and telltales if you wish."

Kosk thought her response: "I do wish. I also hope you'll understand if quite gruesome images appear in my mind's eye, or that of my companion; If I see myself slitting the throats of all at this inn, it is not because I find it likely to happen, or desirable; it is merely one eventuality that one thinks about."

The dire wasp, facing the countershaded fennec from behind the bar, nodded.

Kosk went on: "I hope you will also understand if I endeavor to put up barriers."

The dire wasp said into her thoughts: "I would find it quite understandable, and indeed a commonality from visitors adept in the magical arts. For my part, I will make no concerted effort to pry, and I anticipate your barriers will be effective. If you wish for a sample of any of our food or drink offerings, I can preview it for you through this avenue."

Kosk offered a response freely in her thoughts: "Really! That is delightful! What is your favorite drink, and what is one you think would be my favorite, and what is one you think Faern would like?"

The fennec fox, while still standing nearby the front door, her mouth closed, and having not drank of anything inside of the inn thus far, felt a taste form on her tongue: something *very* sweet, much like a sugary syrup, with notes of apple. Her mouth watered, and she felt a shiver resonate through herself. That taste went away—seemed, in fact, washed away, as though she had just rinsed her mouth out with bubbles, though again, her mouth still remained closed.

That had been Locke's favorite drink, then. Next, for a drink that Locke thought would be Kosk's favorite, came a very bitter tasting beer; *exceptionally* bitter; *sour*, one might say, especially just after the previous sugary taste.

That taste, too, washed away.

Kosk waited for the last taste, something that would be Faern's favorite.

By this time, Faern itself was enmeshed in a card game with the others at its table. Kosk realized that she was unsure as to whether this card game had already been taking place, or if Faern had spurred it to happen. Which, subsequently, made her realize that she had not yet gone through her typical procedure, of thoroughly investigating any place that she was newly arriving at. She would have to do so, momentarily.

She thought to the dire wasp: "Well? For Faern's drink?"

Locke answered: "You would enjoy your stay better if I did not tell you, and instead, that knowledge from Faern's mind remains unknown to you."

"Give me the taste."

The taste of vomit mixed with urine appeared on Kosk's tongue.

Kosk fainted.

When the fennec awoke, she was seated at a booth, that was tucked into one corner of the inn's common room. Faern was seated beside her; she on the innermore side of the bench, against the wall, and it on the outtermore side of the bench. On the table before the two of them were two large cups of water, hers still full, its nearly empty.

Kosk reflected on the taste again, and with no time to think as she felt a violent heave coming on, she snatched Faern's cup, and a second later was throwing up into it.

"Rude," Faern said.

"You owe me," Kosk said, as she brought the cup below the table. She began covertly pissing into it, masking the sound from the other patrons using her magic, and also magically cleaning any that missed. She set the cup of vomit and urine on the table in front of Faern.

"Have you utterly lost your mind?" Faern asked.

"Drink up. And thank the psionic innkeeper."

LOCKE

Truly, I wish it hadn't happened.

FAERN

Huh.

Faern lifted up the cup and started taking big gulps.

Kosk, keeping up her magic to muffle sounds from the other patrons, doubled over against the table, dry heaving.

Faern took little, thoughtful, careful sips as it stared at her.

Soon Kosk could endure the raccoon's company no more, and left the booth, getting out by crawling under the table past the raccoon's legs. With no energy to give the commonroom a thorough examination like she wanted to, and with no energy to put up barriers towards the dire wasp in the slightest—she was dizzy, nauseous, and could barely keep a train of thought going—she went to the bar counter, and said aloud to the dire wasp, “We travel in pursuit of a friend and cannot figure out the nearby telltale. It has been a long day, and.”

The dire wasp answered, aloud, “Rooms with beds are down this hall. Any door that is open is available, your lodging is free as a token of my apologies. For the telltale, I will explain more tomorrow, but be assured I know how to use it, and we should plan to awaken very early for the best odds of it working.”

“Thank you.”

“Shall I bar Faern from retiring to the same room as you tonight?”

“Oh I don't care. Wait. Yes, actually. Yes.”

Kosk shambled down the hall that Locke had indicated, stumbled into an open door, kicked it shut behind herself, collapsed onto a bed, and fell asleep immediately.

The next morning, pre-dawn, Kosk and Faern both awoke, and at the same time, exited their rooms, which were opposite one another in the hall: there, across the hall, they met one another's eyes, by the light of a lantern that sat on a small table nearby.

KOSK

You're gross.

FAERN

You're scrumptious.

KOSK

Ugh.

FAERN

I didn't *ask* you to actually do any of that. I was literally never going to bring up the idea for as long as I lived.

KOSK

Well. Sometimes things come to light anyways. Now we know.

FAERN

Know... what exactly?

KOSK

That you're gross.

