

Unprofessional

Vignettes from Azuaveria — Episode 17

@dressupgeekout

June 13, 2020

The mob in front of Carmen's, still restless from lack of caffeine and still bewildered from Joyce's scene, was finally out of earshot. Joyce and Bisky had walked up Port Avenue a block or two, toward a small, anonymous municipal park which the skunk frequented but the squirrel did not.

The morning sunlight was still nascent and pale, the dew on the freshly cut grass crisp and fresh. The squirrel's paws were thrust firmly into the front pockets of her brown apron, but she doffed it when they took a seat on a weathered palmwood bench along the curved brick path. This park was unique in Port Sokuit for having paths made of brick, not the usual brushed-shell. Apart from a homeless graymuzzle coyote who slept on a bench on the opposite side, they were the only animals in the vicinity.

Bisky continued to observe Joyce. She seemed to have mostly calmed down, at least on the outside. Joyce instinctively reached into her purse for an Alondra and a lighter, but hesitated and tossed them back into the purse instead, as if rolling dice. Bisky couldn't help but notice a small copy of *The Manual* tucked in there, too. Somehow, she had figured she'd have one of those.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Bisky ventured.

Joyce took a deep breath. "I dunno."

Bisky placed her bag on the brick. "Can't corporate give you a break already?"

"Heh, shift leaders don't sprout from the ground, babe."

"True," Bisky admitted. They certainly did not. Not everyone was built like Joyce. But, as Bisky was beginning to realize, not even Joyce was built like Joyce, buckling under the weight of her own problems until she finally collapsed. How do Captains not shipwreck themselves? How does any beast do it, really? Are we all just collectively faking it until something kills us? Why is Marlsay Day always so stressful? Who cares about some dead music fox, anyway?

Bisky's terror laid in the simple fact she may have understood *everything* Joyce was ranting about earlier.

"I lost it recently, too, Joyce."

Joyce turned and tilted her head, weak but intrigued.

"I haven't kept up promises. I lied to my mom, then she died, I lied to my dad, and then he died, and I've lied to Dalebius, and now they're dead to me. I'm afraid I'm going to lie to Gardenia, and I'm afraid I'm just lying to myself this entire time. And I'm afraid that's all there is to it. So, yeah. You really moved me back there. I totally get it."

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Joyce ventured.

Bisky took a deep breath. "I dunno."

Joyce twitched her nose. "Well, then, I wanted to say the only reason why I let myself do, heh, *that*, was 'cuz you were there. I actually didn't mean for it to be an actual meltdown..."

Bisky tilted her head. Joyce continued. "I wish you never hear the sound, Bisky. The truck crunching against the wall like that. The espresso machine nearly fell over. It was really scary. I've been stressed. That was the last straw. And all I could think about was: by the Maker, I need help. I need a raspberry Alondra. I need my best associate. I need Bisky. Right now."

"*My* help?" Bisky was genuinely surprised. "But you always have your shit under control."

"No, babe, not really. Just being professional. It's *you* who always has her shit under control."

"No, Captain. I'm a total shipwreck. Just being professional."

"Well, then, promise me, babe, to never be professional with me ever again. Captain's orders."

Bisky, despite her unofficial and incomplete training, intuited precisely what needed to happen next. Upon realizing she was in fact close enough, she tossed with all her might a heavy mooring line made of her own heartstrings to port, where Joyce caught it and deftly secured it to the bollard of her soul. Skipper Bisky's little vessel winched ever closer. She was not going anywhere. Heartstrings can handle it. Who knows what they're even made of, but their adamantite toughness and infinite flexibility guaranteed the hitch would never come undone

by accident. And after all, the very first heart there ever was, was beating right from the start.

Bisky grinned. Joyce laughed her hoarse non-laugh. Perhaps today was going to be an alright day after all.

The homeless coyote stirred a little and mumbled something in his sleep. He involuntarily kicked his leg, which struck his shopping cart with a surprisingly loud metallic splash. More animals slowly began to pour into the park as the morning progressed and the grass dried up.

“Wanna see how unprofessional I can be?” Bisky asked.

“Heh, sure.”

Bisky adjusted herself and turned towards Joyce. “What’s going on, Joyce?”

Joyce slouched on the bench slightly. It creaked a little. “Um, where to begin?”

“The start,” Bisky insisted gently.

“Too far, babe. How about, I dunno, a month or two ago?”

“Okay, sure.”

Joyce tilted her head back and took in the morning sky. The few, streaky clouds up there bore a tangerine and raspberry hue. Time to be unprofessional, for fucking once.

“Cerise was getting angry with me. She was uncomfortable with the idea that I was sucking rum and Alondras more than sucking her, heh. I think she felt useless and unable to help me, or neglected, and I think I scared her, so we decided to separate for a bit. Well, actually I’m not sure how mutual that was. I surfed online for roommates, ’cuz evidently I need those, and that’s when I met Twazz and we moved into our current place. That was like six months ago. Four or five paychecks later, she comes over while Twazz was away for the Long Weekend and we fuck and she gets really pissed that I’m so sleepy, ’cuz I had plenty of rum before she arrived. She thinks I’m broken and that she can’t fix me. She leaves, she’s done. I finish the rest of the rum ’cuz I’m thirsty. I black out and then I have some sabal ’cuz why the fuck not, I already have a pulverizing headache and I’m unfixable anyway, and I don’t pick up the phone when my mom calls me on Sunday like normal, so she gets worried and drags me outta there and tells me I’m fucked in the head and then we realize I actually need

medical attention 'cuz my vomit looks funny. Remember that Monday when you called me about the grinder's gears getting jammed? And you needed the technician's personal phone number? I was in the hospital. And then back to work on Tuesday. So now I'm on The Plan. I'm a fuckin' Redbooker."

She produced *The Manual* from her purse. It was a tiny volume, about the size of Bisky's cell phone, maybe 50 or so pages. Its cerise-colored cover was unlabeled, but even the most minimally cultured Azuaverians could recognize it and what it represented. She shook the book once, not proudly, and immediately put it back in the purse.

Bisky stared in horror. "You told me you were on vacation for the Long Weekend."

"Heh, well, I guess I did manage to get away from it all..." She snorted.

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

Joyce shrugged and shook her head. "Just being professional."