

Any Other Way

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 7

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May 26, 2020

Her own house was on fire, and *her* family was on the brink of death, not anyone else's. Her violin had already disintegrated to ash. The place was filled with an impenetrable, asphyxiating smoke. Her parents had already managed to escape, and Forest leaped out of the window to safety just in the nick of time—but suddenly, much of the second story with its burgundy carpet had collapsed and blocked her way out. The foyer was about to grill and devour her for lunch. The smoke was so thick that it muted her screams, but she could still hear her little brother's desperate, futile pleas from the front lawn. A flaming plank of eucalyptus and the chandelier to which it was attached broke free from the rafters, spinning downward in a dizzying display of pyrotechnic doom. Looking skyward, she could feel the heat on her muzzle intensify exponentially as it fell. Crying was pointless as her tears evaporated immediately into steam. The plank and chandelier, from her angle, looked like a giant, hellish and unknowable squid with tentacles of white-hot iron crashing down on her. She had never known unbridled terror before. It had seized her. And all she could do was writhe in horror, as in a straitjacket, eyes crowbarred permanently open such that she had no choice but to look.

The instant before the squid made impact, Gardenia Manarritat sprang solidly awake. She touched her face. She turned: the violin was still secure in its case in the corner. She looked down and confirmed she was still wearing her shorts and t-shirt. Breathing heavily, the skunk flung herself out of bed and looked around. The sudden silence disoriented her. She jumped to her second-story window. Palmview Street, early morning. Everything was normal. She shook her head violently, as if to eject the nightmare from her head like salt from a shaker. She attempted to calm down, took a seat on the edge of her bed, concentrating on real life and the Mephitidaean flag which hung on the opposite

wall. Everything was going to be okay.

Sokuiters swore that dawn broke differently in the Leeward Neighborhood than in other areas. Maybe it was the characteristics of sunlight glinting off pearls of dew on the manicured lawns. Or maybe the wide, tree-lined avenues filtered the impurities away from the daybreak and left behind only the sweet, juicy bits. No beast knew for certain, but they hardly spent any time philosophizing about the phenomenon, either—more of a gut feeling. Leeward residents were very comfortable just *living* there, a mostly silent neighborhood where lots of nothing was always happening. Except for that fire the other day which engulfed a house on Palmview Street not a block away from Gardenia's place.

Scary shit, that.

Gardenia had woken up significantly earlier than intended. She needed to rehearse today, but it would be rude to wake up everyone else at this hour. She snatched her glasses from the desk and tip-pawed gingerly down the burgundy-carpeted stairs to the kitchen, making sure not to look up at the chandelier. She prepared a simple breakfast of mackerel on sporzo, a cranberry-poppysseed muffin from Bisky's family's bakery, and two tall glasses of oat milk.

Gardenia's mother appeared in her nightgown, surprised. "You're up early, pumpkin," she remarked, touching her own forehead.

"Big day tomorrow," Gardenia replied through a mouthful of muffin. She touched her forehead.

"You'll do wonderfully," Mother said as she kissed her daughter lightly on the cheek.

Gardenia savored the kiss, but still recoiled in uncertainty. "There's this one passage that I'm gonna mess up, I know it."

"Are you worried?"

"Yes. I need to practice. A lot." Gardenia was dreading it.

"You'll do all the rehearsing you can. And if that doesn't take care of everything, Dalebius will see to the rest," Mother reassured, preparing a pot of orange-leaf tea.

"Yeah, you're right."

"Will Bisky be there?"

Gardenia frowned. "No, she's always *super* busy on Marlsay Day. But we're

planning on going to Schooner Bailey's after the concert, at least."

"I worry about her," Mother said, and not necessarily to Gardenia.

"Yeah, the last few months for her have been... rough sailing."

Mother nodded, her eyes cast downward.

Gardenia decided she did not need to wait for several hours for Forest to wake up on his own, so she did the rude thing by heading upstairs to begin rehearsing. Father was already awake, she could hear the upstairs shower running in the hallway. Ordinarily, Gardenia was vehemently allergic to rudeness, but this was different. We're talking about measures 376 through 412 of Julius Marlsay's *Variations on a Theme by Garriona*, among the most technically challenging passages for violin in Marlsay's oeuvre, with syncopated, asymmetrical rhythms, no shortage of tricky double-stops (unusual and groundbreaking for the time period), all bundled together with violent and unpredictable dynamic shifts. The end result is intricate, geometric, complex, and, frankly, beautiful. But the fragile harmonies require that every musician play their part well. Marlsay's early period is easy to identify because of its intense and acrobatic qualities. On the other paw, Forest's habit of sleeping in wasn't actually all that important. And *anything* to keep her focused and distracted from thoughts of the house burning down would be most welcome.

The skunk ceremoniously lifted the violin out of its case and tightened the bamboo fiber bowstrings. A particularly prized possession, expertly crafted from the wood of sequoia, to which it owed its reddish hue. She flipped the sheet music to measure 376 and set the music stand beside the other chair in her bedroom, the one specifically for playing violin. She sat down. After some cursory warm-up exercises—chromatic scales, a collection of arpeggios at different tempi and varying articulations—she sighed deliberately. The musical notation itself as printed on the paper was difficult to decipher. This was not easy. For a long moment, far longer than it ought to have been, she thought about giving up her first chair position. Then she wouldn't need to embarrass herself in front of an enormous gathering of animals at the performing arts plaza on Port Avenue, with one of the most recognizable but also impossibly difficult solos imaginable for a lowly violinist. But even if she was the best violinist, they'd jeer and hiss anyway, because the audience would be focusing intently on a *skunk*, of all beasts.

Music was a sublime experience for the listener, a sadistic one for the composer, but a downright persecution for the performer. It took decades for Gardenia to accept the simple truth.

She pressed her forehead with an index finger.

(This is real art.)

— Dalebius wouldn't have it any other way, would they?

(No. There is a euphoria to be found in the very act of overcoming one's own fears. That is the actual art. Music is but a nice side effect.)

— Alright, alright. I have to trust them.

(That is the ultimate lesson.)

— Mephitis kastane rilanhoss, Nakasat Dalebius.

(Mephitis kastane salanhoss, Manarritat Gardenia.)