LOCKE

Ahem. If you're both up, we should begin at once to the telltale. We will want to be there at or before sunrise, ideally.

The three left the orange valley tavern together, and traversed the trail through the black forest, in the nighttime. Each of the three kept nearby them a small flame of their own conjuring. Here and there in the woods, other tiny fires swooped through the treetops—some of the birds kept conjured fires as well.

LOCKE

I am going to place a small amount of water into the cup atop the rock that stands in the center of this fork in the road. The air will smell of lilac. Find a comfortable way to sit or lie down, as we will then have to remain still for some time; You may breathe, and adjust your seating a little if you are uncomfortable, but we must not make any hasty movements, and it is paramount we not make any noises even so loud as speaking. We should put away our flames now, as well, before we get there. When some time has passed, with these instructions followed, the telltale will arrive, and you may speak with it, and ask it your questions.

When the black fennec, the rainbow raccoon, and the dire wasp arrived back at the fork in the road, the sky was just beginning to illuminate with the morning sun.

The dire wasp waved a spindly arm over the cup that was atop the stone, and conjured a trickle of water to fall into the cup. Kosk nested down in a ball at the foot of the boulder, while Faern sat leaning back against the boulder.

The morning progressed along, as the birds chirped, and the sky overhead brightened, bit by bit. Calmly, calmly, Kosk and

Faern both remained as they were, taking slow, full breaths, and feeling the wind occasionally ruffle their fur the slightest bit.

Eventually, a red bird flew down from the black forest, and stood before the fennec and the raccoon.

Kosk asked, “When a hatchling dragon passed through here the other day, which way did he go?”

The red bird hopped in place, and turned, and was facing the path that Kosk and Faern had yet to explore—not the way they had come originally, and not the way to the orange valley tavern, but the remaining way. Along with the red bird’s pointing, a ghostly image of a green hatchling dragon could be seen walking, exiting the fork in that direction.

Green. Not blue. This was not Eric.

Faern asked, “Has a blue hatchling dragon passed through here, that you have ever seen?”

The red bird hopped in place, and then buried their beak down into the black grass at foot.

“Oh?” Kosk asked. “Then... hm. What times has a fox or a raccoon passed through here?”

The fork became dense with ghostly images passing through, but among the crowd, Kosk was indeed able to spot herself and Faern, doing as they had done both yesterday and even earlier today.

Kosk remarked, “Are we to deduce, then, that Eric never in fact made it to this telltale?”

Kosk and Faern, with Locke’s help, and the help of many friendly birds, began to sweep the black forest, in the direction the fox and the raccoon had come from.

Eventually, a bird excitedly flew to where the fox and the raccoon were searching, and loudly chirped, “I found him! I found him! I’ve never seen anything so blue!”

Following after the bird through the woods, over black hills and around many trees and areas of dense bushes, the party arrived at a large blue egg resting against a tree.

FAERN

Oh.

KOSK

Dragons do have a slippery relationship to ages. I had heard of a coarse and wizened dragon fleeing to new, fresh environs, and appearing gay and youthful again. This is the first dragon *I* know of to slip from hatchling back into his shell.

Right at that moment, the shell began to crack, and soon enough, Eric spilled forth from his shell once again. He beheld Kosk and Faern standing before him.

ERIC

I was with him again.

The re-hatched dragon began to sob.

ERIC

I was chasing after visions of him until I came here, and fell asleep. And then I was back home again, WITH HIM again. One day. One day, I got to spend back there again, WITH HIM, and now I'm back here again.

The blue dragon grabbed at pieces of his shell, and feebly tried to put them back onto himself.

Duluth, Minnesota

JANE

And THAT... is where we will close for tonight. Bravo, you two. Lidia, you spotted the innkeeper was psionic IMMEDIATELY, you got that way, way sooner than the book thought anyone would, there were clues ALL over the tavern that we did not need ANY of, amazing.

TEAGAN

So, IF you can tell us now, what WAS the rule with the telltale?

JANE

Get ready, I am going to read this from the book directly: For this telltale to work, the player must first place an offering suitable for a bird into the cup, such as a splash of water or a morsel of food, and then wait in place for one continuous hour, not making any startling noises or sudden movements. The clearing will smell of lilac for one hour after anything is placed into the cup. The telltale is not the cup itself, or any of the stones, but is a red bird who remains within a 2 mile radius of the cup. If there is a startling noise or sudden movement in the clearing, the bird will not approach until the dawn of the next day. For the bird to have any reason to appear, the player must be visible to the bird. If the party is arriving without prior knowledge of what has transpired in the clearing throughout the day already, make a percentile roll to determine if the bird has already been startled: the odds begin at 0% at dawn, and for every full hour of daylight that has passed, the odds increase by 3% that the bird has been startled prior to the party's arrival.

LIDIA

Oh my GOD.

TEAGAN

Thanks I hate it.

JANE

I was like OH NO, are they going to spend weeks on this? Is this actually just how the adventure ends, even? But you two nailed it today.

Madison, Wisconsin

Mattie and Shayna do not get high and watch cartoons together sometimes. Shayna does not ever explain to Mattie Rocky Horror. Mattie does not ever say to Shayna, "This is probably a crazy idea, but do you want to try to rent a house together?" Shayna doesn't get food poisoning when Mattie makes both of them dinner for the first time, and doesn't spend hours throwing up, and then hours lying in bed with Mattie, and Mattie is feeling like an asshole and Shayna is feeling like a half-

zombie, under comfy blankets, trying to just keep every sensory experience pleasant but not overwhelming.

Mattie and Shayna do not play card games and shoot the shit. Mattie and Shayna do not ever get really into the weeds of discussing LOTR and Star Wars and Star Trek and Yu-Gi-Oh and MLP and different fantasy worlds like that, talking about what is confirmed canon, what is fanon, what is kind of technically only ever expounded upon in the fanon but is really strongly implied to exist from the stuff that's openly shown in the canon. Mattie does not ever, based on some random tangent from a conversation with Shayna, get soil and clay pots, and start gardening. Shayna does not ever taste a weirdly delicious, huge green pepper from Mattie's garden. Mattie does not ever attend a funeral with Shayna for emotional support, and then listen and play along as Shayna tells stories reminiscing on the drive home. Mattie and Shayna are never driving together and pass by a German Shepherd and Mattie is like "Would" and Shayna is like "Oh my GOD, pull over I will actually ask the owner," and Mattie doesn't pull over because Shayna actually would ask the owner. Mattie and Shayna do not know that their birthdays are two days apart, which isn't anything that has any particular significance, but like, that's the kind of thing you *could* know about somebody else, if their birthday was two days apart from yours.

Mattie and Shayna do not wear zetas on their accessories, or any shirts with anthropomorphic characters on them, or anything with pawprints. Mattie and Shayna do not go online looking for new friends. On the rare occasions that one of Mattie's friends makes a joke about bestiality, Mattie does not laugh, and does not expand upon the joke. The one time one of Shayna's friends was talking about some news story about a man being caught having sex with a dog, Shayna did not suggest that the news might not have entirely represented the story fairly.

Mattie and Shayna do not find out that one another are zoophiles. Mattie and Shayna do not have a conversation out loud, with anyone, for their entire lives, about zoophilia, or about the depth of the relationships that each of them had with their respective family dogs growing up. Mattie and Shayna do

not ever think of one another as anything more than someone who is basically a stranger who they went to high school with back when they were teenagers, and they sat in some of the same classes together. Mattie and Shayna do not do more than nod and say nothing when they pass by each other some days in the grocery store.

Duluth, Minnesota

Teagan and Lidia were lying in Lidia's bed together. Teagan had surrendered her phone to Lidia, with her old erotic Blue's Clues fanfiction pulled up. She had read snippets of it to Lidia before, carefully selected excerpts, but this was the first time Teagan was allowing free range access. Teagan laid with her head buried against Lidia's side, against the fabric of Lidia's shirt, as Lidia was reading.

Lidia eventually commented, "Ohhhh my god you so get it. This is zooey as hell."

"Yeah I mean, zooey, but also just a fixation I had on a show that happened to be about a dog."

"Well, the way that you write your dogcore aesthetic is very pleasing to me."

"Thank you."

Teagan wrapped her arms around Lidia's middle, having to burrow one arm between Lidia's underside and the bedsheets, and gave her favorite zoophile a hug.

Teagan in all honesty couldn't even remember when she learned that Lidia was a zoophile. She did vaguely remember the first time Lidia had used that word, "zoophile," in a text chat, and she had selected the text, and pasted it into Google, and been like, "Oh, I didn't know there was a word for that," but like, sure, of course Lidia was that. She remembered the time like a year after that that she was sleeping over and saw Lidia and Marcus kiss, and it clicked that they were kiss-kissing, but that wasn't like, surprising as far as "Lidia is a zoophile," it was surprising as far as "Lidia has a BOYFRIEND?"

Lidia turned on the bed towards Teagan, and licked Teagan's face in one long trail, starting at the chin, going up past the lips and over a cheek, around the nose, really pressing in against the

tear duct while passing by the eye, up over the eyebrow, and ended the lick with a kiss to Teagan's forehead.

Lidia then looked into Teagan's eyes for a while, and eventually said, "You're really fun to spend time with, in character and out."

"Oh my gosh, that's so nice. You too."

Lidia then requested, "Tell me the DETAILS of who is fucking who in Blue's Clues and what all of their fucked up kinks are."

"Oh my god. Okay, so..."

Teagan and Lidia stayed up really, really late, talking.